

On Twain, Typewriters, and Technology

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For many ACE members, our feelings about the bundle of electronic innovations we call “communication technology” depend on the day you ask us. On good days, we’re thankful for progress; on bad days, some of us long for simpler times.

Creative folk have always faced the technology dilemma, and this dilemma dates back to well before computers. Consider the case of Mark Twain, for instance, whose amusing brush with technology is discussed in a recent issue of *The Writer* (Leddy, 2007). In this brief article, we discover that the famed writer and humorist was in fact what diffusion scholars would call an “early adopter” of the leading-edge communication technology of his day: the mechanical typewriter.

But in 1874, after shelling out \$125 for the newfangled writing machine, he became exasperated with its clumsiness and its limitations, which included sticking keys and the inability to produce lowercase letters. Twain’s frustrations with the clunky contraption continued to mount, and before long, he traded it to an acquaintance for a \$12 saddle.

One of the most interesting aspects of the story (beyond the existence of a \$12 saddle!) is the notion of a communicator having the option to *reject* technology and still be successful. Granted, unlike Twain, we are not all early adopters of communication technologies. But through our ACE SIGs and other professional activities, agricultural and applied communicators are on the cutting edge of new technologies. As a group, we realize that we must master their use and integrate them with existing communication tools and media. Further, we must conduct and use research to measure and understand their educational impacts and consequences. Refusing to accept these challenges is not a socially or professionally responsible option.

As I’ve argued previously, the *Journal of Applied Communications* is our venue for documenting and archiving this important work. I want to thank several of our colleagues for their contributions in this issue. Margaret Herring and her distinguished coauthors share advice and insights that help make the case for the importance of communication units, while also providing tips for managing change. David Doerfert and René Miller discuss data that can help enhance undergraduate agricultural communications curricula. Jamie King and her coauthors discuss how three major U.S. newspapers covered the first case of BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) in 2003. Rebecca McGovney-Ingram and coauthors discuss

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results of an ACE member survey that describes the U.S.-based membership. Finally, Bob Rost and his coauthors provide a critical perspective on the impact reporting process.

In addition, I want to introduce a longtime friend and ACE veteran who is now assisting us with the JAC. Dennis Hinkamp has many great ideas for building the professional development content of future issues. I'm excited about this collaboration and the positive editorial dividends it will soon yield. His column follows.

By the way, don't think less of Twain for his rejection of communication technology. The article goes on to say that within 10 years of casting off his first writing machine, he bought another one, and was actually the first U.S. writer to produce a typewritten manuscript for a publisher.

Reference

Leddy, C. (2007, June). First "typewriting machine" infuriated Twain. *The Writer*, 120, 8-9.