The Best Of...
2017

*The best articles, tips and snippets
from Tim's Tech Tips email newsletter...*

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THE
HELPFUL BOOK
COMPANY

Contents

Hello

As you probably know, I write "Tim's Tech Tips" and send them out by email every week. (If you don't already get them, you can sign up, for free, at www.helpfulbooks.co.uk)

Sometimes they're specific to something that's just happened - maybe some scam or virus to watch out for, or some service that's not working or inside rumours of something that might be happening in the future.

But other times they're things that are useful whenever you read them. Tips on using some device, tricks to get more out of some app you might have or a clever website that you might not have known about.
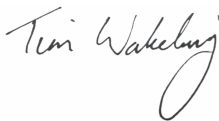
From using Facebook to keeping your PC/tablet/ smartphone secure to planning your next holiday - really useful stuff that not everyone knows about.

And that's why I've taken the best articles from the last year and put them together into this book - so you don't miss any and you can refer to them whenever you want.

Not only that, I've improved them here and there - including pictures of the screen to make things clearer and adding the odd extra bit of detail where there wasn't room for it in the original email.

I hope you'll find it interesting!

Yours

Tim Wakeling

PS As I say, if you don't already get my emails, best sign up at www.helpfulbooks.co.uk There's no charge, we'll keep your details private and if you decide you don't like them after all, you can cancel instantly at any time.

Computers, eh? They're great…
…until they're not

You're not the only one who gets frustrated by them from time to time. I do too. (And I bet we're not the only ones.)

Last week, for example one "corrected" my typing for me – and used the American spelling of favourite instead of the UK spelling.

The interesting thing, though, is that I have my computer set to UK English – so why did it change it to US? Well, you also need the language in the spellcheck to be set to UK. In some programs they'll check what your computer is set to and copy that, but some don't.

Most of the programs on my PC do have the spellcheck set to UK – but not the one I use to send out these newsletters. And that changed my typing and I didn't spot it when I read it over again.

Lesson learned – and a good tip to you – if you're bothered about everything you write being in UK English, make sure whatever programs you're using that have a spellcheck (and particularly any that automatically "correct" what you write) are set to UK English… or read it back more carefully than I did!

I'm told some people like chocolate – I couldn't possibly comment…

Handy

Website

For really nice chocolate, I'd recommend Hotel Chocolat – their website is www.hotelchocolat.com/uk. They do some really nice ranges and if you need it in a hurry you can get it delivered next day – or even the same day provided you don't live too far from one of their shops.

Or if you want something nice but not quite so posh, Thorntons chocolates are also available online at www.thorntons.co.uk and they do next day delivery (if you order before 4pm).

QR codes – not as hard as they look

Time after time I've come across bits of technology that promise to be easy to use and turn out to be like grappling with Medusa.

You've probably had the same experience.

But it's less common to come across something that looks like it's really complicated, but turns out to be much easier than you'd think.

A QR code is one of those things.

The very name makes it sound complicated. I don't even know what QR stands for! (I've just looked it up and now I do: it's Quick Response Code, which sounds like it should be some kind of emergency service!)

And they look a bit space age. Here's one – a sort of square barcode:

You've probably seen them on everything from adverts to cereal packets.

What are they for? Well they originally were used in car factories – an easy way to label different components and boxes that could be read by a machine.

But nowadays they're used as an easy way to take a phone or tablet to a particular website.

For example, suppose you're a magazine publisher and you've run an article about baby seals playing. You've also got a video of it that you want to give readers a link to.

You could put the link in the article – maybe something like: http://www.babysealmagazine.com/videos/babysealplayingwithmotheronbeachinwinter.htm (don't type that web address in, by the way, it's not a real one!).

But it's a bit of a pain for the reader to type in – and if they get one single letter wrong or add a space or a full stop where there shouldn't be one, it won't work.

Instead you could print a QR code and if the reader scans it with their smartphone or tablet, it'll take them straight to that webpage. (Of course you might choose to do both.)

And it's even more useful if you're out and about – maybe if you've seen an advert on a bus stop and you want to check the details on it. Typing a website address in on a small phone screen can be fiddly, but you can quickly and easily scan the QR code (it's like taking a photo of it but with a different app).

I've even seen them in museums if you want to find out a lot more about a particular exhibit.

And you can scan them on paper (if you see one in a magazine) or when they're larger (eg on an advert on a bus shelter) or even on a screen (say if it's on a TV programme).

So, how do you do it? How do you scan a QR code?

First of all you need a suitable app. You might already have one on your phone or tablet – look for anything with QR in the name or that calls itself a barcode scanner of any kind.

If you don't have one, you can go to the App Store (if you have an Apple device) or Google Play Store (if you have an Android one) and download one. You can search for QR code and find dozens – mostly free ones.

I use "Kaspersky QR scanner" and it seems to do the job well and without too many of its own adverts.

Once you have a QR app, start it up and point the camera on the phone at the QR code. You don't need to press a button or anything – once it realises it's pointing at a QR code it'll scan it and take you to the webpage. Some apps will tell you what webpage you're being taken to and check you're happy with that first.

Feel free to try it out with this one – you should be able to scan it straight off the page:

A quick tip – when a webpage looks like Picasso got at it...

Sometimes (whether you're using a tablet, smartphone or PC), you'll find a webpage just doesn't load properly. It might show some of the text but maybe it's all garbled. Sometimes the text will be fine but the images won't be (and that can be a problem if the images include diagrams or even sometimes some of the headings that are in fancy fonts). And sometimes all you get is some coloured boxes that in theory should be behind the writing – but there's no writing there. Or the whole thing looks like Picasso has got at it.

Luckily, usually all you have to do to get it working is tell your device to download the page again. Most of the time, just trying again will sort the problem – it really was a one off blip.

To do that on a PC or laptop, look at the top of the browser screen, next to where you type the web address. There should be a little circular shaped arrow, pointing around at itself: C . Click on that and it should refresh the page.

On a tablet you usually look for the same symbol.

Mobiles can be different, though. Some browsers on some smartphones do have the same symbol – but other's don't. For example I use Chrome on my smartphone and I don't get that symbol (though other people with Chrome might – depending on a few things like the size of your screen).

What you do is touch the webpage in the middle somewhere – it doesn't matter exactly where. Then drag your finger downwards and let go. You should get a little circular "I'm doing something" symbol for a moment, then it'll update.

Easy once you know how but, like a lot of things on smartphones, not easy to work out if you haven't been told.

Oh, and it works on most tablets, too, so if you prefer you can use that instead of tapping the circular arrow. Up to you which you like best – they both will do exactly the same thing.

It can also be useful if you want to check for an up to date version of a webpage since you started reading it, for example if you're reading a news site and want to see if it's changed since you opened the webpage, though many of those update themselves automatically.

If you ever use two different devices...

When I write these articles, I try to make sure you get a good mix of things that are useful on PCs, laptops, phones and tablets. I know not everyone has one of each, so to keep it useful I include a mix.

But this time I've got something that can be really handy whichever you use – particularly if you use any two (or even two of the same – eg a laptop at home and a PC at work).

When you're browsing the web, sometimes your web browser will remember things for you to make your life easier. Usually little things like when you start typing in a web address – you get as far as www.hel and it finishes it for you as www.helpfulbooks.co.uk

It works because it knows you've been to that site before and so there's a good chance that's the one you want this time (and if it isn't, you can just keep typing and you haven't lost out).

Similarly it might finish filling out some web forms for you or remember other bits and bobs.

But if you've (say) visited a website on one device (say your laptop) and then want to visit it on another one (say your phone), then the phone doesn't know that you've been to that website, so can't finish it off for you.

Except, if it's set up right, it can.

For example, if you use Google Chrome on both devices, then you can make sure they're both logged into your Google account and it will know that both devices are "you" and will share information between them, making life a bit easier.
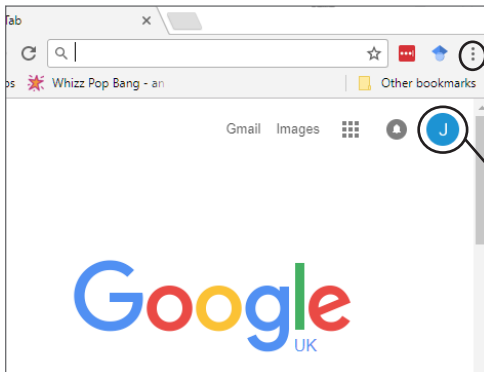
To see if you're already signed in, you can tap or click on "settings" in this menu in the top right – or go to Google's homepage: www.google.co.uk – and sign in from there.

If you have an Android phone you probably already have a Google account from that – but your PC or laptop or tablet may not be signed into it. If you don't have a phone, you may still have a Google account if you've ever used Google Docs, Google Drive, Gmail or one of their other services… or it'll let you set one up (free) if you don't have one – again, just go to Google's homepage to do this.

Then once both devices are signed in, it'll start sharing information between them.

(This can also be useful if you switch from an old laptop or other device to a new one – if you're signed into your Google account on both, then it'll remember the things the old one had remembered about you, so you don't need to start from scratch.)

Are computers & tablets romantic?

Computers, tablets and so on might not seem to have much to do with Valentine's day. After all, they're not exactly romantic things! But they can be useful things – and useful in all sorts of ways.

Handy Website

Probably the most obvious is the Interflora website: www.interflora.co.uk. You can choose from all sorts of different flowers (red ones seem to popular at the moment!) and have them delivered from a local florist. And if you've suddenly realised you might be in trouble for forgetting the day, they can even do same day delivery on some.

If you have an Apple Mac, don't panic, but be aware of this

For years (in fact I suspect decades) Apple have been selling their Apple Mac computers (they're a sort of rival to computers running Windows) on the basis that it's much safer because they don't get viruses.

I've always thought it was a very brave thing to say so publicly… the main reason they don't get viruses is because not so many people have them, so it's not so worth the criminals' time to write viruses for them. But if the adverts work and they get more popular, then the criminals will start paying attention to them. Apple's response to arguments like this went along the lines of "No, no, no, our computers are just much better than everything else so it's not a problem." Or as I would put it, along the lines of sticking their fingers in their ears and going "la la la, I can't hear you."

Well, it's not much consolation, but it looks like I was right. Lately there's been a spate of various different kinds of malware program discovered that target Apple Macs. Sure, it's not as many as target Windows PCs, but then everyone agrees that if you have a Windows PC, you need anti-virus or security software to keep it safe.

Anyway, if you don't have an Apple Mac, you don't need to worry! If you do have one, still don't panic. But it is sensible to take the precautions that people with PCs take – in particular I'd recommend getting an anti-virus program. Of course, it's possible that even without it, you'd be fine. But it's very possible you wouldn't be too. So my advice is to avoid the risk.

(If the above comes across as me having a dig at Apple, well, it's not meant that way. Not entirely, anyway. They've made some really impressive kit over the years and some developments in technology that have changed the world – going right back to the 1970s. And I'm not criticising the computers they've made at all. But I feel it's a bit irresponsible for them to dismiss any worries about viruses and Macs – and that's not fair to the people using their computers.)

Do you like free coffee?

FANCY TECH

Most of the time, at home, I drink tea. Probably too much of it! But when I'm out and about, I quite like having a posh coffee from time to time. You know the type – all frothed milk and cinnamon (especially cinnamon!).

They're quite expensive, but I don't mind splashing out now and again for one if it's really nice. I like it even better when they're free, mind.

So you might think I'd be glad to have one of those loyalty cards – in fact I have got one, for Costa coffee. If you scan it every time you buy a coffee then every so often you've got enough points to get your coffee free. Great.

But the problem is it's yet another card to carry in my wallet. Along with the petrol loyalty card, the supermarket one and so on. And you might even have more than one supermarket or petrol one, if you don't always use the same supermarket or petrol station.

Which is why I think it's a great idea that a lot of these companies are now giving you the option to use an app on your smartphone instead of using your actual loyalty card.

Costa have been doing this for a while and Tesco are now following suit. I expect others will too.

The way it works is you still sign up for a loyalty card and get a physical one, but you can also download an app. You log into it – exactly how depends on

the different company, but on some you need to put in the number on your card or simply log in with the details you used when you first registered the card.

Then instead of carrying the card, you open the app on your phone and it displays a special barcode called a QR code (have a look back at page 2 to find out more about them) and that's what you scan at the tills. You don't need to be able to access the internet or anything while you scan the code – you just need to have your phone turned on.

