

# BOOK REVIEW

Sandage, T. (2013). *Writing On the Wall: Social Media the First 2,000 Years*. New York: Bloomsbury. 278 pp.  
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**W**riting on the Wall: Social Media the First 2,000 Years showcases the underlying structure and dynamics of communication networks from the Roman elite to the present-day consumer of the Internet. This text adds to the literature a comprehensive characterization of the sophisticated and structured communication networks that originated 100,000 year ago (emergence of human language) and 5,000 years ago (emergence of written language) in the Neolithic period. The history of the cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing systems, the Roman Empire's use of scribes and slaves to enact messages, Saint Paul, Martin Luther, and Thomas Paine, and their quests to inform the masses of pressing religious and political plights, are all exhibited in the text.

Author Tom Standage, the digital editor for the *Economist* and editor-in-chief of the magazine's website, Economist.com, presents a series of social media systems that occurred in differing times, places, and circumstances; however, all systems are linked by a common theme, person-to-person sharing of information. Our communicative

habits today have correlating factors with surprisingly deep historical roots, “built on the habits and conventions that date back centuries” (p. 5). This text lays the foundation for a course in social media’s origin and applicability through a worldview and national history standpoint. Collegiate students with or without a social media historical background will be entertained by the amount of useful and relevant historical contexts, timely examples, and analogies of social media.

Standage gives the reader a wide swath of contextual information pertaining to the development of present-day mass media markets, by taking a step back in time to focus on the essential aspects of how Western media has its connections with the past. Modern experiences of social media enable the reader to see the past with a new perspective. By this examination of the past and its communication mediums (i.e. papyrus rolls, wax tablets, the printing press, and the Pony Express), the reader can begin to examine the analog antecedents of today’s digital social media, and begin to debate and discuss the communicative aspects of the future. For example, messages sent over short distances that requested a quick reply during Julius Caesar’s reign, “were written with a stylus on wax tablets mounted in wooden frames that folded together like a book. To modern eyes these tablets, with their flat writing surfaces surrounded by a wooden frame, look strikingly similar to [today’s] tablet computers” (p. 23). The reply would be scratched onto the wax surface, and the messenger would deliver the tablet right back to the source. After decoding the reply, tablets would be erased and then re-used, by smoothing the wax with the flat end of the stylus.

Standage’s comprehensive 278-page book is organ-

ized into eleven chapters covering the history, science, revolutions, challenges, innovations, oppositions, and the revitalization of present-day social media applications. The chapter headings include a quote from a pinnacle personality of world history, and the reader gleans why that quote was selected by reading the chapter. Pictures, diagrams, charts, advertisements, and newspaper images/caricatures, are utilized to convey communication discussed within the text. These visual representations allow the reader to see archival and museum specimens of concepts and tools that were paramount during a particular era, giving visual clarity to the unique and specialized mediums.

The book is detailed with specific examples and reads like an encyclopedia. With so much material to cover, the author structured the book into sections: Ancient Foundations of Social Media, the Role of Social Media in Revolutions, Social Media for Self-Expression and Self-Promotion, The Challenges of Regulating Social Media, How Social Media Promotes Innovation, Tyranny, Optimism, and Social Media, The Rise of Mass Media, Media in the Broadcast Era, and the Rebirth of Social Media. The encyclopedia structure helps the reader see the chronological aspects that correlate with social media applications today.

Countless research articles cite SixDegrees, Friendster, or AIM, as the first forms of social media applications. These tools helped people connect with and send messages to others; however, these applications, according to Standage, were not the first communication mediums utilized to connect and send messages. Social media patrons do not passively consume information; they are cre-

ating, commenting, sharing, discussing, and modifying, information from a plethora of sources and mediums. The result is a shared social environment and a sense of membership in a distributed community. Wax tablets, papyrus rolls, and the telegraph, have much in common with Twitter, as each medium was a certain generation's channel to attain the "instant" communication response.

*Writing On the Wall: Social Media the First 2,000 Years* is a comprehensive text for an undergraduate college student wanting a detailed background on the metamorphosis of social media by current standards. The text would be best served in an introduction to mass communication or social media class, where a baseline is vital to start classroom dialog. The book, an effortless read, is relevant to the average undergraduate college student. Standage makes the reader think about exploring the social media tension between freedom of self-expression and censorship, aspects of public discourse and the First Amendment to free speech. Finally, the role of innovation pertaining to self-promotion and fueling revolutions and citizen uprisings, are what make the book truly worth the reader's time.

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