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Reports of the death of the PC are greatly exaggerated

Tablets may be selling like hot cakes but there will always be a place – and a market – for the personal computer

Unless you have been holidaying on Mars, you will have gathered that Apple launched a new version of its iPad some time ago. [. . .] Granted, it has a significantly better display, a more powerful processor (therefore better graphics performance), a better camera and a wider range of mobile connectivity options. But otherwise, it's the mixture as before. [. . .]

The presentation was led by Tim Cook, Apple's new CEO, who had one fascinating slide. It showed that in the last quarter Apple had sold 15.4 million iPads. In the same quarter, Acer, Dell, Lenovo and HP – the world's four leading manufacturers of PCs – sold 9.8 million, 11.9 million, 13 million and 15.1 million PCs respectively. This demonstrates, Cook declared, the extent to which we have moved into a "post-PC" world – a world which, he implied, would continue to be dominated by Apple. [. . .]

So are we indeed entering a "post-PC" world? Most of the attention at the moment is focused on trying to predict the "crossover point" – when the graph of rising tablet sales intersects the curve of declining PC sales. Estimates of when that will happen range from 2014 to 2017 or even later. But even when the crossover happens, it still won't signal a post-PC universe, for a variety of reasons.

Sales of new devices, for example, ignore the fact that there is a colossal number of PCs in the world, most of them owned and operated by businesses whose purchasing decisions are very different from those of individuals. To date, the iPad frenzy has been mainly a consumer phenomenon. That doesn't mean companies aren't buying tablets, just that they're not doing it at the same pace as consumers are. And their huge investment in large networks of PCs running Microsoft Windows means that a move to tablets would require radical changes in their IT infrastructures. Companies won't make those changes lightly in a tough economic climate, especially if their boring old PCs are providing a "good enough" service – which most probably are. [. . .]

Predictions of a post-PC world are just the latest example of what the computer scientist John Seely Brown calls "endism" – the idea that a new technology signals the end of an older one. The reality is more mundane. While the newcomer does indeed disrupt things and take over parts of the ecosystem, the established species adjust and retreat to the habitats where they have significant advantages.

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