

# Is Social Media Good for History?

Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms are widely used by historians. But does anyone benefit?

Published in *History Today*, Volume 70, Issue 2, February 2020



Crowd in front of the Piercy Roberts window in London Caricature Shop, 1801. Rijksmuseum.

## **‘Social media favours the quirky, the visual, the gruesome’**

*Catherine Fletcher, Professor of History, Manchester Metropolitan University and author of The Beauty and the Terror: An Alternative History of the Italian Renaissance (Bodley Head, 2020)*

At its best, social media is a remarkable mechanism for exchanging ideas, book recommendations and contacts, all of which makes the life of the historian a great deal easier. Last year, I was part of a conference round table featuring research on Manchuria, Korea, Russia and Italy, which wouldn't have happened without Twitter. Archive work can be isolating and social media can be an excellent virtual water-cooler, a place to swap jokes and amusing tales, such as the mystery of the shrinking crocodile that occupied me and my followers while I was working on the Medici wardrobe records. (Both large and small crocodiles were among the curiosities collected by the 16th-century dukes of Florence.)

The crocodile story is instructive, however, because I wasn't in Florence to research deceased reptiles. My project was on guns, which are a much more sensitive topic on social media. It would be all too easy for a witty comment about historical firearms to lose its humour amid breaking news of a shooting, which is why I'm pretty cautious when it comes to tweeting about them. Social media is spectacularly bad at nuance: the subtlety that is a mark of good historical writing rarely plays well amid the clamour. Stuffed crocodiles seem somewhat safer.

Yet even crocodiles aren't without their problems. They're an example of the way social media favours the quirky, the visual, the gruesome, salacious or conspiratorial. There's a certain tabloid headline quality to it all and, while that can be fun, it has real problems. In a Twitter thread last June, curator Sara Huws wrote of her concern that the histories she tweeted from a Welsh museum account got more attention if she implied they'd been suppressed. The public wanted to believe in a conspiracy to hide the historical truth, even when there was no evidence of such a thing. Huws stopped using the tactic. Yet under pressure to promote an exciting piece of research, it can be all too easy for historians – even those with the best of motivations – to buy into social media's more worrying tendencies.

### **'The disorders of social media can also be the liberty of alternative interpretations'**

*Jeremy Black, Author of The Power of Knowledge: How Information and Technology Made the Modern World (Yale, 2015)*

Nobody has ever owned opinion. Even in the most authoritarian states, there have been gossip and rumour both within and outside the system and, in many respects, social media is a set of means for the dissemination of both. The Internet has taken forward the capability offered by the telephone for instantaneous communication between spatially separate individuals. Thanks to such developments, established political, social, economic and cultural loyalties and alignments coexist with rapidly developing linkages. Patterns of control are challenged.

Linked to this, there is a host of intellectual and cultural concerns, from health panics to the fear that accuracy and authority in reporting have been corrupted. If opinion and feeling trump facts and thinking, what are the consequences?

For historians, they include access to a broad tranche of opinion as many societies experience a process of democratisation in which existing institutions were shaken. The Internet has offered a range and capacity different from those of previous national, transnational and global information and communications systems. It has also permitted a more engaged consumer response, wherein consumers become users and users become producers. Media content and software-based products provide platforms for user-driven interactions and content. The resulting idea of information and opinions as chaos and crisis all too often reflects the standard approach of 'what I stand for is reasonable, but you are a victim of false consciousness and your approach is crude and populist'.

A more careful analysis of circumstances is needed. Established patterns of academic and other authority are not necessarily benign and, in much of the world, history is part of a state-driven process of legitimation and ideology. Even in liberal societies, there are heavily slanted processes of professional influence and argument, including access to grants and publication. The disorder of social media can also be the liberty of alternative interpretations.

### **'It is hard to get a sense of what really lurks behind one's online bubble'**

*Matt Shaw, Librarian at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London*

History – or at least the engagement of historians – is undoubtedly good for social media. On Twitter, they make me laugh out loud daily, they urge caution when a historical image with a dicey provenance is going viral and they diligently puncture the myths, nostalgia and explanations that find such fertile, and sometimes dangerous, ground online. But when looking at social media it is difficult to get a sense of what really lurks beyond one's online bubble, neatly curated as it is with a wide selection of coruscating Twitterstorians.

With a few exceptions, it is hard to see historians making any real dent on the broader culture through Twitter, let alone the giants of Instagram, WeChat or Facebook. This is not to say important discussions have not taken place, notably around Confederate Monuments in the US or the use of

the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’, but they don’t register in the broader babble of bots, grams and stans. A more quantifiable contribution might be the opening up of historical collections to wider audiences. But is social media good for historians? Here, I think, we are mostly looking at Twitter, which, like the discipline of history remains a largely textual medium, leavened with the occasional well-chosen gif. It is a gift to the historian’s tradecraft: the bread and butter of sharing references; testing of thoughts; raising profiles; deciphering a tricky hand; discovering fellow toilers in the same field. But there is an undoubted emotional, even psychological, cost that the medium exacts – one that is mostly not borne by those identifying as male, nor by those in positions of academic seniority or other privilege. The real boon it offers, if the cost to those raising critical, under-represented, or new voices can be overlooked, is the shaking off of old views of what history is and how it should be done.

Whether or not social media is good for us or not, it isn’t going away anytime soon. Nor is it going to stay still. Maybe social media will settle down as business pressures, regulation and shifting demographics reshape the online – and the real – world. For Gen Z, a Twitter thread is as likely to be as attractive as a recorder party at Professor Welch’s.

**‘How can I fail to be stimulated by the ease of access to understanding that social media has brought?’**

*Llewelyn Morgan, Tutorial Fellow in Classics, Brasenose College, Oxford*

A few years ago, British Pathé uploaded its entire collection of historic films to YouTube. The editing of each of the 85,000 items was pretty minimal, needless to say, and a lot of the material was issued with inaccurate descriptions attached. One such item was a minute-long news report, subtitled in German, on a revolution in Afghanistan in 1928-29. We see the rebel forces marching into Kabul, a close-up of their leader, Habibullah Kalakani, soon to be King Habibullah II but denigrated by his enemies as Bachaye Saqao, ‘Son of a Water carrier’. At the end we glimpse the British Vickers Victoria aircraft that spirited foreigners and members of the former royal family out of danger and over the mountains to India. Pathé claim it as a different event entirely, wrong date, wrong king.

It’s an amazing survival; one of the things I’m most proud of having brought to greater attention, and that despite the scenes when I posted it on Twitter and made the mistake of referring to Habibullah as Bachaye Saqao. (What is safely history to me can retain an urgently contemporary charge in Afghanistan.) But it encapsulates, I’d like to suggest, social media’s impact on our discipline: a thrilling explosion of information, combined with the dramatic loss of authoritative framing that this democratisation of knowledge-gathering has brought. Dodgy versions of history thrive and go uncontested in this environment and it offends us deeply. But for all that, what a thing to see. What an exciting document for a historian to be able to share.

Fresh sources of information, not to mention fresh means to communicate information, can never be a bad thing for a historian. In my later middle age I can be reading about Anglo-Saxon saints one minute, cuneiform scribes, Subcontinental genetics or Edwardian architecture the next. How can I fail to be stimulated by the ease of access to understanding that social media has brought?

Yet am I grateful that I learnt to sift and evaluate evidence in the Dark Ages before the Internet came along? Yes, more than I can say.