



"Underwood"  
© Pedro Meyer

## Most people never had...

Nowadays, when we discuss about new technologies, and I hear that they are not available to everyone, I wonder when was that, if ever, the case? Certainly those Underwood typewriters which today look to us as having such a romantic aura to them, were never something that was available to the masses.

To begin with, you needed some basic skills to use them, first would be the knowledge of the language you are writing in, and then the other is that you need to know how to type. Not everyone has those skills. That has not changed today with new technologies either, regardless if you are using a computer or an Underwood typewriter there are certain abilities you require in order to make it work for you.

What we had in Mexico in the fifties, for those that needed to write love letters and did not know how to write them, or those in need of filling out forms and who did not have a typewriter, was for someone to help.

A scribe sitting on the street at a minuscule table together with his typewriter and open for business was the solution. Some fifty years later, the only thing that changed is the type of typewriter being used. Today they are using IBM electric typewriters, but still no computers with word processors.



© Pedro Meyer

It's fascinating to observe how very slow the pace is at which new technologies are being implemented in certain areas that are resistant to change. One could also think of the dark room in certain schools of photography as the equivalent of these street scribes that do not find it convenient to move from the analog world to the digital one, even though everything around them is moving in that direction. I am sure they have very legitimate reasons to justify their decisions; in the case of the electric typewriter it would be that you have the equivalent of a printer and the word processor all rolled into one very easy to deal with unit.



Mexico 2007 © Pedro Meyer

I do believe that all these new technologies that the digital world tends to offer, are not conceived to be so easy to use. Increasingly they become more and more complex, even though their price tends to come down. However, with regard to these complexities it's only a matter of time, when due to competition, they will also make products that are far easier to use.

As that happens over time, they will also become more accessible to most everyone. One good example are digital watches, that are so cheap that most people have access to owning one, and not because they are cheap do they necessarily become unreliable. Telling time was something that at one point in history was done mainly by instruments only accesible to a very few, let alone being reliable.<sup>1</sup> This is not how things are anymore today.



Quito, Pichincha, (Ecuador). Mayo, 2002 © Pedro Meyer

New technologies, have always been associated with changes related with how things are done, and how things can be done is usually associated with new cultural possibilities.

I still recall some fifty years ago, when migrant farm workers came to the city to find a way of making a living, they had a hard time adapting to the notion of time that was used in the factories at which they sought work. The notion of producing along shorter periods of time than their usual sunrise and sunset references, was not such an easy transition to adapt to. Such concepts we tend to forget today as we take for granted that everyone understands time in the same manner. Well, neither is time the same all over the world, nor are the notions of how technologies can be adopted.

**Pedro Meyer**  
*Coyoacan, Mexico*  
*May, 2007*

---

(1) In 1714, the British Parliament offered a cash reward to anyone who could invent a clock accurate enough for use in navigation at sea. Thousands of sailors died because they were unable to find their exact position, because the exact time was needed to find longitude, and pendulum clocks would not work at sea. For every minute lost by a clock, it meant that there would be a navigational error of 15 miles, and sailors died because they were lost or smashed against rocks because they were unable to figure out their exact position. Then, in 1761, after 4 attempts, John Harrison finally succeeded at inventing a small clock accurate enough to use for navigation at sea. This tiny pocket watch lost only 5 seconds in 6 and ½ weeks.