

The Telegraph:

How the First Global Network of Wires
Changed the Way People
Read, Write, and Think about the World

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Introduction:

This animated presentation about the telegraph was created using the web application Moovly. I investigated a number of animation programs before beginning because I thought applications which leaned towards simple presentations or video editing would lack features and objects that would make the video engaging. I have used the PowToon application in the past but found that costs and licenses would be the deciding factor. I found that PowToon had a larger bank of features and objects but the fact that Moovly offered an educational use license which dramatically reduce the cost of a 10 minute video made it the clear choice. I would have liked to have spent more time learning the program and exploring more stylistic options but I was ultimately happy with its user friendly layout and stock templates. Moovly allows the easy manipulation of objects, text, and sounds which allowed me to demonstrate the complexities of telegraph operations and communication using simple visual aids. I would have liked to have ran a background music track through the video to create some flow but found that the stock music did not suit theme and looping uploaded audio to be tedious. Despite being slightly over time, the video is dense and in the future I would attempt to slim down the content and focus on a few key components of the message.

Storyboard

Part 1: Horses and Steamships

In 1825, Samuel Morse, an American painter travelled to Washington to complete a commissioned portrait. At that time, the trip took four days from his home in Connecticut. Since travellers and messages used the same mode of transportation, letters and parcels were only as fast as a messenger could ride. For this reason, word of Morse's wife' illness was slow and by the time Morse received the message in Washington and returned home, she had already been buried for several days. (Standage p. 42) Morse's frustration with the slow communication of the day was shared by many. He would eventually become known as the "father of the telegraph" but the problems created by the inadequacies of the day's communication were common.

In America, travellers left their families to seek gold in California and Colorado. Settlers followed creating new villages and towns cut off from the rest of the country. The great distances and difficult terrain resulted in common feelings of isolation. Hand written letters took weeks and months by horse and steamship to cross the country. The famed "Pony Express" was a private enterprise that expanded the reach of communication in America to the west coast maintaining scheduled deliveries before the advent of standardized time (Ridge p. 4). Messages were sent for social, political and business purposes (Cooper 760).

Despite moderately successful mail operations in Europe and America, the industrial revolution created a demand for information that neither system could meet. The social need for goods outmatched the systems of production and delivery. Railways which shared information using handwritten texts were inefficient and dangerous (Tarr p. 41).

The first significant attempt to meet the need for faster communication was developed in France by the Chappe brothers. In the late 1700's they sent messages by clanging ceramic dishes and using an auditory code. (Standage p. 25). The brothers then created the first "optical telegraph" using a large structure with rotating arms that could be viewed by an operator using a telescope. Different arm positions could create 92 separate signals that represented various numbers, letters, and phrases. (Standage p. 26).

Part 2 - Electromagnetism and Morse Code

In the 1820's Hans Christian Oersted observed that an electrical current in close proximity to a compass could make the compass needle move back and forth (Standage p. 40). Although Morse was unfamiliar with Oersted's work, the concept of electromagnetism spread and Morse recognized the potential for communication. With improvements in battery technology and electrical cable, it was soon well known that signal could be sent along electrical wires with seemingly instantaneous speed. Morse could not take credit for the scientific discoveries that made the telegraph possible but he would soon devise a signal and code system that would make the telegraph practical and economical. The Morse telegraph code developed in 1832 succeeded in becoming the world standard because it used only two types of signals, a short signal and a long signal, and it only required one electrical wire (Standage p. 45). The operator at the sending end of a Morse Telegraph would tap out signals with a device and the receiving device would print out the message on a piece of paper using dots for a short signal and dashes for a long signal. Not long after establishing the Morse telegraph, operators learned to translate the code faster using the sound made by the signal and stopped using the original printouts (Drinkwater p. 2).

Even though operators became efficient at sending and receiving Morse Code and translating the signals into their original messages, signals could only be sent one at a time. This led to telegraph companies charging its customers on a per word basis. Quickly, a new language of shorthand, abbreviations and supplementary codes developed to shorten the length and reduce the cost of using the system. Because of the fragmented development of telegraph lines by numerous companies, lines were run by different operators and unique dialects of codes appeared. Once telegraph companies began to conglomerate, codes began to mix and standardize. The "Q Code" is one example that became widespread. Because the letter "Q" is used rarely in English, operators would shorten words and phrases using the letter without confusing the code with common words. "QTH" was used to enquire about the receiving operator's location and "QRM" was used to alert operators of signal interference. (Neuman p. 7). Other common abbreviations included "GA" for "go ahead" and "SFD" for "stop for dinner" (Standage p. 81). Operators became fluent in Morse Code and the dialects of the wires they worked on. Aside from translating handwritten messages to Morse Code, and then back again, operators used the language of dots and dashes to socialize during slow periods. Operators would tell jokes and stories and play chess to pass the time. A networked community developed on the wires which became personal. Operators could recognize each other based

on their style of transmitting the auditory code and personalized signatures referred to as "sigs" (Standage p. 147).

