

The Network

Dan Auerbach

2015

Part I

The Telegraph

Chapter 1

Communication at a Distance

The electrical telegraph brought near-instantaneous communication to the Victorian world, accelerating commerce, business and the connectedness of the human species. Yet long before telegraph engineers were plotting the best ways to build spider webs of wires all over the planet, the word “telegraph” was already in widespread use as a description for a network of towers used to relay information. Much like signal fires that have been used since antiquity to convey simple, this *optical telegraph* required no wires at all, instead relying on ordinary sight. In the section that follows we will explore a few different sight-based communication systems and by weaving in history with some basic conceptual building blocks, we will lay some fundamental groundwork for understanding communication systems in general.

1.1 Telecommunications Using Plain Sight

Suppose you decide to play a game of catch with your friend Mary. After throwing back and forth a little, the inner athlete in Mary takes over and she decides just throwing the ball around is too boring – she wants to practice some drills.

You’re too far apart to yell at each other, so she waves you over. Soon she is excitedly describing her workout plan to you: for each throw, she is going to tell you whether she wants a high ball or a fast line drive ball thrown hard, and your job is to deliver these balls. The point of the exercise isn’t to surprise her – she prefers to know what is coming – but to deliver the throws she wants as accurately as possible.

You grumble to yourself about Mary’s inability to just have fun without making activities so competitive, but know that it would be futile to resist. And besides, you have a much more practical question in front of you: how is she going to indicate if she wants a high ball or a low ball? After all, she’s far

enough away that shouting is no use given how loud the passing cars are. The two of you briefly consider having her hold up one finger for a high ball, and two for a low ball, but quickly realize it will be hard to discern the number of fingers she's holding up from a distance.

Then you figure out a system that works. She will raise her right arm straight up to indicate that she wants a high ball thrown, and will put her right arm straight out sideways for a low ball:



High ball

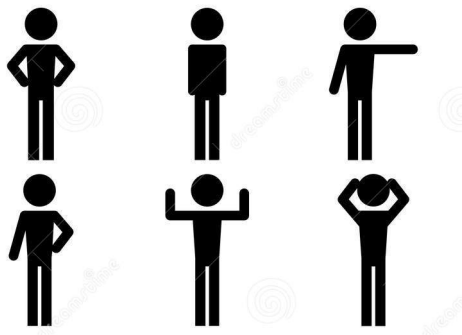


Low ball

This works like a charm. Mary chooses the ball she wants, and gets to practice her catching, and you have to admit that it is kind of fun to practice particular types of throws instead of just generally playing catch.

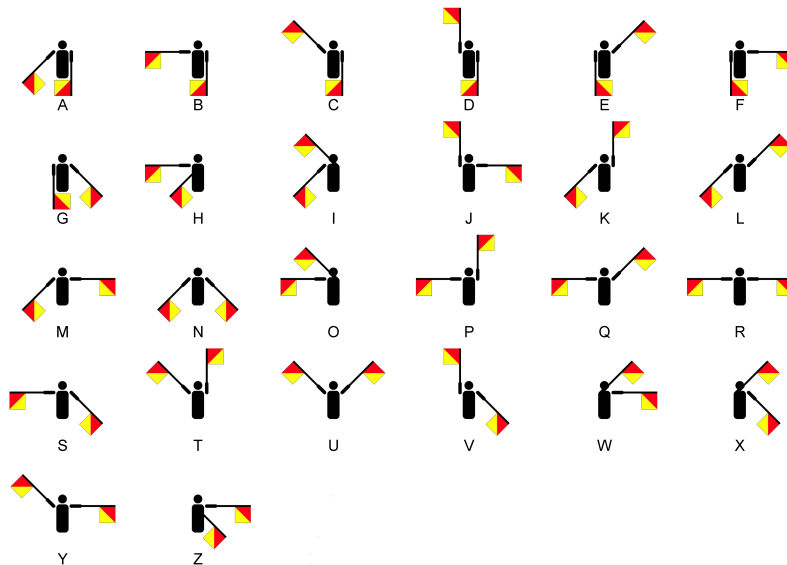
Now, just as you are getting into a rhythm, Mary waves you over again. Your suspicions are quickly vindicated as she explains that she now wants to be able to signal one of *six* different types of throws for you to deliver to her. After some grumbling, you give in and find yourself again faced with the task of coming up with a system for distinguishing the throws from one another without being able to communicate verbally.

The arm-based signaling system was working pretty well, so you decide to extend it, this time using two arms instead of one:



It takes a little getting used to, but you pick up the system and once again settle into a rhythm, having hopefully satiated your throwing partner's lust for pushing her body to the limit. Your mind wanders, and you start thinking about the system you just devised. Can it be extended further? Is there a limit to how much information you can convey with just two arms?

After thinking through it a bit more, you realize that if you could represent every letter of the alphabet via a different set of arm positions, then by using your arm positions to signal individual letters, one at a time, you could communicate entire sentences via your system that translates arm positions into letters. It's not too difficult to come up with such a system:



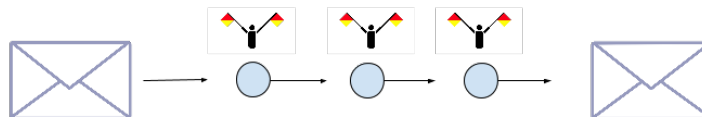
Here we display one possible system where the person signaling holds flags for extra emphasis so that the arm positions can be seen from far away.

Using this system, you could compose a message (“hey Mary, let’s stop being so intense when we play catch”), and pass that message to Mary one letter at a time encoded via your arm signaling system, who in turn could decode it and understand the message.

This system is an example of what is called a *semaphore system* of communication. While it may not seem that groundbreaking or useful for your game of catch, this core idea of encoding useful information into symbols and then transmitting those symbols is the essence of all communication in the Internet era.

Now you might naturally wonder: is there any way for us to extend this idea to quickly transfer information across dozens or even hundreds of miles?

The key insight is that to turn this basic semaphore system into something useful, we will need a *network* of relay stations, each passing a message along to the next faster than any horse could ride.



Even those in the ancient world understood that relay stations could be used in this way to transmit visual information, and they did this through the creation of networks of signal fires. For example, the play *Agamemnon*, which was part of a trilogy that won first prize at the Dionysia festival in Athens in 458 BC, begins with a watchman looking for a signal fire that was the last in a line of fires being used to signal the fall of Troy. [CITE]

Another famous example is African talking drums. Originating in West Africa, the instruments themselves were hourglass-shaped drums constructed to allow the player to modulate the pitch as he or she was playing. This made it possible for skilled players to approximate speech of highly tonal African languages. Even more incredible, over time sets of phrases were developed that could be played out via the talking drum and understood from far away. The phrases were intended to communicate useful information, but they had to be quite verbose so that they could be told apart from one another from a distance. For example, “Come back home” might be translated by the drummers into a long phrase such as: “Make your feet come back the way they went, make your legs come back the way they went, plant your feet and your legs below, in the village which belongs to us”, which would then be “spoken” by the drum doing its best imitation of a person saying that phrase aloud. [CITE GLEICK]. The phrases were often relayed from village to village, forming a system of communication that could travel faster than horseback and convey complex ideas unlike signal fires.

However, both signal fires and talking drums had their shortcomings, and could not carry complex messages reliably. While other systems had been proposed to accomplish communication at a distance, it wasn’t until the 1790s in revolutionary France that an inventor named Claude Chappe was able to champion and get the financial backing to build a working network capable of transmitting information. He needed a name for his new invention, and so he merged the French words for “far” and “writer”, resulting in the *telegraph*.

1.1.1 The Chappe System

If the idea of using a network of stations to relay information had been around for thousands of years, why did it take so long to improve this core idea into a working network for reliable communication?

