Frank Rose’s New York Times Review of ‘Writing on the Wall,’ by Tom Standage (November 1, 2013)

For nearly 20 years, we’ve thought of “new media” as the brash young upstart and “old media” as the stalwart if increasingly embattled establishment. But what if new media aren’t as new as we assume — and old media not really old at all? So argues Tom Standage in “Writing on the Wall,” a provocative book that asks us to look at media less in terms of technology — digital or analog? — than in terms of the role they invite us to play. Are we passive receptors for whatever facts, opinions and ad messages come our way? Or are we participants, sharing what we like with others, amending or commenting in the process? The second is characteristic of the Internet in general and social media in particular. But there’s nothing revolutionary about this, Standage says. Instead, it’s the role of consumer, so typical of 20th-century mass media, that’s unnatural — and to Standage, a historical blip.

This observation has been made before, but never with such a wealth of information to back it up. Standage — the digital editor at The Economist and the author of such unorthodox chronicles as “A History of the World in 6 Glasses” and “The Victorian Internet,” a steampunk classic about the rise of the telegraph — makes a convincing case. Today we equate media with conglomerates and moguls: Time Warner, Viacom, Rupert. But far more representative in media history may have been Cicero, who like other upper-class Romans got his news on papyrus rolls that were copied, annotated and passed from person to person. Speeches, books, even personal letters were read aloud by slaves and sent on to friends and acquaintances. This distribution system made early media social; by sharing in this fashion, people were able to do what people do in such situations: signal their interests, define their personas and strengthen their ties with others.

Literacy fell with the Roman Empire. For all but the ecclesiastical elite, media took a 1,000-year holiday. Not until the advent of the printing press did people have much reason to read again. Once they did, Standage says, their behavior reverted to that of the early Romans. Social sharing could produce electrifying effect: The 95 Theses Martin Luther posted on his church door in Wittenberg, printed and passed from hand to hand, spread rapidly across Germany and within a month were known across Europe. Two and a half centuries later, Thomas Paine’s inflammatory anti-British pamphlet “Common Sense” coursed through the American colonies in much the same way. People read it aloud in taverns and coffeehouses; they debated anonymously in newspapers. When it was published in January 1776, independence was all but unthinkable; on July 4 it was declared.

The 18th-century gazettes that served as Paine’s forum, filled as they were with pseudonymous essays, commentary from readers and news cribbed from other sources, were more like blogs than anything we would recognize today as newspapers. But that began to change with the Industrial Revolution. In 1833, just as high-capacity, steam-powered printing presses were coming on the scene, a 23-year-old printer named Benjamin Day started The New York Sun, which sold for a penny at a time when other dailies sold for 6 cents. As Standage explains, Day’s scheme could work only if the paper attracted a lot of paid advertising, and advertisers would come only if they could be guaranteed a big readership. So he hired reporters — a relatively novel idea at the time — who wrote lurid crime reports and fantastical stories about creatures on the moon. Readers came, and with them ads for everything from lotteries to abortionists to patent medicines. Additional reporters were hired, producing additional racy accounts that would send circulation even higher, making the paper even more desirable to advertisers. Success brought imitators, and as it did the role of the press changed. Once a quasi-open platform for discussion and debate, it became an outlet for ads and reporting. Readers, once a community, became a market.
The shift happened even faster with radio and television. Standage gives us a fascinating account of the early days of radio, when a profusion of teenage hobbyists treated the new medium as the occasion for a freewheeling conversation — until they were silenced by commercial forces and complaints of antisocial behavior. (False charges that their chatter interfered with operations to rescue the Titanic are apparently what did them in.) The limited capacity of the airwaves — not to mention the rapacious behavior of people like David Sarnoff, chairman of the Radio Corporation of America — forced radio and then television into a pattern of centralized, one-way broadcasting. In America, these broadcasts would be used to sell ads; in Britain, through the BBC, to elevate the public’s taste; in Nazi Germany, to indoctrinate the masses. The results were alternately vapid, condescending and horrific.

The question is, what now? From Benjamin Day onward, today’s mass media were pioneered by enterprising young people, many of whom shared a populist vision of themselves as diffusers of knowledge. (The Sun’s motto: “It shines for all.”) Some, like the early radio hobbyists, even saw a potential in technology for direct human connection. Then they were silenced. Could the Internet meet the same fate? Standage notes with dismay that large social-media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are centralized too, in a way that e-mail and blogs are not. But there’s a problem with this analogy: The big social-media outfits function as information exchanges, not as publishers. They might sell out users for their data, but they can no more afford to silence those users than a telephone company can cut off its subscribers. The real threat to the Internet would seem to be from governments and copyright holders, which have repeatedly sought to circumscribe its usage in the name of fighting piracy. But Standage addresses the first only briefly and the second not at all.

Then there’s the reaction against social media. Standage cites a laundry list of complaints, from time wasted to the degradation of personal relationships that allegedly occurs as the virtual supplants the real. In “Alone Together,” Sherry Turkle laments a technology-induced flight from conversation; in “Hamlet’s BlackBerry,” William Powers suggests, somewhat weirdly, that families fight isolation by watching television together. Unfortunately, Standage’s rebuttal doesn’t venture far beyond such bland observations as, “New technologies are often regarded with suspicion.” He notes that we’ve survived the telegraph, despite an 1891 screed in The Atlantic Monthly decrying the “frantic haste” it brought to our lives. But he makes no mention of The Atlantic’s more recent attack on social media, a classic of the genre called “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” Nor of Jaron Lanier, the onetime virtual reality pioneer whose more informed intimations of dystopia make this sort of thing seem naïve.

Even when Standage considers social media on their own terms, he can be a bit short on insight. He presents them in opposition to one-way broadcasting but fails to note the extent to which Twitter and the like are actually becoming an extension of mass media, turning much of television and print into a conversation. Will this so-called second screen remain a bolt-on, or will it become fused with mass media — and what would happen if it did? You won’t find out here.

Nonetheless, Standage makes a crucial point: Social media, whether of the digital or the preindustrial variety, fill a universal human need for connectedness, for self-expression and for information-sharing. This need is as old as language itself — which suggests, if nothing else, that satisfying it digitally won’t leave us emotionally crippled after all.