

The victorian internet essay sample

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Tom Standage, a technology journalist, argues that the real shrinking of time and space took place not with the arrival of the Internet but in the Victorian era with the development of the telegraph. One of the sure signs that a technology has transformed society is that people begin to treat it as part of the landscape. Tom Standage (1998) shows in his book *The Victorian Internet* how the world's first electronically mediated communications tool (the telegraph) was created in controversy but became ubiquitous. Promoted in utopian terms by its backers and dismissed as cumbersome or useless by its critics, over time it proved essential to news and commerce. The ultimate sign of its success was that it did the right things but did not do them well enough. Within two generations inventors had outmoded it with the telephone and radio, not as a rejection or abandonment of the concept but rather as a testimony to its powerful collaborative potential.

To understand fully the growth and geographies of ICTs and cyberspace, one must appreciate their history within the 'information revolution' (Standage 1998, p. 13). The advent of ICTs and cyberspace has not been achieved independently, rather, it is bound within the histories of telecommunication technologies, computing and wider social and political-economic histories. There are many striking parallels that can be drawn between the development and growth of the telegraph and the Internet, particularly in terms of how the technologies were perceived by the public, how they were hyped by the media and marketing people, and their impact on society (Standage 1998). The capacity of the wires may have been smaller in the nineteenth century, compared even to today's slowest network links, and there were human operators at the nodes rather than digital computers, but

the telegraph's enabling of instantaneous communication over great distances had a profound effect. Standage (1998) describes the telegraph as the 'Victorian Internet' and argues persuasively that all the advances in telecommunications made since Morse's famous 1844 message, 'What hath God wrought!', have been incremental improvements rather than revolutionary breakthroughs.

The enthusiasm-and investment-which the technology engendered is quite remarkable. After linking London to Paris in 1852, attempts were made to lay a 2,500-mile cable to the USA. In 1857, two cable-laying ships left Valentia Island in south-west Ireland, but the cable broke after 350 miles. More money was raised and about a year later two ships sailed to the middle of the Atlantic and headed in opposite directions laying the cable. Twice the cable snapped and they sailed back to the starting point; and an encounter with a whale and one more break meant abandoning the venture and a return to Ireland. On the next attempt they achieved success, connecting the two continents by cable in 1858:

The celebrations that followed bordered on hysteria. There were hundred-gun salutes in Boston and New York; flags flew from public buildings; church bells rang. There were fireworks, parades, and special church services. Torchbearing revellers in New York got so carried away that City Hall was accidentally set on fire and narrowly escaped destruction. 'Our whole country', declared *Scientific American*, 'has been electrified by the successful laying of the Atlantic Telegraph.' (Standage, 1998, pp. 77, 79)

Standage's conclusion is that the perceived significance of the telegraph resembles closely that of the Internet:

it revolutionised business practice, gave rise to new forms of crime, and inundated its users with a deluge of information. Romance blossomed over the wires. Secret codes were devised by some users, and cracked by others. The benefits of the network were relentlessly hyped by its advocates, and dismissed by the sceptics. Governments and regulators tried and failed to control the new medium. Attitudes to everything from newsgathering to diplomacy had to be completely rethought. Meanwhile, out on the wires, a technological subculture with its own customs and vocabulary was establishing itself. (Standage, 1998, p. 1)

By the time electric telegraphs attracted significant attention in the 1840s–50s, the ground had been laid for thinking about the analogous difficulties of nervous and telegraphic communication. Since the nervous system was typically imagined as (at least like) an electrical system, the analogy became especially apt with the arrival of the electric telegraph. William Fothergill Cooke, one of the electric telegraph's inventors and originally an anatomical wax modeller, even referred to breaks in his wires as 'injuries'. In a particularly striking example of this analogy, an early American historian of the telegraph, George Prescott, wrote that the telegraph in its most common form, communicating intelligence between distant places, performs the function of the sensitive nerves of the human body.

Standage claims that in order to comprehend the depth of the nervous system-telegraph analogy, we need to examine its roots in several

commitments that British natural philosophers tended to share in the early industrial period. For one thing, the problem of communication stood at the heart of concerns about provincialism and science. Tom Standage has drawn parallels between the steam age and the electronic age, and certainly Morse code in particular served as a precedent for digitising information that would be useful for encoding cyberspace: operators have been communicating in bits for more than a century and a half.

Furthermore, the celebration of the possibilities of the Internet as part of the new information age is hardly original. In a study which makes explicit the parallel developments of telegraphy and the Internet, Tom Standage identifies some striking similarities in public responses to both technologies. In both cases public reaction was ‘ a confused mixture of hype and scepticism’ (Standage 1998: 194). Like many recent writers, Victorians celebrated the telegraph as a new mode of communication that would further democracy and social communication for the good of all (to bring about peace among nations) at the same time as they saw it prompting new methods of control. Businesses could be centralised (control could be direct with less delegation to outlying plants), and governments could much more easily direct their armies (and their societies) through swift and authoritative communication. As Standage concludes:

Today, we are repeatedly told that we are in the midst of a communications revolution. But the electric telegraph was, in many ways, far more disconcerting for the inhabitants of the time than today’s advances are for us. If any generation has the right to claim that it bore the full bewildering,

world shrinking brunt of such a revolution, it is not us – it is our nineteenth-century forebears. (Standage 1998: 199-200)

He argues that: ‘ If any generation has the right to claim that it bore the full bewildering, world-shrinking brunt of such a revolution, it is not us-it is our nineteenth-century forebears’ (Standage, 1998, pp. 199-200). Standage does not argue that nothing has changed, but point to powerful continuities for national media and the continuing significance of local and national cultural production and consumption.

- Public service, national broadcasting is alive and well, albeit with reduced audiences, under increasing pressure to compete, and in an environment which is uncertain and fast-changing.
- In the UK in 1999, about a third of households had cable or satellite television, and they watched terrestrial channels for nearly two-thirds of their viewing time.
- There is hardly such a thing as ‘ global television’. What there is attracts minimal audiences.
- Viewing figures, however, are not the whole story, because commercial forms and practices are influencing heavily the content of national broadcasting organizations.
- The press is profoundly national in its organization.
- News, although globally sourced, is almost entirely nationally or locally produced.
- The nation-state remains the main body which regulates the media.
- The history of the telegraph suggests that there is nothing dramatically new about recent communication technologies and global

communication, and cautions us regarding the more apocalyptic claims which are made about ' the information revolution'.

Works Cited

Standage, T. *The Victorian Internet* , London, Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1998.