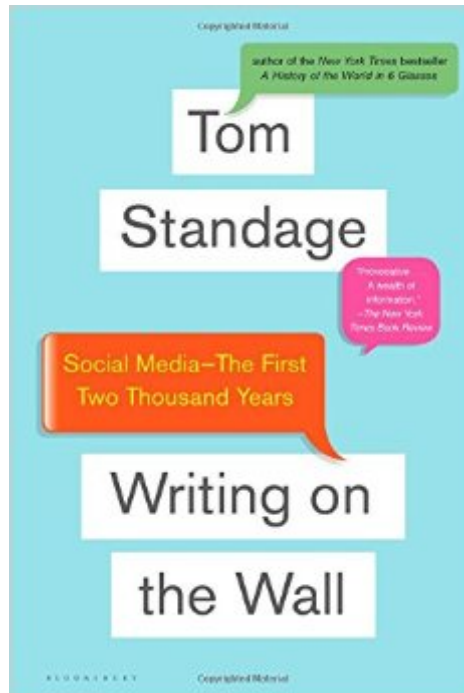


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# Writing On The Wall: Social Media – The First 2,000 Years



## Synopsis

Social media is anything but a new phenomenon. From the papyrus letters that Cicero and other Roman statesmen used to exchange news, to the hand-printed tracts of the Reformation and the pamphlets that spread propaganda during the American and French revolutions, the ways people shared information with their peers in the past are echoed in the present. After decades of newspapers, radio, and television dominating in dissemination of information, the Internet has spawned a reemergence of social media as a powerful new way for individuals to share information with their friends, driving public discourse in new ways. Standage reminds us how historical social networks have much in common with modern social media. The Catholic Church's dilemmas in responding to Martin Luther's attacks are similar to those of today's large institutions in responding to criticism on the Internet, for example, and seventeenth-century complaints about the distractions of coffeehouses mirror modern concerns about social media. Invoking figures from Thomas Paine to Vinton Cerf, co-inventor of the Internet, Standage explores themes that have long been debated, from the tension between freedom of expression and censorship to social media's role in spurring innovation and fomenting revolution. *Writing on the Wall* draws on history to cast provocative new light on today's social media and encourages debate and discussion about how we'll communicate in the future.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

There's no way I could have resisted Tom Standage's book, which promised to show how social

media is anything but a new phenomenon. I've been online since long before online was cool, when BBSes were long-distance modem calls; I've been running online communities since CompuServe was a dominant force; I've been writing reviews since 1998 (this is #804); and I've been doing "social media" since before anyone gave it a name. Twitter? Google+? Facebook? Yeah, I have a bunch of "followers," which is why my name's on the cover of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Twitter Marketing*. But I see all of these as part of the same universal human urge: It's all just a conversation. We all like to talk with each other about the things that interest us. When we can't connect in the "mass media" (whether for political reasons or the desire to find People Like Me), we find alternate ways to do so. Standage apparently sees "social media" the same way, and he traces its back to Cicero (who wrote letters on papyrus to exchange news across the Roman Empire, urging friends to copy the letters, annotate with their own comments, and share with others... an extremely slow Facebook). He does a splendid job of casting the historical influences of communication styles in current terms, such as a chapter on "How Luther went viral" and "And so to the coffeehouse: How social media promotes innovation." In a way, however, this is as much about the history of ALL communication media, not just social media.

Having loved the author's *A History of the World in 6 Glasses*, I looked forward to him proving a theory that has many believers. The basic premise is social media is a return to way things used to be. This argument suggests that our ancestors knew how to communicate one-to-one and one-to-many with meaning. Then 19th and 20th Century mass media bunged this all up with its huge and overwhelming broadcast capabilities. This machine pelted people with messages without asking if they wanted them or if they ever provided any value. Many now believe that social media has democratized media and communications. This I believe is largely untrue. For a short time, in the early 2000s, social media may have delivered on the promise of conversation but it missed the opportunity. All too quickly it became big business and fell into the hands of traditional marketers, advertisers and media professionals who were only comfortable with what they knew best and that is control. As a result, social media is now little different from radio, print and television. It is blaringly loud, aggravatingly intrusive, and only episodically relevant. It is a channel of communication that flows one way like a fire hose. People are tricked into believing their posts, tweets and likes give them power. In reality, they are pinging and sharing what a small handful of people want them to. It is more "what you get is what you share" than "what you share is what you get". Social media is a parlor trick. It only gives the appearance of being highly personal and individualized. What could have been the masses' media is mass media plain and

simple. This is a big miss in the book as is the lack of commentary around content.

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