

# Social Networking in the 1600s



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Men enjoying a drink and a chat in a 17th-century coffeehouse.

By TOM STANDAGE

Published: June 22, 2013

LONDON — SOCIAL networks stand accused of being enemies of productivity. According to one popular (if questionable) [infographic](#) circulating online, the use of Facebook, Twitter and other such sites at work costs the American economy \$650 billion each year. Our attention spans are atrophying, our test scores declining, all because of these “weapons of mass distraction.”

Yet such worries have arisen before. In England in the late 1600s, very similar concerns were expressed about another new media-sharing environment, the allure of which seemed to be undermining young people’s ability to concentrate on their studies or their work: the coffeehouse. It was the social-networking site of its day.

Like coffee itself, coffeehouses were an import from the Arab world. England’s first coffeehouse opened in Oxford in the early 1650s, and hundreds of similar establishments sprang up in London and other cities in the following years. People went to coffeehouses not just to drink coffee, but to read and discuss the latest pamphlets and news-sheets and to catch up on rumor and gossip.

Coffeehouses were also used as post offices. Patrons would visit their favorite coffeehouses several times a day to check for new mail, catch up on the news and talk to other coffee drinkers, both friends and strangers. Some coffeehouses specialized in discussion of particular topics, like science, politics, literature or shipping. As customers moved from one to the other, information circulated with them.

The diary of Samuel Pepys, a government official, is punctuated by variations of the phrase “thence to the coffeehouse.” His entries give a sense of the wide-ranging conversations he found there. The ones for November 1663 alone include references to “a long and most passionate discourse between two doctors,” discussions of Roman history, how to store beer, a new type of nautical weapon and an approaching legal trial.

One reason these conversations were so lively was that social distinctions were not recognized within the coffeehouse walls. Patrons were not merely permitted but encouraged to strike up conversations with strangers from entirely different walks of life. As the poet Samuel Butler put it, “gentleman, mechanic, lord, and scoundrel mix, and are all of a piece.”

Not everyone approved. As well as complaining that Christians had abandoned their traditional beer in favor of a foreign drink, critics worried that coffeehouses were keeping people from productive work. Among the first to sound the alarm, in 1677, was Anthony Wood, an Oxford academic. “Why doth solid and serious learning decline, and few or none follow it now in the University?” he asked. “Answer: Because of Coffea Houses, where they spend all their time.”

Meanwhile, Roger North, a lawyer, bemoaned, in Cambridge, the “vast Loss of Time grown out of a pure Novelty. For who can apply close to a Subject with his Head full of the Din of a Coffee-house?” These places were “the ruin of many serious and hopeful young gentlemen and tradesmen,” according to a pamphlet, “The Grand Concern of England Explained,” published in 1673.

All of which brings to mind the dire warnings issued by many modern commentators. A common cause for concern, both then and now, is that new media-sharing platforms pose a particular danger to the young.

But what was the actual impact of coffeehouses on productivity, education and innovation? Rather than enemies of industry, coffeehouses were in fact crucibles of creativity, because of the way in which they facilitated the mixing of both people and ideas. Members of the Royal Society, England’s pioneering scientific society, frequently retired to coffeehouses to extend their discussions. Scientists often conducted experiments and gave lectures in coffeehouses, and because admission cost just a penny (the price of a single cup), coffeehouses were sometimes referred to as “penny universities.” It was a coffeehouse argument among several fellow scientists that spurred Isaac Newton to write his “Principia Mathematica,” one of the foundational works of modern science.

Coffeehouses were platforms for innovation in the world of business, too. Merchants used coffeehouses as meeting rooms, which gave rise to new companies and new business models. A London coffeehouse called Jonathan’s, where merchants kept particular tables at which they would transact their business, turned into the London Stock Exchange. Edward Lloyd’s coffeehouse, a popular meeting place for ship captains, shipowners and traders, became the famous insurance market Lloyd’s.

And the economist Adam Smith wrote much of his masterpiece “The Wealth of Nations” in the British Coffee House, a popular meeting place for Scottish intellectuals, among whom he circulated early drafts of his book for discussion.

No doubt there was some time-wasting going on in coffeehouses. But their merits far outweighed their drawbacks. They provided a lively social and intellectual environment, which gave rise to a stream of innovations that shaped the modern world. It is no coincidence that coffee remains the traditional drink of collaboration and networking today.

Now the spirit of the coffeehouse has been reborn in our social-media platforms. They, too, are open to all comers, and allow people from different walks of life to meet, debate, and share information with friends and strangers alike, forging new connections and sparking new ideas. Such conversations may be entirely virtual, but they have enormous potential to bring about change in the real world.

Although some bosses deride the use of social media in the workplace as “social networking,” more farsighted companies are embracing “enterprise social networks,” essentially corporate versions of Facebook, to encourage collaboration, discover hidden talents and knowledge among their employees, and reduce the use of e-mail. A [study published in 2012 by McKinsey & Company](#), the consulting firm, found that the use of social networking within companies increased the productivity of “knowledge workers” by 20 to 25 percent.

The use of social media in education, meanwhile, is backed by studies showing that students learn more effectively when they interact with other learners. [OpenWorm](#), a pioneering computational biology project started from a single tweet, now involves collaborators around the world who meet via Google Hangouts. Who knows what other innovations are brewing in the Internet’s global coffeehouse?

There is always an adjustment period when new technologies appear. During this transitional phase, which can take several years, technologies are often criticized for disrupting existing ways of doing things. But the lesson of the coffeehouse is that modern fears about the dangers of social networking are overdone. This kind of media, in fact, has a long history: Martin Luther’s use of pamphlets in the Reformation casts new light on the role of social media in the Arab Spring, for example, and there are parallels between the gossipy poems that circulated in pre-Revolutionary France and the uses of microblogging in modern China.

As we grapple with the issues raised by new technologies, there is much we can learn from the past.

*Tom Standage is the digital editor at The Economist and [the author](#) of the forthcoming book “Writing on the Wall: Social Media — The First 2,000 Years.”*