That works exactly the same as a physical loyalty card but you don't have to carry dozens. Oh, and often you can check how many points you have on your card just by opening the app, which can be handy.
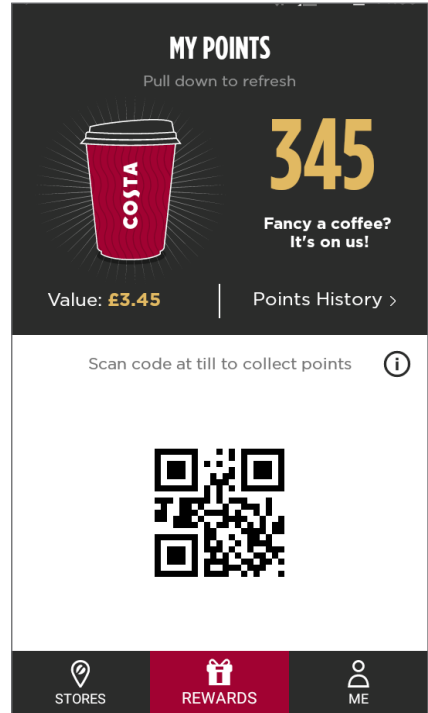
One thing I would recommend is opening the app before you get to the front of the queue. Once or twice I've been ready to pay (or claim my free coffee) but when I've opened the app it's decided it needs updating, which isn't too hard, but not something you want to do with your coffee in front of you going cold, and a queue of thirsty people behind you!

It's not ideal if you don't carry your phone with you when you're out and about (or if you don't have one, of course – though you could in theory use a tablet if you have one of those that's not too big and cumbersome) so it's not for everyone, but it could be really handy for a lot of people.

Oh, and don't worry if you change your phone – you can download the app again onto your new phone, type in the same details as last time and carry on where you left off.

Anyway, I'm off to put the kettle on now – all that talk about coffee has made me thirsty…

The birthplace of e-commerce

A good pub quiz question: When and where did e-commerce start?

I've recently been on holiday – and one of the places we went was to a brilliant computer museum in Cambridge called the Centre for Computing History. (If you are interested, their website's www.computinghistory.org.uk and the place is well worth a visit if you're ever in the area.)

I had a great time (so did the boys – and I managed to show them how I learnt programming on computers from the 80s by writing a simple "Guess my Age" program together).

But one of the things I found interesting was a device called a ROCC Teleputer.

It dated back to 1984 and was the first system that let people buy things by computer without leaving their homes.

Sorry for the scrappy photo – it's a snap I took on my phone.

E-commerce (shopping over the internet) is huge now, as you know. Amazon, eBay, all the main supermarkets and nearly every other shop you can think of are online so you can buy things and get them delivered.

The Worlds First Online Shopping System

In 1984 a company called ROCC (also known as Redifusion) developed a way for pensioners to be able to buy their weekly shopping using the television set in their home. Backed by Gateshead council and connected to Tesco supermarket the system was a success.

It is the first recorded instance of online shopping in the world. On display here is that system.

But if you'd asked me I'd have guessed it started in the late 90s. I know people talked about it before that and had ideas how they could do it, but I'd have guessed it wasn't actually working until the late 90s.

But back in 1984, in one area you could do your shopping at the supermarket by typing what you wanted into this computer in your home, then they'd deliver the shopping to your door.

And where was this futuristic system up and running, years before anyone

else had online shopping working? Was it Silicon Valley, maybe? New York? London?

Nope. It was Gateshead.

So there you go. Gateshead – the birthplace of online shopping.

One of my favourite gadgets... noise cancelling headphones

A while ago I mentioned a few of my favourite gadgets – well, here's another one. Noise cancelling headphones.

I must admit when I first heard of them I was suspicious.

But I tried a pair out and was surprised at how well they work.

The idea is that whenever you're doing something noisy (for example travelling on a noisy train or plane or something) you put them on. Some of them do cover your ears pretty well, but that's not why they work so well (a lot of noise-cancelling headphones are just the little bud type that you stick in your ear).

There's a tiny microphone on the outside of the headphones that picks up the noise you would hear. It then plays the opposite sound to that through the headphones, which literally cancels the sound out.

At first I was sceptical that it could do it well enough to work – and fast enough (sound travels pretty quickly after all). But it seems to.

I tried them out and they really do seem to work. You can still hear the outside noise, but it's much quieter and less intrusive.

You can either just do that or also play music through them like you would through normal headphones, but better because you can hear it clearer without the background noise.

Again, they're not for everyone. But if you are often in a situation where there's a lot of background noise you want to block out, they might be handy.

I'd like you to peer inside a live volcano…

Do you know Google StreetView – where you can use your computer to "wander around" different places from Millom to New York? Lately they've been adding some more, well, out of the way places to it. But this one really stands out.
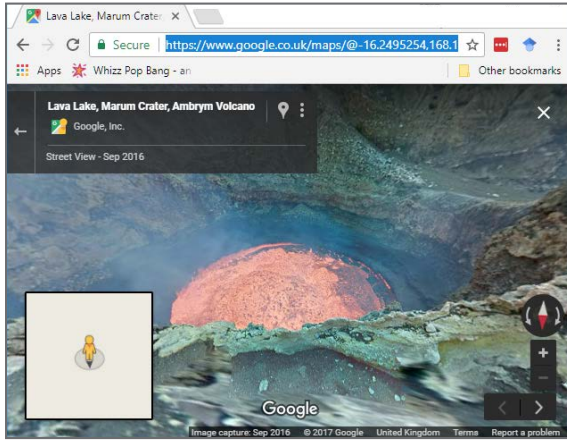
You can actually wander round the rim of an active volcano. You can peer inside at the fiery lava. All without the risk of slipping and ending up rather toastier than you'd like.

It's pretty impressive stuff – and I must admit I admire the people who took the special cameras there – a little bit more intimidating than preparing the pictures of the Eiffel Tower, Buckingham Palace or Millom Town square…

(When I wrote about this in Tim's Tech Tips, I included a link straight to the volcano. The full web address is a few hundred characters long, though, so I didn't think you'd fancy typing it in by hand! So I've used another pretty cool website called TinyUrl to make you this nice short address instead that'll take you to the same place: www.tinyurl.com/y8bxwon5)

Google's handy for holiday planning

I don't know about you, but as we get towards summer (well at least out of winter…) I start to think about having a holiday. Much as I love my work, it's fun to get away, too!

And as I sat down to write this, it crossed my mind how useful computers, the internet, tablets, smartphones and so on are for organising holidays. It can make it totally different from before they existed.

Before them, you might book a holiday based on what you read in a brochure or were told by a travel agent. And you might find out a bit more about the

place by reading a guidebook.

But now you can find out so much more before you go. I think that's a really good thing – you can be more certain that it's a place you'll enjoy and also you can find out more before you go to make sure you don't miss the things you'd really like to see. To say nothing of how it means you can enjoy the fun of the holiday more before you even go!

Even if you prefer to actually book your holiday through a travel agent or over the phone, you can still find out a lot about the place online first.

So I thought I'd pass on some tips about using computers and so on to help with holidays before you go away.

Google Maps can tell you lots about a place

Say you're thinking of going to Normandy in France and are considering two different towns. You can go to Google Maps (either at www.maps.google.com or using the app on a tablet or smartphone) and type in the name of each one in turn – to see how the town is laid out, what's nearby, what the transport is like, etc.

And if you want, you can even go into "StreetView" mode and wander around the streets, all on your PC, tablet or smartphone. In the Google Maps app you need to tap and hold on the map to drop a "pin" – then a little photo with a circular arrow on it should pop up at the bottom of the screen.

On the website, you can either do the same thing, or click and drag a little yellow man from the bottom right of the screen and drop him somewhere on the map.

You can also look up transport

Not just to get to wherever you're going on holiday, but transport while you're there. It can be helpful if you're planning on driving everywhere – in which case you might want to check what parking is like in the places you might visit.

Or if you're planning to use public transport – in which case you can look at where buses go from and to, what times, when trains run and whether you might get caught out if they stop early on a Sunday. For train times, I usually

use National Rail Enquiries at www.nationalrail.co.uk. A for bus times, you can look up time tables on bus company websites.

But to be honest, it's probably as easy to do it all through Google Maps these days, using the directions option: [◇ DIRECTIONS] or [◆ GO].
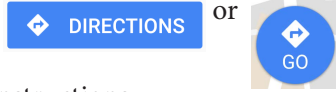
Tell it where you want to go from and to, and it will give you instructions for driving there, going by public transport (you can choose from bus, train or tram in "options") or walking.

If you want to walk around a town, you can check how far everything is so you know whether it'll be a quick stroll or a long hike.

If you're driving to your holiday, checking the route on Google Maps can be helpful as well. A lot of people have Sat Navs nowadays but even so it can be a good idea to have a rough idea of the route beforehand. And if there are some junctions or turnings that look like they might be hard to recognise, you can use Google StreetView to get a good idea of what they look like beforehand – you might be able to notice that the turning you want is just after the two tall trees or the funny looking narrow building or whatever.

Find out about more about the area online

Of course, you can also look up the local sights. The simplest way is to just type the place name into Google. Or you can type in the place name along with "tourist information" and you'll usually get the official tourist information page along with some others.

You can just type "Things to see in Bognor Regis" into Google (obviously if you're going somewhere else, don't type Bognor Regis in…) and get a list of ideas. But even if you already have a few places in mind, you can check on the web when they're open, what parking is like there, how much it costs, what the best way to get there is and often get an idea of how long to allow.

Advice on choosing a phone, tablet or PC…

After you get a computer, tablet or smartphone you usually gradually get to know it a bit better as you get used to it. You might never become a world class expert (you probably don't need to) but you learn a bit more about how it works.

On the other hand when you first get it, you might not really know very much at all.

Which makes it difficult to choose which phone/tablet or PC is right for you in the first place! You have to choose when you actually know the least about it!

So I thought it'd be useful for me to give you a few tips on what to look for when you're choosing a new device. Of course, you might not be after one right at the moment, so you might want to keep this to hand for the future!

(And you might want to make a cup of tea before you read this – it's quite long! I've made myself one before I start writing it…)

I've avoided saying "You should get this model" or even "This is a good model if you want XYZ" because these things can change literally from week to week as companies bring out new versions, cancel old models, change prices and even change the specification (spec) of a model that was already out.

So instead I'm going to tell you about some of the things to think about and take into account.

I'll assume you already know whether you're after a phone, a tablet, a laptop or desktop PC but if you're not quite sure, the best thing to do is think about how you'll use it and where you want to use it – that should help you decide.

Choosing an operating system

One of the big decisions is what operating system you want. For PCs (laptops and desktops) the main choice is Windows and nowadays that's Windows 10. There are other options – Macs, which tend to be very expensive, Google's Chromebooks which only really work while they're connected to the internet and Linux of various versions, which is great but not ideal for a beginner. For most people, unless you have a particular reason to choose one of the others, Windows is probably your best bet.

For tablets and phones, though, there are two popular choices: iOS (made by Apple) and Android (the system is made by Google but the devices are made by all sorts of companies). You can also get Windows phones and tablets but they tend to be much less popular – so again, unless you have a particular reason for wanting one, I probably wouldn't steer you in that direction.

I don't have any great preference between iOS and Android – they're both good

systems that work well and are designed to be generally pretty easy to use. The main thing I'd say is if you've used one before, it's probably simpler to stick with that rather than learn something more different. The other thing is that often Apple kit is quite expensive, so if you're not wanting anything top of the range, I'd tend to go for Android. Up to you, though, and you can always try both out in a shop.

Choosing a make or brand

If you do go for Apple's iOS, then the thing will be made by Apple, too, as they won't let anyone else use their system. So you'll be getting either an iPad or an iPhone. But if you want an Android one you also get to choose the make. Some people start by choosing this and if you've been happily using a Samsung (say) in the past, there's some sense in sticking with them as it will be more similar.

Otherwise, though, I'd actually leave choosing the make until later and start with what you want the phone or tablet to be like. You may then find that leaves you with only one or two makes to choose from, which makes it easier!

Similarly with PCs – there are lots of makes but I'd start by deciding what you want it to be like first, rather than choosing a make.

Processor speed – do you want to be able to play fancy games?

