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Critique: Writing on the Wall

Chapter 6 – And So to the Coffeehouse: How Social Media Promotes Innovation


What was once denounced by proprietors in the 1670's as "a vast loss of time grown out of a pure novelty" and "great enemies to diligence and industry" is known today as the pioneering space of intellectual and collaborative innovation, where the origins of Newton's Principia, the scientific journal, and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* began: the coffeehouse. Standage describes the way in which the coffeehouse completely transformed the dissemination of information in Europe, providing an environment that is simultaneously intuitive, intellectually rich, collaborative, yet also niche.

Much like encountering a corner of the Internet that is fine-tuned to your interests, like the forum-based platform known as Reddit, the antiquated equivalent to a "subreddit" – a forum dedicated to a specific topic – would be the frequenting of multiple coffeehouses, depending on what discussions you find stimulating. Whether you're a musician, doctor, literati, or person of many interests, there'd be multiple specific coffeehouses to indulge yourself in a variety of different discussions. The innovation from the Arab world that is the coffeehouse revolutionized the speed and efficiency of communication through sorting by topic which eased the finding of specific information, asserting dominance over the chaotic and regulated media environment at the time. More importantly, the physical coffeehouse made the social networks in which information is passed along tangible, traceable, and easy to find, which introduced the advantage of social mixing. Making contact with London's scientists would be as simple as entering the Grecian coffeehouse. Standage explains that the receptive environment supported not only the

flow of information but the creation of new works through an audience that is eager to discuss it. Standage describes the critiques of coffeehouses at the time, which don't seem very logical when juxtaposed with the grand achievements and innovations that came from coffeehouses, and relates it to the modern critique of social media as a vehicle of unproductive and inefficient time-wasting.

Fueled by an intuitive environment of curiosity and shared interest, the global implications of these physical spaces known as coffeehouses have ultimately formed the way the internet operates and information is shared. We undoubtedly retain a plethora of characteristics from the time of the coffeehouse in relation to how we communicate today. The coffeehouse was the person to person version of any forum-based platform we so frequently use in the modern-day. Commonly referred to as "the democratization of knowledge", the Internet supports an environment of curiosity and spaces for shared interests with the novel ability to scour the World Wide Web for anything you wish. Instead of entering a different coffeehouse for a specific topic of discussion,  we can now utilize platforms like Reddit and Twitter and find niche online communities in a matter of seconds. Not only does the Internet pose a solution to the issue of geographical proximity to a certain coffeehouse, it also holds an unfathomable amount of information, AKA knowledge, that can be accessed instantaneously. The Internet's vast expanse surpasses any physical bound of geography, any intellectual bind that is the lack of knowledge, and any bound of timeliness.

The popularity of forum-based online platforms like Reddit and Twitter is not surprising at all given the history of the coffeehouse– more importantly, our own human biology– our psychologically innate urge as social animals to share, learn, quell our curiosity, and sometimes, create. The nature of Reddit, which boasts 430 million active monthly users, is forum style

discussion with no limits of character count, unlike Twitter's 280 character limit. In turn, the contents of discussions on Reddit are much more detailed and expansive, fostering an environment of in-depth sharing. There are over 130,000 active communities, known as "subreddits". The nicheness of Reddit is why people love it so much and find it so useful. Whether you're starting a new medication and want to hear the specific yet varying experiences of others on the same medication, or you're looking for relationship advice and objective perspective, or you're seeking a community that understands the specific grief of addiction loss, or you simply want to peruse the clever shower thoughts of others, there is a subreddit for all things imagined. Truly, everything listed is an example of an already existing subreddit– In order: r/tretinoin (A skincare medication community), r/AITA (Need a second perspective on an interaction you had? This subreddit stands for Am I The Asshole?) , r/NarAnon and r/showerthoughts.

Twitter, on the other hand, limits the contents of discussion to just 280 characters. While some may prefer Reddit as a tool for niche knowledge, often based on the detailed experiences and support of others, Twitter's environment is much more bitey. Unlike Reddit, which limits you to posting under a certain community, Twitter users are able to post what they wish freely, separate from the community (when compared to Reddit's model of discussion). Twitter's model is based on sharing a short, individual thought, and having the community that is interested in the contents of the thought come to *you*. By liking, retweeting, or replying, discourse is created through engagement with the original thought (Tweet) you shared, unaffiliated with a set community, yet simultaneously engaging with those who are interested in the topic. Whether they agree with you or not, more and more engagement allows for more and more discussion, furthering the flow of conversation and information. Similarly, Reddit has "upvotes" and

"downvotes" to show one's like or dislike for a specific comment. The more upvotes you have, the higher your comment will be on the original forum post. In this way, Reddit differs from Twitter as there is no option for your comment to reach a viewership beyond the subreddit you're commenting on through engagement metrics.

Much like the routine of a coffeehouse regular, who "would pop in once or twice a day, drink a dish of coffee, hear the latest news, and check to see if there was any new mail waiting for them" as described by Standage, the routine of the modern-day Internet user is to log on your site of choice or simply open the app, see what's on the timeline, and check for any unopened messages. In the same way that these caffeine-powered vessels allowed you to get an update of information of value to you, or as Standage puts it, " [a] promise of a constant and unpredictable stream of news, messages, and gossip", media platforms like the aforementioned remain relevant for the exact same reasons. The alluring social platform of the coffeehouse fostered and fueled curiosity, discussions of interest, leisure, and even became a place to pick up personal mail, similar to the various ways in which we utilize the Internet and its endless stream of information for the same reasons.

Standage's analysis of the earliest forms of social media is important in the quest to understand the media technologies that facilitate our everyday lives through a historical lens, specifically the time-wasting critique of social media that many are quick to assume. While this can be true, it is similar to the way that coffeehouses were once denounced for, among a multitude of other similarities between the now antiquated coffeehouse and the modern-day timeline. Standage offers an interesting perspective of our innovative digital society through an understanding of one of the most important and pioneering facilitators in human communication and discussion: the coffeehouse.