

Social Media: myths from the first 2000 years

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*The Economist's Tom Standage is first up in Polis' Media Agenda Talks lecture series – his book *Writing On the Wall*, a history of social media is reviewed here by Polis reporter Kyle Bowen*

While some view social media as a dynamic forum for the exchange of ideas, others deride it as a frivolous pastime that portends a precipitous decline in human intelligence: kids these days are much dumber than the youth of previous generations because they spend all their time messing around on Pinterest or Instagram. And while anyone with a Facebook page or Twitter feed has probably been exposed to a plethora of trivial minutiae, does this necessarily prove that social media constitutes little more than a masturbatory assault on our collective intellectual capacity?

In a word: no, argues digital editor at *The Economist* Tom Standage. In his forthcoming book, *Writing on the Wall*, Standage adopts a historical perspective and argues that today's social media environment is not an ephemeral novelty, but rather a contemporary iteration of a phenomenon that goes back centuries.

Ancient History

Standage defines social media as “media we get from other people, exchanged along social connections, creating a distributed discussion or community.” When defined this way, social media environments can be observed as far back as ancient Rome. Standage explains that during this period, “information circulated through the exchange of letters and other documents which were copied, commented on and shared with others in the form of papyrus rolls.”

And since there was no formal postal service, letters had to be carried by friends, messengers or travellers who happened to be heading in the right direction. Put another way, members of the Roman elite exchanged information through a web of social contacts, any of them able to produce, filter and distribute information for each other. While this ancient social network was supported by a vastly different technological infrastructure, the dynamic, horizontal exchange of information it enabled bears a striking resemblance to today's social media environment.

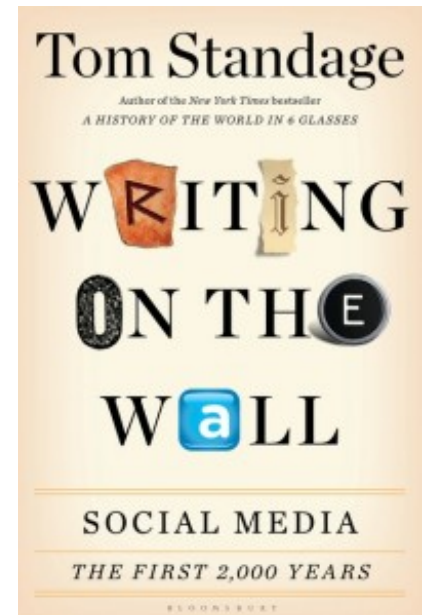
17th Century Social

Another social media platform that predated the internet by over 300 years can be found in 17th century England. During this time, people began to congregate in coffeehouses in order to read and discuss pamphlets and the ideas they contained. The English coffeehouse served as an open forum for the exchange of ideas; an Anglo agora, if you will. What was remarkable about coffeehouses, Standage points out, was that people of all social classes were encouraged to join the discussion. They were, in a sense, radically egalitarian.

Standage illustrates this point with the following quote from Samuel Butler: “[The coffeehouse] admits of no distinction of persons, but gentlemen, mechanic, lord and scoundrel mix, and are all of a piece.” Here again, a parallel to contemporary social media can be drawn: platforms such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter enable the exchange of information among individuals from vastly different races, religions and social classes.

Quotidian Topics

But what about the charge that social media is a flippant distraction of relatively little intellectual value? Sure,



coffeehouses facilitated conversations among different groups of people, but these conversations may well have revolved around quotidian topics such as the contents of last night's dinner, or the recent antics of the town drunk.

As it turns out, variations of this critique can be traced back centuries. Standage marshals a quote uttered by Anthony Wood in the 1670s to underscore this point: "Why doth solid and serious learning decline, and few or none follow it now in the university? Because of coffeehouses, where they spend all their time."

Two points are noteworthy here. First, if "solid and serious" learning had already begun to decline during the Scientific Revolution, one wonders when exactly this golden age of intellectual achievement to which Wood seeks to return may have been. Second, and more importantly, it illustrates that not only the use of "social media" in the 17th century, but also the contemporaneous criticism thereof, bear remarkable conceptual similarities to contemporary debates surrounding the use of social media today.

Invention Crucibles

Standage argues that coffeehouses were "crucibles of innovation," explaining that scientists would regularly meet in coffeehouses to discuss theories, conduct experiments and hold lectures, which yielded incredibly fruitful intellectual results. In fact, Standage points out that Newton's *Principia Mathematica* was written in order to settle a coffeehouse argument between Wren, Hooke and Halley! The intellectual and commercial development enabled by coffeehouses in the 17th century runs parallel to the possibilities for innovation and the dynamic exchange of ideas provided by today's social media platforms.

By adopting what may be termed a genealogical approach to social media, Standage contextualizes contemporary debates and anchors today's social media environment in a broader historical trajectory. In so doing, he demonstrates that social media not only connects us to each other, but also to our past.

Get [details of Tom Standage's lecture and the rest of the Media Agenda Talks here](#)

This article by Polis reporter Kyle Bowen

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