The first thing to think about with PCs always used to be how fast the processor was and how fast it would run. This is still relevant for PCs and other devices, but it's not just about the processor speed – it's about how much memory it has and several other things as well. You can often get a rough idea of how fast a device is just by price – it's often one of the biggest things that makes it more expensive. Or you can ask in a shop which one is quicker or read up on the internet about the models you're interested in.

Before you do that, though, have a think about how you're going to use it. A modern phone (even a cheap one) has more power than those old mainframes that filled entire rooms… whether you need even more than a cheap one depends on what you're going to use it for.

If you're just going to browse the web, send emails and maybe play the odd simple game, you probably don't need anything very fast. Even watching videos or making video calls isn't particularly demanding for a modern device.

On the other hand if you want to edit home video or play fast 3D games then you'll need something faster – and if you want the device to be able to keep up

as new versions of the software comes out, then it'll need to be reasonably fast as well.

How important are the size and weight?

Another thing that matters, for laptops, tablets and phones if not for desktop PCs, is the weight. This can vary quite a lot, so again, think about how you'll use it. If you have a tablet for use at home on the sofa, you might not be too bothered about how heavy it is. On the other hand if you're carrying it in a handbag, you might want it nice and light. Similarly with a mobile phone.

In fact if you're going to read a lot on a tablet, you might not want it too heavy anyway, if you find it more comfortable to hold the tablet while you read. On the other hand if you think you'd prop it up to read, then it probably doesn't matter anyway!

Of course the weight often partly depends on the size – and the size is something else to take into account, particularly if you want to carry it out and about. So it's worth thinking about whether it matters to you whether it fits in a pocket or not.

What size device you want depends mainly on how you plan to use it. For example if you're buying a laptop to use mainly at home on a desk (but you want to be able to put it tidily away so you want a laptop instead of a desktop) and you want to do lots of work on it, you probably want something with a fairly big screen and you won't mind so much if it's a bit heavy. On the other hand if you want to take it out and about and use it in cafes and on trains to take the odd note, then you probably want something small and light and don't mind if the screen isn't too big.

It's similar with a tablet – if you're going to use it at home to watch TV on, you want a decent sized screen but if you want to carry it in a pocket or handbag you probably want something a bit smaller. And even with smartphones, there are lots of different sizes, depending on how you plan to carry it around (I've got a fairly small one, with a smallish screen, so it easily fits in a pocket – but some people prefer to carry it in a bag and have a bigger screen).

More about the screen

It's not just the size of the screen to think about, though. There's also the resolution – which is how many dots it uses to make the picture. The higher the resolution, the sharper the picture (up to a point – they're now getting to the point where you actually can't see the difference with a human eye!)

You might not notice the difference, but if you compare some screens that have a lowish resolution, they just aren't as sharp and nice to use as the better ones. But if all you want to do is browse the web and send the odd email, it probably doesn't matter. If you want to read ebooks on it, you want a nice sharp screen, even if it costs a little more.

So again, it's horses for courses – it all depends what you want to do with it.

The other thing I want to mention about screens is something the shops never seem to mention much: the viewing angle. This is whether the picture still looks good if you're slightly off centre when you look at it. And it can be very different on different screens.

If you'll only ever use your device on your own you probably don't mind. After all, you'll be sat straight in front of it. But if you use it along with someone else – for example to watch TV on your tablet along with your other half, then you want to make sure that even if you're sat a bit off centre, it'll still look good. You can sometimes find out about this online, but if it is something that matters to you, your best bet is probably to go into a shop that sells the tablet, laptop or whatever that you're thinking of getting and try it out.

Battery life

Battery life is another thing that will only matter to some people. Generally, heavier devices tend to have a longer battery life (because they have bigger batteries!) but also devices with bigger screens tend to have worse battery lives (because the screen takes more power). And bigger heavier devices tend to have bigger screens so in practice it often balances out anyway.

They do usually tell you what the battery life is like though, so if you plan to use your device away from home a lot, you might want to check it. Otherwise you can just make sure you plug it in when you need to (and you can use it while it's charging too, as long as you have a handily-placed power socket).

How much storage it comes with is the other thing that matters

For a laptop or PC, that's how big the hard drive is, measured in GB (GigaBytes) (or sometimes in TB, which is about 1000 GB). For a tablet or

phone it's not technically a hard drive, it'll be what's called flash memory, but it serves much the same purpose and again it'll be in GB.

This is where the device stores all your programs, any music, photos or videos, ebooks, emails and so on.

For general use you won't need very much, but if you like to have a lot of programs (apps) stored on your device you might want a decent amount of space. Photos don't take up too much but if you have lots of video, that can take up a fair bit of space, particularly if it's high quality video (whether it's stuff you've recorded on the device with the built in camera or TV that you've downloaded).

If you have less storage you might find yourself having to clear it off every so often, deleting things that are filling it up (possibly after saving them to some other device or to the "cloud"). That might not bother you – but if it will, it's worth thinking about before you buy the device. You can add more storage to some devices afterwards (for example some tablets or phones let you add an "SD card" that adds space) but some (most Apple devices for example) can't be expanded, so if you think you might want to store a lot, it's worth either getting a device with lots of space (which can be expensive) or getting one that can take an SD card for more space.

Oh, and if you do get an SD card, make sure you get the right size. They all work in much the same way but some devices take a full sized SD card, some mini-SD and some micro-SD.

full SD   *mini-SD*   *micro-SD*

Some cards come with an adaptor so they can fit any size – but not all.

Extras – are they worth it?

Some makers will also try to convince you to buy their model by throwing in extras – a case, stylus or whatever. This can be handy but in general my advice is not to be too swayed. You can always buy whatever extras you want afterwards and that way you're more likely to get exactly what you want.

For example you might want a case that closes, like a wallet, to protect the

screen. Or you might want a hard case that protects the device but doesn't close, because they tend to be slimmer. Whichever you want, there's not much point in being swayed by a free case if it's not the type you wanted. (Especially since these sorts of extras tend to be pretty cheap – I think my phone case cost me £3!)

Phew – that was a long article. But it should give you a good round-up of the things to take into account when you're choosing a new phone, tablet or PC.

Summary

As I said at the start, I can't say "buy this one" partly because what's out there changes by the day – and partly because it'll depend on what you want it for. So instead I've gone over the things to think about and why you might or might not be bothered about them.

If you're after a new device, I'd suggest going through that list and for each, thinking about what you want. Then, armed with that list you can look at what's available safe in the knowledge you have a reasonable idea of what you're after.

And if you're not after a new device, why not keep this article to one side, in case you are in the future!

A quick tip if you're planning a meal out

If you're planning a big family do or a romantic meal out, the internet can be really useful. Most restaurants now have websites and most of them have their menu on, so you can have a look at the menu in advance to check what they've got on to make sure there's something you (and your other half, of course) fancy.

On some restaurant websites you can even book a table online, though if it's short notice you might be better phoning – at least they should have their phone number on the site.

If you're not sure about the restaurant, if you type its name into Google you can probably find some reviews of it. I always take online reviews with a pinch of salt – both because sometimes you'll find they were left by the owner's best mate and so are too positive and because sometimes people get carried away and leave negative or even downright nasty reviews over a tiny little thing… but if there are lots of good or bad reviews, that might be worth paying attention to.

Is the internet a load of old cobblers?

The internet is great, I think. But in other ways it's a load of old cobblers.

All right, I don't really mean that, I suppose. But there are definitely some problems it's caused, even though in other ways the things it lets you do are fantastic.

One way is the millions of scams around. Cons, email scams – all sorts. And there's one in particular I wanted to tell you about today.

It's an old one, but it seems to have become more common recently.

How it works is you're sat at home and the phone rings. It's Microsoft, saying they've had a warning that there's a problem with your PC and if you click a few buttons they can put it right.

Maybe they'll say it's been hit by a virus or maybe they'll say it's on the verge of failing – but they'll be adamant that you need to let them access it. Or visit a particular website and download a particular program.

The thing is, it isn't Microsoft, it's a bunch of horrible little scammers trying to get hold of your hard-earned.

They'll either use the access you give them to put software on your PC that tracks whatever you're doing – including any card details you use. Or that locks your PC so they can charge you to unlock it (like the recent ransomware attacks). Or use it to take over your PC and use it to spread viruses to other computers.

Or all three.

Oh, and they don't always say they're Microsoft. Sometimes (especially if they think they're talking to someone in a business) they'll say "It's the IT department." I find this one especially funny if they call me. I know our IT department – it's me and Mike. And if they don't sound like Mike and I'm not talking to myself, it's not our IT department!

Sometimes they'll say they're from BT – and if your internet connection really is through BT, you might find that persuasive. Just remember they could say that to everyone and probably half of everyone they talk to has their Internet through BT, so they had fairly good odds of getting it right.

If you do get a call like this, just ignore them and hang up.

Or if you feel like having some fun, say "Oh, I don't have a PC" or "Which one,

I have 8 different PCs – is it one of the Linux ones or the ones running MS DOS?" and listen for them to get confused and hang up.

Looking after your phone, tablet or PC...

If you're anything like me, you'll want to keep your device in good condition. After all, these things aren't cheap, so you want to look after them.

Here are my top tips for how to look after your device, whether you have a PC, a tablet or a phone (or even all three!)

Get yourself a case

First, if you have a tablet or a phone, I'd recommend getting a case and keeping it in it all the time. It doesn't matter so much whether you have the hard plastic type that clip onto the back or the leather/fake leather type that close around it like a wallet, though the second type also protect the screen while it's not in use.

They tend to be slightly bulkier, though, so it's up to you. The main thing is that any case protects the body of the phone from shattering if dropped (as long as you don't drop it too far – chuck it off the top of the Eiffel Tower and you might find it's not in very good shape!)

By the way, some cases, particularly the folding ones, can double as stands, which can be useful if you ever watch TV or videos on it.

Laptops – if you take it outside the house, I'd get a proper case to carry it in as well, rather than just using a bag. They have padding in the right places to protect it and laptops don't take kindly to any knocks or things being dropped on them, so a case is a good idea.

Laptop cases and tablet or phone cases can be really cheap, so it's not expensive to protect it.

Don't let it get wet

Unless you have a waterproof model, one of the most important things is to keep it dry. Water getting into a phone or tablet can ruin it… and if you have it plugged into the mains at the time, it can be downright dangerous.

If you do drop your phone or tablet into water or knock a drink over it or over a PC, here's what to do to give it the best chance of surviving.

First, turn it off. If it's plugged into the mains turn it off at the wall first, so you can't electrocute yourself (important!) but then turn the phone or tablet off – completely off, not just in sleep mode so the screen goes black.

Next take off any case and unplug any other bits and pieces you have plugged in. Take out the battery if you can, then wipe the outside of the device dry with a soft towel or kitchen roll.

Now you want to try to get any water that's in it out. Don't use a hair drier as some people will recommend – the air can push water deeper into the device. You can use a vacuum cleaner instead to try to suck the water out of the phone, but the main thing I'd recommend is to put it on something that tends to absorb water.

You can just put it between two soft towels (make sure it's not somewhere anyone will sit on them!) but what I'd recommend if you can is to either put it on a layer of (uncooked) rice, or on the kind of shredded paper you get as packaging or that you might have if you've shredded old bank statements lately. They're very good at absorbing moisture and will gradually pull some of the water out of the device. Leave it there for a while – if you notice the rice or paper or towels getting damp, change them for dry ones.

I'd leave it for a full 24 hours and make sure it feels completely dry before trying turning it on again – and when you do turn it on, I'd do it without plugging into the wall the first time, just in case.

If it won't turn on or it turns itself off again shortly afterwards, give it another 24 hours to dry out further.

Phew – so that's what to do if it gets wet. But as I say, try not to let it get wet!

What next – protecting the screen

Some people like to use a screen protector – a thin layer of plastic you put on. On the other hand some people find they make the touchscreen not work as well so I wouldn't recommend one for everyone. The screens are pretty hard now, so I personally don't use one.

More importantly to protect the screen, if you use a stylus, if the squidgy bit on the end starts to come loose or break, then get a new stylus – don't use one where the hard plastic of the stylus could come into contact with the screen.

