Telecommunication of the Past

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â€œTelecommunicationâ€• simply means communicating information across a large distance. Today, this term encompasses television, radio, the internet, phones, satellites, and much more. However, long before these methods were developed, people came up with other ways to send their messages.

The smoke signal was one of the first methods used for distant communication. Smoke can be seen from great distances and was used in concordance with agreed codes in order to successfully communicate over hundreds of kilometres, passing the message along from person to person. Although traditionally associated with American Indian tribes, smoke signals were also popular in Ancient China where soldiers on the Great Wall passed on warnings of potential attacks. The system was refined by Polybius, an Ancient Greek who made the first smoke signal alphabet using pairs of torches.

In Africa, drums have long been used to send messages. The talking drum of West Africa is one exampleâ€”it has an hourglass shape and can successfully mimic human speech in a language that is purely based on tone. In the eighteenth century, these drums were used to send complicated and intricate messages from village to village, far quicker than a man on horseback could. During the slave trade these drums were banned, as they proved such an effective way to communicate over huge distances in a language the enslavers could not understand.

The semaphore was an effective visual telecommunication method. In 1792, Claude Chappe created the first one between Paris and Lille, which was able to transfer a message in just a few minutes when working at top capacity. The system involved towers being built between ten and fifteen kilometres apart with beams which could be angled at varying degrees. Messages were passed from tower to tower by raising and lowering the beams. At the receiving end, they used a code book to translate the meaning of the angles. Soon, other lines were built and the semaphore became popular during the French Revolution as a method of sending vital information across the country.

Even more advanced was the first electrical telegraph invented by Samuel Thomas von SÃ¶mmering in 1809. This worked by running a number of wires across several miles between those who wished to communicate. At the receiving end, the tips of the wire would be placed into different beakers of acid, each marked with a letter. An electrical current sent through the wires would cause the acid to electrolyse and bubbles to form. The operator would record the letters in the order they bubbled and translate the message.

From these humble beginnings, weâ€™ve now reached a stage where technologies such as fibre optic broadband transmit incredibly complicated messages across the world in moments. People now take for granted being able to communicate and form relationships in a way which was unthinkable a century ago. It is fascinating to wonder what changes the technological advancements of the future will bring.

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