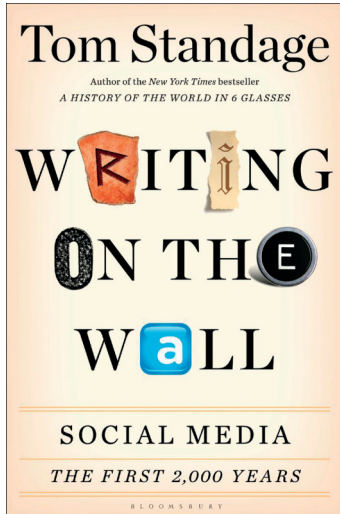


September 2014



Reading Guide: *Writing on the Wall: Social Media—The First 2,000 Years* by Tom Standage (2013)

1. *Writing on the Wall* argues that although social media is new, many of the behaviors associated with it are not. Did you find Tom Standage's argument compelling? Why or why not? Which of the examples he cited reminds you most of current society?
2. Standage discusses many unusual ways of communicating before the age of mass media. If you could travel back in time, which would you most like to try?
3. What argument or example in the book are you most likely to share with others? What most surprised you?
4. In *Writing on the Wall*, we see a pattern where a new technology brings unfettered exchanges for a while before consolidation into mass media takes place. Do you think this will happen with the Internet? Why or why not?
5. Given what you now know about the ways humans communicate outside mass media, what do you think is truly unique about Internet-based social media?
6. If you also read *History of the World in Six Glasses* by Tom Standage (a Fall 2011 Book Group selection), do you have a preference between the two? Why?
7. Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Why do you say so?
8. Are there related books, museum exhibitions, websites, or other resources that you would like to share with fellow readers of this book?

About Tom Standage

Tom Standage is digital editor at *The Economist*, overseeing the magazine's website, Economist.com, and its digital platforms. He previously served as business editor, technology editor, and science correspondent. He has been the editor of the *Technology Quarterly* supplement, which covers emerging technology, since 2003. Standage is also the author of six history books. He holds a degree in engineering and computer science from Oxford University.

Other Related Texts

If you liked *Writing on the Wall*, you may enjoy these other books (descriptions courtesy of Amazon.com):

- *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-line Pioneers* by Tom Standage (2014 paperback/1998 hardcover)
A short history of the development and rapid growth a century and a half ago of the first electronic network, the telegraph, which developed almost simultaneously in America and Britain in the 1840s. Standage sorts through a complicated and often contentious history, showing the dramatic changes the telegraph brought to how business was conducted, news was reported, and humanity viewed its world while drawing parallels to the development of the Internet.

- *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself* by Andrew Pettegree (2014)
In the preindustrial era, news was gathered and shared through conversation and gossip, civic ceremony, celebration, sermons, and proclamations. The age of print brought pamphlets, edicts, ballads, journals, and the first news-sheets, expanding the news community from local to world-wide. This book traces the history of news in ten countries over the course of four centuries.
- *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History* by Nicolas A. Basbanes (2013)
A consideration of all things paper—its invention that revolutionized human civilization; its thousand-fold uses (and misuses), proliferation, and sweeping influence on society; its makers, shapers, collectors, and pulpers.
- *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols, and Other Typographical Marks* by Keith Houston (2013)
Leading a tour of two thousand years of the written word, Houston weaves a trail across the parallel histories of language and typography. Whether investigating the asterisk (*) and dagger (†)—which alternately illuminated and skewered heretical verses of the early Bible—or the at sign (@), which languished in obscurity for centuries until rescued by the Internet, Houston draws on myriad sources to chart the life and times of these enigmatic squiggles, both exotic (¶) and everyday (&). The book travels from the Library of Alexandria to the halls of Bell Labs, with figures as diverse as Charlemagne, Vladimir Nabokov, and George W. Bush, as they cross paths with both obscure and common punctuation marks.

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