

# “By Atlantic Telegraph”

## A Study on Weltcommunication<sup>1</sup> in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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### Abstract

The article explores aspects of Weltcommunication in the nineteenth century using the Atlantic telegraph connection as a case study. In a first step, it focuses on submarine telegraphs as a medium of communication, in a second step it deals with the telegraph as carriers of world news that fed a bourgeois public sphere. The article argues that communication “by Atlantic cable” presented itself as an elitist undertaking. Further on, considering the dispersion of world news a lengthy process of adaptation on “what is news?” was necessary before communication had caught up with its technology. Thus stages of a globalization of communication can be marked.

*“When the Atlantic Cable is completed, it is a fact, that a message will be received in America five hours before it leaves England.”<sup>2</sup>*

With these words, an article in the British magazine *PUNCH* of 1866 expressed people’s perplexity about a new timeliness which the successful completion of an Atlantic telegraph would inaugurate. News would not only be ever faster, as the submarine telegraph line eliminated the twelve days a mail steamer took from Europe to North America, but also ever newer. According to the above logic, events could even be reported about before they had actually happened. The fact that standard time zones would only be introduced in 1884 and universally adopted in 1929 as well as the novelty of experiencing simultaneity of times<sup>3</sup> explain the above confusion.<sup>4</sup> However, *PUNCH*’s statement clearly expresses a fascinati-

on with the speed by which messages could now be transmitted all around the globe. The majority of scholars working on telegraphy agrees that its importance, for a history of communication, lies in its capacity to dematerialize global information flows.<sup>5</sup> For the first time, the message was separated from its material messenger and could reach its destination at unprecedented speed. Undoubtedly, the telegraph thus also became “an essential component and motor of globalization in the middle of the nineteenth century.”<sup>6</sup> In their ability to increasingly integrate the world through speedy communication, submarine telegraphs were basic to the development of world economy, *Weltpolitik*, and world news.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Kapp coined the term *Weltcommunication* in 1877: Ernst Kapp, *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik: Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Cultur aus neuen Gesichtspunkten* (Braunschweig, 1877), 100.

<sup>2</sup> *PUNCH*, “Something like a Telegraph,” August 4, 1866.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Zweig, *Sternstunden der Menschheit: Zwölf historische Miniaturen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1982). Zweig argues that the great importance of the electric telegraph is how it changed the worth of time, which allows the instantaneity and hence simultaneity of experience (dt. Instanter Erlebnisraum). Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Allen, “The Times They Are A-Changing: The Influence of Railroad Technology on the Adoption of Standard Time Zones in 1883,” *The History Teacher* 33, no. 2 (2000). Carlene Stephens, “The Most Reliable Time”: William Bond, the New England Railroads, and Time Awareness in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America,” *Technology and Culture* 30, no. 1 (1989).

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive study on the dematerialization of

telecommunication see: Roland Wenzlhuemer, “The Dematerialization of Telecommunication: Communication Centres and Peripheries in Europe and the World, 1850-1920,” *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007). Hartmann in contrast argues that the change is rather one from communication as a movement of goods to telecommunication as a movement of information. Frank Hartmann, *Globale Medienkultur: Technik, Geschichte, Theorien*, UTB Medienwissenschaft 2723 (Wien: WUV, 2006), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Wenzlhuemer, “Editorial: Telecommunication and Globalization in the Nineteenth Century,” *Historical Social Research. Historische Sozialforschung* 35, no. 1 (2010): 9.

<sup>7</sup> Jorma Ahvenainen, “The Role of Telegraphs in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Revolution of Communication,” in *Kommunikationsrevolutionen: Die neuen Medien des 16. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Michael North, 73–80, *Wirtschafts- und sozialhistorische Studien* 3 (Köln: Böhlau, 1995), 74–9.

In this narrative of a communication revolution<sup>8</sup> that laid the groundwork for the development of media modernity<sup>9</sup>, submarine telegraphs play an essential role. Once the Atlantic cable had, after a lengthy period of trials, provided final proof of the feasibility of ocean telegraphs, the remaining nineteenth century witnessed a cable-hype: cables to India, Australia and South Africa, as well as others to China, Japan or Brazil followed the Atlantic connection.<sup>10</sup> By the late 1870s, virtually any place on globe could be reached via submarine cable – at least theoretically. As submarine telegraphs represented the technical “nerves of mankind”<sup>11</sup>, the world accelerated on its journey to becoming a global village.<sup>12</sup> At the time, this new kind of *Weltcommunication* served as the basis for a perspective, which had, influenced by European enlightenment<sup>13</sup>, fostered the ideology of world citizenship and cosmopolitanism.<sup>14</sup> This has morphed into the current historiographical perception of a larger global entity organized in a global media system.<sup>15</sup> Scholars have furthered this concept in treating submarine telegraphs as the *Victorian Internet*<sup>16</sup> or proclaiming the existence of a global public as the internal system of the arising *Weltpo-*

*litik*.<sup>17</sup> The term *Weltcommunication*, as it was coined by Ernst Kapp in 1877 and used by contemporaries of the telegraph age rather served as basis to a philosophy of technology, which attempted to encompass the emergence of new technologies which radically rendered the very experience of existence, than a theory of communication. For most, technology and media as means of global disclosure marked moments of liberation and emancipation from nature to culture.<sup>18</sup> To Kapp, submarine telegraphs represented the nerves of mankind, in form of an ever expanding network, and as such, Kapp being a true Hegelian, the innervation of the *Weltgeist*.<sup>19</sup>

In the following paper, I will explore aspects of *Weltcommunication* in the nineteenth century using the Atlantic telegraph connection as a case study.<sup>20</sup> The first part will focus on submarine telegraphs as a medium of active use for communication, the second on submarine telegraphs as carriers of news information that fed a bourgeois public sphere.<sup>21</sup> Only by looking at both, the active as well as the passive use of submarine telegraphy, can all aspects of *Weltcommunication* be ful-

Further see: Daniel C. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Pascal Griset and Daniel R. Headrick, “Submarine Telegraph Cables: Business and Politics, 1838-1939,” *Business history review* 75, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Michael North, ed., *Kommunikationsrevolutionen: Die neuen Medien des 16. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, *Wirtschafts- und sozialhistorische Studien* 3 (Köln: Böhlau, 1995). It was the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, who probably first proposed the concept of a communication revolution initiated by electric telegraphy at the turn of the twentieth century. Charles H. Cooley, *Social organization: A study of the larger mind* (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1909). He agrees with his contemporaries, such as Charles Bright, probably one of the most eminent telegraph experts of his time who speaks of the “great revolution which submarine telegraphy has effected for the world's progress.” Charles Bright, *Submarine Telegraphs: Their History, Construction and Working* (London: C. Lockwood, 1898); Founded in part on Wünschendorff's *Traité de Télégraphie Sous-Marine* and Compiled from Authorative and Exclusive Sources, 169.

<sup>9</sup> John B. Thompson, *The media and modernity: A social theory of the media*, Repr. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Jorma Ahvenainen, “The Role of Telegraphs in the 19th Century Revolution of Communication,” in *Kommunikationsrevolutionen* (see note 7), 74.

<sup>11</sup> Hartmann, *Globale Medienkultur*, 10. Translation mine. For a thorough contemporary discussion on the above see: Kapp, *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik*, 140ff.

<sup>12</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The global village: Transformations in world life and media in the 21st century*, *Communication and society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> For example Otfried Höffe (Hg.), “Immanuel Kant: Zum

ewigen Frieden,” (München: Oldenburg Akademie Verlag, 2010)

<sup>14</sup> This also explains why initially the submarine cables were seen as bringers of world peace.

<sup>15</sup> Hartmann, *Globale Medienkultur*; For Global Media System see: Robert M. Pike and Dwayne R. Winseck, “The Politics of Global Media Reform, 1907-1923,” *Media, Culture & Society* 26 (2004).

