Kevin Eagan’s Review of Writing on the Wall: Social Media — The First 2,000 Years by Tom Standage, 2013 — Bloomsbury (September 26, 2013)

A new essay trend has started in both print and online publications: a complaint (usually from an older white man) about how social media erodes the mind, perpetuates shallow dialogue, and debases smart discussion. In these articles, platforms like Facebook and Twitter — even the blog itself — get blamed for everything from the death of print to heightened levels of anxiety in teens. Todd Oppenheimer calls the effects of technology overload “the flickering mind” — that pavlovian response to our chiming phones notifying us of more +1s or RTs.

A recent example of this anti-technology, anti-new media essay genre is Jonathan Franzen’s “What’s Wrong With the Modern World” (see, also, my response to Franzen). In it, Franzen complains of “individual to individual” communication being replaced by “people bending over smartphones,” as if before smartphones, people never used technology to communicate. And by technology, I’m including the low-fi pencil and paper, which was, for centuries, the most effective social media app available.

Author Tom Standage’s recent book, Writing on the Wall: Social Media — The First 2,000 Years shows just what Franzen and other naysayers miss: social media is the driving force behind most social movements, revolutions, and shifts in thinking. It’s through social media, claims Standage, that ideas spread across the Roman Empire, post-Reformation Europe, and Revolutionary War-era America. What allowed this spread of ideas was an interconnected, informal network of eager thinkers and readers anxious for debate and real-world action.

Writing on the WallEarly in Writing on the Wall, Standage clarifies what constitutes social media, and it’s not the technology itself (although new technologies played a role, for sure). Instead, ideas spread through “two-way, conversational environments in which information passes horizontally from one person to another along social networks, rather than being delivered vertically from an impersonal central source.” Writers who engage this network best end up spurring on the most effective social change. Thus, social media is tied closely to publishing and communication technology, but it’s the crowd that decides what has long-term significance.

Dismissing social media, according to Standage, has the same effect the Roman Catholic Church had on popular belief after Martin Luther published his “Ninety-Five Theses.” The Church responded by publishing articles in Latin, circulating them through academia — essentially, ignoring the public at large. Luther’s ideas spread because they were written in colloquial German and printed with the latest communication technology, the printing press. I think we know how that turned out.

You Have Been Poked by Your Tabellarii. Poke Him Back?

Writing on the Wall is a comprehensive look at the history of social media. It broadens our modern and narrow view of social media to include all forms of social communication. Standage even starts out with our biological and evolutionary need to be social, comparing early communication with the social grooming habits of pre-human species and primates.

For example, Standage shows how an informal mail delivery system in ancient Rome helped spread Roman customs. As the Roman Empire grew, writers like Cicero depended on this network of slaves and couriers, known as “tabellarii,” to keep up with the latest on politics, philosophy, and even gossip. Messages were transmitted within days, sometimes within hours. As Standage says,
For the first time in history, news and gossip, both personal and political, began to circulate in large quantities in written form. The messages exchanged were sometimes formal, but could also be familiar and conversational in tone and often contained colloquial terms, in-jokes, puns, and abbreviations.

Abbreviations were similar to Internet acronyms like LOL or FWIW. Some messages were transmitted on small, iPad-sized erasable slates. Because of limited space, messages had to be shortened with abbreviations, like modern-day tweets. And after sending a message, it was common for Romans to feel anxious as they waited for a response and approval from their peers. Sound familiar?

It’s clear, however, that these communication tools were designed for the elite — those who could afford to hire a courier or already owned a slave. And that’s where we see the first barrier to participation within a social network: access and ability to transmit ideas is dependent on your social standing. While social networking empowered some people, it disenfranchised others.

The Revolution Will Not Be Retweeted

Standage is very thorough in his historical approach to social media, but he misses out some crucial examples of how social networks formed in the margins of society. For example, he makes no mention of one of the most important social networks in American history: the underground railroad. Without the informal network between freemen in the North and slaves in the South, the underground railroad wouldn’t have been as important to American history as it is today.

Equally, he skips another 19th Century social networking phenomenon, this time in Great Britain: the Luddite movement. Today, we use the term Luddite to label a person as anti-technology (and, by extension, anti-social media), but the movement was a social media event that affected society. Ludditism was a direct response to the effects of early industrial-level technology: Luddites went destroyed machines that replaced them as factory employees. As we see today, social networks have a way of empowering movements, even if they become small footnotes in history. But new technologies don’t always lead to effective revolutions or a happy citizenry.

Even though he misses some key moments in social media history, Standage makes a compelling case for social media’s effects on revolutionary movements. In Colonial America, for example, the informal network of printers and newspaperman spurred on the Revolutionary War. After independence, it was that same network that solidified American patriotism and explained the role of government. Writers like Thomas Paine used colloquial language juxtaposed with provocative statements about the British to fan the flames of revolution.

Equally, an informal print network of writers in 17th Century Britain helped create “niche” publishing. Groups of thinkers and readers — who were all male, white, and financially well-off, let’s not forget — met at specialty coffee shops to discuss the latest ideas. One coffee shop was set aside to discuss and read about politics, another for economics, and yet another for literature. Much like how bloggers today survive by finding or establishing a niche within an informal social network, publishers sought out and established new groups of readers and used this informal network to spread new ideas.
What’s More Important: the “Social” or the “Media”?

The part of Writing on the Wall that most informs our current state of social networking is Chapter Nine, “The Rise of Mass Media: The Centralization Begins.” Starting with Industrial-era steam technology, books and newspapers were distributed across a broader socio-economic range than ever before. Middle class men and women became literate and sought out new reading material, and rich publishers gave them what they wanted. Newspapers grew in popularity, and they needed stuff to print to fill the pages.

Writers and readers alike depended on the social network of publishers. New technologies, like the telegraph, allowed text to be distributed in a matter of minutes, with printers printing and distributing newspapers and pamphlets within a day. What we now call pop culture came out of this era of social media: what was printed and most popular affected public perception, and vice-versa. Writers responded to the popular opinions of readers, not their own tastes.

Standage argues, rightly, that for a period of about 150 years, the old concept of a distributed social network was replaced by “mass-produced news for a mass audience.” This established a hierarchy of media, a vertical instead of horizontal distribution network. Capitalist printers and curators controlled a small number of printed media, distributed from a centralized location to the largest number of readers possible. As technology grew up, so did the controls over the distribution network. Standage shows this helped change writing in dramatic ways, establishing “high” and “low” art distinctions. It also allowed despotic governments, like Hitler’s Nazi party, to control the social network however they saw fit.

Today, it’s this vertical approach to publishing that has clouded our perceptions of what is “worthy” of distribution. Yet Standage acknowledges the new network of digital publishing subverts mass media, even as social networks try to commercialize their offerings. As Facebook monetizes your “likes” and Twitter bring in sponsored tweets, new networks sprout up to replace the old networks. Those who appeal to the sentiments of the average person get distributed, or “go viral” in today’s terminology.

Overall, Writing on the Wall is a wonderful read, even though he misses several important social media “events” in history and skims over 20th Century examples of social change spurred on by distributed networks, like the American civil rights movement or India’s independence from British rule. At times, he confuses the distribution of the network with the network itself, and sometimes his history of social media turns into a history of communication technology. His descriptions of how the Internet came to be are nothing special; read any issue of Wired and you’ll learn more useful information about the Internet than anything in this book.

Even with its missteps and imperfections, Standage makes a strong case for social media as the driving force for change, whether for good or bad. Ultimately, Standage shows us we shouldn’t be ashamed of our live tweets, crowdfunding donations, or blog comments because communicating, in all its forms, is the only reason why social media survives.