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Ajm339

Essay #1

The Cultural and Political Influences on the Telegraph

By Alex Meyers

Theme: How did political and cultural ideas affect the development and use of the wired telegraph and the wireless telegraph systems in the period 1830 to 1920?

The telegraph was one of the first inventions to truly revolutionize the way the world communicated. People no longer needed to send a messenger across borders and oceans in order to communicate at long distances, they had a mechanism that could these send messages in a fraction of the time. As big of an influence as the telegraph was on society, political and cultural ideas had their own effects on the development and use of the wired and wireless telegraph. Politics affected the widespread international use of telegraphs because political leaders needed them in order to have immediate access to other countries, their ambassadors and military leaders regardless of their location on the globe. Culture created new concepts and uses for the telegraph through the evolution of business, travel and family relationships. Overall, both politics and culture transformed the telegraph into a tool that began the process of creating the interconnected world that is present today.

The idea of the workings and importance of the electric and wireless telegraph began with Great Britain and shutter telegraphy during the Napoleonic wars. Great Britain realized that the rapid exchanges provided by shutter telegraphy was extremely potent in military communication. Politics herein began to affect the development of the wired telegraph. Peter J. Hugill writes that the idea and technology of the telegraph was relatively simple, but the funding required to build long and successful telegraphs was not easy to come by. Since the British government understood the importance and value of the telegraph, it launched the Telegraph Purchase Bill which gave "£8,000,000 sterling for reinvestment by those who looked favorably on electric telegraphs as a subject of safe and sure remuneration" (Hugill 32). Although the British government did not develop the telegraph itself, its influence and money enabled the private sector to develop stable technology and build extensive lines of cables. The British also had political and monetary influence over the companies that created the materials necessary to build the electric telegraph cables. Since Great Britain had so much influence over the electric telegraph market, many of the world's communication lines were built through or

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around London. This made Britain the center of telecommunications which created the early British Communications Hegemony which lasted for many years to follow.

Great Britain's widespread dominance of the electric telegraph allowed it to control how the rest of the world used the telegraph on an international level. Since, "The global telegraph network [was] centered on London, [it] was generally believed that the British were reading everyone's mail. It was obvious that they could, and the events surrounding the Zimmerman telegram indicate that they were certainly reading the important bits," (Hugill 140). The quote refers to the general perception in the United States and other European nations that since England held so many of the international cables, that it was abusing this power to spy on the other world powers that could potentially threaten its dominance. With this in mind, countries had to be careful what messages they were sending and to whom, because if the details of a message were intercepted, the results could prove costly. London's stronghold on telegraph wires is yet another example of British politics influencing the telegraph. Countries had to find alternate routes for their messages if they wanted to avoid British detection. One such case was the Zimmerman Telegram. During World War I, Germany attempted to enlist more allies for its cause, so German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmerman extended an offer to the Mexican President Venustiano Carranza of, "generous financial support and an undertaking on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona' if Mexico would join Germany in a war on America" (Hugill 48). In this situation, the Germany was trying to communicate with Mexico via a telegraph line through a Swedish roundabout, but the British were able to receive the message first, and use it in a manner to persuade the neutral United States to join the war. In the midst of this, the British were also able to cover up the fact that they had been intercepting telegraphs by pawning it off as espionage in Mexico City to the Americans and as intercepted by the American secret service to the Germans (Hugill 48). This shows that not only could the British read whatever information they wanted to, but their politics influenced how the rest of the world used the telegraph.

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did you say this
in the paragraph for
the German-Mexican call?

The story also shows that when the British did intercept a message, they could portray the information from telegraphs however they pleased to whomever they pleased. This influenced the telegraph as a weapon for espionage and deception.

Great Britain held this ultimate power of wired telegraphy and used it to transform the way telegraphs were used until the arrival of wireless telegraphy. Guglielmo Marconi invented the wireless telegraph and patented it in 1896. He attempted to sell the patent to the British Postal service, but they offered him a low bid for it, so the British government lost out on the large success that Marconi had when he formed the Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company (Hugill 93). This mistake proved costly to the British, because they were now behind the curve on this newer more advanced technology. The British were still able to get their hands on the wireless telegraph technology and used it to expand their communication monopoly from the wired telegraphs. British political and military strategy expanded the necessity and popularity of wireless telegraphs when it started to install them on its naval fleet. The navy was Britain's safety net if an enemy ever amassed more land and people resources than Britain. The British naval fleet used wireless telegraphs to communicate with other ships and Whitehall, which helped expand its dominance, and increased the relevance of the wireless telegraph. After a generation and a war, Britain realized that communication was as valuable as people and resources, thereby giving even more significance to the development and installment of telegraphs everywhere.

The telegraph had just as much influence in the United States as it did in Great Britain. Although Great Britain achieved a global communication hegemony early in the history of the telegraph, the device still held a vital role politically and culturally in the United States. The single-wire telegraph developed in the United States by Samuel Morse replaced the slow Pony Express to help unite the powerful and well-established East Coast with the physically and socially distant burgeoning West Coast. Early lines that played a role in connecting the country were the Baltimore-Washington Trial Line (1843-1845) and the U.S. Transcontinental Telegraph Line (1861).* The

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Baltimore-Washington Trial Line was funded by the United States Congress and was managed by the Post Office. Although Samuel Morse developed and held rights to the wired telegraph in the United States, he felt the government should control it.* This ideology set the precedent for governmental control over electric telegraph lines and communication as a whole. The U.S. Transcontinental Telegraph Line was constructed by Western Union between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento California, and an existing line connected St. Joseph to the East Coast. This line was partially financed by federal land grants from the Pacific Telegraph Act of 1860.* This line was created eight years

before the completion of the transcontinental railroad, demonstrating how the U.S. Government had transformed the telegraph from just a tool of communication to a bridge connecting two vastly different parts of a nation in order to unite it. Before the transcontinental railroad and telegraph, the gold-mining towns of the West Coast functioned almost independently from the rest of the country.

