

'The Social Network': Charles Dickens wrote the script

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He looked at the technological revolution unfolding around him and recognized the possibility for new kinds of social networks, and the insight catapulted him to the pinnacle of his field and changed popular culture forever.

Mark Zuckerberg? The founder of Match.com? Think further back — way back, urges a UCLA authority on the life and work of [Charles Dickens](#).

In a forthcoming book, Jonathan Grossman ascribes key characteristics of Dickens' work to the 19th-century author's appreciation of the implications of Victorian innovations in high-speed, global passenger transport, including new perceptions of time, space and community.

Through such novels as "The Old Curiosity Shop," "Little Dorrit," "A Tale of Two Cities" and "Great Expectations," Dickens helped his readers synthesize and understand the historic shift engulfing them, Grossman contends in "Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel."

"Dickens grasped the promise that the public transport revolution held in networking people together," said Grossman, an associate professor of English at UCLA. "He cheered this revolution. He helped us to imagine and understand a networked world. He also lamented the tragedies that this networking wrought."

From Dickens' famously intricate plots, to his galley of diverse characters whose fates intersect, to his description of synchronous events occurring over long distances, Grossman sees the indelible influence of key 19th-century innovations in stagecoach, rail and ocean transport in the author's 15 novels and numerous essays and short stories.

Grossman's book, due out from Oxford University Press this spring, is being published at a time when Dickens is in the spotlight. With the 200th anniversary of his birth on Feb. 7, events are being mounted worldwide to celebrate the life and legacy of the author who is responsible for some of English literature's most iconic novels and characters. At UCLA, the anniversary is being marked with an exhibit at the Charles E. Young Research Library of Dickens-related holdings, including original letters in the author's hand and rare examples of his novels in their original serialized form.

While other scholars have looked at the impact of various 19th-century technical innovations on Dickens' work, Grossman's 256-page analysis is the first devoted to the role of transportation in the author's oeuvre. The scholar's findings are part of a new trend examining the impact of networks in literature.

Translated into more recent terms, Dickens lived through the equivalent of the today's communications revolution, Grossman said. The advent of stagecoaches, then of railways and transoceanic steamships, made round-trip journeys across once prohibitively lengthy distances seem ordinary and systematic. Time itself was changed. In the service of a comprehensive public transport system, the Victorians overran the separate local times kept in each town, establishing instead the synchronized 'standard' time that now ticks on our clocks.

"There was even railway time observed in clocks, as if the sun itself had given in," the narrator laments in Dickens' 1846 novel "Dombey and

Son."

Along the way, conventional definitions of community fell by the wayside.

"Prior to the 19th century, a typical sense of community was based on proximity, so people felt most connected to their local town," Grossman said. "But after the shift to a network of public transport, they also started to feel more connected to those people they could get to the most quickly through the network."

The transport network's greatest influence in Dickens' novels, Grossman contends, can be found in the way crisscrossing fates link characters from different locales, different walks of life and different classes. For the first time in history, 19th-century transportation innovations created the kinds of dense social networks that would enable a waif from a debtors' prison to marry a world traveler (the plot of "Little Dorrit") or a forlorn orphan to discover his life's course has been secretly shaped by the simultaneous activity of a benefactor living on the other side of the world ("Great Expectations"), Grossman argues.

"Dickens' stories are often about the crisscrossing connectedness, the density of your relations to other people — literally as a human body intersecting with others across wider and wider expanses, which of course is what a transportation system accomplishes," Grossman said.

Long before Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram demonstrated the concept of six degrees of separation, Dickens was showing a similar level of uncanny connectedness, which had been made possible for the first time by transportation advancements, Grossman argues in his book.

"The world," Grossman quotes Dickens as saying, "was so much smaller than we thought it; we were all so connected ... without knowing it."

Even the authorial voice that Dickens chooses is affected by his appreciation of this new sense of community, Grossman contends. When Dickens uses a third-person omniscient narrator, which is the voice associated with most of his novels, he does so partly to provide the perspective of a person trying to see himself or herself moving in a vast, interconnected, infrastructural system of transportation, a perspective we now take for granted but one that was just beginning to dawn on his readers.

Such a perspective also formed part of the advent of standardized time, first called "railway time," in which clocks were synchronized across once-separating distances. Standardized time made it possible, for instance, to imagine two trains leaving stations in distant towns at precisely the same moment.

"Dickens himself loved to relate simultaneous happenings in his novels, and in his later works, he stretched such co-incident events across international borders too," Grossman said.

Grossman sees Dickens' first novel, "The Pickwick Papers," published between 1836 and 1837, as a celebration of the coming together of regional public transport systems and of how mobility can unite people. The novel follows the adventure of Pickwick, an enthusiastic fan of the country's stagecoach system, on which Dickens relied heavily in his first career as a newspaper reporter.

In Dickens' next novel, "The Old Curiosity Shop," Grossman finds an exploration of what today would be considered "going off the grid." The beleaguered heroine of the 1840-41 novel succeeds in evading a group of malevolent pursuers by avoiding the country's bustling stagecoach network. She and her ailing grandfather become "lost" in plain view by taking to foot travel and journeying through increasingly unpopular canals at a time when their pursuers were frequenting the most efficient

transportation of their time — stagecoaches.

Grossman argues that the 1855-57 novel "Little Dorrit" opened the door to several later novels that illustrate a new international network of personal connections made possible by advancements in steamships. In "Little Dorrit," a character returns from working in China to London, where he meets a poor girl who has spent her life living in a prison; the girl then inherits wealth and travels through Europe before returning to marry the bewildered hero.

"More than a century before the advent of eHarmony and Match.com, Dickens shows how new social networks made possible by technological advances were facilitating connections that would not have occurred at an earlier time," Grossman said.

Dickens even experienced a dramatic downside of the new network: He survived a bloody train wreck in 1865, but the incident severely damaged his health, Grossman said. In fact, Dickens died five years to the day after the 1865 Staplehurst accident.

"It was a somewhat sad end to a writer who correctly viewed himself as an expert in locomotion," Grossman said.

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

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