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

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

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

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

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

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


The Victorian Internet contains the following sections:

Preface
Chapter 1: The Mother of All Networks
Chapter 2: Strange, Fierce Fire
Chapter 3: Electric Skeptics
Chapter 4: The Thrill Electric
Chapter 5: Wiring the World
Chapter 6: Steam-Powered Messages
Chapter 7: Codes, Hackers and Cheats
Chapter 8: Love over the Wires
Chapter 9: War and Peace in the Global Village
Chapter 10: Information Overload
Chapter 11: Decline and Fall
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American and International Morse code lists

Excerpts from The Victorian Internet:

Chapter 1: The Mother of All Networks

Page 9
Chappe wanted to call his invention the tachygraphe -- from the Greek for "fast writer" -- to signify the unprecedented speed with which it transmitted information. However, he was talked out of it by his friend Miot de Métilto, a government official and classical scholar, who suggested the name télégraphe, or "far writer" instead.

Page 18
In fact, as far as most people were concerned, so little progress appeared to have been made toward the goal of a practical electric telegraph compared to the highly successful optical design that anyone who expressed an interest in electric telegraphy was regarded as something of an eccentric. As one satirical verse of 1813 put it...
Morse was forty-one when he caught the telegraph bug following a chance meeting on board a ship in the mid-Atlantic. In 1832, he was returning to the United States from Europe, where he had spent three years in Italy, Switzerland and France improving his painting skills and working on a rather harebrained scheme to bring the treasures of the Louvre in Paris to an American audience. On a six-by-nine-foot canvas, he was painting miniature copies of thirty-eight of the Louvre's finest paintings...

Chapter 3: Electric Skeptics
Page 45-46
In December 1842, [Morse] journeyed alone to Congress in a final bid for funding. He strung wires between two committee rooms in the Capital and sent messages back and forth... two days later the bill was passed by a vote of eighty-nine to eighty-three -- a narrow margin which reflected the widespread unease that the electric telegraph might still turn out to be nothing more than elaborate conjuring trick. But seventy congressmen chose not to vote at all, "to avoid the responsibility of spending the public money for a machine they could not understand."

Chapter 5: Wiring the World
Page 83
Indeed, the construction of a global telegraph network was widely expected, by Briggs and Maverick among others, to result in world peace: "it is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for the exchange of thought between all the nations of the Earth."

Chapter 7: Codes, Hackers and Cheats
Page 111
The confusion of different rules increased as more countries signed bilateral connection treaties. Finally, 1864, the French government decided it was time to sort out the regulatory mess. The major countries of Europe were invited to a conference in Paris to agree on a set of rules for international telegraphy. Twenty states sent delegates, and in 1865 the International Telegraph Union was born. The rules banning the use of codes by anyone other than governments were scrapped; at last, people could legally send telegrams in code. Not surprisingly, they started doing so almost immediately.

Chapter 8: Love over the Wires
Page 134
"Ordinarily an operator can tell a woman in the moment he hears her working the wire," claimed the Western Electrician magazine in 1891. "He tells by her touch on the key."

Page 141
Young Thomas Edison was legendary for being able to take down messages as fast as anyone could transmit them. Edison was taught Morse code as a teenager by a railway stationmaster, whose three-year-old son he had plucked from the path of an oncoming train.

Chapter 10: Information Overload
Page 172
Under this scheme, companies and individuals could reserve a special word as their 'telegraphic address' to make life easier for anyone who wanted to send them a telegram. Telegraphic addresses were easier to remember than full postal addresses, and after 1885 the pricing scheme was changed so that it cost more to send a message to someone with a longer address.

Chapter 12: The Legacy of the Telegraph
Page 205
Although it is now faded from view, the telegraph lives on within the communications technologies that have subsequently built upon its foundations: the telephone, the fax machine, and, more recently, the Internet. And, ironically, it is the Internet -- despite being regarded as a quintessentially modern means of communication -- that has the most in common with its telegraphic ancestor.

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