The reasons are primarily economic. A century before Chappe was devising systems for towers to communicate, in 1684, the British thinker Robert Hooke

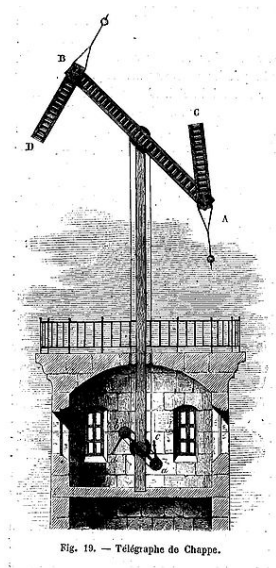
wrote out a detailed proposal for a system of communication at a distance, but the proposal languished and was never implemented. [CITE]

To get a sense of the economics at play, let's say one wanted to be able to send and receive messages from 300 miles away – roughly the distance from Paris to Lyon, or Philadelphia to Boston. Intermediate stations would have to be roughly 10 miles apart (or perhaps even closer, but we can be generous). Hence, the cost of building a network capable of transmitting information between Philadelphia and Boston would amount to the cost of building and maintaining 30 expensive buildings, and employing perhaps 60 people or more to manage the buildings and relay messages. Moreover the cost is pretty much all up front: it takes many stations to be built before information can usefully travel from large city centers. It's worth highlighting this economic situation since we will see this pattern repeating again and again in the telecommunications industry: there is always an incredibly high up front cost for building a network before it can be used to send a single message. Interestingly, this is kind of the opposite business model as the prototypical Internet-era start-up, which has a very low barrier to entry. Much later, we will explore the tension between these two business models, and how they affect the net neutrality debate.

With respect to Hooke's vision of optical telegraphy, building and maintaining all of those towers was simply too high a price for the English government of the late 17th century to spend on an unproven idea without any critical use cases. But a hundred years later when Chappe was (re)inventing his optical telegraph, revolutionary France was embroiled in intense international military conflict. In this context, not only did instability of the revolution encourage spikes in short-term spending by those in power looking out for their own interests, but the *value* of being able to transmit and receive information quickly had also skyrocketed for a military waging fast-paced wars on multiple fronts. It was not a completely rosy time for inventors like Chappe either. While the government and military desperately wanted the powers afforded by Chappe's towers, citizens were suspicious of these mysterious obelisks and in one incident burned a tower to the ground.

Yet instability and violence was a fact of life in revolutionary France and did not deter Chappe, who furiously iterated on the design of his towers. Chappe's challenge was to figure out the nitty gritty details: how were two relay towers going to actually communicate? Chappe tried a variety of systems, some rather elaborate that involved synchronizing the time between two relay stations. In the end, the simpler solution won out, another trend in telecommunications that we will see continues for centuries.

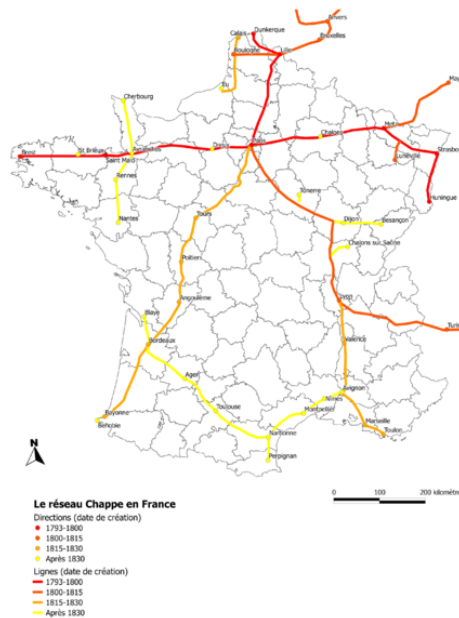
The relay stations would be large towers with mechanical arms that could be seen from as far away as possible. In particular, there were two small arms both connected to a large cross arm:



Similar to how we used human arms when experimenting with communication earlier, the arms of the tower could be given many different positions, each corresponding to a different letter or phrase. [ADD DIAGRAM FOR THIS?] The advantage of the mechanical arms over human ones, of course, is that the arms on the tower are much larger and hence can be seen from further away.

Since this first telegraph was to be used for strictly military purposes, the meaning of the arm positions that emanated from the towers was to be kept secret. In fact, even the operators of towers often were simply mimicking the arm positions of the transmitting tower, without knowing the meaning of the message contained within that series of arm positions. [CITE]

The first line of these towers between Paris and the town of Lille was completed in 1792. Once this proof of concept was established, given the military utility of what Chappe offered, the telegraph network spanned much of France within half a decade:



This was the world’s first extensive telecommunications (“distant communication”) network, and it required no wires at all.

The network in France was copied in other countries, as telegraph towers started appearing all over. In fact, if you live in a hilly city, you may have a neighborhood nearby called *telegraph hill*; this name is derived from the hills upon which optical telegraphs were placed to maximize visibility.

1.2 A System of Lights

Chappe’s large mechanical arm positions offer one way to communicate at a distance, mimicking the game of catch we played earlier with Mary. What other methods might we use?

In this section, let’s briefly consider another method of communication using light. Suppose that your football-playing friend Mary lives several miles away on a hill which is clearly visible from your house. Just after your game of “catch,” as you are about to part ways, Mary extends you an open invitation to dinner for being such an excellent throwing partner. She tells you to come any night that you would like – how nice of her!

Unfortunately, there is a catch. Mary prefers a quiet life and so has no phone or Internet connection. She assures you that she will be reliably cooking every night, and that if you show up around 8 o’clock in the evening, you will be able to enjoy whatever she has prepared; there is no need to let her know in advance that you’ll be joining.

But alas, you are a vegetarian, and Mary sometimes likes to cook meat. While you enjoy Mary’s company, it’s definitely not worth a forty five minute trek to her house unless you know Mary has cooked a meal you can enjoy.

How can Mary communicate what type of meal she has cooked to you so that you know whether or not to come? Building a tower is too much work, and you couldn’t see it in the dark anyway, a disadvantage of Chappe’s telegraph network to be sure.

But just as you are about to give up, Mary remembers that she has a huge bright light on her roof that when turned on is visible to you from your house. (Light bulbs were not invented until the late 1800s, so this method was not available to Chappe.) If she is cooking a meal with meat, she will shine the light and leave it on all evening. That way you will know that if you see the light on, you should avoid coming over.

How does this simple communication system work? There are only two possible configurations for the light: on or off. Let’s name the light being on as 1 and the light being off as 0:



Figure 1.3: “0” (light off)

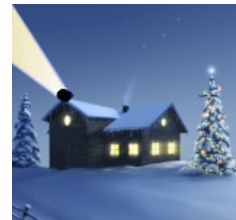


Figure 1.4: “1” (light on)

We can write our simple system as follows:

0 : no meat
1 : meat

This works great as a system for Mary to message you about dinner, but now there’s a twist – you have a mutual friend Fred who cannot consume dairy, but does enjoy meat. In order for the system to work for both you and Fred, Mary now has to broadcast whether or not the meal being prepared that night contains meat (for you) and whether or not the meal contains dairy (for Fred). The solution is easy enough: Mary installs a second bright light, clearly distinguishable from the first. The second light is on if and only if the meal has dairy. So now when you or Fred look on Mary’s house on the hill there are 4 possible configurations:

00 : no meat, no dairy
01 : no meat, dairy
10 : meat, no dairy
11 : meat, dairy



Example of one possible configuration “01” (first light off, second light on)

As we’ve seen, by combining 2 lights we can display 4 possible configurations. What happens when we add another friend to the mix, with an aversion to gluten? With 3 lights, how many possible configurations can we display? For each of the possible configurations we’ve already listed above, the third light can either be on or off, effectively doubling the number of possible configurations.

