

## In the Beginning

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I recently went back and re-read a wonderful book written by a friend of mine. The book, "The Victorian Internet," is by Tom Standage, the business editor for The Economist in the UK. Tom's contention in the book is that if Victorian England's inhabitants were to be transported to the present day, they would find the Internet to be something of a big yawn – they'd be less-than-impressed. Why? Because today's Internet mirrors in every way you can imagine what the telegraph did for the Victorian Age. It hosted online weddings, chat rooms, casual conversation, even online porn – such as it was at the time. The telegraph, just like the Internet today, accelerated the pace of information dissemination.



What this led me to think about is the role of social media in the world today. But just what is social media, anyway? Our mind automatically jumps to Facebook and Twitter when we hear the term, but let's take a moment to dissect it. Sorry, this is what I do – I'm a language guy. I have an undergraduate degree in an arcane field called Romance Philology, which is the study of the origins of Romance languages. So you'll just have to humor me for a moment.

'Social' derives from society, "A community of people living in a particular region and having shared customs, laws, and organizations." 'Media' refers to the various means of communication among a population that reach or influence people widely, such as radio and television, newspapers, magazines, and online gathering places." So based on those two definitions, 'social' and 'media' go hand-in-glove. Communications methodologies that reach a broad number of people fall into the category of social media.

The Internet came into popular use with the arrival of the first browsers that made it accessible to everyone in or around 1993. So what did we have in the way of social media before the Internet arrived? How did people share information and communicate widely and collectively before the appearance of Facebook and Twitter?



Needless to say, we had broadcast radio and television. We also had two-way radio in the form of citizen's band and ham radio, both of which still exist today. We went to coffee shops to meet with friends, went bowling, and hung out at our neighborhood bar. We wrote letters to each other and anxiously awaited a response. We went to speakeasies. We sent telegraph messages back and forth. We learned Morse Code. We talked.

I guess that's my point. Technology always evolves to meet the needs of society, and communications technologies meet the evolving human-to-human communications requirements. Social media allows every person to have a voice, regardless of geography, social status or belief structure. To a large extent social media levels the playing field, providing a platform upon which to discover and understand the similarities – and differences – that bind us together.

Thanks for reading.