If the screen gets dirty or has smeared fingerprints on it, you may be able to

clean it just with a dry tissue or soft cloth (like a glasses cloth). But if not, the best thing is to use an alcohol based wipe. If you don't have one, I wouldn't recommend a water-based wipe, like a baby wipe as they're just a bit too wet. I'd use a tissue that was only slightly damp – that way there's less chance of water getting into the device. And make sure the moisture only goes on the screen, not near any of the buttons or sockets.

One more thing on looking after your device

With tablets and phones you'll sometimes hear people say there's this great app you can get but you have to "jailbreak" your device to let it work. It doesn't make any difference, they might say, it just lets more apps run. That's true in a way – but it also makes it possible for more viruses and other malware to run on it, too, so I'd avoid it. For the same reason I'd avoid setting an Android device to allow it to get apps from all sorts of different places rather than just the official app store.

If you don't know what on earth that last paragraph meant, that's fine. It's not the kind of thing you're likely to do by accident. But if anyone offers to jailbreak your device for you to let you run some app, my advice is to say no thanks.

A quick tip if you're going away

Quick Tip

A clever trick my wife came up with – before we go away on holiday, she orders a supermarket delivery to our house for the day after we get back.

We use www.tesco.com, but all the big supermarkets deliver these days. You order what you want online and book a slot to have it dropped off at your house. That way we don't have to worry about doing a big shop when we get back. As long as we've got enough milk for a cup of tea and something to eat that night, we're all right.

Making QR codes

Handy

In an earlier article (on page 2), I told you what a QR code is (one of those square barcode things you can scan with a phone or tablet) and how to scan one.

But I also wanted to tell you something surprising: it's really easy to make one.

Website

But Tim, why on earth would I want to do that? I hear (at least some of you) cry.

Well, to be honest, at one time I'd have said the same thing. But then I was selling a car (the boys had got too big for the back seats so I needed something with more space). I took some photos and listed it on one of the big car sales websites. And I printed off a couple of sheets of paper saying "For Sale" to put in the windows of it when I parked it. I listed a few details but wanted to put a link to the online advert so people who saw it could find out more about it.

But the link I had was long – and not easy to remember at all. And it'd be much easier for people if they could just quickly scan it and go straight to the right webpage.
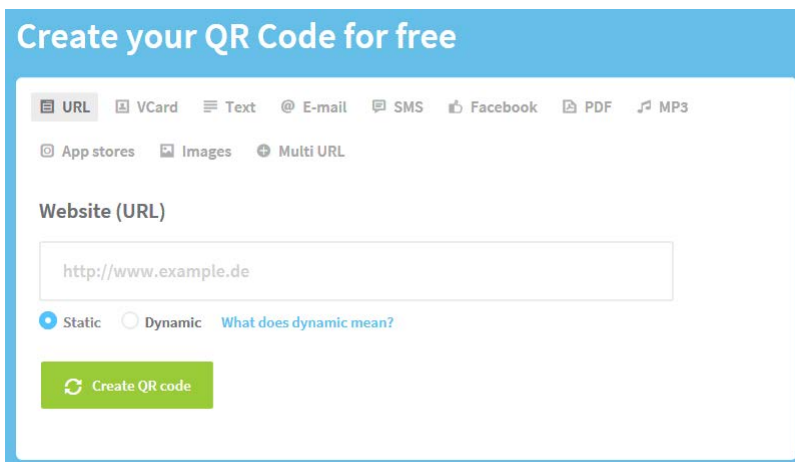
So I turned the link into a QR code. You could do the same thing with any web address. If you make a poster for a local society's meeting and they have a website with details on. Or a drama group or concert that has details online. Or if you're selling a car, like me. Or even if you're selling a house.

But isn't it hard to create a QR code? Nope. If anything, it's easier than scanning them!

First you need the web address you want the code to take people to – the web address of your car advert, club webpage or whatever it is. Say it's: www.mycaradvert.co.uk/Tim050617acjfiwnch/32 (not a real link – don't type it in!).

Then go to this webpage: www.qr-code-generator.com.
There are lots of others that do something similar, but this is the one I used. You'll see a screen that looks something like this:

Pop the web address you've got into box that says "Website (URL)" (I use copy and paste but you can type it in if you prefer). Then click on "Create QR code".

That's it – on the right a QR code appears. You can just print the webpage out (and cut off the rest of the page) or use the download button underneath it to download it onto your computer, where it'll work like a photo.

It's not the kind of thing you'll want to use everyday. But now and then it might be useful – and chances are you might have assumed it wasn't something ordinary people could just do – maybe thought that you would need special programs to create one. But now you know you don't – you can always come back to this article if you want to use one in the future.

Choosing a printer

Paper. Some people think it's on the way out, now that touchscreens and ebooks are around. I'm not so sure (after all, there's nothing like screwing a sheet of paper up and throwing it in the bin when something doesn't work out right).

But anyway, for now, people like to use paper – whether it's for printing a poster to put up, a document you need to read, directions to a hotel or simply printing out some photos to put up around the house.

And if you're printing something from a computer, that means using a printer. Of course, for photos you could get them printed elsewhere (and that can be a good move for top quality), but for most things, it means printing it yourself – which you can only do if you have a printer.

So I thought I'd give you a few tips about choosing a good one.

Cheap printers and ink cartridges

You sometimes see really cheap colour printers – in some cases cheaper than a set of ink cartridges for them, even though they come with cartridges. What's going on?

Well, the printer companies usually make the profit on the cartridges, not on the printer. So they're happy to sell you a cheap printer in order to get you using their cartridges.

But could you just buy a new one each time, since they include ink with them? Well, you could, but the cartridges that come with them are usually "starter" versions that don't actually have much ink in them. So they won't last as long

as normal cartridges.

What about buying "compatible" cartridges instead of the expensive ones made by the manufacturer? Well, it can work. But all too often I've found that compatible ones aren't all that compatible… or they'll start off working and then stop soon after.

It's not that they're badly made – it's that the printer makers deliberately design printers to not work with any but their own cartridges, so if the printer realises it's not got an official cartridge, it might stop working. Not all printers work like that, but generally (to save the hassle and doubt) I stick to official cartridges.

Another thing on the cheap printers: you'll often find that the cheaper printers cost more in ink. That's fine if you won't be printing much, but if you'll print a lot, it can be cheaper to get a more expensive printer that costs less in ink. It's not as simple as how much an ink cartridge for it costs as they don't all print the same amount – you have to look at how many pages each cartridge will last for.

Good quality photo printing – PPI and proper paper

You'll also find the more expensive printers are often better quality – the simplest way to get an idea of the quality is to see how many dots it uses to make up each inch of the photo or whatever you're printing – or the "PPI" (points per inch). The higher the better!

And if you want good quality photos, using proper photo paper makes a big difference, especially if you tell the printer you're using photo paper when you select to print.
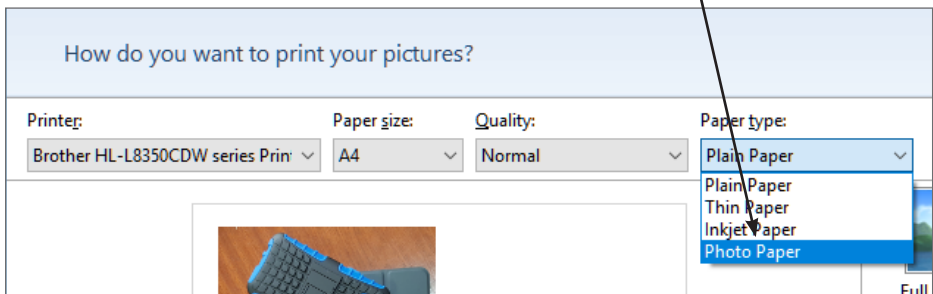
If you don't print things very often...

One thing you might find if you don't use your printer for a while is that it won't print properly, even though there should be plenty of ink. What tends

to happen is that the ink dries up and blocks the nozzle, so it won't squirt out. Sometimes just trying a few times is enough to unblock it – but sometimes you'll need to replace the cartridge, which is frustrating if you've not used it much.

One solution is to buy a laser printer instead of an inkjet printer, if you aren't going to be printing very often. They don't dry out because the "ink" is a powder rather than a liquid. The cheaper ones tend to be black and white only, which is fine for documents but not great if you want to print photos. You can get colour laser printers but they're not so good for photos anyway and they are more expensive.

So it depends on what you want to use your printer for. If it's text, I'd recommend a laser printer, if it's photos, you might want an inkjet and just make sure you don't leave it for ages without using it.

Holidays – while you're away

Of course, if you have a big desktop PC, then that's not going to be much use while you're away on holiday for the simple reason you probably won't take it with you. But you might take a small laptop or a tablet or your smartphone if you have one.

What you can do with them depends partly on whether you have internet access – depending on where you're staying you might have free wi-fi, but you might not. And if you're using a smartphone you might be able to connect to the internet through that anyway (though make sure you won't get huge bills from your mobile phone company, particularly if you're abroad).

But even if you're using a laptop or tablet and there's no wi-fi at wherever you're staying, lots of cafes, pubs and even shopping centres have free wi-fi now, so you can still occasionally check things if you want to.

So what could it be useful for?

Well, some of the same things as while you were booking the holiday.

You can check transport, check what times particular places are open and where they are.

If one day you decide you'd like a meal out, you can look at restaurants in the area and usually see what other people have said about them. In some cases you can even book a table online – at the least you can get the phone number in order to book.

You can also check the bang up to date weather forecast for that exact area, so you know whether it's a day for the beach or the museum (assuming the museum is indoors…) – I've installed the BBC weather app on my phone, but you can get the same forecast at www.bbc.co.uk/weather

If you have a phone or tablet, you can use it as a sat nav – and you can do that whether you're in a car or walking, so you can even use it to find your way around a town or city you don't know (the only snag is if you're between tall buildings, that can often cause problems for the signal).

And you can keep in touch with friends and family through email, Skype or Facebook.

In the evenings, you can listen to music via your device – either music you've got stored on it or by going to a radio website – just google your favourite radio station to find their website.

Or watch a film online (or if you have a laptop with a DVD player, watch a DVD) or even read a book on your tablet or phone.

Watching TV in a bookshop and liking all your fingers

Where do you go to watch TV? Not long ago, most people would have said "The lounge of course" (well, unless you call it a living room, front room or whatever!)

Some people had TVs in kitchens or even bedrooms, too. I was too worried about the consequences of being engrossed in a programme whilst chopping peppers with a big sharp knife to want to do that – I like all my fingers!

Nowadays, with tablets and laptops, you can watch them in any room you like – or even in the garden if your wi-fi signal stretches there.

But how about if I started talking about watching TV in a bookshop? That'd sound a bit strange, I grant you. So you might not be surprised to hear I'm not talking about a real bookshop – I'm talking about a web bookshop.

What on earth is Amazon Prime?

You've probably heard of Amazon – they started as an online bookshop, where you go onto the site, find the book you want, buy it online and they post it to you. And they still do that.

But they also do a lot of other things now – from selling groceries to storing bits of other companies' websites for them.

And one thing you'll see promoted from time to time is Amazon Prime.

The only thing is, I've never seen a decent explanation of what it is. Not even on Amazon's own website.

They'll mention some parts of it and leave out other bits – so you never get a straight answer to the question "But what actually is it?". So here you go:

It's actually made up of several things – you pay a monthly or annual fee and get all of them – how you use them is up to you:

Next Day Delivery

The first thing is you get free next day delivery on most physical things you buy from Amazon. Books, CDs, DVDs and other things like kitchenware or board games.

You only get the free delivery if you're buying it from Amazon themselves, not from someone else advertising on Amazon, but it is very quick – in some cases I've ordered something in the evening and had it before lunch the next day. (I think when Amazon Prime first started, this was all it was – a way to buy delivery for everything you order for the year.)

Music

You also get Prime Music – access to lots of music that you could buy from Amazon – but you don't have to buy it, you can play it on your computer/tablet/smartphone whenever you want (while you stay a member).

Obviously a lot of the music won't be to your taste as there's a real mix there, but it has over two million pieces of music there, so whatever you like, there'll be some there. And you can search for whatever you want and start playing it straight away.

TV (in a bookshop)

Probably the bit they advertise most is Prime Video – where you can watch TV on it. This is why I'm talking about watching TV in a bookshop – you go to Amazon, which started as a bookshop, to watch TV. But this isn't a way to watch normal channels that you could see anyway – they have programmes that aren't shown elsewhere, made specifically for them.