0 00 : no gluten, no meat, no dairy
0 01 : no gluten, no meat, dairy
0 10 : no gluten, meat, no dairy
0 11 : no gluten, meat, dairy

1 00 : gluten, no meat, no dairy
1 01 : gluten, no meat, dairy
1 10 : gluten, meat, no dairy
1 11 : gluten, meat, dairy

Hopefully you are starting to see a pattern. With every light we add, we double the number of possible configurations that can be displayed.

1 light = 2 configurations

2 lights = $2 * 2 = 2^2 = 4$ configurations

3 lights = $2 * 2 * 2 = 2^3 = 8$ configurations

4 lights = $2 * 2 * 2 * 2 = 2^4 = 16$ configurations

5 lights = $2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 = 2^5 = 32$ configurations

6 lights = $2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 = 2^6 = 64$ configurations

7 lights = $2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 = 2^7 = 128$ configurations

8 lights = $2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 = 2^8 = 256$ configurations

9 lights = $2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 * 2 = 2^9 = 512$ configurations

etc

Written more concisely, we have just seen that if we have some number n lights, then we can display 2^n possible configurations.

There are many more questions we might want to answer about our system of lights. What messages can be sent with these lights? What about just a single light? How fast can information be transmitted? What if a light is burned out? We will return to these questions in time, but first let's travel back to the early 1800s, when people were only first starting to understand the power of electricity.

Chapter 2

The Electrical Telegraph

So far we've talked about two systems for communicating at a distance: the optical telegraph system, and the system of lights on top of Mary's house. One major limitation of both of those systems is that they rely on line of sight. What happens if it gets foggy? Or if you want to communicate across a large body of water that doesn't allow for the construction of towers along the way?

The electrical telegraph solves these problems, providing a more robust solution to long distance communication. Electricity traveling over a wire can be made into a fundamental building block for developing a system of communication. This approach doesn't have the shortcoming of the line-of-sight approaches the wires can snake around large mountains, treacherous deserts, and lie at the bottom of substantial bodies of water. Moreover, electrical telegraphy doesn't require expensive towers to be built and maintained, and wires can fairly easily be re-positioned, making a network based on the electrical telegraph much less expensive and more flexible than one based on the optical telegraph paradigm.

Given all the advantages of the electrical telegraph, it is no surprise that shortly after being invented around the 1840s, it eclipsed the optical telegraph as the dominant mechanism for communicating at a distance, and nowadays when someone talks about the "telegraph" they are almost certainly referring to the electrical telegraph. I will follow this convention, and explicitly use the phrase "optical telegraph" when I need to refer to the older line-of-sight-based Chappe technology.

The development of the electrical telegraph occurred in the first half of the 19th century, and relied on advances in battery technology and a steady progression in our ability to harness electricity in increasingly sophisticated ways. The telegraph served as society's first widespread proof in the power of electricity, and, much like the early 21st century, the mood was jubilant about what could be accomplished through further technological progress.

Like many great inventions, the ideas behind the telegraph were developed more or less independently by more than one person, and, like many great inventions of the modern legal era, bitter patent lawsuits were not far behind. The man who has ended up getting the majority of the credit as the father

of the telegraph is Samuel Morse, an American painter-turned-inventor who was born in 1792, just as Chappe was furiously iterating on his towers half a world away. Morse was unaware of telegraphy of any sort through his early life. He painted portraits through his 30s and only in his 40s turned his attention towards electricity and the idea of creating a system of communication using electricity over a wire. He then obsessively worked on this problem, eventually developing and popularizing the dominant telegraphy system which became the standard used throughout the world for the next sixty years.

Besides Morse, the other prominent pair of inventors were Cooke and Wheatstone, who worked in England, independently developing their own systems for how to communicate over a wire. Conceptually, all of these people were on a similar track, but Morse's system had certain advantages over that of Cooke and Wheatstone, and eventually even Cooke and Wheatstone agreed that the "Morse system" was superior.

2.1 A Simple Circuit

The Morse telegraph is in essence just a simple electrical circuit. There is a power source, a switch and a loop of wire connected to an electrical device that acts as a receiver indicating whether or not electricity is flowing through the circuit:

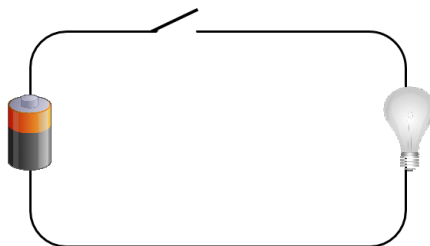


Figure 2.1: Switch closed; no electrical current

In the circuit diagram above, the power source is the battery drawn on the left. The little angled line represents a *switch*, and works just like a light switch in being able to turn the system on or off (in fact, light switches are essentially

just switches in the sense of a simple circuit). If the switch is open, as it is in the diagram above, electricity does not flow through the circuit. If the switch is closed, on the other hand, then an electric current flows through:



Figure 2.2: Switch open; electricity flowing

How exactly does electricity “flow” through a circuit? For those without a background in electrical engineering, we will deepen our understanding in the chapters to come. For now, note that objects can have positive or negative electrical charge. In the diagram above, the battery has one positive and one negative terminal. When the circuit is closed, free electrons move through the wire from the negative terminal to the positive terminal. This flow of electrical current means that the device on the right hand side has electricity running through it. Typically in elementary electrical engineering explanations, a light bulb is used as an illustration of this electrical device indicating that electricity is flowing through a circuit, and so we have used this above as a simple illustration.

Unfortunately for Morse and his peers, there were no light bulbs in the 1830s and 1840s, but there were alternatives serving the same conceptual function as a light bulb in the diagram above.

2.2 One Telegraph to Rule Them All

While all electrical telegraphy developed through the 1840s was based on the paradigm of a simple circuit that we described above, the details varied quite a bit among competing designs. There was not a single telegraph during this period, but rather a plethora of distinct competing experimental systems for communicating over electrical wires.

When the dust settled, however, the telegraph that became the de facto worldwide standard was an iteration coming from Morse and his collaborators, notably Alfred Vail. As we will see time and time again, simplicity is a major virtue when designing a telecommunications system, and by requiring only a single circuit for transmission, this was a major advantage of the Morse telegraph over other early prototypes.

Let's look in a bit more detail at how the Morse telegraph worked. Here is a representation superimposed on our basic circuit above:

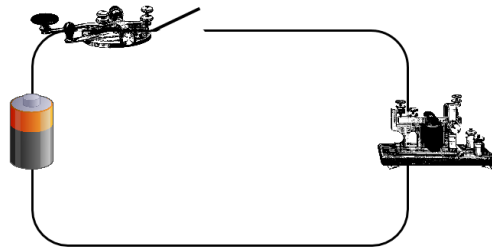


Figure 2.4: Telegraph as a basic circuit

The circuit was closed by default, which means that electricity was flowing through. Transmission occurred via a *telegraph key*, an invention of Vail that was essentially just a single button that an operator could press. When pressed, the circuit was opened and electricity no longer could flow through the wire. When released, the circuit was closed and electricity resumed.

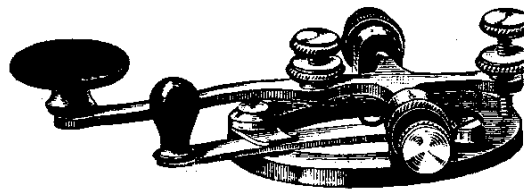


Figure 2.5: Telegraph key

Telegraph operators would tap out messages with this single key in a specified manner (which we'll discuss shortly).

