Twain’s Brand and the Modern Mood

Twain’s Brand explores how, in ways that Mark Twain anticipated, contemporary humor encapsulates American culture today, especially elements related to our postindustrial economy based on global trade in electronic and print media, performances, and other forms of intellectual property. Of the many links among comedy, commerce, and culture, two stand out. First of all, humor can be understood, like all interpersonal communication, as an economic transaction in which the customer is always right. The humorist exchanges a comic gambit (an idea or representation in a joke, cartoon, or other form, including play with the rules or codes of language) with an audience whose laughter, applause, or other symbolic response specifies what’s funny, how funny it is, and what’s not funny at all. Second, the capitalism underlying American popular culture explicitly makes the humor audience a real rather than metaphorical customer and a commodity in its own right. That is, in today’s marketing-driven economy, customers are not only an audience who purchase entertainment, often via mass media, but also a demographic commodity for sale to advertisers. For their part, advertisers aim for the audience of readers, viewers, and consumers to identify as a community and vote as a bloc—always with dollars, sometimes also with ballots. The language of the ludicrous inflects contemporary American culture from entertainment to business and politics as a result, because the postindustrial, information economy of today trades in ideas, attitudes, and audiences—the stuff of humor—instead of goods. As manner becomes matter, humor becomes the ideal commodity to be marketed and sold as a brand.

America acquired its most iconic comic brand, Mark Twain, because Samuel Clemens understood and exploited the new information economy as it emerged after the Civil War. America’s transition from an industrial base of manufacturing to an information base of mass media, digital communications, and professional knowledge just recently reached maturity, but the process began in Twain’s day, when allied industries such as public relations and advertising also acquired their modern forms.
Mark Twain's role in this process reflects an ability to seize the opportunities of his time. Mythologizing has made Twain a nineteenth-century icon, but the life of Samuel Clemens straddled two centuries, and his humor bridges their world views. Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri, in 1835, a time just two generations removed from the American Revolution and fourteen years after Missouri joined the union as a slave state; in 1839, when the family moved thirty miles to Hannibal, just across the Mississippi River from Quincy, Illinois, the area was still considered the West. Thus he grew up poised not only between the cultural forces of East and West, but also between the ideals of North and South—a position shaping his sense of comic incongruity as born of cultural contrasts. Clemens died in 1910, after American capitalism, communication, and consumerism had taken their modern forms, the Spanish-American War had placed the U.S. among the world’s international powers, and imperialism set Europe on its course toward World War I.

The rhetoric, themes, and techniques of his humor pulsed to the beat of his changing world. His early fiction and platform lectures burlesqued conventional religious tracts, children’s fables, and journalistic genres; the writing and performances of his middle years satirized America’s struggles with racism, sectionalism, and romanticism; his late work—consistently modernist in its moral relativism and much of it too politically incorrect to be published in its day—blasts industrialization, imperialism, greed, and the entire human race, often in terms more despairing than in his letter to William Dean Howells on May 12–13, 1899: “Damn these human beings; if I had invented them I would go hide my head in a bag” (MTHL, 2:695).8 Indeed, Twain’s brand of humor increasingly reflected modern ideas and values as its nineteenth-century forms and settings acquired distinctly discordant, modern themes. The ironies of the so-called “evasion sequence” at the end of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, for instance, inject post-Reconstruction despair into antebellum burlesque. More directly, the scathing sarcasm of his “Salutation-Speech from the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth,” published in the New York Herald December 30, 1900, sees the new era as cause for lament: “the stately matron named Christendom” has returned “bedraggled, besmirched, and dishonored from pirate-raids in Kia-Chow, Manchuria, South Africa, and the Philippines, her mouth full of pious hypocrisies” (CTS 2:456).

In fact, the years from 1875 to 1910, when the U.S. entered the world stage as a modern industrial nation with a burgeoning postindustrial information economy of publishing, electronic communication, advertising,
and publicity, coincide with the years of Twain’s most mature writing. His major novels begin with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and end with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) and *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894). Short works that speak profoundly to modern concerns, such as “What Is Man?” (1906), also date from this period. From 1897 to 1908 he worked on *The Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, left unfinished along with other provocative late works at his death in 1910. By that year, as William Leach has described in *Land of Desire* (1993), American culture had abandoned a Calvinist spirit of work, sin, self-denial, and hope and reorganized aesthetically, socially, and politically around an economy based on “self-indulgence, self-gratification, and self-pleasure” through the consumption of mass-marketed goods and entertainments. These developments remain significant today, when services have displaced goods as 55 percent of U.S. GDP, while advertising, publicity, and mass media alone total more than $1 trillion annually, nearly 30 percent that of manufacturing. But a century ago, when these trends formed the backdrop for Thorstein Veblen’s attack on conspicuous consumption in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Twain had already sided with the masses. In “Edward Mills and George Benton: A Tale” (1880) he lampooned the virtues of self-denial. He brought a more rueful tone to humor about money following his mortifying bankruptcy amid the recession of 1893, with ironic explorations of “clean, imaginary cash” in “The $30,000 Bequest” (1904). Yet Clemens managed to leave his daughter an estate of more than $600,000 in 1910 ($14.2 million in 2011 dollars), despite setbacks and lavish spending, because he understood how to exploit Mark Twain as a brand-name commodity of the information economy.