Again there's a real mix and you are unlikely to want to watch all of them (just as well or you'd never have time to do anything else) but there are likely to be some to your taste. I really enjoyed the series of Ripper Street that they had and also the first series of The Man in the High Castle (though I'm finding the second one more complicated and harder to follow – maybe because Edward's been waking up lots at night again so I've been tired – I even find it hard to follow a complicated TV programme when I'm tired!).

Anyway, you watch these programmes over the internet on your PC, laptop or tablet (or smartphone but the screen is a bit small unless you connect it to a full-sized TV).
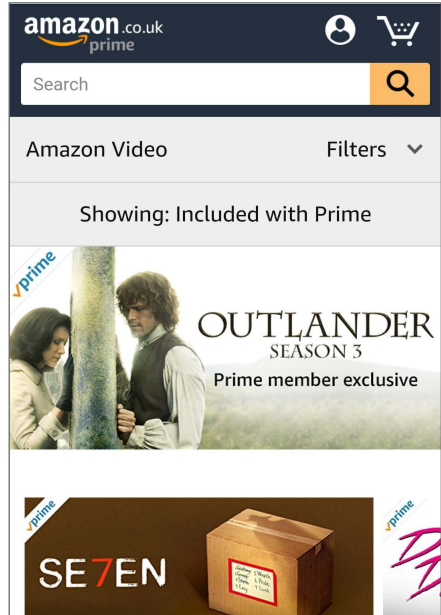
Update – After I originally wrote this, one of my newsletter readers pointed out that I'd missed something that you might also find useful (thanks Chris!). You can also download films or episodes from a series to the tablet to watch later on when you don't have an internet connection (or if the internet connection is too slow to watch them "live").

That can be useful if you're going away for a few days and want something to watch in the evenings but you won't have wi-fi (or it might be a really slow connection). Or if you want to watch it in a room your wi-fi won't stretch to. Or even if you want to take it round to a friend's house to watch together.

And, as Chris said, Netflix and Now TV don't give the same ability.

Some people probably won't use it, but at times it can be really handy.

Ebooks

If you like reading books as ebooks, you can also "borrow" ebooks from the Kindle Library if you're a prime member. It only works on an actual Kindle ebook reader or on one of Amazon's own Fire tablets, not on (say) an iPad with the Kindle app. I've no idea why they haven't made it work on everything, but that's the way it is!

But if you do have a Kindle, you can borrow one book each month – it's exactly the same to read it as any other book you've downloaded. You keep it as long as you want and return it when you're finished – and after that you can borrow another one. Not all ebooks are included in the Kindle Library, but quite a lot are.

Bits and bobs

There are also a couple of features for Prime members: you can read a few books before they're generally released without having to pay anything for them, you get access to unlimited storage space for your photos, and they have what they call "Lightning" sales that are only available to members.

Phew – so that's what Amazon Prime is.

I want to stress, though, I'm not trying to convince you that you should join – I don't work for Amazon or anything! It's just since no-one seems to tell you in a straightforward way what is actually included, I thought I'd do it!

What's the blooming point?

Do you ever ask yourself: "What's the blooming point?"

Don't worry, I'm not getting all philosophical on you – I'm not going to start rumbling on about the meaning of life. That's a bit deep for a Monday morning.
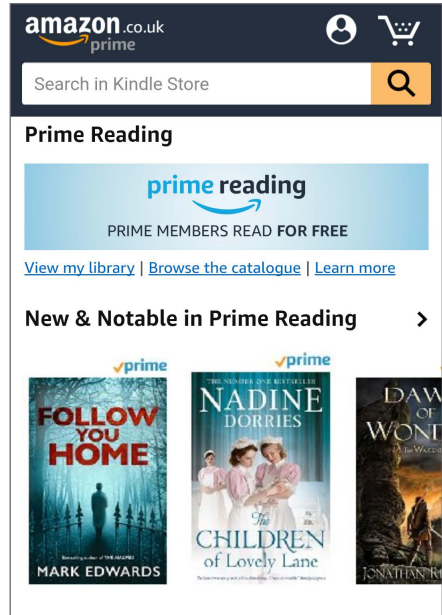
But do you ever ask it about some new gadget or technology?

"What's the point of that?" I know I ask myself it about some of the latest gadgets.

And sometimes, I really can't come up with a good answer beyond "It's a clever bit of technology and it's fun to show to other people". Not really a great answer.

But it's not always like that – and Facebook is one example.

It's popular, you probably know. And so I often get people ask me "But Tim, what's the point of Facebook?" (I know, getting asked questions like that is maybe a sign I'm not going to the right dinner parties.)

Usually the people asking have friends or relatives tell them they should start using it – but they don't see why.

At first, I was a bit sceptical of Facebook. And it doesn't help when you hear people saying they have umpteen million "friends" on Facebook – and of course, they've never met most of them.

So that's one way some people do use it – to "meet" new people and get as big a collection of "friends" as possible.

It's not what I'd recommend, and when it comes to a collection of friends I'd definitely say size isn't what matters. But some people like to do that.

But there are other ways you can use it.

Some people use it to stay in touch with friends they see all the time – you can use the messaging feature in it to quickly (and without paying anything) send messages to other individuals or several people at once. Handy if you're organising to meet up later on.

And because often people have Facebook friends who are local and they'll have friends who are local and so on, it can be a good way to get word out in a particular area. Just recently I've seen it used to try to track down a lost cat – and within a day or so hundreds or thousands of people in the area knew about the lost cat and were keeping an eye out.

But even that's not the main point of Facebook as far as I'm concerned.

I think it's best for keeping in touch with people who you don't see all the time. Friends and family who don't live just across the road. Maybe even in another country.

For example my family's quite spread out – my Mum and Dad are down in Plymouth, my brother is currently in Saudi Arabia, my sister in Australia…

So it's really handy to have a good way for all of us to keep up to date. We can jot a quick note on Facebook to say what we've been up to or any news – and anyone we're friends with can see it.

Or if the boys are proud of something or want to show something off, I can take a photo and put it on Facebook – and minutes later my Mum and Dad might see it – just moments after I took it. That's particularly easy if you have a smartphone or tablet but you can do it with a PC or laptop and a camera, too.

Taking video and sharing it is no harder, which can be really great. When Edward first started speaking, I was able to get him to repeat the words, video it and share it with my family – just like that.

It's not always the big significant things, either. Just being able to see what my sister's been up to day to day helps us feel like we're not thousands of miles apart, even though we are.

So that's what the point is, as far as I'm concerned. And next time you hear about people having thousands of friends, well, as far as I'm concerned, they've missed the point. But it's up to them!

What is ransomware… and what the NHS should have done…

Earlier this year, you might remember there was a lot of fuss about the "ransomware" that affected the NHS and others. And you might have been wondering what it was all about.

First of all, what is "ransomware"?

It's a kind of program that's designed to lock your computer, tablet or smartphone. Some types stop you using your device at all, some just stop you having access to your files (photos, documents or whatever).

Then a message pops up on your screen saying that your files are locked and you can't get at them unless you pay a ransom to the hackers who wrote it.

In some cases you can get rid of it without paying the ransom – but not always.

So how does it get onto your computer?
(I'll just say computer but it could also be tablets or smartphones)

Well, there are umpteen different ways – the most common is either if you download something that turns out to be dodgy, or open an email attachment that contains something dodgy. They can also often then spread to other computers on the same network, so if it gets into one computer in a system like the NHS's, then it can very quickly be on nearly all of them.

What about if you have a backup of the data?

If you have everything that's on your computer properly backed up, it shouldn't be so bad. You might possibly have lost access to your computer, but you can put the backup onto another computer – a new one, a friend's or if it's happened at work, onto an unaffected work one.

The problem comes with the way some backups work. When you're planning a backup you might think "I don't want to have to plug a separate drive in, I want to be able to back everything up automatically. So I'll have something connected all the time that automatically has a backup. But I'll keep it separately, maybe connected by the internet. That way if the main computer fails or even if it's destroyed in a fire, I'll have a backup."

The problem with that is if the main computer gets attacked by ransomware, it'll also be able to attack the backup, because they're both connected. You need a backup that's completely separate – what they call "an air gap", so there's no connection between the backup and the main system after you've taken the backup.

Sadly, not many organisations do this.

So how can you protect against things like this?

Well, there are two methods – only one is really viable for normal people at home.

The first method (that isn't really viable for most people) is to have your network completely unconnected from the internet and the outside world. If it isn't connected, it can't be attacked. (A lot of the recent issues came about from dodgy emails, so if you don't have email, or at least don't have email outside of your system, that couldn't happen.)

It's harder than it sounds, though. It's easy to just have a network that isn't connected to the internet. But what about USB drives – if your PCs have USB drives, someone could innocently plug in a pen drive/memory stick that they've used at home… and if their home PC is infected, that'll now infect the network. And since it wasn't connected to the internet, you probably won't have up-to-date anti-virus/security software on it.

And it's not much use at home if the point of having a PC is to access the internet!

The other way is to keep your operating system (eg Windows) up to date and keep your security software up to date. If you have Windows updates turned on, that'll take care of the first part of that as long as you're using an up-to-date version of Windows itself – 7, 8.1 or 10.

Sadly, it looks like parts of the NHS were still using Windows XP (they should have read my newsletters – I've been saying using XP online is a bad idea for years!) and that means even with up to date anti-virus software, you just aren't properly protected.

Worse, there was an update back in March that would have protected against this very attack. And it wasn't installed – at least not on all NHS computers.

Lots of people got very het up about the fact that the NHS were still using Windows XP. And that's fair enough – as I say, I've been telling people not to use it online for ages. But they weren't (and probably still aren't) the only ones, by any means. And it was already public knowledge that they were still using it.

Still, hopefully it'll have been a good push to them, and any other organisations still using XP, or who don't have updates happening automatically, to sort their systems out. And if you're using XP, well, at least now you know some of the risks – and if you do carry on using it on the internet, for goodness sake don't use it for bank details, paying by credit card or anything like that. But really, I wouldn't recommend it for on the internet at all.

Sadly, I'm not sure whether it will make people take it seriously. As long ago as 2014 the Government were reminding hospital trusts to move away from

Windows XP and even offering funding to do so – but lots didn't. Then in September 2016 a security company took them to task for still using XP – and several of the hospital trusts brushed concerns away, saying they were properly protected. Then in January of this year a London Hospital Trust was hit by a ransomware attack, similar to this one (but smaller) – and still they didn't learn. Let's see if they do now!

Sharing and printing your photos

If you've been out for the day, visiting family or off on holiday, you might want to share any photos you took with friends – Facebook is a good way to do that, but you might want to do something a bit more permanent with them too.

I use a computer to put all our photos together. For example when we go away, we take some photos on our camera, which gives pretty good quality pictures (or it does when I point it in the right place…). But I also usually have some snaps I've taken on my phone. Sometimes I want a picture and just don't have the camera to hand, which is when my phone comes in handy.

Once we're back, I copy all of the photos from both onto the computer and put them together. Then I delete any fuzzy ones or ones with my thumb over the lens. And if there are several that are similar, I'll pick the best and keep that. It's not unknown for Julie to have taken a photo on the camera and for me to have taken basically the same photo on my phone without realising she was taking one!

And then I can send the photos I really like off to be printed – we've used www.photo.jessops.com but there are lots of other similar services.
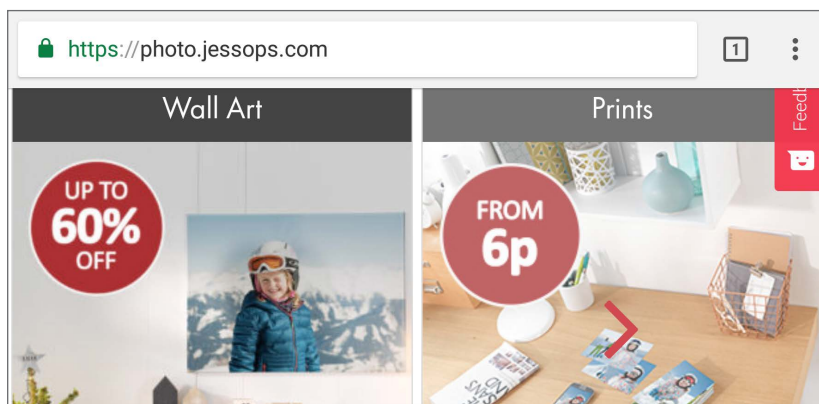
Or if you have a good printer you could simply print them out.