<sup>16</sup> Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The remarkable story of the telegraph and the nineteenth century's online pioneers* (London: Phoenix, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Cooley already speaks of a “mental whole of communication” Cooley, *Social organization*, Chapter 8.; Rudolf Stichweh, “The Genesis and Development of a Global Public Sphere: Revised version of a paper first published in *Development* 46, 2003, 26-29,” (2006).

<sup>18</sup> Yet, the idea that mankind reproduces its nature technologically while simultaneously exponentiating the very same is in the 20th century famously captured in McLuhan's work. See: McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man*, repr. (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Hartmann, *Globale Medienkultur*, 79-89.

<sup>20</sup> It is understood that the Atlantic communicational space represents only one piece of the puzzle in a coherent picture of an assumed global communicational space. Yet, as this paper will show, in the late 19th century the assumed globality of a twentieth century global media space was only developing out of these puzzle pieces. The term *Weltcommunication* rather refers to people's imaginary, which always thought in a global perspective even while only telegraphing via the Atlantic. After all, the Atlantic cables had only been the first part in “Puck's girdle around the globe”.

<sup>21</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Reprint. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

ly assessed. Communication “by Atlantic cable” presented itself as an elitist undertaking, steered through exorbitant high tariffs and based upon a philosophy of communication, which saw the demand for social exchange diminishing in relation to geographical distance. Telegrams’ intrinsic brevity and with it, the use of codes and ciphers enhanced the occurrence of failed communication on the transatlantic line. Lastly, it is important to highlight that not only in the transatlantic case was *Weltcommunication* mainly one of business matters (business matters being defined as commercial as well as political). The global implementation of communication through submarine telegraphy contained holes in its network<sup>22</sup> and it would be erroneous to consider the telegraph as a medium of mass communication. The second part of the paper will sketch the processes of adaptation, which were necessary before new imagined communities<sup>23</sup>, such as the “transatlantic brethren”<sup>24</sup>, could actually be translated as world news into print. As will be shown using examples from the British press, transatlantic news coverage via cable initially failed due to the inability on the British side to decode messages as “John van Buren is dead” properly. The message was fast, but it was not new. As a result, a discussion arose on ‘what is new(s)?’ It would take roughly fifteen years before an appropriate reference system had been developed and thus news had caught up with technology. Transferring these findings on *Weltcommunication* onto a history of globalization, the study can be used to mark stages within processes of global integration. It further shows that these processes were neither unidirectional, nor did they happen in the same way or at the same pace at the same time.

Submarine telegraphs represent by concept a transnational entity. Already with the idea of the very first submarine cable, it was obvious that this

invention would unquestionably expand beyond the nation state. Rivers, seas, and oceans, similarly to mountain ranges, had for centuries served as natural border lines. Even though in the 19th century borders – foremost in the United States and Africa – were made on the drawing table according to degrees of latitude, water lines remained popular characteristics of defined territoriality and belonging.<sup>25</sup> It lay therefore in the very nature of this kind of telegraphy to expand beyond its respective national territoriality by going sub-marine. The first true, i.e. commercially used submarine telegraph was run 1851 through the English Channel, connecting England and France.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, it is only productive to study submarine telegraphy, irrespective of scientific approach, from a transnational angle.<sup>27</sup> Predominantly, this study is based upon Anglo-American newspaper accounts, but also makes use of business papers and personal papers of relevant cable companies and cable agents.

## Making use of *Weltcommunication*

As already mentioned, the first true submarine cable was opened in 1851 connecting France with Great Britain. The success of this cable gave considerable impetus to the as yet infant business of submarine telegraphy. In the 1850s, several short submarine cables were laid in the Irish Sea, the English Channel or the Mediterranean.<sup>28</sup> However, the great submarine cable project many were brooding over was the Atlantic. The best-known story in this regard is that of the American Cyrus W. Field, the British engineer Charles Bright, the entrepreneur and financier John Pender and others. After a decade of struggle and many failed attempts, they brought the so-called Great Atlantic Cable project in 1866 to successful completion. Hereby, they initiated the submarine cable

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Geschichte der Globalisierung: Dimensionen, Prozesse, Epochen*, 4th ed., Beck’sche Reihe / Beck’sche Reihe 2320: C. H. Beck Wissen (München: Beck, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed., 2. Ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> Daily News, “A Cheap Ocean Telegraph,” May 2, 1874.

<sup>25</sup> See: Maier, Charles, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History. Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era,” *American Historical Review* 3, no. 105 (2000): 807-831.

<sup>26</sup> E. A. Marland, “British and American Contributions to Electrical Communication,” *The British Journal for the*

*History of Science* 1, no. 1 (June 1962): 44.

<sup>27</sup> For a comparative approach to the use of the electric telegraph in Germany and the United States see: Ursula Lehmkuhl, “Producing and Consuming Knowledge: Comparative Perspectives on the Development and Usage of the Telegraph in Nineteenth-century Germany and America,” in *Atlantic communications: The media in American and German history from the seventeenth to the twentieth century*, ed. Norbert Finzsch and Ursula Lehmkuhl, 171–9, Germany and the United States of America. The Krefeld Historical Symposia (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Bright, *Submarine Telegraphs*, 6–15.

age and with it, the global implementation of communication.<sup>29</sup>

According to the great density of newspaper accounts accompanying the transatlantic cable projects, people of the time were well aware of the technical progress which happened before their very eyes as well as its implications for economy, politics and communication on a world scale.<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly then, a large number of people wanted to be among the first to use the new tool for Weltcommunication. As the British *Daily News* reported, “[m]any applications for priority of messages ha[d] been telegraphed to the managing director from London, and the chief capitals of commerce”.<sup>31</sup> This first submarine enthusiasm resulted in a number of extraordinarily long and hence expensive telegrams, which showed how little people were yet used to the new medium and probably also how many understood it as a faster version of the letter. Among the first to make extensive use of the Atlantic cable was Emperor Maximilian of Mexico and his wife Charlotte. As the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported “[a] dispatch of 478 words in cipher” had passed over the Atlantic Telegraph between them. The cost of transmission was over 5,000 dollars.<sup>32</sup> As a sort of communicational sensation, such telegraphic records continued to make headlines. Soon after the opening of the transatlantic cable, it was reported that a single message had been transmitted by the Atlantic telegraph, “the cost of which was £800”. Considering the then current tariff, the telegram must have “consisted of 800 words, containing 4,000 letters.”<sup>33</sup> This record was soon beaten by a dispatch from the United States Government to the American minister at Paris in December of 1866, which “consisted of more than 4,000 words and occupied ten hours in transmission”. Its cost had been over £2,000 and it was the “longest message yet transmitted through the Atlantic Telegraph”.<sup>34</sup> In a first frenzy of technical enthusiasm during

the summer of 1866, a relatively large number of such telegrams extraordinaire were sent across the Atlantic. Simultaneously, they were publicized in a combination of celebrating as well as promoting the communicational innovation.

Yet, telegrams like the above remained the exception over the years. Rather, the transatlantic communicational space soon played itself out as one where time, (i.e. brevity) and money ruled. Soon after the establishment of transatlantic telegraph traffic in 1866, it became clear that its use was absolutely exclusive, bestowing the benefits of instantaneous communication only upon those “who can pay”.<sup>35</sup> Tariffs started out at £20 for twenty words and were then reduced to £5 for ten words plus the costs for each additional word according to destination. (This move also paid tribute to the fact that people rather tended to send telegrams shorter than twenty words.) In 1867, the Anglo-American Company tried a word rate of £1 for the traffic on their 1866 and 1865 Atlantic cables, but it was not until 1872 that Mr. Henry Weaver, then traffic manager of the above cable company, first instituted a regular word rate system of four shilling per word.<sup>36</sup> Due to such rates, the transatlantic telegraph did not set out as a medium of social communication. As *The Era* pointed out 1869 “[m]any a friendly message would be sent if it could be managed for a sovereign [sic], but when we come to Two Pounds for name and address only people recollect that a letter is delivered in nine or ten days”.<sup>37</sup> Soon, it had become clear that submarine telegraphy would certainly not supplant ordinary mail.

