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There's nothing like a good debate around the saloon table on a stormy night, but computer access to facts is threatening the fun

I've weathered many a storm down south, offshore, inshore and at anchor. The latter is always the preferred location given a choice. With lines to the rocks or trees, well-secured with wind whistling through the rigging and no need of an anchor watch, it should be an enjoyable, if not an inspiring experience.

During lengthy periods hunkered down, when not reading from our extensive library or writing in our journals, we defaulted to the art of conversation at the saloon table, usually over a bowl of popcorn and a bottle. Lively debates evolving into full-blown arguments were common.

Obscure topics left open to conjecture could be the distance from the sun to Neptune, the politics of Nepal or, more likely, Wales; why and how the National Health Service was failing, or the merits of Shackleton versus Scott. Some questions, such as when did Captain Alan first make an appearance in the *Tintin* series, were easily answered as we had the entire collection on board. *Bowditch, the American Practical Navigator* was also a mine of information to settle nautical questions.

But many discussions festered on, sometimes for days, argued by half truths, assumptions or pure bluffing – much to the amusement of the spectators who were loosely involved.

This banter fundamentally changed when my mate Hamish, a computer guru still arguing the merits of DOS long after Windows made an appearance, came on board with an Encarta Encyclopedia dongle. It must have been around 1995. I will never forget when Julian and Matt were hotly debating the chemical methodology of distillation – a fine topic indeed – Hamish smugly plugged in the Encarta dongle and proceeded to read out nine pages of text to settle the argument of how, in fact, it all worked.

He thrust his hand into the bowl of popcorn to signal the end of the speech. We had just heard the bald truth, and the truth was ugly. An awkward silence ensued as we all came to realise what had just happened.

From that point forward we tended to stay away from argument that could easily be solved by accessible fact and instead invented conundrums to ponder over. In spite of this, as the Nineties closed out, more and more computers started to come aboard and with them an inverse proportion of philosophical discussion around the table.

A further devolution of social interaction occurred from around 2005 when digital photography became well established. On a once-in-a-lifetime cruise to Antarctica recording the images was paramount and if digital gear was not to be trusted theretofore – the oven was used to cook out the moisture from many of the earlier models – by then it was the norm. Formerly, with print and slide film, there was nothing to do but reload for tomorrow and clean the lens.

Now, after a long day out of doors, we would all retreat to the main saloon for a cocktail, but instead of settling down in conversation, editing pictures had taken over the table, hardly leaving room for the hors d'oeuvres and drinks, the settee a tangle of cables, chargers and hard drives, as we all struggled to download, back up and edit out the rubbish – in the thousands per day.

I am happy to report, however, that technology has finally triumphed and made this digital filing so efficient and generally foolproof that time and space has once again been created and we are slowly relearning the attractions of debate.

On our last trip this August, it was back to Scott versus Amundsen to the South Pole, and Shackleton came out on top as the supreme leader of men in polar travel. Argued more by emotion than by the facts we had to hand, I felt I had come full circle back to the joys of 26 years ago on that first voyage south.

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