Something you might not know about smartphones

Most people using PCs or laptops nowadays use wi-fi to connect to the internet. The same goes for most tablets and most smartphones.

But with smartphones (and even a few tablets) it's a little bit more complicated. And it's worth knowing why.

Most smartphones can connect to the internet in two different ways.

Wi-fi is the same as a laptop would connect. You might use it at home, if you have broadband at home, or you could use it in a cafe or hotel that has wi-fi.

In a nutshell your phone connects to a gadget called a router, which is plugged into the wall. That router connects to the internet, so when your smartphone wants to look at a webpage, download an email or whatever, it sends that request to the router, which fetches whatever the phone wants and sends it across the air to the phone.

You don't usually pay for each request your phone sends, though you do have to pay to have the router set up and connected in your house and if you're in a hotel you might get your wi-fi free or you might have to pay to use it.

The disadvantage is you can only use wi-fi when you're reasonably close to a router – whether that's in your house, a cafe or even outside – some parks, buses and trains have them now!

The other way a phone can connect to the internet is through the mobile phone signal – the same kind of signal it uses to make calls or send texts.

You'll often hear this called 3G or 4G or sometimes 2G. The higher the number, the faster the signal.

As I say, this is the same signal your phone is using for calls, so it's the same kind of thing you pay your mobile phone company for. The advantage is that you can use it almost anywhere – you're not limited to somewhere that has a router.

The disadvantage is that you have to pay for it – often depending on how much you use it.

In practice most phone contracts include a certain amount of use of it (your "data allowance", they call it) before you have to pay – and you might never "run out".

But it's worth understanding the difference because then you can make sure you don't use up your allowance of this kind of connection by making sure that when you have lots of things to do, you use wi-fi.

For things like downloading big updates that'll use up lots of the allowance, most phones will automatically be set to wait until they're on wi-fi, so it doesn't affect your allowance.

But if for example you want to download a new app or game, watch a video a friend or relation has put on Facebook, or make lots of Skype video phone calls, you might want to wait until you're on wi-fi.

A quick tip about Amazon Prime...

Several people have mentioned about how Amazon promote Amazon Prime when you've ordered something – they offer you the free fast delivery service if you take up a free trial of Amazon Prime.

Quick Tip

That can work well – you get all the benefit of it for a month and as long as you cancel it you pay nothing. But it's easy to forget to cancel and end up paying… or not be able find the email they send you with a link to cancel it. Or even to not realise you need to cancel it!

Well, now you know to watch out for accidentally signing up for Prime when you order something. (Look out for it saying "free delivery with Amazon Prime Trial" or words to that effect.)

And if you do take the trial and can't see how to cancel it or don't want to wait for the email they send you, you can cancel without that email. Here are Amazon's instructions on how.

If you do join on a trial (accidentally or on purpose) and forget to cancel within the trial, you'll find yourself paying an amount every month – and you might not notice at first.

That can be an unpleasant shock if you suddenly realise you've been paying for

the last 4 months!

Obviously you should cancel it straight away if that happens, but it might also be worth getting in touch with Amazon. At least one of my newsletter readers did and found that Amazon checked he'd never used the service and refunded him. I can't guarantee they'll always do that but it's worth checking with them!

Printing and wi-fi

Nowadays a lot of people use wi-fi printers, where you don't have to plug the computer, tablet or whatever into it – it connects via your home wi-fi. (This only works if you have wi-fi at home!)

It's convenient, but in my experience most of the problems people have with printers are from using wi-fi. If you're using a PC or laptop, I'd always recommend plugging the printer into the computer. You can do this even with most wi-fi printers, using a USB cable. Of course, you don't have to leave it plugged in – only when you want to use it.

If you've already got a wi-fi printer and are using it happily, then that's fine, no need to change. But if you're getting one, my advice is to make sure you can just plug it in – and it'll probably be easier to do it that way.

What about if you want to print from a tablet or mobile phone? Then you'll probably need to use a wi-fi printer as there's usually nowhere to plug the printer into the tablet. But I have to admit my usual advice if people say "How should I print from my tablet?" is "Don't!"

It does work fine for some people but I've heard from so many people who've had problems (either it not working at all or working, then suddenly stopping for no reason). It's possible of course, but tends to be far more fiddly and prone to going wrong. So if you have a PC or laptop, I'd tend to print from that.

If you only have a tablet, you can't do that – in which case make sure your printer is a wi-fi one – and I'd search the web for your particular tablet model and the type of printer you're thinking of getting to make sure they work well together.

Oh, and if the printer says it has a particular app to make it print but it's not essential, there's a good chance it *is* essential and without it, it won't print from a tablet. So if you're having trouble, check the printer box or instructions (if you were lucky enough to get any) and see if it mentions an app – in which cases, try downloading it and you may find you can suddenly print OK!
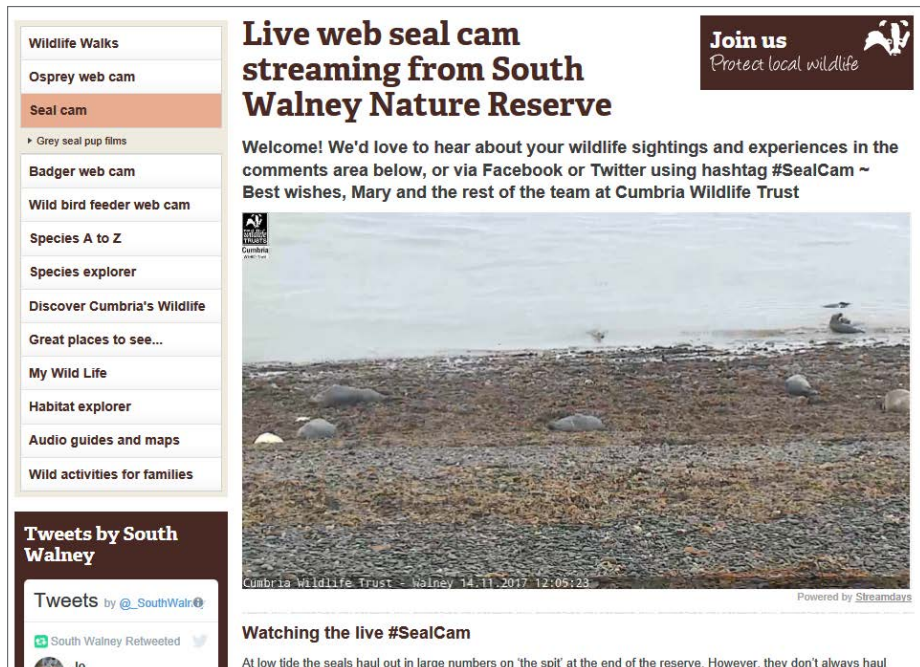
Seals at play...

It's amazing what you can find on the internet – everything from dates of little-known historical events to shops selling all sorts of things.

But I've just been watching seals play on the beach. I don't mean I've gone down to the sea. I've been watching the Cumbria Wildlife Trust's Seal cam on Walney Island, not far from us.

It's a web cam pointing at the part of the beach where seals often sit and play – and often there are seal pups there, too. You can watch what the seals are up to right now – if you fancy having a look, this is the website address:

www.cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk/wildlife/seal-cam

There are quite a lot of this kind of web cam set up all around the world – if there's something in particular you fancy looking for, just search for that word and then web cam. For example I just searched for Safari web cam and moments later was watching some elephants playing in a pool.

There are loads of other interesting web cams around the world broadcasting live, too – it could be worth having a look.

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Smartphone battery life

Quick Tip

On page 38, I told you about the difference between wi-fi and mobile data, also called 3g or 4g. And there's one more thing you might want to know about it.

(Well, I say want to know – I don't mean you're itching to know it, can't wait, desperate to find out. More that it might be useful!)

It's this: using wi-fi and using mobile data is OK on the battery. But when your phone is looking around for new wi-fi networks, looking for one to connect to, that can use up the battery faster.

So if I'm going out anywhere with my phone and I want to make sure the battery doesn't run out, I'll turn off wi-fi, just so it won't be constantly looking around, trying to find a network.

It's different at home or if I'm at work, where it can connect to a wi-fi network and stay connected to it. But if you're in the car on a longish journey or out and about, you can make the battery last longer by turning wi-fi off so it doesn't keep trying to connect.
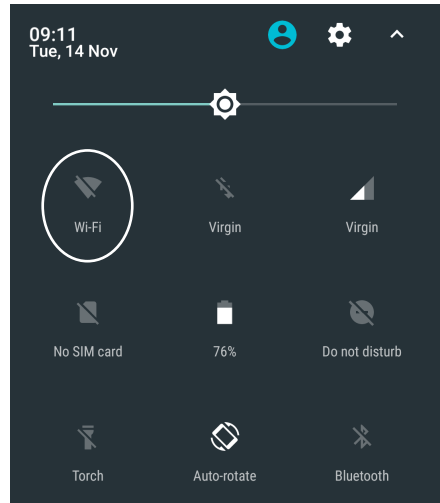
Incidentally, if you do want to make your battery last longer before it runs down, turning off location in the settings menu will make a big difference, too. It does mean you can't use it as a sat-nav (without turning it back on again), but it will make the battery last much longer.

Worth knowing if you're out and about and don't want your battery to run down.

# Facebook, PCs, tablets and smartphones...

When Facebook was first created, you used it on a website on a PC (or laptop – which is just a portable PC). That's simple enough but when tablets and then smartphones caught on, using a website with so many options on it was a bit tricky on the smaller screen.

So next Facebook created a different version of the website and by some clever jiggery-pokery, when you visit their website it works out whether you're on a PC, tablet or smartphone and shows you a different version of the website, to make sure it fits.

That meant you can use it on whatever type of device you prefer.

In fact they've gone a step better than that now and if you have a tablet or phone, there's an app you can download instead of doing it through the website. This makes it even easier – the app is designed to work properly on a device of the size you're using, it remembers that it's you, so you don't need to log in all the time and so on.
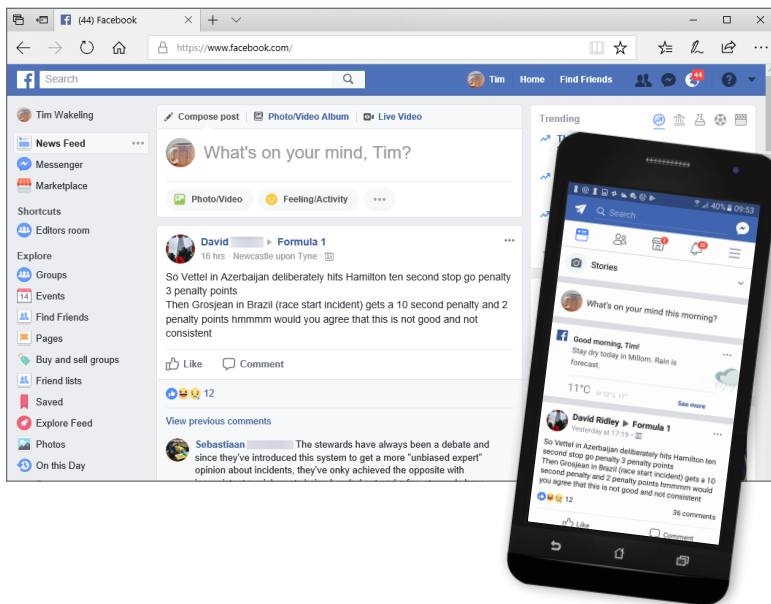
And using Facebook on, say, a phone or tablet has advantages over a PC. It means you can check it when you're away from home. You can easily use the video phone call feature and don't have to sit at a desk or table with your PC. You can find out news from friends and family wherever you are – and easily take photos of what you're up to and share them.

For example if you've just visited a stunning castle, you can take a photo and share it or just share a note saying "Just visited Caernarfon castle – amazing place".

On the other hand some people prefer using a laptop or PC – that's fine too.

But one of the things not everyone realises is you don't need to choose.

When you set up an account, it's your account. It isn't really linked to the device you used. So even if you set it up using a PC, you could then use the same account on your phone – and all of the people you've set up as friends on it will still be classed as your friends. If you share something, the same people will see it. And you'll be able to see things from the same people.

You can use it on different devices at the same time (well, not literally the same time I suppose unless you have 4 hands – but I mean use one one day, the other the next and then back again – you can have it set up on more than one device at the same time).