Almost an explosive multiplication of submarine telegraphs throughout the entire world followed the success of the first transatlantic cable. Regarding the Atlantic, France was put in direct telegraphic communication with the United States by a cable from Brest to Cape Cod in 1869. In

<sup>29</sup> There are several works on the 1866 cable: Gillian Cookson, *The Cable: The Wire that changed the world* (Strout: Tempus publishing, 2003); Bern Dibner, *The Atlantic cable*, Blaisdell paperback books in the history of science (New York: Blaisdell Publishing, 1966); Vary T. Coates and Bernard S. Finn, *A retrospective technology assessment: Submarine telegraphy - the transatlantic cable of 1866*, ed. Program of Policy Studies in Science and Technology. (San Francisco: San Francisco Press, 1979); John S. Gordon, *A thread across the ocean: The heroic story of the transatlantic cable* (New York, NY: Walker, 2002); Chester G. Hearn, *Circuits in the sea: The men, the ships, and the Atlantic cable* (Westport,

Conn.: Praeger, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Hartmann, *Globale Medienkultur*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Daily News*, “The Atlantic Telegraph Expedition,” July 21, 1866.

<sup>32</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, “Atlantic Telegraph,” October 8, 1866.

<sup>33</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, “Miscellaneous,” August 9, 1866.

<sup>34</sup> *The Belfast News-Letter*, December 13, 1866.

<sup>35</sup> Jacob Brett, Mr. Jacob Brett Papers Vol. 2, UK0108 SC MSS 008/2, IEE, 146.

<sup>36</sup> Bright, *Submarine Telegraphs*, 143f.

<sup>37</sup> *The Era*, “Topics of the Week,” July 18, 1869.

the 1870s, several more transatlantic submarine telegraphs were paid out and even more were to come. By the turn of the century, the trans-Atlantic route was served by thirteen cables making the Atlantic the communication space with the highest telegraph density as well as the most contested telegraph market. After it had outgrown its technical infancy, ocean telegraphy was a prestigious and profitable field; company after company attempted to enter the submarine business on the Atlantic. However, until 1883 all of them, La Société du Câble Transatlantique Française (1869), the Direct United States Cable Company (1874), La Compagnie Française du Télégraphe de Paris à New York (1879) as well as the American Telegraph Company (1882) were forced to enter into a business arrangement, the so-called *cable pool*, with the Anglo-American Telegraph Company. The Anglo-American had laid the very first transatlantic cable and since then, held a firm monopoly on the Atlantic market.<sup>38</sup> Every time a new competitor entered the field, hopes were roused that charges for telegraphing could be reduced. Such hopes were not irrational, as all new cable companies claimed to hold the object of “cheapening telegraphic intercourse with our transatlantic brethren,” as could be read in a statement by the Direct United States Cable Company in 1874.<sup>39</sup> Fierce price wars in the 1870s and early 1880s were the result of the competition. All initially led to substantial price reductions before each new company capitulated before the Anglo-American, joined its pool and charges were raised once more. In 1883 the American mining tycoon John W. Mackay together with James Gordon Bennett Jr. owner of the *New York Herald*, set up the Commercial Cable Company, which was to finally break the Anglo-American’s monopoly. In the following price war, tariffs dropped by 50 per cent and more. By 1887, the Commercial Cable Company held 50 per cent of the telegraph traffic and both Companies entered an agreement.<sup>40</sup> In 1888, the shilling rate, i.e. 1 shilling per word, was adopted and remained the standard for the following decades.<sup>41</sup> Despite the fact that it was an

enormous reduction from initially £1 per word in 1866 (breaking down the £20/20 words tariff to a one word tariff) to 1 shilling per word in 1888, this was in no way a social tariff. The average income of a Newfoundland fisherman, the anchor place of the Atlantic cable, varied from £70 to £90 a year. In 1909, Henniker Heaton, British M.P., journalist and one of the most ardent supporters of a penny-post system for the British Imperial telegraphs, pointed out that the cable rate of one word still ranged from one day’s to six day’s wages of a farm laborer.<sup>42</sup> This placed telegraphic communication across the Atlantic out of reach for most. Through a system of high rates, Atlantic cable companies closed off communication per submarine telegraph as a mere elitist undertaking. The Atlantic cables were “a golden bridge, to be used by the possessors of gold only, an expensive luxury that but few can enjoy”.<sup>43</sup> Consequentially, it established a two class system of communication in which “those with long purses, and engaged in large transactions” were in possession of intelligence from the opposite sides of the ocean “twelve days in advance of their neighbours [sic]”.<sup>44</sup>

At this point, let us consider the communication theory which backed the above tariff policy. In the mid-1870s, the British *Daily News* led a discussion on the demand for long-distance communication and hence the need for a social tariff. It revealed the cable companies’ understanding of *Weltcommunication* and thus the motives behind their price policy. In an open letter, James Anderson, among others manager of the Anglo-American Telegraph Company, attempted to quash all suggestions concerning a social tariff. He claimed that it was unprofitable and asserted that there would not be enough demand for telegraphs across the Atlantic to make a penny post worth it:

*I affirm that they [the Americans] are just like Englishmen in that respect, and that neither country possesses a sufficient number of persons ready to spend 1s [shilling] per word upon messages which are not commercial, or of serious*

<sup>38</sup> www.atlantic-cable.com; Pike and Winseck, “The Politics of Global Media Reform, 1907-1923”.

<sup>39</sup> *Daily News*, “A Cheap Ocean Telegraph”.

<sup>40</sup> Griset and Headrick, “Submarine Telegraph Cables: Business and Politics, 1838-1939”: 556.

<sup>41</sup> Bright, *Submarine Telegraphs*, 143f.

<sup>42</sup> Letter by Mr. Brassey to the Editor of the *Hastings News* on his trip to Newfoundland, September 2, 1872, Cyrus Field Papers, Box 3/2 Mr. Brassey’s letters, writings, New

York Public Library, Manuscript Division; Henniker Heaton J., “The Cable Telegraph System of the World.” *The ARENA* 38, no. 214 (September 1907): 226-229, 228, Fleming Papers – Telegraphy and Submarine Cables, Folder 51, National Archives Canada.

<sup>43</sup> S. A. Goddard, “The Atlantic Telegraph: To the Editor of the *Daily Post*,” *Birmingham Daily Post*, August 2, 1866.

<sup>44</sup> S. A. Goddard, “The Atlantic Telegraph: To the Editor of the *Daily Post*,” *Birmingham Daily Post*, August 2, 1866.



*importance. I assert that people separated by a great distance do not either write or telegraph frequently to each other, and, as a rule, the greater the distance, and the longer the period of separation, the less frequent would the interchange of communication become. One shilling per word would not be a social tariff low enough to encourage travellers to bother their friends with anything but the most important affairs, and if they had important affairs to communicate they would not be deterred by 4s per word.*<sup>45</sup>

Anderson's argumentation that the demand for social communication lessened in proportion to distance was hotly contested. Over the following days, various responses to Anderson's claim could be read in the *Daily News*. Some called Anderson a "veritable Balaam"<sup>46</sup> – i.e. a wicked man, who was only interested in his company's revenues; others actually challenged his theory of communication. Both had their point. Considering the first reply, it is true that submarine telegraphy was a business of great (initial set-up) expenses, but also – once the business was running – of great profits. Of greater interest at this point is the reply concerning Anderson's theory of communication. Distance, so the reader agreed, did play a role in social communication. However it was distance created by time, i.e. the days and weeks it took a letter to arrive at its destination thus rendering all information to be outdated, and not distance created by geographical space; the latter, so the common assumption, could easily be "annihilated" by a telegram.<sup>47</sup> It was thus only "pure assumption on the part of Sir James Anderson that people separated by a great distance do not care either to write

or telegraph to each other frequently" – rather it was the great expense connected with transatlantic telegrams which hindered traffic.<sup>48</sup> While this person had a point in his argumentation, he made the mistake of equating a letter with a telegram and presuming that speed would automatically create news, two aspects which will be discussed further in the paper. Undoubtedly, economic motives influenced the cable companies' tariff policy: each new competitor was after all considered to be "ruinous competition".<sup>49</sup> Yet, the tariff system was also based on a communication model, as introduced by Anderson in the above letter, which postulated that "[t]he social element which justifies the penny postage and one shilling or six penny telegrams within the limits of a State does not exist outside these limits and cannot be created".<sup>50</sup> This conception was mirrored in the routes submarine cables took. The new *Weltcommunication* was based upon geopolitical structures of economic and political interests. As Hartmann points out, in the nineteenth century, nobody would have invested in a telegraph cable from Great Britain to India to foster intercultural understanding.<sup>51</sup>