On the receiving end, there was a bit more variance in terms of what gadget was actually used to receive messages over the life of the telegraph. After experimentation with all sorts of receiving devices - making little marks on paper, making needles point to particular locations, and so on - the winning gadget employed throughout the peak of the telegraph in the mid to late 1800s was called a *sounder*:

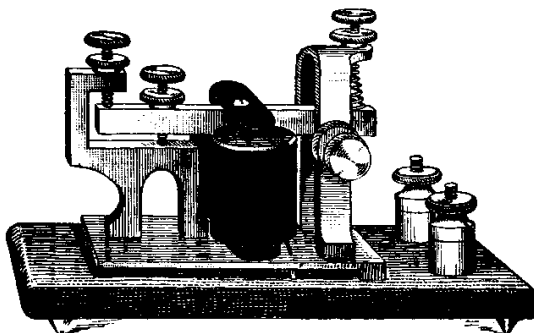


Figure 2.6: Sounder

This device allowed telegraph operators to listen to clicks and pauses which corresponded to the pressing and lifting of the telegraph key by the operator at the other end of the line.

We now have a clearer picture of the mechanics of how a telegraph worked: it was essentially a circuit with a key on one end corresponding to a switch and a sounder on the other end that allowed key presses to be heard as clicks.

2.3 Morse Code

Knowing that someone on the other end of a telegraph line hundreds or thousands of miles away is pressing a key at this very moment is a remarkable achievement, but in order for it to be useful for communication, there needs to exist some *system* that translates the “on” and “off” states of the telegraph into useful information.

We’ve discussed a couple such systems for communication already, but these relied on line of sight and being able to display lots of information at once, either in the form of varying arm positions or in various lights that are on or off. In this case, we only have a single on or off state that can change over time. How can this be used to convey information?

The system that stuck for telegraphy is known as Morse code. Morse code enables communication by segmenting the raw “on” and “off” states into four discrete symbols: a dot, a dash, a short pause, and a long pause. A short press of the telegraph key was called a “dot” and a long press of the key was called a “dash”. Different lengths of pauses were necessary to differentiate a pause between letters from a pause between words.

●	dot
■	dash
[short pause]	letter space
[long pause]	word space

These four symbols comprise the basic alphabet of telegraphy, but we also need a way to translate this basic alphabet into English letters, much as we did for our system of lights earlier. It is not too difficult to create such a table:

A	• —	U	• • —
B	— • • •	V	• • • —
C	— • — •	W	• — —
D	— • •	X	— • • —
E	•	Y	— • — —
F	• • — •	Z	— — • •
G	— — •		
H	• • • •		
I	• •		
J	• — — —		
K	— • —	1	• — — — —
L	• — • •	2	• • — — —
M	— —	3	• • • — —
N	— •	4	• • • • —
O	— — —	5	• • • • •
P	• — — •	6	— • • • •
Q	— — • —	7	— — • • •
R	• — •	8	— — — • •
S	• • •	9	— — — — •
T	—	0	— — — — —

Figure 2.7: International Morse Code standard

Armed with this system, the telegraph is transformed from a meaningless single-signal transmission device into the world's first widespread telecommunication technology. The way it works is similar to the semaphore system we outlined above. For example, consider the following sets of dots, dashes, short pauses and long pauses, represented on paper via our table above:

•••• • • — — •• • — — •• — — — —

Using the translation table, to which English word does this correspond?

As mentioned, the Morse system has the advantage that only a single circuit is needed to communicate, meaning that even very simple designs for the physical telegraph could be made to communicate via Morse code. In particular, unlike the more complex designs of Cooke and Wheatstone (as well as Morse's earlier systems), the telegraph which became the standard did not

require multiple circuits to be synchronized with one another to produce an output, significantly cutting down the complexity and of the system.

2.4 Practical Limits of Telegraphy

We now have a basic high level understanding of how the telegraph works, but before dismissing this topic as fully understood, it's worth pausing to reflect on all of the unknowns that we would need to flesh out to have a complete understanding of the telegraph.

Perhaps the largest looming question is how electricity works. We will cover this topic in more detail in the next part of this book, so if you aren't already knowledgeable on electromagnetism, I encourage you for now to rely on a high level understanding of electricity as the flow of subatomic particles called electrons through wires made from conducting metals like copper. This very rough notion in some sense approximates the mentality of engineers through the 1850s (minus knowing about electrons), since it wasn't until later in the 19th century that James Clerk Maxwell and others paved the way for our contemporary understanding of electromagnetism.

Yet despite a lack of theoretical understanding of the fundamental principles that enabled electrical telegraphy to function, engineers forged ahead since the technology did work. It didn't work perfectly, though, and so a lot of energy was spend trying to get telegraphs to be more reliable, to function over long distances, and to be able to cross harsh terrain.

One challenge at first seemed insurmountable: could a telegraph cable be built that traversed the Atlantic ocean?

To achieve this, improvements to cabling were critical. In particular, early telegraph systems involved stringing raw copper wire along poles, or burying it underground. But raw copper wire was super unreliable as a transport mechanism: it could be easily damaged, and simply did not work that consistently even if undamaged.

For telegraphs to function at scale, more sophisticated cabling was needed. Fortunately, *gutta-percha* was discovered by the industrial world in 1843 and quickly became a household name in the Victorian world. This tree sap known for producing a naturally rigid latex became the mid to late 19th century's equivalent of plastic today, and among its myriad uses was as an insulator surrounding raw copper telegraph wires. The gutta-percha in turn was often wrapped in rubber, and then an outer layer of iron or steel, creating a cable whose cross section looked something like this:

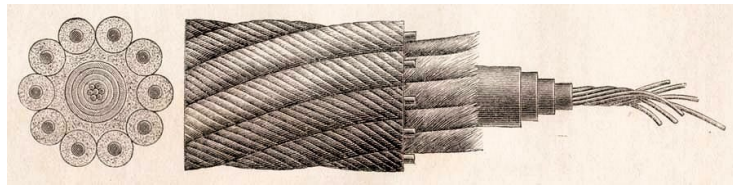


Figure 2.8: Telegraph cable

It did not happen overnight, but 14 years after Morse's first successful proof of concept of the electrical telegraph in 1844 between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., the first transatlantic telegraph cable was laid, ushering in the dawn of a new information age of instantaneous cross-continent communication. Imagine the jubilation one must have felt being in New York City in 1858, hearing Queen Victoria's words to president Buchanan that for the first time could be communicated near-instantaneously across the vast Atlantic ocean.

Meanwhile, engineers remained hard at work making improvements. In addition to better cabling, there were a lot of open questions. How thick should the copper wire be? How powerful should the battery be? The engineers involved in these early projects engaged in a tremendous amount of trial and error, and succeeded in pushing the range and reliability of telegraph lines despite limited theoretical understanding of electricity and magnetism.

Yet even as engineers inched towards cables that were better optimized for the task at hand, there remained one unfortunate fact of life: over longer and longer distances, the strength of the signal diminished.

This phenomenon, which in contemporary parlance is called *attenuation* of the electrical signal, is due to the fact that energy escapes when electricity travels over a wire (escaping as heat, for example), diminishing the signal. To solve the fact that the signal would get weaker over longer distances, some sort of repeating mechanism was needed.

2.5 Electromagnets and Relays

Before we can understand the repeating mechanism, we must first understand an electrical device called an *electromagnet*, first invented in the 1820s, which serves as a basic building block for many electrical systems.

