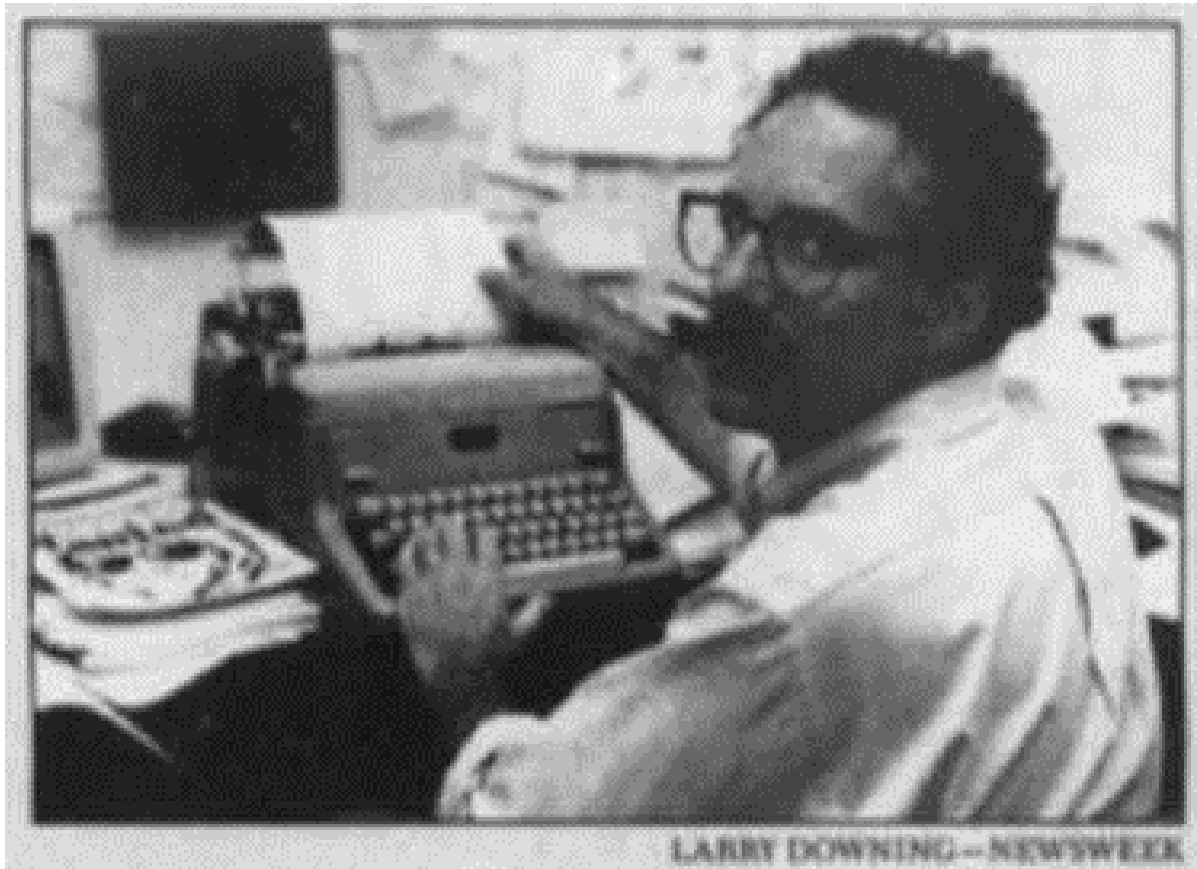


# Requiem for the Typewriter

It was once a great machine—and for me, it still is

Robert J. Samuelson

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IT WAS INEVITABLE SOONER OR LATER. THE LAST GREAT name in American typewriters was bound to self-destruct, bringing to a formal conclusion something that had long ago ended. It happened last week with the bankruptcy of Smith Corona, which once produced manual portable typewriters that were hauled off to college and elsewhere by millions of Americans, including me. In the office next to mine sits a summer college intern busily tapping at his Macintosh PowerBook (nobody ever “bangs” at a laptop). That’s what killed the typewriter.

Just for the record, this column is being written on an old Royal manual. In the combat between computers and typewriters, my loyalties lie with the losers. For writing, the typewriter still has advantages over a computer. Writing is the grinding process of discovering the right flow of words to convey a story, feeling, explanation or argument. Mistakes, fake starts and revisions are not only inevitable. They are essential.