Communication trans-Atlantic was, aside from its engrained elitism, also characterized by reduction through brevity caused by the exorbitant tariffs described above "The wordier a message and the greater the distance, the higher the charge," was the basic rule for (transatlantic) telegraphy.<sup>52</sup> The pressure to be cost-efficient hence led to the fact that telegrams became ever shorter and eventually led to the development of the so-called *Telegrammstil*, which left out anything that was redundant or not essential for the message. Additionally, codes and cyphers were used and codebooks developed for the different industries and purposes. As Wil-

<sup>45</sup> *Daily News*, "Telegraph Companies and Charges," February 17, 1873.

<sup>46</sup> *Daily News*, "to the Editor of the Daily News," February 19, 1873.

<sup>47</sup> John R. Isaac, *Laying the Atlantic Telegraph from Ship to Shore. A Series of Sketches drawn on the spot by John R. Isaac*, London 1858, 2nd edition A brief notice of the Atlantic Telegraph Cable, 1858, MS Gen 1752/5/2/1, Glasgow University. For a thorough study on the context of space and media see Regine Buschauer, *Mobile Räume: Medien- und diskursgeschichtliche Studien zur Telekommunikation*, MedienAnalysen 9 (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verl., 2010).

<sup>48</sup> *Daily News*, "Telegraph Companies and Charges," February 18, 1873.

<sup>49</sup> Gillian Cookson, "„Ruinous Competition“: The French Atlantic Telegraph of 1869," *Entreprises et Histoire* December, no. 23 (1999).

<sup>50</sup> *Daily News*, "Telegraph Companies and Charges" Even

Henniker Heaton, ardent supporter of a penny post had to admit that it not necessarily worked to bind nations closer as the Irish example had shown: "...and as for the cheap postage binding the Empire together, it was ridiculous, for had we not a penny post to Ireland, from which country we were nevertheless shortly to be separated? I will not deny that there is wit in the Irish argument." J. H. Heaton, *The Postal and Telegraphic Communication of the Empire: A Paper read before the Royal Colonial Institute on Tuesday, March 13, 1888* (London, 1888), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Hartmann, *Globale Medienkultur*, 63.

<sup>52</sup> Jürgen Wilke, "The Telegraph and Transatlantic Communication Relations," in *Atlantic communications: The media in American and German history from the seven teenth to the twentieth century*, ed. Norbert Finzsch and Ursula Lehmkuhl, 107–34, Germany and the United States of America. The Krefeld Historical Symposia (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 119.

ke has shown for the case of Germany, ten per cent of all telegrams transmitted within Germany since the late 1870s contained less than five words. For telegrams leaving Germany, up to a third did not contain more than five words. 66 to 75 per cent of all foreign telegrams contained up to twenty words. Only one out of ten telegrams was longer than twenty words.<sup>53</sup> Thanks to the annual reports of the Atlantic telegraph companies, detailed numbers can also be given for the Atlantic cables. In 1877 for example transatlantic messages had an average of 11.4 words according to the Anglo-American Telegraph Company's statistics.<sup>54</sup>

Using this average of 11.4 words as an example, one further has to consider that this also contained information on sender, receiver and destination which reduced the actual content of the message even further. Such enforced brevity had several effects on the message itself, at points rendering its content unintelligible.<sup>55</sup> As early as 1884, an article in the American magazine *Electrical World* pointed at how universally ocean telegraphy had changed communication. The technology's great expense "has a tendency to cause customers to use their ingenuity in condensing their despatches [sic] into as brief a space as possible". The effect of which was that "it is not uncommon to see messages from correspondents asking for more definite instructions or information, as the former abbreviated message was unintelligible". Such failed communication is vividly documented in the correspondence of Lady Emma Pender, wife of Sir John Pender, *the* submarine cable mogul of the time controlling with his Eastern and

Associated Companies 4/5 of the world's ocean cables.<sup>56</sup> With her daughter Marion's marriage to William Des Voeux, an official of the British colonial office, Lady Pender developed the habit of corresponding via telegram, oftentimes using the transatlantic connection. Each of the telegrams, however, was accompanied by an extensive and oftentimes explanatory letter.<sup>57</sup> One of the most common misunderstandings was the phrase "All well" – which came to mean all or nothing in their correspondence. The phrase failed to express any nuances. Upon their daughter's departure from a visit in England back to her husband in the colonial service, Sir Pender struggled in a telegram with the very expression "all well" as the following letter from Lady Pender exemplifies:

*Your Father telegraphed your departure to William. He wished to tell him somehow that you were well but far from strong. This however considered might alarm so at last he left the message ending with "All well". This does not strengthen my faith in telegrams.*<sup>58</sup>

In order to fit as much content into as little telegraphic space as possible, people adopted highly creative methods. Aside from the usage of shortened spelling, such as "immediatly" instead of "immediately", the usage of foreign languages was common. As the *Electrical World* reports, oftentimes two or three words were run together in a foreign language for the benefit of brevity. (The knowledge of German compounds must have been high among early telegraphers.) Yet these so called "evasions" helped little "to carry the message unquestioned out of the originating coun-

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> However, as the report continues, "owing to the high rate per word charged for these messages, resort to the code system is much more general and the messages are consequently shorter than would probably be the case in European telegraphy with a low rate per word." [S. 13f] General Post Office, International Telegraph Convention, London 1879. Proposition of German Administration, Receiver and Accountant General's observation, November 27, 1877, POST 30/361, Part I, BT Archives, 13–4.

<sup>55</sup> William Maver, "Ocean Telegraphy: extract from the Electrical World [American]," *The Telegraphist. A Monthly Journal for Postal, Telephone and Railway Telegraph Clerks* 2, June (1884): 87.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Boyce, "Imperial Dreams and National Realities: Britain, Canada and the Struggle for a Pacific Telegraph Cable, 1879-1902," *The English Historical Review* 115, no. 460 (2000): 40.

<sup>57</sup> Two examples are the following letters by Emma Pender: "A telegram from William [her son in law] with the good

news of „All Well“ but there are congratulations which I do not understand." Emma Pender, Emma Pender to her daughter, 7. Mai 1877 cont., May 7, 1877, DOC/ETC/5/95, Porthcurno Cable and Wireless Archive in *Papers Lady Emma Pender; Letters 1874-1878 Vol I: Box: Pender Papers Correspondence*, ed. o.A. (Porthcurno: Cable and Wireless Archive, 1874-1878).

"You will understand Mr. Pender's telegram by the letters already with you. No wonder it puzzled you." Emma Pender, Emma Pender to her son in Law William, 13. June 1877 cont., June 13, 1877, DOC/ETC/5/95, Porthcurno Cable and Wireless Archive in *Papers Lady Emma Pender; Letters 1874-1878 Vol I: Box: Pender Papers Correspondence*, ed. o.A. (Porthcurno: Cable and Wireless Archive, 1874-1878).

