Howard Schneider’s (humanist.com) Review of Writing on the Wall: Social Media—The First 2,000 Years by Tom Standage.

Tom Standage’s self-imposed mandate is to assuage our technoterror. In books like his laudable study of the telegraph, The Victorian Internet (1998), and An Edible History of Humanity (2009), the author demonstrated, mostly successfully, that technology is liberating and good for us. In his new book, Standage confronts one of the major generators of modern technology anxiety: digital social media. Writing on the Wall, like all of Standage’s books, is a fine work. It’s well written and researched, and contains, as usual, the author’s dry wit. But I’m not sure that he fulfills his agenda this time.

One thesis of this book, that social media—information dissemination through social networks—have been with us for at least a couple of millennia, gives Standage the opportunity to do something he does superbly: scrutinize the past to show how it links to and influences the present. I can only touch on some of the historical moments he examines. Standage begins in the waning days of the Roman Republic, in the first century BCE. The Romans created “the first social-media ecosystem,” he says, a system that allowed patricians to exchange political news and gossip (some things don’t change). The engine that made this communications network viable was slavery: slaves served as scribes and as messengers, in the republic and throughout its distant provinces. The letters disseminated through this system were often considered, by senders and recipients, to be meant for perusal by many besides the addressees.

For Standage, Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in 1440 was the catalyst that permitted a priest named Martin Luther to instigate a revolution. In 1517 Luther nailed his “ninety-five theses” to the door of a local church, attacking the Christian Church’s custom of granting “indulgences” to paying customers. Luther’s theses were swiftly—and unexpectedly—distributed across German-speaking territories via printers. As his conflict with the Church’s dogmas and practices expanded and deepened, he and his opponents would make brisk use of the printers’ craft: the written creeds and screeds went viral, as it were. Therefore, Standage notes, “Theological arguments that would previously have taken place behind closed doors were now taking place in public, in printed form. Being able to follow and discuss the back-and-forth exchanges among Luther, his allies, and his enemies gave ordinary people across Germany a thrilling and unprecedented sense of participation in a vast, distributed debate.”

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London, coffeehouses not only provided a sociable ambiance, but were a social medium. By 1700 there were about 550 coffeehouses in England’s capital city; many of them “specialized”—that is, their clientele met to discuss specific subjects: politics, religion, literature, science, business, and so on. “Whatever the topic, the main business of coffeehouses was the sharing and discussion of news and opinion in spoken, written, and printed form.” Moreover, and this was rare for that era, coffeehouses brought together people from all walks of life: “Conversation between strangers was encouraged, and distinctions of class and status were to be left at the door. ... In theory, at least, this was a realm of pure information exchange, where ideas were to be scrutinized, combined, or discarded on their own merits, and people could speak their minds.” (In theory. I wish Standage had discussed whether women, Catholics, and Jews were allowed to participate in these learned free-foralls.)

In 1814 the Times of London was produced by a new process: steam-powered printing. “With steam printing, information had become an industrial process.” Inevitably, probably, this industrialization led to a new medium, the mass-market newspaper. The first example was the New York Sun, which began
publishing in 1833. The Sun was cheap, accessible, and filled with what we would now call tabloid fare. By 1834 it had the largest circulation of any newspaper in the United States. Imitations quickly followed.

The success of the new-model newspaper—mass produced, with staffs of journalists, and more financially dependent on advertising than on readership—meant that “the job of gathering material and setting the news agenda gradually became concentrated in the hands of a select group of editors, reporters, and proprietors.” The corollary of this was that readers became a passive audience for newspaper content. Standage finds this all deplorable, because the new state of affairs, for the most part, suppressed former social media, and hence the ability of worthy individuals and groups to be heard (and to influence their societies) without the interference of intermediaries. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other media—the telegraph, radio, and television—were also organized and operated top-down, so that decisions about information distribution were made by a very small number of powerful people. (“Television...the most pervasive medium ever,” writes Standage, “is the opposite of social media.”)

But fear not, those who share Standage’s views: today we have the Internet and its ilk, “the rebirth of social media” and “the largest and most complex communications system in human history.” The seeds of the Internet were planted in the 1960s, when an official at ARPA, the Advanced Research Projects Agency, the research branch of the Defense Department, was unhappy that the myriad computer projects funded by ARPA couldn’t communicate with each other. Standage smoothly guides the reader through subsequent events: ARPANET; the linking of computer networks (the Internet as we know it today); the invention of the World Wide Web in 1990 by the British scientist Tim Berners-Lee; blogging; Facebook and Twitter; the role of social media in the Arab Spring and authoritarian nations like China; and where we stand today.

Where do we stand today? Tom Standage (digital editor of the Economist and the author of five other books) divides communications-networks history into three eras: really old media (“distribution of information from person to person along social networks”); old media (newspapers, television, etc.); and new media, our current digital age. New media is quite different from old media, he says, “but has much in common with ‘really old’ media. The intervening old-media era was a temporary state of affairs, rather than the natural order of things. After this brief interlude—what might be called a mass-media parenthesis—media is now returning to something similar to its preindustrial form.” Standage thinks that this is a cause for optimism. He acknowledges the points made by critics of modern social media, such as Sherry Turkle (“Does virtual intimacy, degrade our experience of the other kind and indeed, of all encounters, of any kind?”) and Evgeny Morozov (while social media can abet freedom fighters, he asserts, it can also be used by tyrannies to spread propaganda and monitor dissidents). But Standage isn’t convinced by the critics. He maintains that “from Roman letter-writers to manuscript poetry-sharing networks to news-sharing clergymen in the American colonies, the exchange of media has long been used to reinforce social connections. The same is true today.” He concedes that digital social media can be abused by malevolent governments, but he balances any qualms he feels: “[S]ocial media, whether in the form of the printing press or the Internet, can be a force for freedom and openness, simply because oppressive regimes often rely on manipulating their citizens’ view of the world, and a more open media environment makes that harder to accomplish.”

What really excites Standage is modern social media’s pluralism. “Those in authority always squawk, it seems, when access to publishing
is broadened. Greater freedom of expression, as John Milton noted in Areopagitica, means that bad ideas will proliferate as well as good ones, but it also means that bad ideas are more likely to be challenged.”

I will attest that Standage cogently validates his arguments for the similarities between really old and new media. However, I have misgivings about his celebration of new media. The planet has embraced computers, the Internet, and the like astonishingly swiftly, but those systems simply aren’t up to the task of bearing the numerous burdens—economic, cultural, even psychological—imposed by heedless societies.

Standage also eschews discussing what I see as one consequential difference between really old and new media. While it’s true that the social media utilized by the likes of Martin Luther brought news and commentary to numerous social classes, the importance of those media was derived from the intellectual elites that resorted to them to initiate profoundly important undertakings: fending off tyranny and fomenting religious, scientific, or political revolution. For the most part, it seems to me, the vast majority of “information” promulgated on today’s social media (populist to the core), whether proffered by professionals or “amateurs,” is often banal, worthless, hateful, or all three.

Tom Standage and I agree on one thing: “[W]hatever form social media takes in the future, one thing is clear: it is not going away.”