
UCF Forum

4-24-2019

Notes From a Digital Immigrant: Travels Abroad in Cyberspace

Alvin Wang

University of Central Florida, Alvin.Wang@ucf.edu

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum>

STARS Citation

Wang, Alvin, "Notes From a Digital Immigrant: Travels Abroad in Cyberspace" (2019). *UCF Forum*. 353.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/353>

Information presented on this website is considered public information (unless otherwise noted) and may be distributed or copied. Use of appropriate byline/photo/image credit is requested. We recommend that UCF data be acquired directly from a UCF server and not through other sources that may change the data in some way. While UCF makes every effort to provide accurate and complete information, various data such as names, telephone numbers, etc. may change prior to updating.

This Opinion column is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in UCF Forum by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact lee.dotson@ucf.edu.



Notes From a Digital Immigrant: Travels Abroad in Cyberspace

By Alvin Wang
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, April 24, 2019



I admit it. I am not a digital native. I was born in the 1950s and completed my graduate studies in 1980. Because I teach at UCF, I encounter a new group of college freshmen every fall semester—digital natives—who are constant reminders of my immigrant status.

So I now find myself washed up on the webbed shores of information technology (IT) where I rely on much younger students and colleagues to help me navigate new systems

and applications. This makes me a pilgrim and in order to survive I need help from digital natives.

Marc Prensky, a writer and speaker on education, coined the terms “digital native” and “digital immigrant” in his essay *On the Horizon* (2001). He points out that while digital immigrants can learn IT and become quite proficient at its uses, digital immigrants will think differently and process information in different ways from digital natives who are socialized in highly digitized, information-rich environments. Even with high levels of IT proficiency, digital immigrants will still retain a “footprint” or “accent” from their analog pasts. But no matter how skilled I am at an application such as PowerPoint, my accent gives me away as a digital immigrant. (Another giveaway: gray hair.)

When I was in grade school, we had lessons on using dictionaries and encyclopedias. I’m referring to hardcopy, carbon-based dictionaries and encyclopedias because that was all we had. It would be well after I completed my graduate studies that online dictionaries, Google and Wikipedia would become commonplace.

By the time I was in college, pocket calculators were starting to supplant slide rules. However, in the early 1970s, few of us had a pocket calculator because the one with a square root function still cost several thousand dollars. My first “mobile” device was a pocket calculator that I purchased as a graduate student. I remember that it was made by Casio and had a square root function, played musical tunes, and even told time. I thought it was the bee’s knees. (For digital natives unfamiliar with this term, an online dictionary defines bee’s knees as an anachronistic phrase denoting excellence).

In graduate school it became clear to me that despite my digital shortcomings, I needed to embrace information technology or die.

In graduate school it became clear to me that despite my digital shortcomings, I needed to embrace information technology or die. This was because my dissertation required complex statistical analyses that were beyond the scope of pocket calculators, even the ones with a square root function. Because my survival instincts were intact, I loaded all my data onto 80-column IBM punch cards. In those days, it was common to see graduate students carrying shoe boxes on campus. I was one of those students.

This was because large data sets required hundreds of punch cards that could easily be transported in a shoe box. The next step was to compile punch-card data to be analyzed. On our campus this required a card reader that converted punch-card data into an optical tape format. Back then optical tape was made of paper in which holes were machine-punched according to the octal numeral system. That is, a base-8 system (imagine that you learned to count having only eight fingers). As a member of the original geek squad, I actually learned to count in octal because there was a need to visually inspect tape when there was no access to an optical tape reader.

I remember my first portable computer in the mid-1980s. The term “portable” is used advisedly as it weighed a whopping 28 pounds. When secured in its case, it looked and felt like a hefty sewing machine. My Compaq had 128k of RAM, operated at 4.77 MHz,

and was MS-DOS based. But it did have its own built-in keyboard and a nine-inch monochromatic green monitor. I thought it was the bee's knees.

Despite many successes, my transition as an immigrant to the digital nation has been uneven. It was only recently that I gave up my “dumb” phone. You know, the kind that only does voice. When I tell my students that I still don't text on my new smartphone, I immediately set myself apart generationally and digitally.

So where does this leave me? As a digital immigrant I am grateful for the resources and support that is available in our webbed universe. Much like the colonial pilgrims, I need help in order to survive and the digital natives who are my students and colleagues have always been generous in their support. My students are especially eager to assist me and I appreciate when the student has become the teacher with a great deal of humility on my part. I also appreciate that the digital nation is a highly accessible democracy with permeable borders.

Global communication by multimedia, memes going viral, and the rapid creation of online communities are developments for which there is no turning back. The digital landscape is my adopted home now, but I still have memories of my pre-digital motherland.

Perhaps when I have grandkids sitting on my lap, I'll begin my story “When I was your age going to school, they made me use a dictionary—yeah, the paper kind!”

Alvin Wang resumed his role as a professor in the University of Central Florida's Department of Psychology this year after serving 11 years as dean of the Burnett Honors College. He can be reached at Alvin.Wang@ucf.edu.