<sup>58</sup> Emma Pender, Emma Pender to her daughter Marion, February, 18 1877, cont., February 18, 1877, DOC/ETC/5/95, Porthcurno Cable and Wireless Archive in *Papers Lady Emma Pender; Letters 1874-1878 Vol I: Box: Pender Papers Correspondence*, ed. o.A. (Porthcurno: Cable and Wireless Archive, 1874-1878).

try”.<sup>59</sup> Once the evasion was noticed, extra toll was collected. For reasons of secrecy, but also of brevity, users of the telegraph soon came to use ciphers and codes. These were developed to meet the needs of particular industries or user groups. Sometimes the cable company also developed its own code system, which it provided for the telegraphing public.<sup>60</sup> Early on, wealthy transatlantic travellers and tourists were identified as possible cable users. Already in 1880 a Mr. Palmer edited his first *European Travelers and Telegraph Code book*; a second edition followed in 1884. In 1887 Golder Dwight published his *Official Cable Code and General Information for European Tourists including French and German Phrases with English pronunciation*.<sup>61</sup> With the use of a cable code, travellers could send “almost any information they wish (at a comparatively small expense) to friends at home” as advising them of their safe arrival, their state of health, what sort of voyage they had or where they intended to go first.<sup>62</sup> The usage of codes not only made messages safer and shorter, but also more exclusive. It further bound receiver and sender to the same tool, i.e. the same code book, as messages had to be decoded before they could unveil their content. This made the community one could talk to even smaller. Even a Lady Pender was at a loss facing a coded telegram by her son in law. Although she could read it, she could not make out its content. Communication trans-Atlantic had failed again:

*Your telegram with some code words came yesterday evening & John [Sir John Pender] being in the country we are unable to decipher it. However that is not at all an uncommon occurrence I believe when cipher is used.*

*Kingdoms have suffered from lost or absent keys as well as humble people.*<sup>63</sup>

It is unconceivable that Lady Pender would truly have to worry about either the telegram’s expenses or its length, yet ironically she complains about the very same. The conclusion could be that Sir Pender was so extremely fond of saving money or rather that Lady Pender obeyed the unwritten rules of communication that the medium of telegraphy had put on her. The correspondence of Lord Mayo and the Countess of Mayo can be used as another example to argue in favor of the latter. Upon the opening of the submarine telegraph connection from Britain to India, Sir John Pender gave an evening party. For entertainment of the guests, a telegraph station was put up at the house, where everybody present could telegraph all around the world free of charge. Lady Mayo made use of the opportunity and sent an extensive, letter-like telegram to her husband in India. The reply of whom was in absolute obedience with the law of brevity, containing only a couple of words in the sense of “all well”.<sup>64</sup> One approach to the story of Lady Mayo would be through concepts of gender theory, but I would strengthen the argument that it is rather a case of frequency of use, (which certainly is proportionate to gender). The telegraph established itself as a medium of short message and formed its users accordingly. Even those who could afford otherwise did not use the submarine telegraph as a means of extensive social communication, but of business correspondence.

In conclusion, transatlantic telegraphic communication did not bring people closer together but

<sup>59</sup> Maver, “Ocean Telegraphy”: 87–8.

<sup>60</sup> Albert B. Chandler, *A New Code, or Cipher specially designed for Important private correspondence by Telegraph. Applicable as well to Correspondence by Mail* (Washington D.C., 1869)., Slater Robert, *Telegraphic Code to Ensure Secrecy in the Transmission of Telegrams. By Robert Slater, Secretary of the Société du Cable Transatlantique Française, Limited: Second Edition* (London, 1897).

<sup>61</sup> Dwight Golder, *Official Cable Code and General Information for European Tourists including French and German Phrases with English pronunciation* (New York, 1887); Anglo-American Telegraphic Code and Cypher Co., *The Anglo-American Telegraphic Code to Cheapen Telegraphy and to furnish a complete Cypher. Adapted to use in general correspondence; included business, social political and all other sources of correspondence* (New York, 1891); Palmer, *Palmer’s European Travelers and Telegraph Code* (18807).

<sup>62</sup> Golder, *Official Cable Code and General Information for*

*European Tourists including French and German Phrases with English pronunciation*. Golder argued that with his code book a traveller could condense as many as 36 words in one. As for example “Dare” meant: “Arrived at Queen stown to-day. Not feeling well, as I was sea-sick most of the time during the voyage. I shall remain here at the Queen’s Hotel for a day or two before going on to London.” Sending this message would costs nine dollars, by using the code only, p. 111.

<sup>63</sup> Emma Pender, Letter to her Daughter, April 10, 1887 in *Papers Lady Emma Pender; Letters 1874-1878 Vol. I: Box: Pender Papers Correspondence*, ed. o.A. (Porthcurno: Cable and Wireless Archive, 1874-1878). In his work David P. Nickles has shown how ocean telegraphy oftentimes hindered rather than helped international diplomacy. David P. Nickles, *Under the wire: How the telegraph changed diplomacy*, Harvard historical studies 144 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>64</sup> *Illustrated London News*, “A Telegraphic Evening Party,” July 2, 1870.



only markets. On an individual basis, the letter remained the dominant means of social communication and as several scholars have already highlighted, it were mainly commerce and politics which benefited from a globe spanning submarine telegraph network.<sup>65</sup> Upon the completion of the first Atlantic cable in 1866, the *Belfast News-Letter* enthusiastically exclaimed how it now became possible “within a few brief minutes, not merely to telegraph from London to New York, but, by a process of easy re-transmission, the gold digger [sic] at California may, if he wishes, communicate within an hour or two with a Parsee merchant in Bombay”.<sup>66</sup> This statement has to be re-read critically. The stress of the above certainly has to be on merchant as well as *gold* [less on digger]. As has been shown above, (submarine) telegraphy had been created from the start as a communicational tool of exclusivity. Exorbitantly high tariffs hindered social messages as much as lengthy correspondence. The “girdle around the globe”<sup>67</sup> created through the submarine telegraphs did not resemble a Victorian internet as postulated by Standage.<sup>68</sup> Rather, the submarine telegraphs further highlighted the distinction between those within and those outside of the developing “global village”.

## The News newer – but what is new(s)?

It would however be erroneous to assume that submarine telegraphy had no influence on a globalizing world apart from facilitating the means for world politics and world markets. It also created world news and thus reached many (not all) of those outside the inner circle of active submarine telegraph users described above. From the beginning of land telegraphy, newspapers and news agencies benefited from the new technology as it helped to spread information more rapidly. Across the Western world, various news agencies, such as Reuters, Havas or Wolff’s Telegraphisches Bureau

(WTB) were set up. In 1869 these three established a news cartel, through the so-called ring circle agreement, dividing the news world among them.<sup>69</sup> From the beginning, the transatlantic news market was of greatest interest to news makers. The second Atlantic cable of 1869 was predominantly a creation of Julius Reuter.<sup>70</sup> As costs for obtaining transatlantic news had risen from an average of £67 (\$ 515) per month in 1865 to £424 (\$ 2,862) per month in 1867, backed by the French government, Reuter founded together with Baron Émil d’Erlanger the so-called French Cable Company, La Société du Câble transatlantique Française. After a first and relatively short price war, the new company adopted the Anglo American Telegraph Company’s tariffs. In 1873, France sold the telegraph company to Pender’s Anglo-American.<sup>71</sup> Transatlantic news was back in the hands of the cable entrepreneurs. Almost two decades later, another news maker attempted to establish his own news cable across the cable – this time with great success. In 1883, James Gordon Bennett Jr., owner of the *New York Herald*, incorporated together with John W. Mackay, a silver mining tycoon from the American mid-West, the Commercial Cable Company. As mentioned earlier on, the Commercial Co. managed to break the Atlantic cable pool’s monopoly on submarine traffic in the Atlantic and by 1887, controlled 50 per cent of it. While one partner’s interest in owning a transatlantic cable was allegedly roused by his wife’s exorbitant cable bills, the other’s clearly lay in the cheap transmittance of news from all around the globe.<sup>72</sup> Submarine telegraphs were essential to Bennett’s understanding of doing business as he ran his newspapers, the *New York Herald* as well as the *Paris Herald*, from wherever he happened to be. His executives “were required to sit at the end of a cable which connected with Bennett wherever he happened to be, and a never ending stream of editors and reporters was kept shuttling back and forth across the ocean at his command”.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Jürgen Wilke, “The Telegraph and Transatlantic Communication Relations,” in *Atlantic communications: The media in American and German history from the seventeenth to the twentieth century*, ed. Norbert Finzsch and Ursula Lehmkuhl, 107–34, Germany and the United States of America. The Krefeld Historical Symposia (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 119; 130.

