

Farmers, ranchers plugging in to social media*By Mace Thornton*

A communications phenomenon known as social media is sweeping our nation. And, recognizing the need to engage in this revolutionary form of public conversation, people from all walks of American agriculture are joining the discussion.

Social media isn't exactly brand-spanking new, but the number of users of Web sites and applications with interesting monikers, such as Facebook and Twitter, has exploded since late last year.

Facebook is a Web-based service (www.facebook.com). It is simple to use and allows people to build and maintain personal pages and connect with other friends, colleagues or allies who are signed up. Twitter (www.twitter.com) takes simplicity one step further. It is a "micro-blogging" site that allows people to build a base of "followers" and keep in touch by typing out simple and quick 140-character messages, also known as a "tweets."

Today, Facebook alone has 200 million active subscribers, and more than half of those people use the service at least once per day. It is growing by leaps and bounds, and, surprisingly, the fastest growing demographic is people over 35 years of age.

While those two social media tools are leading the way, there are many others bubbling to the surface. Social media conversations are breathing new life into those quintessential American activities of community discussion and public discourse, but they also are just another way to keep in touch with friends and family.

Anyone with an Internet connection, a mobile communications device or a so-called smart phone can share information, opinions and personal thoughts with friends, colleagues and counterparts—all at the speed of the mighty electron.

There is one unfortunate issue that may be magnifying the new-found communications influence and popularity of social media. This explosion is happening at a time when at least one old-guard institution of American society—the big city newspaper—is, in many locations, fighting for its very existence.

Poet Archibald MacLeish once stated, "Journalism is concerned with events, poetry with feelings. Journalism is concerned with the look of the world, poetry with the feel of the world."

If you throw MacLeish's thoughts on journalism and poetry into a blender and flip the switch, you get a pretty good idea of the character of social media. It's as much about sharing facts and information about the world around us as it is about sharing our thoughts and feelings about that world. Like an electronic adaptation of the old town crier, the office water cooler or the small-town coffee shop, citizen communicators are telling their social media stories at the places where people gather.

Farmers and ranchers are joining the chorus, from their fields, barns, machine sheds and pastures. Many have Facebook pages. Many can be followed on Twitter. To name just a few, they carry Twitter tagnames such as @foodprovider, @gilmerdairy, @TroyHadrick and @RayLinDairy. They use social media to tell their personal stories. To rephrase the message of the old town crier, when it comes to social media, "It's the 21st Century in American agriculture, and all is well."