

Tom Standage: *Writing on the Wall: Social Media—The First 2000 Years*

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Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and a growing list of other social media platforms allow users to interact, share information, and express themselves. In *Writing on the Wall: Social Media—The First 2000 Years*, Tom Standage argues that social media is not new. Standage, editor-in-chief of TheEconomist.com, compellingly demonstrates that the uses of and social changes brought about by the evolving media landscape of the past two millennia mirror the uses of and social changes brought about by the evolving media landscape of the past two decades.

Standage really does go back 2000 years. He starts with the network of contacts relied upon by Cicero when he was proconsul in what is now modern day Turkey, an impossible distance away from Rome, the center of Cicero's world. In Ancient Rome, information was shared through the exchange of letters and documents on papyrus rolls via individuals' personal and professional contacts. The Roman system of shared letters was so established that officials only made available a single copy of the *acta diurna*, the closest thing Rome had to a newspaper. To get the news out, the creators of the *acta* relied upon citizens to read this single copy and share stories of interest to them through their correspondence networks. News from the *acta* traveled 2500 km to Cicero, and he would complain to his contacts if there were delivery issues.

After Cicero, Standage skips ahead 1500 years to show how Martin Luther—the first viral star—“unwittingly revealed the power of a decentralized, person-to-person media system whose participants took care of distribution, deciding collectively which messages to amplify” (p. 53). The perfectly-timed establishment of Gutenberg's printing press, a sufficient level of literacy, and an issue that

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mattered to society combined to create a situation in 16th-century Germany reminiscent of the Arab Spring four centuries later.

Standage explains how aristocratic youth in Tudor England circulated *Miscellanies*—diary/letter/scrapbook hybrids—to facilitate the exchange of poetry concealing hidden messages. *Miscellanies* “offered... a medium of communication in which the unsayable could be expressed in veiled or coded form” (p. 69). Standage refers to this “gossipy back channel” (p. 69) as “The Facebook of the Tudor Court” (p. 64), but it more closely resembles today’s use of memes, text message slang, and Snapchat, all of which offer users the ability to communicate overtly and covertly simultaneously.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the import of a new phenomenon from “the Arab world transformed the sharing and distribution of information in western Europe” (p. 104). Coffeehouses were where the latest information was shared and discussed and “in large cities[, they] often specialized in... particular subjects,” such as theology, literature, economics, or entertainment. These physical forums are the ancestors of today’s Reddit and Digg.

The industrial revolution led to the creation of high volume, steam-powered presses that commodified the distribution of information and allowed the establishment of major, centralized newspapers. Evolving to the telegraph and then radio and culminating with the popularity of television after World War II, the mass media era was “as far [away] as it is possible to be from a media system in which people create, distribute, share, and rework information and exchange it with each other” (p. 213). Standage paints this era as “a one-hundred-and-fifty-year hiatus ... a temporary state of affairs, rather than the natural order of things... a brief interlude” of hierarchical media interrupting a long history of social media (pp. 239–240). He is correct that after the first email was sent in 1971, what we now think of as social media was not far off.

In 1991, twenty years after the first email (today’s version of Cicero’s network), HTML was introduced. Two years later came Mosaic, the first graphical browser. Early web forums—today’s coffeehouses—began in 1994. The term ‘weblog’ was coined in 1997, followed over the next 2 years by popular blogging platforms Xanga, Blogger.com, and LiveJournal (today’s *miscellanies*). MySpace launched in 2003, Facebook in 2004, and Twitter in 2006. These platforms make “it quick and easy for anyone to share information with others... [and give] ordinary people a collective agenda-setting power” (p. 239).

Today’s social media, with its low cost and immediate global reach, “can be seen as the culmination of a long historical trend” (p. 239). We do not know what the future will bring, but *Writing on the Wall* provides some historical clues. Over the past two decades, modern social media has brought about changes similar to those brought about by historical social media over the past two millennia. This is a valuable and engaging book.