

The good and bad history lessons of social media

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Tom Standage sees the writing on the wall (Photo: Kailey Fuller-Jackson)

This report on our first [Media Agenda Talk](#) of the season by The Economist's Tom Standage, is by Polis intern Meg Charlton. Follow @PolisLSE for live tweets from the talks.

Social media is nothing new according to [Tom Standage](#). He defines it as “media we get from other people and exchange along social connections, creating a distributed discussion or community.” By this view, social media falls in line with the traditions of pre-industrial communication, and is indeed part of a grand intellectual tradition. By contrast he argues, “Industrial media”, those authoritative voices from newspapers, radios, and media conglomerates that dictate from on high, to the passive audience below, is the historical anomaly.

This is all, for me quite vindicating. It is reassuring to hear that using social media does not make you vapid or anti-intellectual, or that tweeting is somehow a corruption of human nature. To call Twitter a “coffee house environment” might be generous, but it’s certainly more productive than dismissing it, fearing it, or trying to harness it without a full understanding of the medium.

However, Standage skirted the fact that the free exchange of ideas on modern social media is still subject to control in a way that can be as corporate as the old newspapers and TV stations.

Industrial Context

Old media was “one man’s vision” which Standage calls “the opposite of social media.” But these social media platforms are, on some level, one man’s vision too. We might have returned to the original social media but it is still taking place in an industrial context, a context created for us by CEOs and software designers.

Standage spoke about this briefly, in the context of his daughter’s preference for Tumblr over Facebook for “trying out” different identities. He is right that different social networks can help users in that way, allowing them to craft different ways of thinking. For example, if one compares the perky aspiration of Pinterest to the self-conscious stream of consciousness of Tumblr, or the clipped confessional snark of a Gchat.

Nothing Given

But beyond tone, these platforms also quite rigidly determine how their users interact with each other. A tweet can, by definition, be only 140 characters. A caption on a Pinterest pin only 500. You can downvote something on Reddit but you can’t dislike it on Facebook. That might seem like a given but it shouldn’t be. Nothing is a given. These are built environments and they are neither neutral nor accidental but the product of a series of deliberate choices.

Jaron Lanier, the techno-philosopher, coined this idea in his manifesto “You Are Not a Gadget,” that your thoughts and behaviors are “locked-in” by software. No doubt coffee houses had such social mores and Roman newspapers too. But acting outside them was, if unwise or illegal, not impossible. If you try to type the hundred-and-forty-first character in your tweet, you simply cannot post it. Furthermore, it seems less concerning that social media makes its users vapid than that their vapid observations are under the full surveillance of private corporations and (as we’ve seen recently) governments.

It is refreshing and instructive to think of social media as part of a longer tradition. Doing so calms the pitch of a debate over whether these “new” forms of communication will save or destroy us. But it’s still worth remaining critical about just how free users of social media really are.

This article by Polis intern Meg Charlton

The [Polis Media Agenda Talks](#) are free and open to the public every Tuesday at 5pm – details [here](#)

Read a [review](#) of Tom Standage’s new history of social media, [The Writing On The Wall](#)

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