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Tech Talk

Tech Tragicomedies ©

by John McCarthy

Hello and a warm welcome to Tech Talk. It's a positive pleasure to be back here on EnglishWaves after a four-month hiatus. Since the very beginning of this series, we've been concentrating on the heady triumphs of technology. Few would dispute the fact that over the last two or three decades, especially in the fields of medicine and science, we've greatly improved our chances of living long, healthy and personally rewarding lives, to an extent that our grandparents wouldn't even have dreamed.

However, we should never ignore that some technologies are at the root of much human suffering, and may yet lead us to a bleak, dystopian future reminiscent of Orwell's 1984. Contrary to what some would have us believe, our advances are not always the result of meticulous research and planning; some of our most important discoveries _ penicillin, for instance, which has saved the lives of billions - have been the result of serendipity dropping in to lend us a helping hand. Furthermore, humanity's tech history is riddled with tragicomic glitches that have on occasion, just like Icarus and for perhaps the very same reasons, brought us crashing back down to earth and underlined our frail follies and foibles.

If you'd like examples of these, just go to Youtube and watch some of the early films of attempts to build flying machines. Remember the Titanic, which was rather arrogantly dubbed as unsinkable and perished on its maiden voyage, along with over fifteen hundred souls? In the world of medicine, there was the tragic thalidomide episode in the 1960s where thousands of pregnant women took this drug to overcome morning sickness believing it was totally safe, and yet it led to death and malformation and remains to this day one of the darkest chapters of modern medicine. On a lighter note, some of you may recall the single-seater Sinclair C5, an electric tricycle with pedal assist, unveiled back in 1985. It was described as the future of transport: a non-polluting machine, capable of taking drivers wherever they wanted to go, which would soon replace oversized, petrol-guzzling cars. Alas, it proved to be an unmitigated disaster, perhaps because it didn't appeal to image-conscious buyers. I remember an eminent politician who worked in the Ministry of Transport at the time, when asked why he wouldn't buy one, replied off record: 'Because I don't want to look like a prat'.

Even tech giants Apple sometimes get it wrong. The Newton immediately comes to mind. This was a small, inexpensive, pen-based computing device that could accompany you everywhere and would be simple enough for everyone to use. It had a five-year, rather turbulent existence and was indeed close to death many times before finally receiving the coup de grâce in 1998. Of course, since then Apple has become the richest company in the world.

Featuring in the news recently – and not for the best of reasons – is the new helmet for the Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth fighter, available for a paltry €360,000. This hi-tech, state-of-the-art, must-have optional extra is linked to six cameras embedded in the jet, which combine

images to provide a perfectly circular 360° view, giving the pilot crucial information on airspeed, heading, altitude and a host of other useful data to increase efficiency and improve reflexes. The only problem is what has been euphemistically described by the UK Ministry of Defence – which has bought a number of these jets - as quote "unresolved issues" unquote. Rumours are rife that the helmet is potentially dangerous to lightweight pilots, who could break their necks if they eject.

In fact, the entire F-35 project has been plagued by problems, design flaws and delays, suffering one setback after another. It's been named 'Lightning II', which is rather ironic given well-founded fears the plane could explode if struck by its namesake natural phenomenon. The jets are therefore not allowed to fly anywhere near storms. In fact recently the entire fleet was unceremoniously grounded and testing suspended after one of the planes caught fire; they've also suffered well-documented cracks from head to tail. Other issues: concerns over its computer systems' vulnerability and reports that hackers from unfriendly countries may have pilfered classified data, flight control problems, placement of the jet's fuel tanks, numerous components of the aircraft have proved to be unreliable, ever-increasing costs … the epitome of Murphy's Law.

Pierre Sprey, a former Pentagon analyst who helped design the F-16, had this to say: "It's one of the worst airplanes we've ever designed … the airplane is a complete mess"

Ouch! However, every cloud has a silver lining and this could prove to be manna from heaven for the Rafale. 2015 has been a good year for Dassault and you may remember that earlier this year French President François Hollande flew to Doha and signed a €6.3 billion deal with the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, for the sale of 24 Rafale fighter jets. Egypt also agreed to purchase 24 of these multirole fighters, and talks with India are still under way. Things are certainly looking up, and this could be the subject of a future Tech Talk.

That's all we have time for today; thank you for your company and do join me again for another edition of Tech Talk next week, courtesy of Englishwaves.fr.

Bye for now.