

Telegraph to Text-Messaging: Comparing Mediated Communication Forms over Time

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Abstract

This essay considers the development of two chronologically separated technologies, in terms of the features which bind them. The mediation and ultimately the use of both texting and telegraphy when it comes to social-developments is presented through this work. An analysis of both technologies in terms of Freidrich Kitler's concept of time-axis-manipulation allows for a close connection to be made between the two. Building off of their similarities, this work seeks to present what could be understood by studying these two technologies comparatively with one another. Whereby, studying the past development of the telegraph can have very real implications on how the social aspects of texting are currently understood. These social aspects are then questioned by concepts such as co-presence and the reformation texting has had on language. Ultimately, this work seeks to present not just the similarities of both technologies but the value that comparing them can produce.

Communication in our society influences all facets of life, and presently our understanding of it is tied up in the technology which facilitates it. Therefore, much can be gleaned from connecting modern technologies with those from the past. In this essay, I aim to argue how the social circumstances telegraph and text messaging communication produce inextricably links them. As technology is not used in a vacuum, it is the social situations it causes that garner change. No matter their distinctions, the connection between telegraph and text messaging can help to ground modern social concepts with those from our past. In connecting both, we can shape the network of technical advancements based upon the impacts they have on society. More specifically, this essay will introduce Friedrich Kittler's concept of time axis manipulation concerning both the telegraph and

text messaging.

Samuel Morse sent the first telegraph between Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland in 1844. The telegraph's rise in popularity came at a time when American's systems of transportation were being drastically reformed. Railroads systems were starting to connect East to West and in this connection ideas and information were spread. At the meeting of these population centers was a whole new system of exchange. The telegraph added to the immeasurable change for communication systems at this time. Instead of relying on footpaths or horse-drawn carriages for communication, messages could be sent in a matter of seconds.

James Carey highlights the broad implications of the telegraph in Chapter 8 of his book *Communication as Culture*. Denoting several critical effects of the telegraph, Carey presents the first factor being "the effective separation of communication from transport" (203) the telegraph caused. No longer was communication bound by the speed it took to reach its destination, thus it began to take on a new shape. The telegraph system itself reflected quicker and more direct lines of contact. Another crucial feature of the telegraph was the inclusion of operators that were needed to transmit messages. Effectively, the telegraph separated the sender and receiver geographically and through the transmission process. New social circumstances were being instated to adjust for these drastic changes.

Aside from separating communication and transportation, the telegraph altered the content of messages being transmitted. Carey examines this idea through his look at the writing of telegraphs, "not only did writing for the telegraph have to be condensed to save money-telegraphic, in other words-but also from the marginal notes and anecdotes of the stringer the story had to be reconstituted at the end of the telegraphic line" (211). These changes reflect not only the functions of the telegraphic but also its form.

The increasing spread of social networks and increased access to communication played a heavy hand in the telegraph's development. Carey provides a perfect example of these changes, "the wire services demanded a form of language stripped of the local, the regional; and colloquial. Language had to be flattened out and standardized" (210). This breaking up of language through technology is mirrored in the process of texting, as it can disconnect a user and their immediate environment.

Text messaging finds its roots in the online communication of instant messaging. It was not until later that text messaging became mainstream through cell phones. Christina Haas et. al present a study of college-age student's instant messaging (IM) communication practices, where traditional norms around such communication were dissected. Through their article "Young People's Everyday Literacies" Haas et. al make the case that most of the trends incorporated by students using IM had added information to their writing. This is a far cry from the public's understanding of what IM was.

Combing through over 32,000 pieces of data it was distinguished that "67% of IM features elaborate on writing while 33% abbreviate it" (389). In turn,

they found that many of these features relate to the “oral features of language use into written conversation” (389). Relating to the telegraph’s disruption of language, the reverse can be observed within texting. The means of communication are again proving to influence how conversation takes place. Instead of flattening language as Carey argues the telegraph did, texting introduced paralinguistic features. The content created because of this study began to open the conversation for linguists and those looking to study how these new forms of text-based communication function.

Another key difference between telegraph and text messaging is the concept of co-presence. Co-presence for the scope of this work denotes; the physical presence of two or more people for instance, a group of friends waiting in the library elevator would all be co-present. They are all present in a singular physical location within the same point in time. Introducing another layer to this relationship is virtual co-presence. Such a concept, Richard Ling presents in Chapter 7 of his book, *New tech, new ties: How mobile Communication is Reshaping Social Cohesion*.

Ling’s work comes several years after Haas et. al’s study. Here, he argues that texting has shaped how we are co-present with one another. Ling looks to explore how mediated communication such as text messaging influences our ritual interactions. Ultimately, he identifies that text messaging can override co-presence if “the mutual engagement and the common mood is invested more in the mediated interaction than in the co-present one” (101). Not only have smartphones and text-messages shaped how we write, but they have also forced us to reconfigure social situations.