Clemens fed the expanding American media environment as a printer, journalist, literary author, performer, publisher, copyright owner, and celebrity. Newspapers more than tripled in number during his career, rising from 5,871 to 20,806 between 1870 and 1900 and to 22,603 in 1909; magazines grew even more dramatically. He graduated from printer’s apprentice to “unsanctified newspaper reporter” and popular author in time to feed these widening outlets. With apparent prescience he began a monthly magazine column in 1868 and purchased a one-third interest in a newspaper in 1869 (*Galaxy, MTBE*). Periodicals flourished in part from advertising, which increased tenfold from 1867 to 1900 to become a $500 million business, and Mark Twain participated in the new journalism as a subject of newspaper and magazine items as well as a writer of them. Advertising, fueled by post–Civil War booms in population and manufacturing, got an additional
boost in 1870 from America’s first trademark legislation, which in turn spurred brand-name marketing: the number of brand names and trademarks registered with the U.S. patent office swelled tenfold between 1871 and 1875 (from 121 to 1,138) and another tenfold following legislation in 1881 and 1883, yielding more than 10,000 registered trademarks by 1906— the year in which Mark Twain adopted the white suit as his icon. (He declared the suit “the uniform of the American Association of Purity and Perfection, of which I am president, secretary and treasurer, and the only man in the United States eligible to membership.”) From 1884 to 1894 Clemens contributed to a national explosion in book publishing as the owner of Charles L. Webster and Company, which brought out *Huckleberry Finn*, Ulysses S. Grant’s *Personal Memoirs* (1885–86), and *The Library of American Literature* (11 vols., 1889–91), among other works: the number of titles in the U.S. more than doubled between 1880 and 1890, then tripled by 1910, the year he died. By that time many hundreds of newspaper and magazine items had reported his writings, remarks, and doings.

His career was spurred by major advancements in communication technology, including the typewriter and Linotype if not his beloved Paige Compositor. His experiments with new illustration technologies, in particular, as Bruce Michelson details in *Printer’s Devil*, imbued narratives from *A Tramp Abroad* (1880) to *King Leopold’s Soliloquy* (1905) with a modern complexity of media and standpoints. Such protomodernism is less surprising when we remember that Clemens saw the paradigm-shifting developments of modern science, intellectual displacements that validated social, psychological, and aesthetic relativism through such landmarks as Darwin’s groundbreaking *On the Origin of Species* (1859), William James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890), Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), and the equations by which James Clerk Maxwell set forth the electromagnetic theory of electric waves and light (1855) and Albert Einstein established the relativity of time and space (1905). More prosaically, also in place in the U.S. by Clemens’s death in 1910 were the more familiar electronic elements of today’s information economy: the transatlantic telegraph network (1866), telephone (1876), radio (the “wireless telegraphy” of American Marconi, 1899, before voice and music broadcasting, 1906), and the Hollerith punch card calculation system (forerunner of programmable computers, devised for the 1890 census). The nineteenth century invented modern information technology, though its full cultural and economic impact took decades to mature into postindustrialism.

Brands and brand names drive the information economy worldwide. Brands serve three distinct but interrelated information functions:
denotation, to name a good or service; differentiation, to distinguish one from another; and connotation, to symbolize a set of associated ideas. When durable goods take a backseat to the less tangible postindustrial commodities of media (information) and services (know-how), brands become crucial to denote, differentiate, and symbolize commodities. In fact, rhetoric itself becomes the product of the information economy as brands supply literal and metaphorical meaning for economic transactions by differentiating one brand from another.

This trend explains the recent rise in the value of organizations’ so-called “brand equity.” Material assets accounted for less than 30 percent of the total market value of top publicly traded companies in 2002, down from 60 percent in the late 1980s; the value of the brand name accounted for the rest. As intangible but not immeasurable assets, brands have become so important that nonprofit philanthropic and educational organizations, athletes, and performers have joined the widget-makers in branding themselves. In this way brands have moved beyond their original function to designate goods; now brands identify and even create communities of consumption and ideology. British branding consultant Steve Hilton put it this way: “Brands promote social cohesion, both nationally and globally, by enabling shared participation in aspirational and democratic narratives.”