You can think of a simple electromagnet as a piece of iron with insulated wire tightly coiled around it:

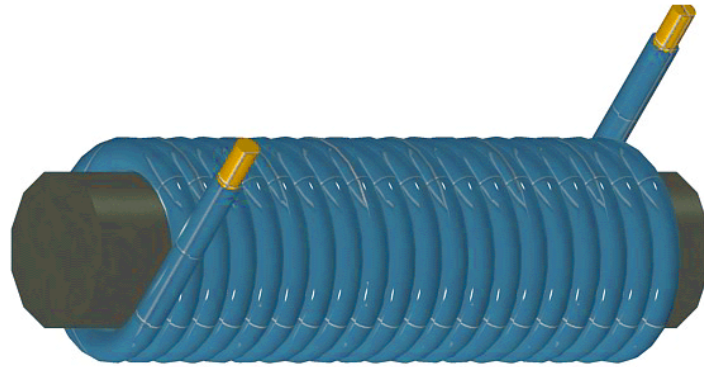
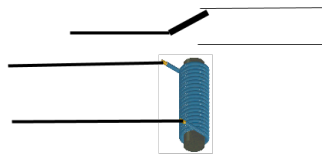


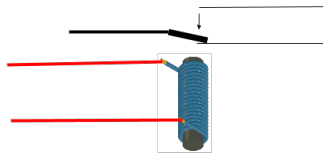
Figure 2.9: Simple electromagnet

When current flows through the wire, it induces a magnetic field, turning the iron temporarily into a magnet that attracts other metals. In other words, with an electromagnet, the flow of electricity is used to dictate whether a magnet is “on” or “off”.

One of the reasons the electromagnet is so important is that it allows electrical current to create mechanical action. To see how this is possible, consider the following setup:



When electricity flows, the electromagnet is activated, creating a magnetic field, which pulls the metal latch down.



When the flow of electricity stops, the magnetic field disappears and the latch returns to its original position. Now what if the metal latch that is going up and down is actually the switch of another electrical circuit? You can now have two circuits with independent power sources linked by this electromagnet like this:

[*DIAGRAM*]

An electromagnet used in this way is called a *relay*. Imagine the left side of the above diagram as a telegraph operator using a telegraph key. When the operator presses down, communicating a dot in Morse code, it opens the switch and cuts the electrical current for a brief moment. This causes the magnetic field to disappear in the electromagnet, and so the latch in the relay returns to its original position, which breaks the current on the right hand side, communicating a dot.

By offering a way around the signal attenuation issue, relays allowed telegraph lines to extend arbitrarily far, though of course relays were yet another piece of equipment that had to be installed and maintained. Still, compared to the Chappe optical telegraph system, in which the “repeaters” were actually just human beings re-coding the message, electrical relays that operate without manual human intervention provide a huge cost savings.

Electromagnets had another important purpose. Recall that a sounder was used at the receiving end of telegraphs to listen to the dots and dashes of Morse code. But how did a sounder actually work? It was an electromagnet that worked just like a relay, except that instead of controlling another circuit, the latch going up and down made respective and distinct “click” and “clack” sounds, allowing operators to identify difference cadences of clicks and clacks with the Morse code alphabet, which they could in turn decode into English.


Chapter 3

A Layered Symbolic System

The telegraph was in one important way a *direct* precursor to the Internet. Unlike the analog telephone and broadcast radio and television technologies that succeeded it, the telegraph was a *digital* communication system unexpectedly ahead of its time. To understand why, we must look a bit more abstractly at symbols and information.

3.1 Alphabets and Symbols

Consider the letter ‘a’, the first letter of the Latin alphabet. What makes this mark meaningful? If we did not know English or any other languages based on this alphabet, then *a* would just appear to be a mysterious mark with no

meaning, such as .

Thus for the letter *a* to carry information for the onlooker, it has to exist within the context of what we can call an *alphabet*. Let us call ‘a’ a *symbol* or *character*. Note that ‘a’ has abstract meaning: we could write it in a different font like this: a. But even though the marks look different when represented in different fonts, the mark has enough similarity that we recognize both marks to refer to the same abstract character ‘a.’ Of course the Latin alphabet is not the only meaningful alphabet. The Chinese character 章 may look meaningless to a non-Chinese reader, but it certainly has meaning within the context of the Chinese alphabet.

What about a number like 2? You might think that this is not part of an alphabet, since it is a number and not a letter. However, for our purposes, we are intentionally going to use the word *alphabet* very broadly, as logicians do, and by this broad definition, the symbols 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 do indeed form an alphabet which we usually call Arabic numerals. Just think of an alphabet as any fixed set of symbols that are distinguished from one another by some known rules or conventions.

Finally, to introduce one final bit of jargon, we will refer to a series of

characters of an alphabet as a *string*. So, for example ‘119914’ is a string in the alphabet of Arabic numerals, and ‘sdlkfsid asdfasdf’ is a string in the alphabet of English.

There are some interesting edge cases. For example, consider the following set of marks:

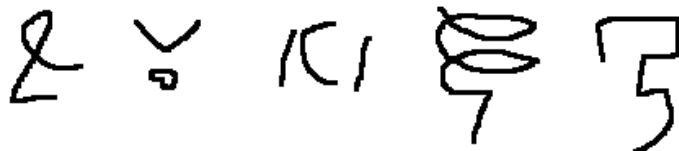


Figure 3.1: Set of marks

Do these form symbols in an alphabet? The marks have no meaning in themselves, but I just wrote them down and said that they ought to be together. Is that enough to constitute an alphabet? Does there have to be some sort of shared knowledge of more than one person for the marks in a defined alphabet to become meaningful symbols? Or can one create a bare ones alphabet by fiat, as I just did above?

Another edge case occurs when we consider infinite alphabets, like:



Figure 3.2: Infinite alphabet

Does this count as an alphabet? Do symbols have to be specified explicitly at the outset when defining an alphabet, or is it enough to describe how one *could* draw the symbols, for example by giving a schema for the user of the alphabet to fill in?

With a little bit of math, one can create a formal definition of alphabet and in doing so characterize these unusual examples. Fortunately for our current purposes, the important thing is not the edge cases or formal definition, but rather just a basic understanding of an alphabet as a backdrop against which sets of symbols have meaning.

That’s enough to come to our first major insight about symbols and alphabets: all symbolic representations are interchangeable.

What does this mean? If you fix a translation system, you can take any string of symbols from one alphabet and translate using the agreed upon translation system to any other string of symbols in another alphabet.

As an example, consider the sentence:

All symbolic representations of information are fungible!

For starters, we could translate this to the Chinese alphabet, giving us a new representation of the sentence:

所有的信息符表示是可替代的！

I mentioned above that one had to agree on a translation system. Which one was employed for this translation? We might call it a *semantic* translation system in that the underlying meaning of the sentence was recreated via a new sentence in Chinese. This is actually a tremendously difficult, imperfect and complicated translation system, as evidenced by the fact that non-human translations still lag far behind human translators as of 2015. Fortunately, we can also come up with much simpler translation systems.

To see this, let's translate the above sentence into Arabic numerals. *Guh? How can you translate a sentence into numbers!?* The important thing to remember is that we get to decide on the translation system. In this case, we can pick something arbitrarily, just like we did earlier during our game of catch with Mary. Let's just translate each letter to its position in the alphabet:

1 12 12 19 25 13 2 15 12 9 3 18 5 16 18 5 19 5 14 20 1 20 9 15
14 19 15 6 9 14 6 15 18 13 1 20 9 15 14 1 18 5 6 21 14 7 9 2 12 5 !

This *almost* counts as a translation into the 10-symbol Arabic alphabet that we specified above. But there is a subtle issue that we need to deal with: we still have the whitespace character ' ' and the '!' character, neither of which occur in the Arabic alphabet. You might counter that neither of these are considered part of the 26-character Latin alphabet that underlies English. But remember that we are using the word alphabet in a particular sense, and in this more formal sense, any alphabet that underlies ordinary written English must have symbols corresponding to whitespace and exclamation points, since these are part of the language. Put another way, if we formalize the written English language as a system for communication, it will necessarily include extra conventions beyond the Latin letters one learns in elementary school to separate words and sentences, etc. This means that whitespace is part of the language too and by far the easiest way to capture the rules around whitespace is to describe the language with reference to a whitespace character.

