

The Victorian Internet: The remarkable story of the telegraph and the nineteenth century's online pioneers.

Title: The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's Online Pioneers

Author: Tom Standage

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Excerpts: [chapter 1](#), [chapter 2](#), [chapter 3](#), [chapter 5](#), [chapter 7](#), [chapter 8](#), [chapter 10](#), [chapter 12](#)

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Suggested by: TRN Staff

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The Victorian Internet is the thorough and engaging tale of the rise and fall of the telegraph -- a technology whose end was long enough ago that its impact and the day-to-day details of life surrounding the technology have faded from collective memory.

Aside from its considerable worth as interesting history, the tale bears telling because of its remarkable business and social parallels with the Internet.

The book is well and engagingly written, and Standage is skilled at putting the reader on the ground at the times and places of the telegraph's rise, rein, and fall. He conveys well what it must have been like when a world accustomed to having the pace of information regulated by post and passenger pigeon gained an instantaneous medium, including the inevitable speculation, predictions and misconceptions about a budding technology.

Predictions sparked as the telegraph took hold are more than vaguely familiar -- a technology that would cut out the middleman, kill newspapers, and bring about world peace. So, too, are social constructs enabled by the telegraph -- a worldwide network of telegraph operators that kept in touch daily.

The book spans a century and a half, from the April day in 1746 when French scientist Jean-Antoine Nollet zapped a couple hundred monks in an early exploration of the technology, to the late 1800s when all of the telegraph journals were changing their names. It includes a long list of engaging characters -- in Standage's words, "the oddballs, eccentrics and visionaries who were the earliest pioneers of the online frontier."

Especially in the preface, last chapter, and epilogue, Standage ties the telegraph to today's technological world, including the rise of electricity and the Internet.

The sources section cites thirty-four books, including many titles from the 1800s. The more modern sources include [*News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America 1844-1897*](#), by Menahem Blondheim; [*How the World Was One*](#), by Arthur C. Clarke; [*What Will Be: the New World of Information Will Change Our Lives*](#), by Michael Dertouzos; [*The American Telegrapher -- A Social History*](#), Edwin Gabler; [*The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851-1945*](#), by Daniel R. Hedrick; [*Early History of Data Networks*](#), Gerard Holtzman and Bjorn Pehrson; [*Information Highways and Byways: From the Telegraph to the 21st Century*](#), Irwin Lebow.

The Victorian Internet contains the following sections:

Preface

Chapter 1: The Mother of All Networks

Chapter 2: Strange, Fierce Fire

Chapter 3: Electric Skeptics

Chapter 4: The Thrill Electric

Chapter 5: Wiring the World

Chapter 6: Steam-Powered Messages

Chapter 7: Codes, Hackers and Cheats

Chapter 8: Love over the Wires

Chapter 9: War and Peace in the Global Village

Chapter 10: Information Overload

Chapter 11: Decline and Fall

Chapter 12: The Legacy of the Telegraph

Epilogue

Sources section (4 pages)

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American and International Morse code lists

Excerpts from *The Victorian Internet*:

Chapter 1: The Mother of All Networks

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Chappe wanted to call his invention the tachygraphe -- from the Greek for "fast writer" -- to signify the unprecedented speed with which it transmitted information. However, he was talked out of his friend Miot de Mérito, a government official and classical scholar, who suggested the name télégraphe, or "far writer" instead.

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In fact, as far as most people were concerned, so little progress appeared to have been made toward the goal of a practical electric telegraph compared to the highly successful optical design that at the time who expressed an interest in electric telegraphy was regarded as something of an eccentric. As a satirical verse of 1813 put it...

Chapter 2: Strange, Fierce Fire

Page 26

Morse was forty-one when he caught the telegraph bug following a chance meeting on board a ship in the mid-Atlantic. In 1832, he was returning to the United States from Europe, where he had spent

three years in Italy, Switzerland and France improving his painting skills and working on a rather harebrained scheme to bring the treasures of the Louvre in Paris to an American audience. On a six-by-nine-foot canvas, he was painting miniature copies of thirty-eight of the Louvre's finest paintings...

Chapter 3: Electric Skeptics

Page 45-46

In December 1842, [Morse] journeyed alone to Congress in a final bid for funding. He strung wires between two committee rooms in the Capital and sent messages back and forth... two days later the bill was passed by a vote of eighty-nine to eighty-three -- a narrow margin which reflected the widespread unease that the electric telegraph might still turn out to be nothing more than elaborate conjuring trick. But seventy congressmen chose not to vote at all, "to avoid the responsibility of spending the public money for a machine they could not understand."

Chapter 5: Wiring the World

Page 83

Indeed, the construction of a global telegraph network was widely expected, by Briggs and May among others, to result in world peace: "it is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for the exchange of thought between all nations of the Earth."

Chapter 7: Codes, Hackers and Cheats

Page 111

The confusion of different rules increased as more countries signed bilateral connection treaties. Finally, 1864, the French government decided it was time to sort out the regulatory mess. The nine countries of Europe were invited to a conference in Paris to agree on a set of rules for international telegraphy. Twenty states sent delegates, and in 1865 the International Telegraph Union was born. The rules banning the use of codes by anyone other than governments were scrapped; at last, people could legally send telegrams in code. Not surprisingly, they started doing so almost immediately.

Chapter 8: Love over the Wires

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"Ordinarily an operator can tell a woman in the moment he hears her working the wire," claimed Western Electrician magazine in 1891. "He tells by her touch on the key."

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Young Thomas Edison was legendary for being able to take down messages as fast as anyone could transmit them. Edison was taught Morse code as a teenager by a railway stationmaster, whose ten-year-old son he had plucked from the path of an oncoming train.

Chapter 10: Information Overload

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Under this scheme, companies and individuals could reserve a special word as their 'telegraph address' to make life easier for anyone who wanted to send them a telegram. Telegraphic addresses were easier to remember than full postal addresses, and after 1885 the pricing scheme was changed so that it cost more to send a message to someone with a longer address.

Chapter 12: The Legacy of the Telegraph

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Although it is now faded from view, the telegraph lives on within the communications technology that have subsequently built upon its foundations: the telephone, the fax machine, and, more recently, the Internet. And, ironically, it is the Internet -- despite being regarded as a quintessential modern means of communication -- that has the most in common with its telegraphic ancestor.

Other books by the author:

[The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine](#)
[The Neptune File: A Story of Astronomical Rivalry and the Pioneers of Planet Hunting](#)
[A History of the World in Six Glasses](#) (June 7, 2005)

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