Discussion Questions

Were you surprised to learn that early “social media” used abbreviations like “SPD” and “SVBEEV” much as we use abbreviations in text messages and other electronic communications? (page 22) Are all such acronyms used merely to save time and/or energy, or are there other reasons for using them?

Cicero and others relied on “informal” methods of delivery because of their cheapness (pp. 25–26) rather than the more expensive but more reliable system of messengers. Is there an analogue of this (formal vs. informal delivery) in modern social media communication?

Roman letter-writers had to censor themselves because their documents were considered “semi-public;” sensitive material had to be sent by private courier (p. 26). What do you think is the distinction between “public” and “semi-public”? Are any modern social media “semi-public” according to your distinction?

It was common to include copies of other peoples’ letters along with one’s own (p. 27). This appeared to be very intentional. In many modern email programs, the default behavior when replying to a message is to automatically include a copy of the original message. Does this result in an overall improvement in communication? Or is something lost by taking this decision out of the hands of the sender?

In the portion of the chapter relating to the “acta” (the daily journal of activities in the Roman senate, pp. 28–30), there are a number of interesting connections with modern times. We learn, for instance, that Julius Caesar instituted this journal for personal political gain and not merely to better inform the public. (Just think about modern arguments about “media bias”.) The author speculates that readership of the acta may have increased when “trivia” began to be included. (Think of modern complaints about the lack of “hard news” and the overabundance of stories about celebrities or other sensational topics.) What other similarities do you see between this early example of a “newspaper” and modern media?

It is easy to find reports on the Web about “information overload.” Is this a new concept? (pp. 32–33)

Prior to reading this chapter, did you think that the idea of a “launch party” (for a new book, a new movie, a new product, etc.) was a modern phenomenon? As we see from page 37, it is not. Why are we so ready to assume that these kinds of events are products of a “modern” frame of mind?

How much did you like studying history in junior high or high school? Is this kind of “history book” appealing? Are you learning interesting and/or useful things from it?