Therefore, to make our mapping to the alphabet of Arabic numerals a proper translation, we need a way to separate the words without using the space or exclamation point characters, neither of which we are available to us in our new alphabet. This isn't as trivial as simply removing the characters, since we need to away to disambiguate strings like '15' which could correspond either to 'af' or 'p'.

We also need this character separator to be some sort of number, in other words a string of one or more digits from 0 to 9. We didn't use the symbol

'0' for any English letter, and it is available to us, so how about that? That almost works, except that there are still some ambiguous strings. For example, '2002' could translate into 'b b' or 't b'. We're getting closer, though. The problem with our current iteration is that each English letter could correspond to a variable number of digits. What if instead we enforce that every letter is exactly two digits long, so the letter 'a' is actually '01'? Now we can make '00' a space, and '27' an exclamation point. Moreover, we can also encode upper case letters and other common symbols as a sequence of two digits. Here is the whole table of our new translation system:

00	[space]	12	l	24	x
01	a	13	m	25	y
02	b	14	n	26	z
03	c	15	o	27	!
04	d	16	p	28	?
05	e	17	q	29	.
06	f	18	r	30	'
07	g	19	s	31	,
08	h	20	t	32	-
09	i	21	u	33	/
10	j	22	v		
11	k	23	w		

Now we can successfully write the above sentence as a rather long number:

011212001925130215120903001805161805190514200120091514190
01506000914061518130120915140001180500062114070902120527

With this, we have translated our sentence from the English alphabet into the alphabet of Arabic numerals. The giant number represented by the Arabic numerals has no inherent meaning, except when coupled with the translation system that we imposed earlier.

Let's compare this *dumb translation* to the earlier *semantic translation* into Chinese.

Given the semantic translation, a reader who did not understand English could understand the new Chinese sentence; given the dumb translation, on the other hand, there is no hope for this Chinese-speaker. The translated sentence still requires knowledge of English to be understood, and so in this sense the dumb translation is semantically vacuous.

Moreover, though it is vacuous, the dumb translation is also in some sense a perfect translation. Natural languages like English and Chinese are complex and messy tools for communication, and there is no way that the Chinese sentence created via the semantic translation perfectly captures the connotations wrapped up with the original English sentence. In that sense, information was lost translating to Chinese via the semantic translation. The dumb translation, on the other hand, merely involved manipulating symbols without any attempt at understand their meaning. Since it faithfully represented each and

every symbol of the original English sentence perfectly, no loss of information occurred.

There is another word for performing a dumb translation like we did above: *encoding*. The amazing thing about symbols is that they can be encoded without any loss of information, and you can encode any string of symbols into any other alphabet. The opposite of encoding is *decoding* and refers to the process of backing out the original meaning from an encoded string.

Let's once again translate our original sentence into Chinese but this time with encoding rather than semantic translation. The Chinese alphabet has many more characters than the Latin alphabet, so we can pick 26 of these at random and create a translation table:

吧	a	爸	l	八	w
京	b	姐	m	叫	x
很	c	见	n	家	y
会	d	好	o	海	z
百	e	贵	p		
过	f	港	q		
国	g	儿	r		
多	h	东	s		
关	i	个	t		
方	j	哥	u		
都	k	对	v		

Luckily the Chinese alphabet also includes whitespace characters, so we do not need to do any extra work for this. Using this encoding, we get the following sentence, written with Chinese characters:

吧爸爸 东家姐京好爸关很 儿百贵儿百东百见个吧个关好见东
好过 关见过好儿姐吧个关好见 吧儿百 过哥见国关京爸百!

This will look like gibberish to a Chinese reader. Nevertheless, it is a faithful encoding of our English sentence, and armed with the encoding table above and knowledge of the English language, one can understand what it means.

Before moving on, let's ask one last question about encoding. As we've seen, you can encode any string of symbols into any other string in a different alphabet. Does this imply that there might be some *best* way to encode information? The answer is that it depends on what you are trying to optimize. If you want to pack in as much information as possible into a small number of symbols (for example, if you are restricted to a single page of text), you might want to use a gigantic alphabet. For example, the Chinese alphabet has several thousand characters and would probably make a good choice.

It turns out, however, that the opposite optimization is actually much more important in practice. What is the *minimum* bare bones alphabet that contains the smallest number of characters that we can use to encode information from other alphabets?

You might be tempted to say that you could create an alphabet of just a single character – let’s arbitrarily say ‘1’ is the single character in this alphabet. Then you could distinguish strings by, say, line breaks:

```
11111111
vs
1111
1111
```

Remember, though, that line breaks are themselves a character. So if you truly restrict yourself to a single character, there is no way to convey any information within a string other than the length of the string, which is too impoverished to allow for encoding. If you are unconvinced, try to encode the strings ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ in an alphabet of just a single character. If you think you have a translation system that works, continue adding words to it that your system did not anticipate having to be able to translate.

Though a one-character alphabet is not powerful enough to serve as a fully flexible translation system, what about a two-character alphabet? Let’s call this alphabet *binary* and name its characters ‘0’ and ‘1’. With binary, we can faithfully encode information from any other alphabet with no loss of information. To illustrate this, have a look at the American Standard Code for International Interchange (ASCII), a standard that we will meet later on that provides a way to encode Latin letters into binary (among other things):



0	0011 0000	O	0100 1111	m	0110 1101
1	0011 0001	P	0101 0000	n	0110 1110
2	0011 0010	Q	0101 0001	o	0110 1111
3	0011 0011	R	0101 0010	p	0111 0000
4	0011 0100	S	0101 0011	q	0111 0001
5	0011 0101	T	0101 0100	r	0111 0010
6	0011 0110	U	0101 0101	s	0111 0011
7	0011 0111	V	0101 0110	t	0111 0100
8	0011 1000	W	0101 0111	u	0111 0101
9	0011 1001	X	0101 1000	v	0111 0110
A	0100 0001	Y	0101 1001	w	0111 0111
B	0100 0010	Z	0101 1010	x	0111 1000
C	0100 0011	a	0110 0001	y	0111 1001
D	0100 0100	b	0110 0010	z	0111 1010
E	0100 0101	c	0110 0011	.	0010 1110
F	0100 0110	d	0110 0100	,	0010 0111
G	0100 0111	e	0110 0101	:	0011 1010
H	0100 1000	f	0110 0110	;	0011 1011
I	0100 1001	g	0110 0111	?	0011 1111
J	0100 1010	h	0110 1000	!	0010 0001
K	0100 1011	i	0110 1001	'	0010 1100
L	0100 1100	j	0110 1010	"	0010 0010
M	0100 1101	k	0110 1011	{	0010 1000
N	0100 1110	l	0110 1100	}	0010 1001
			space	0010 0000	

Figure 3.3: ASCII

Given its simplicity and importance for computing, binary has become a sort of universal standard for understanding and communicating information.

3.2 A Neatly Layered and Standardized System

Although the idea of encoding information into a binary alphabet is incredibly well understood nowadays, this way of thinking about information and encoding and decoding was not around when Morse code was developed. Yet remember that Morse code had its own pared down four-character alphabet:

	dot
	dash
[short pause]	letter space
[long pause]	word space

This alphabet served as an intermediary. It could be translated to and from electrical signals. It could also be translated to and from English. Morse's telegraph involved taking messy continuous information contained in an electrical current, and translating it into this discrete alphabet. This continuous information is sometimes called *analog* and the process of turning into symbols is called *digitizing* an analog symbol. As such, the telegraph can be said to be a *digital* technology. That may seem strange; there are no digits involved so why would we call it 'digital'? A better word to describe the nature of the technology might be *symbolic*; as we've seen, though, any symbolic alphabet can be encoded as digits of a numeric alphabet, and so the word *digital* is often used nowadays to refer to technologies that operate on discrete sets of symbols, as the telegraph did.

