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The Dawn of the International Information Age

We have become so complacent about almost instantaneous transmission of information—virtually worldwide telephone service, direct E-Mail, and television bounced from satellites to provide live news and programming from the remotest places on earth—that it is difficult to conceive of the day when the time for exchange of news and personal messages between North America and Europe was measured in days and weeks. But this was the case until the mid-nineteenth century; all communications, official and personal, had to be carried by ship.

The first transatlantic submarine telegraph cable was completed in August 1858—the third attempt to complete this connection. The cable ran from Valentia, Ireland, to Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, and messages were exchanged between Queen Victoria and President James Buchanan. On 20 August, the first news report went across the wire, the story of a collision at sea.

Alas, the cable connection lasted a mere three weeks; then it too failed, likely because of problems with the insulation.

A transatlantic cable had been the dream of many, including Samuel F. B. Morse, who developed the first practical telegraph on land, but it was brought to reality by Cyrus Field, a New York City financier with a talent for organization. After two previous attempts had failed because of broken cables, in 1858 Field had two ships lay cable from both terminal points and splice the new line in mid-ocean. The three weeks of successful communications validated the principle of a transatlantic cable.

A fifth attempt to lay a working cable in 1865 also failed as a result of a break in the line, so in 1866 the tenacious Field hired the largest steamship in the world to do the work. This time the line held, and a working transatlantic cable was achieved—a success which reduced the time for U.S.-European communication dramatically from days to minutes. The rapid dissemination of official and personal messages, news, and economic information drew the societies of the "old" and "new" worlds together, and fueled an appetite for regular and rapid information from other parts of the globe.

[For more on the transatlantic cable, see chapter 17 of *Masked Dispatches: Cryptograms and Cryptology in American History, 1775-1900* by Ralph E. Weber, published by the Center for Cryptologic History in 1993.]

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