

New social media? Same old, same old, say Stanford experts (w/ Video)

November 3 2011, By Cynthia Haven

If you feel overwhelmed by social media, you're hardly the first. An avalanche of new forms of communication similarly challenged Europeans of the 17th and 18th centuries.

"In the 17th century, conversation exploded," said Anaïs Saint-Jude, director of Stanford's BiblioTech program. "It was an early modern version of information overload."

The Copernican Revolution, the invention of the printing press, the exploration of the New World – all needed to be digested over time. There was a lot of catching-up to do. "It was a dynamic, troubling, messy period," she said.

Public postal systems became the equivalent of Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and smartphones. Letters crisscrossed Paris by the thousands daily. Voltaire was writing 10 to 15 letters a day. Dramatist Jean Racine complained that he couldn't keep up with the aggressive letter writing. His inbox was full, so to speak.

Stanford's [Mapping the Republic of Letters project](#), which forms part of the context for Saint-Jude's remarks, shows that 40 percent of Voltaire's letters were sent to correspondents relatively close by.

Not-so-profound correspondence

What was everyone saying? Not necessarily much. Rather like today's email. "It was the equivalent of a phone call, inviting someone to tea or saying, 'OMG, did you know about the Duke?'" said Dan Edelstein, an associate professor of French and the principal investigator for the project. He will be teaching a course in the spring called Social Animals, Social Revolutions and Social Networks.

Clearly, something had changed: Commercial postal services were on the rise. Though their prototypes had existed down through the centuries, they had mostly served government officials, and later (via the Medicis, for example) merchant and banking houses. Suddenly they were carrying private correspondence.

More people were writing, and more people could respond quickly, not only with friends and family, but across far-flung distances with people they had never met, and never would. Rather like some of our Facebook friends.

According to Saint-Jude, it was an era, like ours, of "hyper-writing," even addictive writing. The aristocratic Madame de Sévigné wrote 1,120 letters to her married daughter in Brittany, beginning in the late 1670s, until her death in 1696. It was important to keep her kid up to date with the goings-on in Paris. Although she is remembered today for her witty epistles, she never intended them to be saved, let alone published.

For a time, the streets of Paris were littered with little bits of papers – les billets – filled with a few words of scabrous and politically defamatory verse that were thrown to the public. Sound like Twitter?

The little bits of paper in your pocket could cause big trouble – Voltaire landed in jail for his verse. Nonetheless, these short, anonymous postings bypassed the government censor. It was also a way of organizing uprisings. Edelstein points out that Egyptian social networks were critical

to coordinating demonstrators and drawing large crowds this year.

Indeed, he noted that social networks are key to almost all revolutions. "The Egyptian youth organizers may have excelled at mobilizing people at a moment's notice, but interestingly it's another kind of social network that seems to be taking advantage of the post-revolutionary situation – the Muslim Brotherhood," he said.

"This network may be less agile, but it has created longer and better sustained bonds between members over time." Unlike Facebook networks that almost anyone can join, the Brotherhood echoed the older, more exclusive networks that vetted prospective members, such as France's Jacobin clubs. "Flash mobs quickly splinter into cacophony," Edelstein told an assembly of incoming freshmen last month.

Dangers of misplaced letters

What is public? What is private? More correspondence meant that letters could fall into the wrong hands. Laclos' epistolary novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, showed the dangers and disgrace that could befall the writers of wayward correspondence. In our own era, need we mention the fate that befell the indiscreet Rep. Anthony Weiner?

Meanwhile, modern journalism was born, via a precursor of the blog. Nobles, such as Cardinal Mazarin, hired their own "journalists" to report on scandal and sex in the city. These writers set up bureaus around Paris to get the juiciest news, and it was written and copied and distributed to subscribers. Literary reviews and newspapers soon blossomed, along with letters to the editor and a new environment of literary and cultural criticism.

These new networks flexed a new kind of media punch. For example, Edelstein noted that across the ocean in America, the Declaration of

Independence was signed on July 2. The news was published in a newspaper on the legendary 4th. "What we're really celebrating is not the fact that 56 men signed the declaration, but rather that a new network of people emerged around the published declaration – a network that would ultimately become the United States," he said.

The poster was invented to invite more and more people to more and more public events – theater, for example, became the dominant art form in the 17th century. Posters mobilized these slow-motion "flash mobs."

The new spaces we have created are virtual, not physical. But the physical spaces of the [17th century](#) and Enlightenment were just as much of a psychological earthquake – l'Académie française, l'Académie des sciences, the celebrated salons. That large groups of people were getting together to chat about literature, discovery, ideas, revolution, or simply to watch a show, was a change from the carefully manicured guest lists of the court, where the principal order of business was big-time sucking up.

These spaces evoked new questions: How does one conduct oneself? How does one appear to others? Managing your public profile became vital. The result? A new self-consciousness was born, and a new social nervousness. The players had the same questions we have today, said Saint-Jude: "How do you curate all this information?"

"Relax," said Saint-Jude. "You're in good company. There's nothing new under the sun."

Provided by Stanford University

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