For example you might have it set up on your PC at home… but also on your phone for when you're out and about or away for the week.

Or you might like it on a tablet for normal use but put it on a phone for while you're on holiday. Up to you.

The point is it's the account you set up (with a username and password) that identifies it as you – you can use that on any device and it still knows it's you.

Personally I sometimes use my laptop for it if I'm at home and want to write anything that says very much, because I prefer the keyboard. But the rest of the time I'll use my smartphone to quickly check if there's any news from my friends and family and also to take photos I want to share – usually of something interesting the boys have done.

Of course, you might only want to use it on one device and that's fine too. But it's certainly worth knowing about this so you can decide if it's for you.

Ding, buzzt and blip…

Today I want to… ding… Oh, sorry. Hang on a minute. Right, where was I? Today I'm going to… buzzt… Just a mo…

OK, I'm being silly – and in fact my phone has sat silently while I type this. But if you have a smartphone or tablet, you've probably noticed it makes random noises from time to time – often even if it's in stand-by or sleep mode.

Obviously it makes sense for a phone to ring if someone calls you. Otherwise it'd be a bit useless. But that's not all they do.

You might get a ding when you get an email, a buzzt when there's a Facebook message, a blip when you get Facebook telling you there's something you might

be interested in and all sorts of other noises for other things – from telling you a download has finished to suggesting a video that it thinks you might want to watch.

Some are useful – personally I do want it to make a noise if I get a message (say through Facebook Messenger or Skype), so I can check it more or less straight away. But others can be just annoying – personally I don't want it binging to tell me someone has posted something on Facebook.

They're a type of "notification" – ways the phone or tablet tells you of something it thinks you'll want to know about – that you've got an email or that a download has finished or whatever.

You get sound notifications (the ones I'm talking about) and also ones that appear at the top of the screen.

I've also found that sometimes things that didn't make a noise will suddenly start making one – as apps update, the people who design them will decide to make them make a noise for different things. In fact mine recently starting dinging when there was something on Facebook it thought I wanted to see – but in the past it didn't.

Luckily, you can usually turn these off and only have the ones you want.

There are two ways – you go into the app that's making the noise and change the settings from there. Or if they don't give you the option, you can go into your phone's (or tablet's) Settings app and "block" that app from giving you any notifications. Sometimes you can do it either way.

To do it in the app, you might have to hunt around a bit as different apps will have the settings in different places. It's often three short horizontal lines above each other. In some apps it's a cogwheel instead.

To do it through the phone or tablet's Settings app you need the option called something like "Notifications" or "Sounds and Notifications". You're looking for a list of apps so that you can choose which to allow notifications from – usually by switching them on and off.

And actually, there's a third way – if you go into your phone's Settings app and look at the "Sounds" options, there's usually a way to turn sounds off when your phone gives you a notification – that way you'll still get a notification on the screen, but your phone won't buzz or bing at you each time.

It can be a bit of a palaver, I know, but once it's done, it's done – you don't have to keep doing it. And it's better than it constantly binging at you to tell you things you didn't want to know!

Using cards online… why it might not ask you for "Verified by Visa" passwords any more

If you've ever bought anything online using a Visa or Mastercard credit card, you've probably been asked to set up and use a "Verified by Visa" or "Mastercard Secure" password.

It's a bit like the PIN you use in a shop or a cash machine – but for online use.

You set up the password when you first use the card online. Then when you use the card again it asks you for the password (or a few characters from it) so it can check it really is you.

It's a good system and I definitely recommend using it rather than clicking to say you don't want to.

But if you set it up a while ago, you might have noticed that it stops asking you for the password – or at least doesn't ask very often.

What's happening is the shops will still be contacting Verified by Visa but it won't be asking you for the letters from your password because it recognises your computer or tablet or whatever you're using. It knows it's your device, so it can tell it's not just that someone's stolen your card or your card details.

It'll still sometimes ask anyway, to make certain – but most of the time it won't.

It does make it more convenient because you don't need to remember the password and work out what the 7th (or whichever) character is (you can tell when I'm doing this because I end up counting the letters on my fingers). But the flip side is it means you don't use the password very often… until you're using a different computer, tablet or phone. And then it can be hard to remember it because you hardly ever use it.

So when you set the password up in the first place, best make sure you won't forget it, whether by just making sure you can remember it or using a password manager like LastPass or some other way.

But at least it does save you the fiddle of putting the characters from the password in.

What do I mean by "privacy"?

Privacy is big news. You see articles in the papers or reports on the news on TV about it, though they don't always use the word "Privacy". Sometimes they'll talk about "Data security" or "Keeping personal data safe" or whatever.

It's something that's easy to brush to one side and ignore – but it's actually really important and most people don't know why.

So first of all, what do I mean by privacy?

I'm talking about keeping your information or information about you, private to the people who you mean to be able to see it. It doesn't mean no-one but you can see it – for example if you've emailed your friend Bob, you want Bob to see the email! But you might not want anyone else to read it (particularly if it says when you're going to be away from home, leaving the house unoccupied, for example).

And although it doesn't only apply to computers (CCTV in public places is a hot topic, for example), the issues tend to be with the internet.

Why does it matter?

I've often heard people say things like "Well, I've got nothing to hide, I don't mind if people can tell what I've done".

Fair enough – and in some cases that's reasonable. But not all the time.

Some people just find it feels wrong to know that another person or organisation can read their emails, see what they've put on Facebook for friends to read and even track where they've been (don't worry, I haven't gone mad – there's a good chance Google do actually know when you're out and about – they certainly do with me).

Other people aren't bothered that an organisation based hundreds of miles away know what you're up to. They might even say "Unless you're doing something wrong, why does it matter?"

Well, it depends who is looking at your data… and what they're going to do with it. You might not be worried about the government having access to your data, though it's worth asking whether you trust everyone who works for them

and has access to it… or whether you trust them to make it impossible for a crook to hack in.

But what if a crook or conman is looking at your data – maybe because your wi-fi is set up so it doesn't keep things private. If you shop online they might watch for your credit card number, or a PayPal password – that's something that everyone who shops online should be concerned about.

Even worse are the cleverer crooks – the ones who look for various bits of data about you. They're into what's called identity fraud. For example they might find out enough about you to write to the bank and convince them that they're you – and that you've moved house. So from then on, everything the bank sends you will go to them. Including if they ask for a new chequebook or new debit card and PIN code.

It's easy to push it to one side and think "That'd never happen" – but it does, and the people who it happens to generally thought "That'll never happen to me" as well – until it did.

The secret code that might make your phone easier to use…

I'm not kidding – there really is a secret code. I mean, obviously it's not totally secret, because I know about it (and you will soon, as long as you keep reading). But they're not publicised in any way and the manufacturers and mobile phone companies don't mention them for some reason.

I don't know why, either, because they can be really handy, and it doesn't cost them anything. But there you go, they keep them secret and luckily I'm here to explain!

It's a code for changing how long your smartphone rings before it decides you're not going to answer and goes to answerphone.

Now that might not sound like a big deal, and I suppose it's not like discovering the lost world of Atlantis, but it can be really handy.

I've had several people say they often don't get to their phone in time to answer it – particularly if you keep it in a bag while you're out and about. And particularly if your phone (like mine) starts off quiet and the rings get louder, so you don't hear it at first.

This can avoid that problem.

Exactly how you do it depends on what network you're on – not who made your phone (necessarily) but the company you pay for actually using it. To set it, you need to know the phone number it uses to send your call to voicemail (not necessarily the same as the one you use to call voicemail to check your messages).

Chances are you don't know what number your phone sends calls to, if you don't answer, but luckily it's easy to find out.
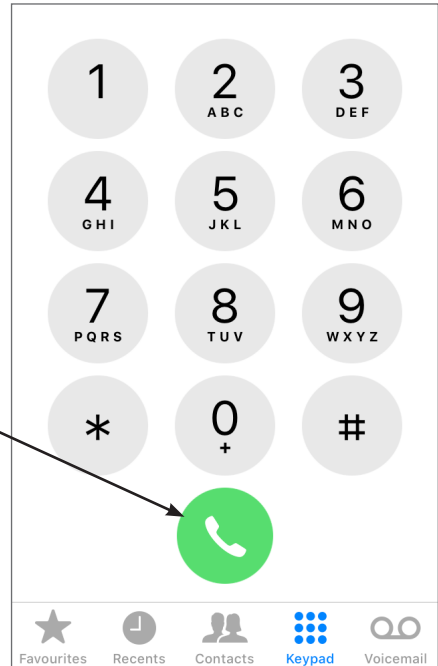
Step 1 – Find out what number it uses to send your call to voicemail

You go onto the keypad, as if you were about to make a call (eg on most phones you tap a symbol of a green phone handle) and tap in:

*#61#

(The * and # symbols are important – don't miss them out!)

Then press the button to actually make a call – usually a green button.

You might have to wait a few seconds and it should tell you what number it diverts the call to if you don't answer. On some phones it might possibly list more than one number, if for example you have it set up to divert faxes and so on as well – if so, look for the one that says "voice forwarding" or "voicemail".

It might also tell you how long it'll take before it goes to voicemail – usually anywhere between 10 seconds and 30 seconds. That's the number I'm showing you how to change.

Anyway, write down the number it lists, including any plus signs. For example, on my phone it's +447953222222 (and if your phone is from EE there's a good chance yours will be the same).

Step 2 – The fiddly bit

Still in the keypad where you can type in a phone number to call you need to type this in:

****61*** then the number you wrote down from above, including the plus sign and the 44 at the start (if you're in the UK, that is) and then ***11*****30#**

All without any spaces. (On an iPhone you might not see the plus – usually you get at it by holding down the 0 key for a second or two.)

Where I've put 30 at the end, just before the #, that'll make it wait 30 seconds before sending the call to voicemail. If you want a different amount of time, simply put it there instead of 30.

Then tap the green "make call" button and after a second or two it should be done. If you get an error message, chances are you've either put in too long a time (you can't make it ring for a hour, for example!) or simply mistyped something – so you'd best try again.

Once it says it's done you can check it's worked by doing the very first step again, where you just typed in ***#61#**

It'll tell you the number and how long it's set for.

Or simply use another phone to call yourself and don't answer, and see how long before you get the voicemail message.

BBC iPlayer

Handy

Website

I know quite a lot of people use the BBC iPlayer website, or their app, to watch TV. It's a great facility – you can watch live TV, but probably more usefully you can watch programmes that were on a while ago.

It's great if you missed something or didn't even know it was on.

It's worth knowing that you do need a TV licence, though. It used to be that you only needed one to watch live TV on it, but that has now changed and you need one even for watching programmes after they were on. (Catch-up TV as they call it.)

Incidentally the rules on watching TV on a mobile phone or a tablet or a laptop if you're not at home are a bit peculiar. If you're watching it on battery power, then as long as you're in the UK, you're covered by your home TV licence. But

if you plug it into the mains it no longer counts as a mobile device and you need to be covered by a licence at that address. (Unless you're in a vehicle – so you can plug it into your car charger or on the train.) Of course most hotels and B&Bs will have a TV licence, so they're likely to be fine, but it might not be if you're in a cafe, say…

If you want to use iPlayer you need to log in or create an account. You can choose to create one, give it a few details about you (including your postcode but not your full address – yet), set up a password and that's it – next time you log in with those details and that's all there is to it.

It also means it can remember what you've watched – of course some people might not like the idea of it remembering things like that – it could cause worries about privacy. But on the other hand it means it can recommend other programmes you might like and let you pick up a programme from the right point after you got part way through it – even if you're watching it on a different device.
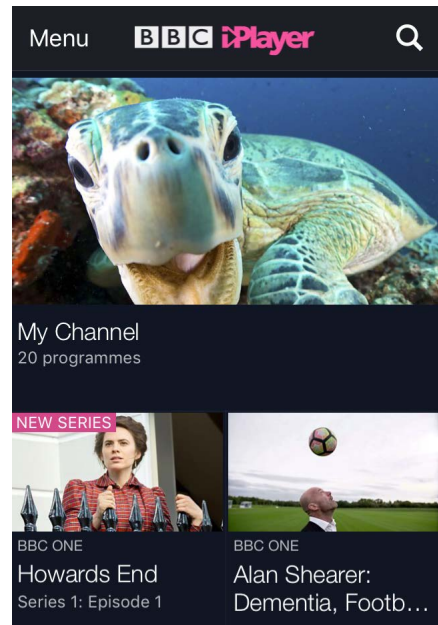
BBC iPlayer (again) and why I'm not writing this article

After my last email (about BBC iPlayer and having to log in to it) several people asked a few questions. And since different people were asking the same things, I thought "I bet other people are wondering the same" – so here are the answers in case you're one of them.