As a digital or symbolic technology, the telegraph had to wrestle with many of the same questions that the Internet still wrestles with: how is digital information to be encoded and decoded? How will the process be standardized? Who will control the standardization process?

To begin to think about how to address these tough questions of how all the parts of the system would work together, the telegraph in contemporary parlance can be conceived of as a *layered communication system*.

It's easiest to understand this through an example. Suppose you are sending a message to your friend Bill via telegram. Let's call the message 'M'. We could also describe the communication as a series of letters being sent via telegraph. But we could also describe it at a lower *layer* as a series of dots and dashes being transmitted back and forth. We can go to an even lower layer and find yet another description: electrical currents are turning on and off in rapid succession.

Let's zoom in on this example communication. A particular electrical current turning off might represent a dot, which might be part of the letter 'g' in your message. We could write this pausing of electrical current a few different ways:

An electrical current is turned off and then on. A dot is being sent. A 'g' is being sent. The message 'M' is being sent.

All of these descriptions are correct, but they are describing what is happening at different layers of the communication system. In the case of the telegraph, we can represent our layered system like this:

[DIAGRAM : A. The physical layer of the electrical signal sent over the wire.

B. The translation of "signal on" and "signal off" into a very simple alphabet of dots, dashes, and spaces.

C. A translation of the simple alphabet of dots and dashes into the 26-letter alphabet (or more if we include extra characters such as spaces and special characters '?') of the English language.

D. A set of standards and abbreviations that telegraph operators used to communicate. For example, there is a standard shortcut for asking someone to retransmit a message [WRITE MORE ABOUT ITU?]]

Thinking about communication technology as a layered system in this way allows us to break down the system into component parts, and has the huge

advantage that layers of the system can now be changed without changing everything all at once. For example, suppose there was an improvement to Morse code that was proven to be a more efficient translation of dots and dashes into the Latin alphabet. Then layer C above could be changed, but nothing else would have to change; you wouldn't need to invent new electrical gizmos to transmit or receive messages. Conversely, suppose the technology for the physical layer vastly improved and electricity were replaced with a more advanced technology like optical fibers, as would happen a hundred years later. In this case, we could still use Morse code if we wanted, and so layers B-D would be unperturbed by changes in layer A. This makes the whole technology more manageable, since some engineers can go off and work on improving layer A and others can work on improving layer B and they do not both need to holistically invent a whole new communication system.

The Internet is also built upon a layered system of communication, which we'll learn about later on.

3.2.1 Metadata

We've discussed layers A, B, and C in some detail already, but it's worth pausing to think about what layer D above might look like.

To emphasize the importance of layer D, suppose you are a telegraph operator sitting in a local telegraph station in Idaho in the 1880s, and you are handed a telegram to transmit. It is identified as being from "John Smith" and going to a "Mary Fitzpatrick" along with a London address for the recipient. What steps do you have to take to deliver your telegram?

First, you have to decide how you are going to route your communication. Let's suppose there is a telegraph line from your local station to a central hub in New York City, which you know has a line directly to London.

So you hop on the line going to New York, and it is time to transmit the message. But wait – you have to convey information *about* the message as well as the message itself, such as the name and address of the recipient. This information about the message is known as metadata (in this parlance, the message is the "data").

How does this metadata about your message get communicated to the telegraph operator on the other end? If you start tapping away at your telegraph key, do you start with the message itself? Or the metadata? Which piece of metadata? The location, maybe? The name of the recipient? That of the sender? Or perhaps some other boilerplate indicating "I have a new transmission for you"?

If you had all day to fumble through communicating this one telegram, you might be able to figure all of this out as you went, but if one is transmitting hundreds of telegrams per day, some sort of system is clearly needed, hence the necessity of layer D in our diagram above.

3.2.2 Protocols

The idea of developing a strategy for communicating has a technical term in telecommunications – it is called a *protocol*. A protocol is a formal, agreed-upon system for communicating. In this case, the telegraph community uses a protocol for message transmission to avoid any ambiguity about the what information is metadata (e.g. the name of the sender) vs data (i.e. the contents of the message). The protocol dictates what to do in other important situations too. How do I tell the other telegraph operator that I missed the last word and need it to be re-transmitted? How do I acknowledge receipt of the message?

You can think of the rules of driving cars on public streets as a protocol. We drive on the right side of the road in the United States. It doesn't particularly matter that we chose the right instead of the left, and other countries have chosen differently. What matters is that we make one choice or the other and stick to it, else each time two cars approached each other on the road, they would have to improvise an ad hoc solution.

Protocols exist to enforce this consistency and establish an agreed upon standard for the interaction of two or more agents, such as telegraph operators or vehicles on the road.

As we will see when we explore the rise of the Internet later in the book, establishing some open, universal standard protocol is quite often much more advantageous to a situation in which there are competing fiefdoms each using their own protocol. For instance, if there were different protocols for layer D above (as there were early in the days of commercial telegraphy), then telegraph operators would have to memorize different protocols and keep track of which cities and companies used which protocols. It wouldn't make their work impossible, but you might expect it to slow them down.

Yet while a single, universal standard is certainly helpful to having a smooth and simple ecosystem, it is also important to note that there is often quite a lot of debate when designing and standardizing protocols. Good protocols are simple and efficient, but there are often trade offs and no clear “best” protocol in any given situation. Different stakeholders may have different requirements and different preferences in how a protocol is designed. Moreover, once a protocol is standardized, it can become quite entrenched, and so many people and entities have to live with it a while, increasing the importance of getting it as agreeable as possible the first time. This dynamic leads to very slow-moving standardization processes that continue to this day.

We will revisit these ideas of layered systems, protocols, and metadata extensively later when we learn about the Internet and the systems of communication of which it is comprised. That global system is much more complex, but fortunately, the telegraph as a digital technology in its own right provides us with a gentle introduction.

3.3 PAROMELLA and CNEBZRYYN

Unlike Chappe's optical telegraph, which was strictly intended for military use, electrical telegraphy thrived because it was embraced by the private sector. Companies saw the value of investing in telegraph infrastructure and then charging for communications sent over their networks.

At first there was an explosion of competition. By 1851, a mere 7 years after Morse's first successful long distance demonstration, there were already 75 companies operating in the United States that had laid over 21,000 miles of telegraph cable [CITE: <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/history-of-the-u-s-telegraph-industry/>]. However, telecommunications benefit tremendously from economies of scale. (Why build two separate lines in competition between Des Moines and Chicago when one will suffice?) Competition leads to wasteful duplication of effort in laying cables, building telegraph offices, and so forth. Thus, economic pressure over the next 15 years pushed the industry towards consolidation, and by 1866 Western Union emerged as the dominant national telegraph monopoly.

The cost of sending a domestic telegram varied quite a bit, but during the first twenty or thirty years of widespread telegraphy, it was cost-prohibitive as a regular means of communication to all except businesses and wealthy individuals. For example, in 1860, the cost of a ten word telegram from New York to New Orleans cost 2.70, *or about* 70 in 2014 dollars. Using the Transatlantic lines was much more expensive, costing about 100 *at the time for a telegram to England, or* 2600 in 2014 dollars. [CITE: <http://www.gizmag.com/last-telegraph-message/28314/>]

Given the high cost of sending telegrams and the fact that companies like Western Union charged by the word, people learned to be creatively brief with their messages. At first this was ad hoc, but by the mid 1800s, code books were developed and published that aimed to encode common phrases into single words, saving money for the users of the telegraph network. This also made the network itself more efficient at moving information around. Indeed, when code words were used, the dots and dashes had a higher information density than they would typing out the full English phrase, a notion that we will make precise in coming chapters.