Take the above-mentioned example of the friends are all together in the elevator, they are still all co-present. What happens when one of them receives a text? Say it comes from a family member and without hesitation, they immediately respond. The conversation in the elevator continues, but now one of the friends is splitting their attention. Now they are sharing that same co-presence but shifting it to the realm of virtual presence, now they are removed from their physical surroundings. Examples such as this have become so entrenched in daily life that they are second nature. Between the paralinguistic features of texting and the virtual-co presence it has introduced; it is clear texting has brought about broad social and linguistic implications.

At the crux of these two technologies is Fredrich Kittler’s “time-axis manipulation” (34), which is referenced in a collection of his essays, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Kittler’s specific mention of time-axis manipulation (TAM), here is about the recording capabilities of records used on a gramophone. Gramophones moved verbal communication unto a form that could be recorded, played back and no longer needed to be fully remembered. Kittler presents TAM not just when looking at gramophones, but with all communication technologies. TAM constitutes a transfer of information through space and the ensuing disruption of time which comes with it. The major similarity between telegraph and text messaging is how our sense of time can be warped by these two technologies.

TAM is introduced through the far-reaching capabilities of the telegraph, as Carey highlights through the change from a “spatial frontier” (227) to a time-based one. This change from space to time didn’t happen in an instant, it came from the introduction of time zones (227). A universal time was established, whereby major communication channels could be instated. Communication between business associates in New York and California required these time zones, as they communicate by traversing the space between them. The telegraph, as well as the railroad were chief actors in generating the need for this new system. Suddenly days were broken up into units of time which could be measured to the exact second and thus time became something to be filled and organized. If the telegraph reinforced this rigid synchronization of the world through time zones, then texting makes TAM even more prevalent through virtual presence and the spreading of our social circles.

At its core texting is not so distant from the telegraph, each grant connection between those who are geographically separated. However, the telegraph functioned primarily for information’s sake, flattening language to prevent confusion when communicating. The telegraph required users to go to a telegraph office, they did not have the ability to respond immediately. Texting takes the wholly informational attributes of the telegraph and mixes them with more social features because it requires use of a personal mobile device that people own and keep in their pockets.

Similarly, to the telegraph, texting’s form can influence not only users it can also reflect the values and assumptions of those who use it. Texting requires no immediate response; this often generates sporadic communication. Responding to a message can involve a period of waiting for a response, on this level TAM is again invoked. Spatial distance is circumvented to communicate, but within this messaging a new sense of time is formulated. Jason Farman questions what texting has done to the concept of waiting in Chapter 2 of his book, *Delayed Response: The Art of Waiting from the Ancient to the Instant World*. Forms of texting and instant communication have given us “expectations around how that time gets used in the ways we coordinate and keep in touch” (37) as two people from different sides of the world share the same clock. Returning to our friend in the elevator, they are hitting send on their response to the message they received. It came from their cousin, who lives in Germany, where she is an exchange student. Now another level of communication must be traversed, one of both distance and fragmented times.

For scholars Kate Maddalena and Jeremy Packer, a large part of TAM comes from the physicality of the technology in question. In their article “The Digital Body: Telegraph as Discourse Network” the two study this concept, stating that “Time-axis manipulation is not imagined as a media storage container, but a repeated bodily process” (99). For both the telegraph and text message Maddalena and Packer’s point rings true, the repetition of a process is what situates it in our minds. The rules surrounding a technology can develop through this repetition, especially the social ones. As presented in the above examples, the

telegraph reinforced new perceptions of time through time zones and the communication they were supposed to connect, whereas texting slowly developed and shifted our ritual interactions through our daily circumstances with it.

Co-presence and its virtual counterpart are an extension of these repeated bodily processes. The repetition of texting serves to further establish the splitting of co-presence and virtual presence as well as reinforcing the social rules behind them. Even though Maddalena and Packer focused their study on the communication systems of wartime signaling and telegraph communications their points remain equally as valid when extended to texting. Instead of distributing orders or affirming war plans, texting is used for the multifaceted purpose of social communication. First established through its past of IM and computer messaging, texting built off these former processes. Since its integration it has changed how we communicate, introduced paralinguistic features and split co-presence to the virtual sphere. Comparatively, the telegraph flattened out localized forms of communication and instituted a commonly understood body of language, and connected communicators via standardized time zones.

What the telegraph serves to introduce is a similar case as text messaging. It can be looked at as a comparative technology, which can tease out the nuances of text messaging and its social factors. As was stated previously, the ritual interactions of text messaging can make it difficult to study. Much of these changes are latent, and telegraph can serve as a baseline to follow when studying such new technologies. I present this essay as underlining the interconnection between two drastically different technologies. Technology has led to developments in social communication, but it has also become ridiculously easy to overlook the technologies of our past. With minds oriented on the future, it is hard to turn around and consider the lessons to be learned in our past.

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