Samuel Clemens seized upon branding along with the more tangible opportunities of this new, postindustrial capitalism. He drew on recent legislation in a November 1882 lawsuit claiming that a pirated edition of Sketches New and Old violated his exclusive right to use Mark Twain as a trademark. The judge in Clemens v. Belford, Clarke Company rejected this attempt to close loopholes in American copyright laws, which put uncopyrighted newspaper stories in the public domain while trademarks could be renewed forever, in a decision holding that “[t]rade marks only protect vendible merchandise, and can not be applied to or protect literary property.” But Clemens continued to conflate the two, establishing Mark Twain as a brand name commodity through mutually reinforcing comic journalism, performances, authorship, and entrepreneurship. (For evidence of his de facto success, note that some scholars cite Mark Twain as a trademark, despite the lawsuit’s failure.) Indeed, his creation of the Mark Twain Company to manage his copyrights in 1908 merely formalized the branding process that had united his pseudonymous writings, comic persona, and physical body for more than forty years. Friends already called him “Mark” as well as “Sam” when he became a comic performer in 1866, three years after adopting Mark Twain as his pen name.

Throughout his lifetime Clemens treated Mark Twain as a comic commodity to be marketed through modern media buzz. He exploited the links between publicity and profit and the synergy among various media as early as the summer of 1868, when he promoted an upcoming lecture by inventing scandals about himself and planting the hoax in San Francisco newspapers (*MTS*, 25). Like P. T. Barnum, whose appetite for publicity he burlesqued in “Barnum’s First Speech in Congress” (1867), Mark Twain used newspaper humor to promote lectures, performances to subsidize book writing (*Innocents Abroad, Roughing It, Following the Equator*), books to sell magazine pieces, and fiction to supply lecture material. The
process eventually moved from the stage to less overtly performative venues—including literary narration as well as after-dinner and occasional speaking—but it continued to trade, in the literal commercial sense, on Mark Twain’s celebrity.

Twain’s brand had already achieved such international recognition by December 14, 1872, when a caricature in the London periodical *Once a Week* depicted Samuel Clemens (who had visited England August 31–November 12 of that year) astride a frog leaping over a hedge (figure 1). The image, labeled “American Humour,” characterizes Mark Twain as the quintessential American and the embodiment of American humor, not simply the author of the “Jumping Frog” tale. The news item accompanying the cartoon likewise emphasized Twain’s Americanness even though the artist dressed him like a British rider and imagined a tidy hedge for a frontier obstacle. “California has developed a literature of its own, and its proudest boast is the possession of Mark Twain,” the author explained near the beginning of the article. His praise for “the peculiar humour invented by our American cousins” mixed imperial condescension with Anglo-American kinship amid promises of “a hearty welcome whenever he revisits the Old Country.” Yet this early commentator did not hesitate to proclaim: “Mark Twain is altogether the best living exponent of American humour.” In commercial terms, Twain’s significance as a humorist traded on his Americanness.

The image of an American writer in a British periodical highlighted in its own way the global dimensions of the growing information economy in the 1870s. Even in this early stage, international media trade had spawned at least seven pirated British editions of Twain’s works (*MTJB*, 4–5), which (not at all coincidentally) added to his transatlantic honor and fame. In fact, the author of the *Once a Week* article accompanying the caricature seemed to know Twain’s writing primarily through such pirated editions as John Camden Hotten’s *Innocents Abroad* (2 vols., 1870), *Eye Openers* (1871), and *Screamers* (1871). Royalties lost from piracy had led Clemens earlier in 1872 to authorize a British edition of his newly published *Roughing It* by Routledge and Sons, who themselves had pirated *The Celebrated Jumping Frog* (1867) and *Burlesque Autobiography* (1871), as Howard Baetzhold has detailed (*MTJB*, 4–5). The deal had prompted the London visit and occasioned what Clemens described to his wife as a “blast at Hotten” in the September 21, 1872, London *Spectator* (*MTL* 5:169). There he asked the public to grant him the preference that the copyright laws did not:
My books are bad enough just as they are written; then what must they be after Mr. John Camden Hotten has composed half-a-dozen chapters & added the same to them? . . . . & then, on the strength of having evolved these marvels from his own consciousness, go & “copyright” the entire book, & put in the title-page a picture of a man with his hand in another man’s pocket, & the legend “All Rights Reserved.” (I only *suppose* the picture; still it would be a rather neat thing.)

. . . Mr. Hotten prints unrevised, uncorrected, & in some respects, spurious books, with my name to them as author, & thus embitters his customers against one of the most innocent of men. Messrs. George Routledge & Sons are the only English publishers who pay me any copyright, & therefore, if my books are to disseminate either suffering or crime among readers of our language, I would ever so much rather they did it through that house, & then I could contemplate the spectacle calmly as the dividends came in. (MTL 5:163-64)26

While these remarks anticipate his later crusade to tighten copyright protection, they also show that he saw his books as commodities in an economy that runs on intellectual property and brand image. He displaces outrage at piracy with jokes about branding: he imagines Hotten’s colophon (a printer’s trademark) as an image of a pickpocket, identifies the counterfeit product as dangerous, and declares its “customers” (not himself or his publisher) as Hotten’s chief victims. He contrasts this caricature with the genuine article, the dignified businessman and brand-name product identified at the end of the letter, signed “Samuel L. Clemens (‘Mark Twain’)” (MTL 5:164). He clearly understood, along with Hotten and the Routledges, the significance and value of Twain’s brand.

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