The main question was what if you're over 75? People were worried that they wouldn't be able to use iPlayer if it started demanding a TV licence because being over 75 they didn't need one.

Well, the new login isn't linked to TV licences – at least not yet. I suspect it will be at some point, but the BBC haven't said when. So to begin with you just need to create a (free) login when it asks you to, give it a few details (your name, postcode and some other bits and pieces) and that's it.

But what happens if and when they do link it to licences, so you have to give it your TV licence number?

Well, I've had a read up on this and as far as I can make out (I'm no lawyer) when you reach 75 you do still need a TV licence – it's just that you don't have to pay for it. (And I'm not sure whether you have to renew it every year or the same one just carries on forever.)

I must admit I've no idea how strict they are on this and whether there are lots of over 75s who don't have a licence at all – it might be that the BBC don't worry about it since the licence would be free anyway or it might be that they're very strict – I have no idea.

So even if you do have to put a licence number in at some point at the future, if you're over 75 you should have a free licence (or can get one) and you'll then be able to put that licence number into it and have free access to iPlayer, just like to conventional TV.

A scam that's fairly new, as far as I know

What happens is you get an email saying you've been caught speeding in London (or wherever) and you have to pay a fine.

Of course you might think "But I don't live anywhere near London (or wherever it is) so that can't be true". Here's where it gets sneaky.

There'll be a link in the email to click to watch video footage from the camera that "caught" you. And if you know it couldn't have been you because you don't live there, there's a good chance you'll want to click it to find out how they got it wrong… and so you can reply saying "that wasn't me, you've got it wrong".

But when you click the link, it takes you to some dodgy site that installs nasty stuff on your computer – again it might be something that watches for any card details you enter.

And though I say computer, if they're clever, it'll check whether you're on a

computer or tablet or smartphone and on some devices could install dodgy stuff on a tablet or phone as well.

Even if you have it set up to check with you before allowing it to install anything, it would probably say something like "To watch this video you need to install SpeedCamViewerFree – click OK to go ahead" to get you to tap or click on OK – only SpeedCamViewerFree would actually install whatever dodgy programs they wanted to get onto your device.

If they're really clever, they'd then show you some unrelated speed camera footage, just so you don't realise you've been scammed, at least straight away.

So if you get an email like this, don't click the link. If you're worried maybe you really have got a speeding ticket, ring up the relevant department (best get their phone number from the internet, not from the email – I don't know for sure but they might have put a fake phone number that goes to their own people in the email) and ask. You need to look for the number for your regional police force and look for the Fixed Penalty Unit or the Central Ticket Office or something like that – they have different names in different places.

Phew – definitely the less pleasant side of the internet. On the other hand, I suppose, the internet and email makes it much easier for me to warn you about them, so there's definitely a bright side too.

"Hang on Tim you twerp"…

Julie got a new phone last week, and as she was setting it up, I mentioned something I find useful on my phone (and that you might use on a phone or tablet, too)…

Quick Tip

…and then I thought to myself "Hang on Tim you twerp, why haven't you told everyone about this?" So here you go…

Passcodes

Most people have their smartphones set up with some kind of passcode on it, so that when you turn it on you need to type a pass number in, or draw a special shape or whatever. Some phones even check it's you by looking at your face or fingerprint or even your voice.

And I'd definitely recommend you have something like this set up. It can be a bit of a pain, having to type a number in every time, but it means if you lose your phone or someone steals it, they can't get at all the things you've got on it.

More importantly, they can't use it to pretend to be you – otherwise they might be able to (for example) email your bank to tell them to change the details on your account, and if your bank then calls or texts you to check it's really you, they'd simply answer the call or reply to the text.

That's just an example – there are lots of other reasons you don't want other people getting access to your phone.

It doesn't matter too much whether you use a number you have to type in or one of the other methods to keep it secure – but the pass number is the most common method.

But as I say, it can be a bit of a pain to have to type it in every time. And that's where the useful thing I was telling Julie about comes in.

"Trusted locations"

On most Android phones (but not on iPhones unfortunately), you can set a "trusted location" (eg your home). It works on the basis that if your phone is at home, it probably hasn't been stolen! So if the phone can tell that it's at the trusted location, then you don't need to use the pass number. If you're not there, then you need to use it.

It saves the hassle of typing the number in each time if you're at home, but gives you the security of having it if you're not at home.

How you set it up depends on exactly what phone you have – on mine (a Samsung), you go into Settings, then scroll to Security and tap on it. Then tap on Smart Lock.

Then you can tap on Trusted Places and tell it that where you are at the moment is a place you trust – a place it doesn't need to ask you for a passcode.

There are a few other options there – if you have a car with bluetooth for example, you can set it up as a "Trusted device", so that when you're in your car it should remain unlocked. But the most useful option (I think) is the trusted location or trusted places one.

← Smart Lock ⋮

On-body detection
Keep your device unlocked while it's on you

Trusted places
Keep device unlocked at Home

Trusted devices
Add device to keep this one unlocked when it's nearby

Trusted face
Set up facial recognition

Trusted voice
Set up voice recognition
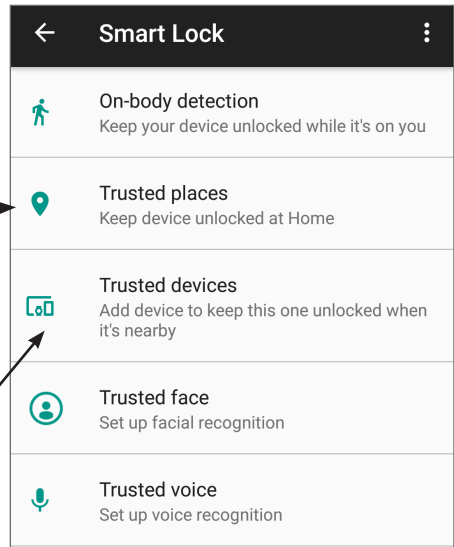
It's not perfect – sometimes it doesn't realise I'm at home and demands a passcode when it shouldn't. But I'd rather it was that way round that the other way round.

Anyway, I mentioned it to Julie and she set it up and found it useful – it might be something you'd find handy, too.

Sir Humphrey on the latest technology

Today, I'm taking my inspiration from Sir Humphrey.

You know, from Yes, Minister. Did you ever watch it? You should – it's hilarious. A bit dated now, but hilarious.

(There was even an episode about the government trying to bring in a computerised database with all the worries about privacy that involved.)

Anyway, I've been looking at all the new equipment – new iPhones, tablets and so on that Apple, Google and the rest are planning over the next year or so. And all the updates and tweaks they're talking about.

And it reminded me of a question I get asked every so often (but I suspect nearly everyone asks themselves).

It's this:

Do I really need to keep it all up to date?

Do I really need an the latest smartphone, computer or tablet? Do I need all these updates it keeps telling me about? Does it matter if I prefer an older version of Windows?

Do I – yes or no?

And here's where I put my Sir Humphrey hat on: "If pushed to answer, I'd say yes and no".

But don't worry, because unlike Sir Humphrey I'll explain in plain English what I mean.

When it comes to having the latest device, you certainly don't need to keep up to date. You can if you like, but it'll cost you a lot more and within 6 months it won't be the latest version any more anyway! As long as your tablet/ phone/computer does what you want it to, don't feel you need to stay bang up to date.

So that's "no, you don't need to keep up to date".

Then there are updates to your operating system – that's the system that actually runs your device. Windows for most PCs or laptops, or Android or iOS for most tablets or phones. These are the things that your device will normally do (or at least ask you if it can do) automatically. They fix bugs in the system, add features, make it less likely to crash and most importantly fix security problems.

And because of that last one (fixing security problems), this is really important. If you don't have the latest updates, your device is at risk of being attacked by hackers. So in this case it is really important to stay up to date – you really do need the latest updates. The good news is you don't have to pay for them (or to look at it a different way, they're included in the price of buying the device) and they should happen automatically as long as you don't decide to turn them off or tell it not to install one it asks to.

What about versions of Windows? The latest is Windows 10 – do you need to have that or are you fine using an earlier one if you're happy with it? Well, the answer to this one is another "it depends". If you have Windows 10, that's fine of course. If you have Windows 8.1 or 7, that's fine too for now. If you have Windows Vista or XP, that's only a good idea if you don't use it on the internet.

Why? Well, it's to do with those updates I said about – the ones I said you do need to stay up to date with. Microsoft are no longer making these for Windows XP or Vista, so they're no longer fixing security holes in them. So you shouldn't use them on the internet.

Windows 7 is still getting security updates until January 2020 and Windows 8.1 until January 2023.

So there you go – there are some things you really do need to stay up to date with and some you don't need to worry about – now you know which is which.

Wooooooo – is your PC or tablet haunting you?

My boys love halloween. They always do love spooky things.

And I must admit all the spookiness can be quite fun – telling them stories about haunted houses and so on.

It's not so much fun when it's your laptop or PC haunting you, though. Or your tablet or smartphone.

You know those ghosts that follow you around, from room to room in an old castle so that no matter where you are, they're there, haunting you? (Know them from films, I mean, probably not from actual experience, unless you do live in a haunted castle.)

Well, your PC, tablet or smartphone could be like that.

I mean, there are enough different things to be scared about on devices like this. Viruses, trojans, spyware, worms and so on…

But as well as all those, there's something called a keylogger

As the name suggests, it logs or records every key you press. Then it sends that information to the people who wrote it.

That might sound harmless enough, but what they're looking for is where you've typed a password in. Then if they know you were on a particular website at that time, they know the password for it and can get in. In some cases that might not matter too much – but if it's say a bank website or even your email account, it could be a real problem.

So, what can you do?

Well, the most important thing is to have decent security software running – one of the well known anti-viruses like McAfee, Norton, Kaspersky or so on. If you have Windows 10, Defender is already built in and you'd have to work quite hard to not have something running to keep you safe.

If you have a tablet or smartphone, more important than security software is making sure it's not set up to allow you to install unofficial apps (because keyloggers aren't official ones!). On Apple devices it's really hard to set it up to allow unofficial apps, so you won't have done it by accident.

On Android devices, you need to make sure you don't change the setting to allow it to install apps from "unknown sources" – it's not that every app from unknown sources is bad, but keeping it set to not allow it keeps you safer.

Then you also should be sensible with what you install and so on – installing things from dodgy websites (eg illegal downloads of movies and so on) puts you at risk of things like keyloggers. Similarly, if you get an email from someone you've never heard of, telling you to open the attachment, you're best off deleting it.

That should keep you safe from keyloggers and mean you don't have to worry about your device being haunted.

Style advice from a bunch of silicon chips

FANCY TECH

You've probably heard about how Amazon have developed various devices that they hope you'll have dotted around your house – that can listen to you and do what you say. "Alexa, play me some music" you can say, and it will. Or "Alexa, what's the world record for balancing tea cups on top of each other?". Or "Alexa, order me a new broom and dust pan."

They have various other specific gadgets, too, and different apps you can install on them.

I was reading about one today that has a camera built into it – and if you stand in front of it, it will look at the clothes you're wearing and give you style advice based on "machine learning algorithms with advice from fashion specialists."

Now, I'm all for clever technology, but I'm not sure I'm keen on letting a bunch of silicon chips decide what my best look is.

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Who Is Tim?

Tim started off by jotting down notes explaining how to use the PC for his Mum and Dad. Then he started adding pictures of the screen to make it clearer – and eventually thought "Other people might find this helpful, not just Mum and Dad". That's when he set up The Helpful Book Company.

Over 300,000 copies of his books later, it turns out he was right – other people do find the books helpful! He's written about using PCs, tablets like the iPad and smartphones, along with books on other technology related topics like protecting your privacy or using Facebook.

As well as his books, he also writes a helpful weekly email called "Tim's Tech Tips".

You can sign up for it (free) at www.helpfulbooks.co.uk and every week you'll get tips, advice and Tim's view on any technology that's in the news.