Even though early telegraph stations often had seats so the public could witness the new technology (Nye, p 1068), the new language of Morse Code was mainly used by its operators. Users of the system would receive messages that largely resembled the message that was handwritten by the sender, the only difference being that the message would be written or typed by an operator. This system was not without error. Famously, one telegraph message being used by a rail service was erroneously translated from "bad spot on the track" to "dad shot in the back" (Drinkwater p. 3). Errors when sending sensitive information could have serious consequences for users. New laws were created to address the responsibilities of operators when handling emotional messages. (Malin p. 332)

The demand for speed increased with the growth of the telegraph network. Because sending messages could involve the use of several telegraph wires, stations, sorting tables, pneumatic tubes and hand messengers, accuracy and privacy became large issues (Standage p. 116). This altered the way individuals, businesses, and governments used the telegraph which ultimately changed the general public's consumption and relationship with printed information.

Part 3 - New Uses of Communication

Before the telegraph, newspapers focused their publications on local news that their investigators and reporters had access to. Foreign news would be sent by mail after it was published locally meaning it could be days, weeks or months before one location would hear news regarding another. Since immediacy was unobtainable, many newspapers published irregularly, meaning shortages of news could last for days or weeks (Standage p.163). Once thousands of kilometers of telegraph wires were established including several transatlantic cables connecting North America and Europe, news travelled to enemies instantly, compromising any secretive military strategies (Standage p. 172). Soon, governments recognized the need for privacy and enforced laws that allowed themselves and telegraph companies to transmit messages using codes.

Governments realized the economic potential of the telegraph and coded transmission; information commonly known in one place could be sold to another. For example, telegraph company share prices could be sent from head offices in London to other major cities where bankers could be charged access to the valuable market commodity (Standage p.125). Private information was not just valuable for governments and telegraph companies, because private use of codes was illegal, cleverly devised cyphers were used which appeared as normal conversation. Thieves and conmen used codes to transmit the results of horse races to their counterparts in other cities. They then laid bets on the race after it had finished but before the official results were transmitted. (Standage p.125).

The value of exclusive news and market information created a surge in demand for business use of the telegraph. The public could now consume news of world events within hours or minutes of the events occurrence. The Associated Press was created in 1846, allowing various newspapers to share telegraphs and transmit the most significant stories

throughout the world, news shifted from local to global (Nye p. 1075). The expansive readership of printed news had emotional results. The telegraph was used to transmit updates on the health of dying president James Garfield in 1881. The "Scientific American" described the new phenomenon as "global sympathy" as printed news created the first "shared sickbed" (Standage p. 179).

Spontaneous and exclusive news was profitable for news companies and was in high demand but it also came with some drawbacks. The immediacy of news increased the public perception of urgency and crisis (Nye 1083). Before the telegraph, days could pass from one ominous news story to the next, now breaking news could report horrific or stressful stories throughout the day (Malin p. 3232).

The speed of communication also significantly altered business and banking. Since updates on stocks, market prices, and shipments of goods could dramatically affect profit, companies began subscribing to telegrams which sent valuable information a couple times a week. In the second half of the 1800's, improvements were made to automate the telegraph creating the stock ticker, which resulted in a continuous flow of information (Standage p. 179). Automation also became common in civil uses of the telegraph. By the 1870's, cities used shorter telegraph wires to automatically transmit alarms for theft and fire, significantly impacting public life (Nye p. 1077).

Part 4 - Predictions

Predictions of the effect of the telegraph on public life varied from place to place. A British ambassador argued that ongoing discourse between nations and individuals would surely bring peace (Standage p. 107). Optimism was also high in America where the mid 19th century public thought the telegraph could unify the fragmented nation. Instead, Americans witnessed the Civil War where the telegraph was more commonly used coordinate sending troops into battle (Nye p. 1076). Even at the height of the telegraphs use, access and use was varied. Cities had greater access than towns. Businesses and the wealthy had greater access than the general public. The old mail systems still functioned and allowed users to send parcels as well as their own physical messages. The telegraph was reserved for messages requiring urgency. For many the telegraph was not experienced first or even second hand but through the significant transformations of newspapers, businesses and governments.

By the end of the 1800's the telegraph had significantly altered global communication and with it, the public's relation to written text. Short, abbreviated and coded messages could be transmitted at the speed of light and delivered as fast as fluent operators could translate Morse code. A steady stream of news was shared by consumers globally and businesses used even steadier streams of data to manage a global economy. The public's view of the telegraph ultimately became more literate as well.

Early on, the telegraph was referred to as black magic by religious leaders; the inner workings of the telegraph were far more difficult for citizens to comprehend compared to train, steamship, or horse (Standage p 68). By the end of the telegraph's dominance, publications such as *Telegraphers Advocate*, *The Operator*, and *The Telegraph Journal* enhanced reader's understanding of electrical science and communication (Standage p. 207). Automation, and

later, the invention of the telephone slowly removed the need for a network of Morse code operators. Amateurs and unskilled labour replaced talented operators and eventually the telegraph network entirely. Telephones removed the the cost of operators and the need for complex written codes.

The compromised security of using operators was now replaced by wire taps and new privacy issues. Despite the phasing out of the telegraph network, it's community that spanned continents, security risks and abbreviated jargon foreshadowed future communication technologies including today's world wide web.

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