The U.S. government gave the telegraph the goal and the meaning of a bond between independent regions into one nation., *which in turn shaped the further development of the technology.*

good (As the railroad system began to flourish in the United States, its influence not only changed the culture of the people, but it changed the purpose and use of the telegraph.

In America the telegraph expanded alongside the railroad in a program of joint conquest, its principal utility being that it allowed railroads to avoid both the high accident rate on single-track systems that had to accommodate two-way traffic and the high capital cost of double-tracking. With telegraphy trains could proceed along single-track systems to await passing traffic at the appropriate passing loops instead of having to stick rigidly to an unreliable published schedule or risk head-on collisions (Hugill 27).

The quote explains how the train affected the purpose of the telegraph. When trains first started to become prevalent, there were not many tracks for use, and there were trains that needed to move both directions. With such a new system, the schedules were not necessarily reliable, so the telegraph lines that ran alongside the train tracks were crucial for saving time, resources, and lives, hence, the culture

superb!

of trains redefined the meaning and use of the telegraph line from just communication to a tool for aiding in safety and transportation. There are also many more cultural aspects of society that influenced the development and use of the telegraph such as the nuclear family.

Many believe that the family is the crux of society, so its relationship with the telegraph was crucial to its development. For a long time the nuclear family consisted of a mother, a father, their children, and whatever the parents deemed acceptable for the household. With the introduction of the telegraph, it was easier for potentially unwanted outside influences to affect the structure and workings of the family. There was,

tech's influence on society

Particular nervousness attached to protected areas of family life that might be exposed to public scrutiny by electrical communication. That intimate family secrets would be displayed by the world by new instruments of communication was posed as a series of uncomfortable dilemmas (Marvin 68).

It became all too easy for children to associate with people their parents may not deem fitting or acceptable for their growth. One such example occurred with a girl named Maggie McCutcheon. Maggie used her father's electric telegraph at his newsstand business to contact and flirt with Frank Frisbie, a married operator of the Long Island Railroad. When her father's attempts to thwart his daughter's communication with Frisbie failed, he resorted to violent blows which later resulted in his arrest. The example with Maggie and Frisbie explains yet another cultural idea that influenced the telegraph. One can see that parents clearly worried over the issues that could arise from having such a device in the household and some parents would go to any means necessary to stop its use. This shows that the nuclear family was not a fan of the telegraph due to its potential to bring harm. Families were slow to adopt the telegraph in the home thereby bringing a negative influence on its development and use.

good!
you know
what you are discussing?
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Guglielmo Marconi and the Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company used the cultural idea of business models to mold the way the wireless telegraph spread throughout the entire world. When

Society's influence on the tech

Marconi could not sell his 1896 (four-seven's) patent to the British postal service, he moved on to create contract with Lloyd's insurance that effectively monopolized his wireless telegraph for ship-to-shore-communication in the British Isles (Hugill 93). This set in motion a whirlwind in which Marconi began to eat up the competition for wireless telegraphy and own the market. Marconi later bought out his competitor Oliver Lodge who held the rest of the patents that every wireless telegraph used to function. This power allowed Marconi to make behind the scenes deals with German competitor Telefunken which allowed Marconi to expand his product to whatever region in the world he wanted uncontested. Marconi and his avid business sense were the driving force behind the widespread use of the wireless telegraph. Without the cultural idea of capitalist business, it might have taken many more decades for the wireless telegraph to gain as much traction as it did. good

The telegraph went through a long and dramatic transformation since its creation. From shutter telegraphy to the electric telegraph and finally the wireless telegraph. The telegraph had as much influence on politics and culture as they had on it. The telegraph helped the British create a communication hegemony thereby associating control over communication with world power. The British utilized this power to unite their forces, spy on other nations, and create intangible wealth. The United States used the telegraph to help connect its vast nation, influencing the telegraph as a tool to unite a country. Trains made the telegraph a savior of time, resources, and lives. The nuclear family feared the telegraph because of its ability to bring potentially unwanted outside influences, thereby families attempted to hinder its development. Marconi and his business model transformed the wireless telegraph from the communication of tomorrow to the instrument that connects boats, people, and nations today. Each of the previous entities influenced the development and use of the telegraph in either a cultural or political manner, most worked to spread its power, but some did try to restrict it. What the political and cultural ideas had in common is that both affected the production of one of the

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most powerful tools that has ever surfaced on this planet, a tool that started the process of shrinking the world into one large community: the telegraph.



Works Cited

Hugill, Peter J. *Global Communications since 1844: Geopolitics and Technology*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999. Print.

Marvin, Carolyn. *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.

* Taken from Lecture 2 and 3 notes

Alex,

This is a well-written essay. You not only digest well our reading & lecture materials, but also make very compelling arguments based on those materials. Also, your writing skills are very nice — you have a good introduction, clear arguments, good evidences to support them, and and organize paragraphs well.

Superb job!

UP

(A+)