<sup>66</sup> *The Belfast News-Letter*, “The Belfast News-Letter,” July 28, 1866.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Standage, *The Victorian Internet*.

<sup>69</sup> Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and empire: Media, markets, and globalization, 1860*

- 1930, American encounters - global interactions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>70</sup> Kenneth R. Haigh and Edward Wilshaw, *Cables and submarine cables* (London: Coles, 1968), 316.

<sup>71</sup> Jill Hills, *The struggle for control of global communication: The formative century, The history of communication* (Urbana, Illinois u.a: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>72</sup> Don C. Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts. Father and Son Proprietor of the New York Herald*. (New York, 1974) 363.

<sup>73</sup> Al Laney, *Paris Herald: The Incredible Newspaper* (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1947), 17.

Undoubtedly, submarine telegraphy did heavily influence the making of (transatlantic) news. It made the news newer than ever before. Yet, what is often left out in narratives on how telegraphy revolutionized global news covering is the following: What is new(s)? This becomes particularly clear in the transatlantic setting. From the beginning, news obtained through the submarine cables were for decades marked as “By Atlantic Cable” or “By Atlantic Telegraph” which makes it fairly easy for the scholar of today to get a feel for the kind of information that was transmitted via cable.<sup>74</sup> These transatlantic telegraph news reports tell the story of a lengthy process of adaptation and of negotiation. Particularly in the beginning, it oftentimes remained obscure as to what would actually be new and news to the reading public on the other side of the Atlantic.

As Wilke has shown for the case of telegraphic news reports in the *Nationale Zeitung* in Germany, stock quotes became the first telegraphic news to be noticed by the public. They were soon complemented by other news, such as political reports.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, news that was transmitted “By Atlantic Telegraph” mainly contained business information, such as the price of gold and cotton or the arrival of steam and trading ships at major ports. In between political news, such as information on elections or the Franco-Prussian War, were also run along the cable. It was these very telegrams containing political information that were under heavy dispute. In the 1860s, various newspapers, particularly in Great Britain, voiced their disappointment about the kind of more general information that was being sent across the Atlantic – it was “neither very new nor very important”.<sup>76</sup> Already the first political intelligence proved to be disappointing and did not make the front page. As the *Caledonian Mercury* reported, the British public was merely told about the adjournment of the American Congress – a fact “which will no doubt be read with curiosity [sic], though it contains

little to reward perusal”.<sup>77</sup> Patience on the side of the British news editors was running thin by the late fall of 1866 when the *Birmingham Daily Post* published the following angry article:

*Whoever determines what news shall be sent by the Atlantic Telegraph deserves, in the opinion of the Spectator, a whipping for his stupidity. We have never yet heard how the Ohio and other elections, except the Pennsylvanian, which took place on the 9th, turned out; and then on Thursday, we receive such a scrap as this, in addition to the price of gold, etc. „Mr. John Van Buren is dead,“ What on earth does any one [sic] care about that? There was a President once called Martin van Buren, who was an able disciple of Jackson’s and perhaps this is a son. We regret very much his (or any other man’s) possible premature decease, but it is not instructive tidings. Why can’t the Atlantic telegraph report what people want to know, and not what they don’t want to know.*<sup>78</sup>

Following these press reports, it seemed as if the Atlantic telegraph connection was good for nothing but the transmittance of commercial information. All it was reporting apart from numbers, figures and shipping tables, had either been considered “unimportant” or “practically worthless”.<sup>79</sup> Its advantage for the general public had hence “not [been] particularly obvious”.<sup>80</sup> What had happened in 1866 was that two continents had been put into instantaneous communication that had, said in exaggerated terms, nothing to communicate – yet. The distance of twelve days via mail steamer as well as a history of Anglo-American tensions aroused during the American Civil War had separated the former mother country and colony further than a transatlantic telegraph cable could easily bridge in an instant. Upon the laying of a first transatlantic cable in 1858 (which failed after a mere few weeks), the London *Times* boasted:

*in American and German history from the seventeenth to the twentieth century*, ed. Norbert Finzsch and Ursula Lehmkuhl, 107–34, Germany and the United States of America. The Krefeld Historical Symposia (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 120.

<sup>74</sup> Once competing transatlantic cable companies had been established they marked their cablegrams accordingly, as for example “By French Atlantic Cable”, “By Direct United States Cable” or “By Commercial Cable Company”. The *New York Herald* for example printed European news by cable for example as “Special despatches [sic] from London”. Soon after its establishment the medium even became the messenger. It was not uncommon that one would read “the Atlantic Telegraph reports” or “According to the Atlantic telegraph” in the headings of Anglo-American newspapers. Some even referred to the *Atlantic Telegraph* as a journal, i.e. a news maker, in itself.

<sup>75</sup> Jürgen Wilke, “The Telegraph and Transatlantic Communication Relations,” in *Atlantic communications: The media*

<sup>76</sup> *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle etc.*, “Occasional Notes,” October 24, 1866.

<sup>77</sup> *The Caledonian Mercury*, “Topics of the day,” August 1, 1866.

<sup>78</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, “Miscellaneous,” October 22, 1866.

<sup>79</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, “Wanted, an editor for the Atlantic Telegraph,” November 10, 1866.

<sup>80</sup> *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle etc.*, “Occasional Notes”

*For the purposes of mutual communication and good understanding the Atlantic is dried up, and we become in wish as in reality one country [...] The Atlantic Telegraph has half undone the Declaration of 1776 and has made us once again, in spite of ourselves, one people.<sup>81</sup>*

However, this imaginary community of Anglo-American brethren<sup>82</sup> existed only as a rhetoric figure and could during the 1860s not yet be realized in news print. This becomes particularly clear in the following statement by the *Pall Mall Gazette*:

*There appears still to be something queer about the news received through the Atlantic Telegraph. In this morning's Times we have, for instance – America (by Atlantic Telegraph) General Sheridan has re-established martial law at New Orleans. But not a word is said about the price of Gold at New York, surely as important a fact to the commercial world of Europe as the re-establishment of martial law at New Orleans can be to the Americans.<sup>83</sup>*

While British merchants worried about the receipt of trading information, they understood little about the great significance that the establishment of martial law in New Orleans truly had for America. The telegram referred to one of

the most brutal incidents in America's post-Civil War era, namely the New Orleans Race Riot of 1866. With the compliance of local civilian authorities and police, white southerners had attacked a gathering of Radical Republicans, mainly African-American war veterans, who were angered by the enactment of Black codes in Louisiana. 35 blacks were killed and more than 100 wounded. As a result, the riot convinced public opinion in the North of the necessity of firmer measures to govern the South during Reconstruction. In the following elections, the Republicans won in a landslide and an appropriate Reconstruction bill was enacted in 1867.<sup>84</sup> As further sources show, it would take a couple of years before the gap between the Anglo-American "brethren" was filled with enough knowledge and empathy for transatlantic communication *via cable* to work.<sup>85</sup>

One of the greatest challenges surely lay in the telegram's brevity. Just as these short messages had puzzled Lady Emma Pender and her family, news dispatches puzzled their receiver on the other side of the ocean. More than once, a full account of events conveyed by a letter via steamer had to explain the content of a telegram received twelve days earlier.<sup>86</sup> This surely changed how people read newspapers and in the end how news was made<sup>87</sup>, but it also supports the above thesis: news makers in Great Britain as yet knew

<sup>81</sup> *Times*, August 8, 1858.