You need them. A phrase that didn’t fit at 10 in the morning may, by 3 in the afternoon, be exactly what you need.

The virtue of the typewriter is that it saves my blunders. I rip out my incoherent draffs and spread them across my desk, where I scavenge for serviceable phrases. The typewriter’s other appeal is that it compels me to rewrite by making me retype. Every rewrite suggests some superior word or *exposes* some sloppy construction. No doubt,

computers can deliver similar benefits. Drafts can be printed. But why bother? The typewriter is simpler. I am not utterly hostile to the computer. Once the main composing is complete. I punch my draft into an old IBM PC. which makes the final editing much easier.

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*In its time, it was almost as important as the computer is today*

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By last week, of course, all these issues had been decisively settled against the typewriter. The quality of writing may not have advanced with the computer. but the ease of "processing" and printing words surely has. Gibberish can quickly be made to look neat and impressive. Smith Corona's bankruptcy was merely a symbolic benchmark. The company may ultimately emerge from bankruptcy. and a few other typewriter makers survive. Still, the traditional typewriter is dead.

Its passing deserves notice. What is worth recalling is that, in its time, the typewriter was every bit as revolutionary as today's computer. It was a great feat of design and manufacturing that transformed work and women's role in society. As with most great inventions, its commercial birth was slow and hard. The first modern typewriter was built in 1867 by a Milwaukee inventor named Christopher Latham Sholes. It was also Sholes who devised today's universal keyboard (qwerty).

Early typewriters succeeded technically and failed financially. Production costs were too high. Output didn't soar until the late 1880s. after manufacturing rights had been sold to another company. Economic historian Donald Hoke says the typewriter was "the most complex mechanism mass produced by American industry" in the 19th century because (as one factory manager said) "its thousands of parts must work together with exquisite exactness, yet withstand hard usage "

Mark Twain was a pioneer. "It piles an awful stack of words on one page. It don't muss things or scatter ink blots around," he wrote to his brother in 1874. Twain submitted the first typewritten book manuscript to a publisher. He identified it as "Tom Sawyer" (1876), though some historians think he erred and the distinction belongs to "Life on the Mississippi" (1883). But the typewriter's largest impact was on women and the American office, which was until the late 19th century a male bastion.

Consider. In 1870. men constituted 98 percent of all clerical workers. Most took dictation, copied documents or ran errands. By 1920, half the clerical workers were women. The typewriter had created a demand for literate workers that could be easily filled only by women who - in the 19th century - outnumbered men among high-school graduates. Schools were established for typists, who numbered 615,000 by 1920. Although these jobs were later stigmatized as oppressing women, they were initially liberal. Until then, teaching had been the job outlet for educated women. And typists'

pay was attractive: in the 1890s. \$6 to \$15 a week compared with \$1.50 to \$8 for factory workers.

The typewriter is unappreciated because it has always reflat because it has by more imposing technologies. At the tum of the century, there was the telephone, electric light and automobile. Now there is the computer. I do feel guilty that I am not fully participating- wow. that's a wild understatement - in the great technology ex-ent of our time. The feeling fades, though, whenever Newsweek's computer system crashes or I hear someone complaining about the tedium of learning a new "word processing" program, whose purported advances have zip to do with writing.

Computers can of course, provide vast amounts of information. Databases and documents can be downloaded; web sites can be accessed (I'm flaunting my computer jargon here.) But getting information has never been my problem; the hard part is deciding what it means. Among computer enthusiasts. I have not detected any increase in knowledge or wisdom. Mainly, they seem to have more time to waste buzzing around cyberspace At home, my wife and children have a more powerful machine than my original IBM PC. which is all I truly need. I keep waiting for something that will entice me to become a computer buff.

Until then. I'm sticking with my Royal. It won't give me e-mail. But I don't want e-mail. Nor will it play games when I ought to write. Good. Getting parts is a problem. My local repair shop recently closed. I've now found a new one about 20 miles away that, although it handles mostly electronic machines, will still fix manuals. The manager tells me on the phone that there aren't many manual customers left. Well, there's one more coming.

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