To get a sense of the code books, here are a few of the many thousands of code words and their associated phrases from ABC Telegraphic Code (5th edition) [CITE WIKI?]:

PAROMELLA : in leaving the dock (harbour) struck the pier, damaging the stern

ARIMASPEN : Phaeton with 6 B.H.P. two cylinder motor to seat

four passengers speed — miles per hour

HAUBARER : Charterers will allow the option of carrying horses for ship's benefit

Notice that this is also a type of encoding just as we saw earlier, this time from the alphabet of a limited set of phrases into an alphabet of special words intended for use in telegraphy.

3.3.1 Encryption

These telegraph code books helped people communicate more efficiently, saving them money, but sometimes it was not cost savings but rather the privacy of the message that was the paramount concern. Since these telegraphy code books were for the most part not secret, anyone could decode a message written using this telegraphy code simply by consulting the relevant publicly available code book.

Protecting the secrecy of your message, on the other hand, meant *encrypting* it. Encryption is a general term that refers to the process of scrambling a message with the goal of making it unreadable to anyone except the intended recipient. Encryption has been around for thousands of years, and so it was natural to apply existing techniques to telegraphy.

How did it actually work? Let's suppose you had to send a message overseas and you wanted it to be secret. One method might be to replace each letter in the alphabet with another equivalent: so 'A' becomes 'T', 'B' becomes 'H' and so on. According to a scheme like this, the sentence:

'BATSCANNOTSEE'

Might become

'HTQYVTBBJQYRR'

Let's pause to introduce a bit of jargon. In the case above, the original message written in English is called the *plaintext*. The scheme for moving from the plaintext to its encrypted form is called a *cipher*, and the encrypted text is called the *ciphertext*. Going from the plaintext to the ciphertext is *encryption* and going from the ciphertext back to the plaintext is called *decryption*.

For this example, you encrypt and decrypt using the mapping that we created:

'A' – > 'T'
 'B' – > 'H'
 'C' – > 'V'
 etc

This short mapping is called the *encryption key*. And notice that it also works as the decryption key (well technically you have to read the arrows backwards to view it as a decryption key), and so in the context of ciphers can just be called the *key*. It ought to work somewhat like a physical key: if you possess the key, then you can read the plaintext, otherwise you are out of luck.

Since the same key is used for both encryption and decryption, we say that this scheme is *symmetric*, and the particular cipher we have described is known as a simple substitution cipher.

This is a good first pass, but as you might imagine, simple substitution ciphers tend to be a rather weak form of encryption. Let's now switch gears and put ourselves in the mindset of an attacker. How could we break this encryption? To add one more definition, if one is attempting to break the encryption of a message without having the key, that is known as *cryptanalysis*. Such a person is commonly referred to as an *attacker* not because they are necessarily a bad person, but just because they happen to be attacking our encryption system.

As an attacker, your first instinct might be to try every possible key until you get a message that is an English sentence. This is known as a *brute force attack*.

How many keys would you have to try? To compute this, notice that the letter 'A' must be mapped to one of 26 letters (allowing the mapping 'A' → 'A'). So there are 26 possibilities for 'A'. Once we have fixed 'A', how many possibilities are there for 'B'. Well, 'A' and 'B' cannot both map to the same letter (in other words 'A'-'j' 'D', 'B'-'j' 'D' is not a valid key). This means that once 'A' is fixed, there is one less option for 'B', giving a total of 25 possibilities for 'B'. Having fixed both 'A' and 'B' there are 24 possibilities for C. If we continue in this way, we can see that the total number of keys is

$$26 * 25 * 24 * 23 * \dots * 2 * 1$$

There is a mathematical abbreviation for this term: 26! (the exclamation point is an operator called *factorial*).

This turns out to be a surprisingly large number:

$$403291461126605635584000000$$

It's worth noting that we may not need to check every single key. After all, we might get lucky and find the correct key early on. How lucky would we have to get? We can express this in terms of probability. Assuming the key was chosen randomly, so that all keys are equally likely, each key has a

$$1/403291461126605635584000000$$

chance of being the correct one. This means that it is astronomically unlikely that we will get the correct key after just one or two tries. And even a million attempts gives us a probability of

$$1000000/403291461126605635584000000$$

that we will find the right key. This is way too small for us to bank on. If we wanted to get to a 50

$$403291461126605635584000000/2$$

possibilities. Using more standard exponential notation for large numbers, we can say that this is about $2 * 10^{26}$. That is a large number, but well within reach for an average computer nowadays. Unfortunately if you were trying to

decrypt ciphertext in the 1860s without the key, you didn't have computers at your disposal to help perform some enormous amount of operations. So given that a brute force attack seems infeasible without a lot of computational assistance, how else might we try to decrypt a message encrypted with a simple substitution cipher? The main technique to employ is called *frequency analysis* which is based on the observation that English letters are not randomly distributed in words. 'e' occurs more frequently than 'q' or 'z'. It also helps that you know the length of each word since the simple substitution cipher does not change word lengths. In the example above, the ciphertext of the last word is 'YRR'. There are only 43 three-letter words in the dictionary that have this form, giving us a ton of information and significantly cutting down on the number of possibilities we have to check compared to our brute force approach. Armed with techniques like frequency analysis, after studying a ciphertext for some length of time, one can usually start to slowly recover messages piece by piece like a Sudoku puzzle.

Of course, people designing encryption systems were creative too, and came up with schemes far more complex than simple substitution ciphers. Perhaps the most famous encrypted telegram was the so-called Zimmermann Note which was sent by the German Foreign Office in 1917 to the German Ambassador to Mexico instructing the latter to propose a military alliance between Germany and Mexico should the United States enter World War I.

Here is the ciphertext of this infamous telegram as it appears on the telegram:

WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

Read the following telegram, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

GERMAN LEGATION
MEXICO CITY

via Galveston

JAN 8 1917

130	13042	13401	8501	115	3528	416	17214	8491	11310
18147	18222	21560	10247	11518	23677	13605	3494	14936	
98092	5905	11311	10392	10371	0302	21290	5161	39095	
23571	17504	11269	18276	18101	0317	0228	17694	4473	
23284	22200	19452	21589	67893	5589	13918	8958	12137	
1333	4725	4458	5905	17166	13851	4458	17149	14471	6706
13850	12224	0929	14991	7382	15857	67893	14218	36477	
8870	17553	67893	5870	5454	16102	15217	22801	17138	
21001	17388	7440	23638	18222	6719	14331	15021	23845	
3160	23552	22096	21604	4797	9497	22461	20855	4377	
23010	18140	22260	5905	13347	20420	39689	13732	20867	
0929	5275	18507	52262	1340	22049	13339	11265	22295	
10439	14814	4178	6992	8784	7632	7357	0926	52262	11267
21100	21272	9346	9559	22464	15874	18502	18500	15857	
2188	5376	7381	98092	16127	13486	9350	9220	76036	14219
5144	2831	17920	11347	17142	11264	7667	7762	15099	9110
10482	97556	3509	3070						

BEHNSTORFF.

Charge German Embassy.

Figure 3.4: Zimmermann Note

This message is encrypted with a cipher named “cipher 0075”, which is of course much more complicated than a simple substitution cipher. Yet the British had a crack team of codebreakers throughout both World Wars known as Room 40 and were able to apply more advanced versions of the techniques we saw above in order to break the cipher. When the Germans’ clandestine proposal was revealed, Americans were outraged; this is viewed as one of the major tipping points that pulled the United States into World War I.