<sup>82</sup> The image of the transatlantic brethren was very common in news reports' interpretation of the benefits of the Atlantic cable. E.g.: Baker & Godwin, *The laying of the cable—John and Jonathan joining hands* (New York: Baker & Godwin Printers Printing House, 1858). Another image was that the Old World and the New had been joined in marriage: E.g. *Glasgow Herald*, "Monday Morning, July 30," July 30, 1866.

<sup>83</sup> *The Pall Mall Gazette*, "Occasional Notes," August 9, 1866.

<sup>84</sup> „New Orleans Race Riot.“ Encyclopædia Britannica. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 16 Oct. 2010 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/411927/New-Orleans-Race-Riot>>. The literature refers to the New Orleans Riot as "An Absolute Massacre". See: James G. Hollandsworth, *An absolute massacre: The New Orleans race riot of July 30, 1866* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2001).

<sup>85</sup> If this was already the case for the Anglo-American brethren it was even more so for the United States and Germany. As Wilke has pointed out, until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century news from the United States remained rare in German newspapers. Generally, transatlantic news service in Germany was not very extensive. Jürgen Wilke, "The Telegraph and Transatlantic Communication Relations," in *Atlantic communications: The media in American and German history from the seventeenth to the twentieth century*, ed. Norbert Finzsch and Ursula Lehmkuhl, 107–34, Germany and the United States of America. The Krefeld Historical Symposia (Oxford: Berg, 2004). In contrast to the above *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Irish Belfast*

*News Letter* reported: "By Atlantic Telegraph we learn that quiet has been restored in New Orleans. It seems to have been a very serious affair, and thirty-one negroes and one white man were killed in it." *Belfast News-Letter*, "Saturday, Aug. 4, 1866," August 4, 1866.

<sup>86</sup> See for example the following extract from the *Pall Mall Gazette*: "We had already heard by the Atlantic Telegraph that riots were imminent at Baltimore. Some little further light is thrown upon the matter by the intelligence brought by the Asia." *The Pall Mall Gazette*, "Summary of this morning's news," November 5, 1866. or similarly the following two news reports on an address to Congress by the American President Johnson. *The Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, "Foreign Intelligence," December 7, 1866.; *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, "Dublin: Monday Dec. 17, 1866," December 17, 1866.

<sup>87</sup> See the following article by the *Pall Mall Gazette*. "The existence of the Atlantic Telegraph certainly lessens the interest of the impeachment trial. The bald statements sent through the cable keep the English reader continually in advance of any real information, and when he has read in one column of the newspaper that the case for the prosecution has closed, it is difficult to fix his attention upon those preliminary details which appear in another column. Except to persons interested in the rate of exchange the Atlantic Telegraph, so far as it has to do with public interest, has hitherto been simply a nuisance." *The Aberdeen Journal*, "The Atlantic Telegraph a Nuisance," April 22, 1867.

too little about the United States to be able to decode a telegram reporting John van Buren's death properly. After all, he was indeed the son of the former President Martin van Buren and known to many of the European high society.<sup>88</sup> A common Anglo-American news code first had to be developed and adapted.

Over the following years the British and American public grew closer in and through their news coverage. The transatlantic telegraph provided necessary information and fostered empathy. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 exemplifies one milestone in the process of adaptation. This time not only the human tragedy, but also the event's national and international significance – after all, Chicago was one of the main trading centers in the United States – were properly decoded from telegrams reaching Great Britain via Atlantic cable. From October 8-10 1871, a fire raged in the city of Chicago, which almost completely destroyed it. According to a news dispatch of Reuters, assumptions were that 50,000 people were rendered homeless and about 12,000 buildings burned. The loss was estimated to exceed \$150,000,000.<sup>89</sup> Simultaneous to news report about the fire, various articles encouraged the establishment of “noble contributions” from England “for the comfort of these sufferers” who were after all “knit close to us [i.e. the English] by the ties of race and language”.<sup>90</sup> Only three days later, the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported on a public meeting convened by the Mayor for the purpose of raising an aid fund for the people of Chicago.<sup>91</sup>

Despite the fact that aid was still mainly organized along transatlantic trading routes, news coverage on the fire and subsequent relief actions provides proof that on the British side, interest had shifted from solely stock information to more general information, including catastrophes, on the United States. The United States and Great Britain had come one step closer.

The death of the American president James A. Garfield vividly exemplifies how close the process of adaptation would actually bring the two in their news coverage. Oftentimes Garfield is compared directly to Abraham Lincoln. Both American Presidents were assassinated, one in 1865, the other in 1881. Generally, their example is used to highlight the speed of news provided through the Atlantic cables. While it took two weeks in 1865 before anyone in Europe learned about Lincoln's violent death, it was a question of hours or even minutes in 1881. However, it is not only an issue of speed, but also of density of news coverage. James A. Garfield was shot July 2, 1881, but survived badly injured. He died eleven weeks later on September 19, 1881. During these eleven weeks, the President's health status was meticulously reported about in the British Press by Atlantic telegraph. People in Great Britain learned about the President's temperature, his pulse, what and how often he ate and how he slept during the night.<sup>92</sup> They were virtually at the President's death bed.

President Garfield's death not only highlights the density of transatlantic news coverage, but also

<sup>88</sup> John van Buren (1810-1866) was indeed the second son of the former American President Martin van Buren. He had been quite a popular figure as lawyer and politician in the U.S. For some time, he had also lived in Great Britain, where he had been very popular with the British and European High Society. After a dance with Queen Victoria, the American Press started to call him “Prince John”. “John Van Buren.” *Dictionary of American Biography*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936. *Gale Biography In Context*. Web. 17 Oct. 2010. <http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=K12-Reference&prodId=BIC1&action=e&windowstate=normal&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CBT2310001639&mode=view&userGroupName=nypl&jsid=fd5d89bf50f7fe280aa3b3327c9c4b1>.

<sup>89</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, “Latest News,” October 10, 1871. Today, historians estimate that the fire caused almost \$200,000,000 in damage, rendered about one third of the city's population (about 100,000 people) homeless and virtually leveled 2,100 acres. John J. Pauly, “The Great Chicago Fire as a National Event,” *American Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (1984): 669.

<sup>90</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, “News of the Day,” October 11,

1871.

<sup>91</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, “The Great Fire at Chicago,” October 13, 1871. Also the Liverpool American Chamber of Commerce as well as the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce had set up aid funds. *Birmingham Daily Post*, “The Fire at Chicago,” October 13, 1871.

<sup>92</sup> For example see the following press reports: “Washington, August 13, Evening. President Garfield slept poorly during the first part of the night, but better towards the morning. He was somewhat feverish this morning, the pulse being 104. The continuance of the high pulse caused some uneasiness. Dr. Bliss thinks it was owing to a slight retention of pus in the lower track of the wound. The physicians, however, feel no alarm. The fever decreased during the day, and the patient's pulse this evening is 99. The President's condition is considered favourable [sic] by Dr. Hamilton.” “Washington, August 14, Evening. President Garfield has passed a comfortable day, and the attending surgeons are of the opinion that his present favourable [sic] condition will continue, and that the next few days will show a marked improvement. The President's pulse this evening was 96.” *Daily News*, “President Garfield,” August 15, 1881.



marks the end point of a mainly British process of adaptation. By 1881, the state of knowledge and empathy, basic to successful transatlantic communication had caught up with the state of technology. An adequate reference system had been developed. Thereafter, as the 1880s and 1890s show, demand for even speedier news and messages was high. It was not uncommon that it could happen that the dispatch of a message and the receipt of its answer took place within the space of ten minutes.<sup>93</sup> In particular, James Gordon Bennett with his Commercial Cable Company used the argument of speed as a promotion tool for his Atlantic cables. According to the *New York Herald*, the Cable Company's record for transmittance between New York and London lay at two-and a half minutes in 1885.<sup>94</sup> Basic to this had been the further development of submarine telegraphy. By the 1880s, most Atlantic cables were duplexed, which meant that now two messages could be sent simultaneously from opposite sides of the cable. This enlarged the cables' capacity tremendously.<sup>95</sup> In the two decades leading up to the twentieth century, several events, in the most common sense of the word, were staged to prove the wonders of telegraphic speed. One of its highlights was probably an interview conducted across the Atlantic by cable in 1888. One of the interview partners sat in Canada, the other in London.<sup>96</sup> In the late 1890s the obsession with the technology's speed was carried even further, when British and U.S. American chess clubs conducted matches by Atlantic telegraph. As a sort of commercial campaign, messages were transmitted by the Commercial Cable Co.<sup>97</sup> Both events served, as the *Pall Mall Gazette* pointed out, as a "striking manifestation

of the extent to which time and space have been annihilated by the electric telegraph"<sup>98</sup>, but also, one is inclined to add, as a manifestation of speed as a regained prerequisite for transatlantic communication. Speedy transmission of information was increasingly taken for granted and complaints about messages being outdated could be heard.<sup>99</sup> As has been shown, transatlantic communication via telegraph in the form of news coverage was subjected to a lengthy process of adaptation questioning protagonists' attempt to answer the implicit question: What is new(s)? It took more than a decade before the transatlantic gap which had been bridged technologically in 1866 was filled with appropriate knowledge, empathy and interest for the other side. This was essential for the proper decoding of messages of extreme brevity. Only in the 1880s had potential users caught up with the technology they had been provided with and only then could they truly enjoy the benefits of instantaneous news coverage. The period described above represents perfectly the transition from the innovation of submarine telegraphy to technology in use, as theorized by David Edgerton.<sup>100</sup> The case that has just been made, however, further uncovers processes of increasingly dense networks of communication, hence globalization. Lastly, it must be stressed that these processes of adaptation varied according to setting. As Wilke has calculated, news coverage on the United States in Germany was never very extensive until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1881 and 1913, telegrams from America only accounted for two to five per cent of all international telegrams in Germany.<sup>101</sup> The "special relationship" between Great Britain and the United States certainly played an

<sup>93</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, "General News," December 29, 1885.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Bright, *Submarine Telegraphs*, 121–3. The first application of Duplex telegraphy to a submarine cable was in 1873. This was carried out by Mr. J. B. Sterns on a section of the Anglo-American Atlantic cable going from New Foundland to Cape Breton. In 1878 the Direct United States Cable Company's Atlantic cable was successfully duplexed by Muirhead and Taylor. This allowed a speed of sixteen words per minute. *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *The Pall Mall Gazette*, "Telegraphing Extraordinary," January 23, 1888.

<sup>97</sup> *Daily News*, "Chess by Cable - London v. New York," March 14, 1896.; *Glasgow Herald*, "The Cable Chess Match - Great Britain v. United States. The Trophy won back." February 15, 1897. These Anglo-American Chess Matches had first been carried out in 1895. Telegrams were transmitted by the Commercial Cable Co, which used the games as another means of promotion. Large numbers of moves were actually transmitted within three minutes from each other, the distance of the players being 3.483 miles. *The Newcastle Courant* etc, "The

Game of Chess,"; A. J. Gillam, *Great Britain vs. America Cable Matches 1895-1901* (1997).

<sup>98</sup> *The Pall Mall Gazette*, "Telegraphing Extraordinary"

<sup>99</sup> Oftentimes delays were caused by cable breakages. This was the case in 1873 when the shipwreck of the *City of Washington* was not known in Liverpool until three days after the disaster. *The Leeds Mercury*, "Wreck of an Inman Steamer," July 9, 1873.

<sup>100</sup> David Edgerton, "From Innovation to Use: ten eclectic theses on the historiography of technology," *History and Technology* 16 (1999).

<sup>101</sup> Jürgen Wilke, "The Telegraph and Transatlantic Communication Relations," in *Atlantic communications: The media in American and German history from the seven teenth to the twentieth century*, ed. Norbert Finsch and Ursula Lehmkuhl, 107–34, Germany and the United States of America. The Krefeld Historical Symposia (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 113. Amelia Bonea is working on how the *Times of India* reports "World News" in India. E.g. Amelia Bonea, "The Medium and its Message. Reporting the Austro-Prussian War in the Times of India," *Historical Social Research. Historische Sozialforschung* 35, no. 1 (2010).

important part in the way the processes outlined above played out. Many scholars actually date the beginning of the so called Anglo-American Special Relationship to the mid-19th century.<sup>102</sup>

Yet even if the story were to be retold from the U.S. American point of view, its timeline would be slightly different. These processes of adaptation and negotiation occurred more intensely in Great Britain than in the United States, where Europe and particularly Great Britain had been the major point of reference. The evaluation of each other's importance was thus uneven.<sup>103</sup> In American newspapers aside from the usual stock quotations, particularly information on Europe's wars or the movements of its royalty made front page as "From Europe by Atlantic Cable" or "Europe – Latest by Atlantic cable".<sup>104</sup> Generally, there seems to have been less of a tendency to decode telegrams incorrectly as the American reference system with regards to Europe seems to have had a larger vocabulary. Yet there were also critical voices, such as Henry David Thoreau. He was highly skeptical of the benefits of an Atlantic telegraph connection:

*We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new, but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.*<sup>105</sup>

My future work will analyze the stages of adaptation from the U.S. American side. Thus far, we can already hypothesize that there were various speeds of communicational integration and adaptation of news in a globalizing world. Yet, as the study of Gordon Winder has outlined, the processes of integration do not result in one global public, but rather publics. Each of these shapes and adapts so-called global media events, such as the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 according to dynamics of its own locality.<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusion

In people's imagination, submarine telegraphs, such as the Atlantic cables, did indeed establish *Weltcommunication*. They broadened people's imaginary beyond the borders of their local or national community. After all, had not time and space been annihilated, had not the Atlantic dried up and had they not become one people? Yet, the imaginary global, which the submarine telegraphs provided, still remained an empty image for some time. Only slowly did the world integrate and become more interlinked along the communicational paths that a submarine telegraph network provided. Yet this network was based upon political and commercial considerations. This integration contained processes of adaptation and the negotiation of common codes. Yet, these processes were neither unidirectional, nor did they happen simultaneously in a consistent pattern. The imaginary *Weltcommunication* still contained many holes and provided clear distinctions between those inside and outside of its system along the lines of class or gender. It based its communicational practice upon the understanding of time as

<sup>102</sup> Ursula Lehmkuhl, "Creating Anglo-American Friendship: The Great Exhibition of 1851 and the Social Construction of the „Special Relationship“,“ in *From Enmity to Friendship: Anglo-American Relations in the 19th and 20th Century*, ed. Ursula Lehmkuhl and Gustav Schmidt, 28–52, Schriftenreihe des Arbeitskreises Deutsche England-Forschung 53 (Augsburg 2005).

<sup>103</sup> This is a phenomenon easily explained by the fact that North America had from its point of "discovery" been predominantly settled by Europeans. In particular, the late nineteenth century further saw great waves of immigration.

<sup>104</sup> *Daily National Intelligencer*, "Europe Latest by Atlantic

Cable," November 28, 1866; *The Daily News and Herald*, "From Europe By Atlantic Cable," November 05, 1866. Interesting is the high coverage of the Fenian movement, which is probably owed to the high number of Irish immigrants in the U.S.

<sup>105</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1854 (reprint 1971)), 52.

<sup>106</sup> Gordon M. Winder, "Imagining World Citizenship in the Networked Newspaper: La Nación Reports the Assassination at Sarajevo, 1914," *Historical Social Research. Historische Sozialforschung* 35, no. 1 (2010).

money and provided a theory of communication which considered the demand of social intercourse beyond the national as unimaginable. In

the late nineteenth century, submarine telegraphs had provided the means for *Weltcommunication*, yet were not meant for the world to communicate.

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