

Hampf, M. Michaela; Müller-Pohl, Simone (Hrsg.): *Global Communication Electric. Business, News and Politics in the World of Telegraphy*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag 2013. ISBN: 978-3-593-39953-9; 386 S.

Rezensiert von: Gabriele Balbi, Institute of Media and Journalism, Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano

The so-called global history is a rising approach in historical studies worldwide and also media history and the history of telecommunications are recently going global, after decades or better centuries in which the geographical framework was mainly national. Going global means at least three different things. First, comparing single national cases in order to find specific „national styles“ in communication history (the most famous, and criticized, example is Hallin and Mancini¹). Second, adopting a transnational perspective and studying communication flows over national borders, international institutions and actors that had to regulate them, supranational economic powers, circulation of ideas (and people) that cannot be circumscribed by national spaces.² Third and final, for historiography of communication going global means historicizing the process of globalization itself, retracing its roots and rediscovering the past of an apparently recent phenomenon.

This book tries to take into account all these three dimensions, focusing mainly on the global history of wired telegraphy between 1860 and 1930. First, it is a book in which different national and even regional case studies of global telegraphy are considered: Japan's, the United Kingdom's, India's governments, companies, newspapers and people were all confronted with the new technology, as well as small and peripheral regions in Scandinavia and Arizona (US). Second, institutions such as International Telecommunication Union, global news agencies as Reuters, 19th century conglomerates such as the Eastern and Associated Telegraph Companies were all main characters in the transnational history of telegraphy. Finally, this volume reflects on a technology that „caused the most dramatic globalization effects among all new tech-

nologies of the nineteenth century“ (p. 7), tracing back the history of globalization at least to the first half of the 19th century and pointing to the role of the electric telegraph in this process.

This is not great news and the potential reader should not think about another, enthusiastic and taken-for-granted book on „unavoidable“ and „irresistible“ globalization. On the contrary, the volume „critically reconsiders these grand narratives of the annihilation of time and space, the Victorian internet, imperial control and nationalist power politics“ (p. 9), and focuses on more innovative elements. Dwayne Winseck's and Léonard Laborie's chapters aim to complicate the categories of 'national' and 'global' even from a methodological perspective, discussing models in which media history is studied / written and reconsidering the history of the first international institution that was ever created to manage the telegraph (the Telegraph Union, later known as ITU).

The book also describes plenty of alternative, and often failed, histories of global telegraphy. One of them is the failed idea of building a global communist network described by Martin Doll: „Workers of the world, communicate!“ to paraphrase one of the most famous rallying cries from the Communist Manifesto. The utopian linkage of telegraphy and world's fairs to symbolize the unification of two institutions of modernity is a further story (see Lars Bluma's chapter). Finally, as Michael Mann and Amelia Bonea emphasize, telegraphy was not only used in favor of colonial powers and the UK specifically, but also to build an Indian nationalism. Accordingly, telegraphy and globalization were neither irresistible nor easily controllable forces.

Some chapters focus on geographical issues, trying to counteract the annihilation of narratives of space.³ Englishness influenced the

¹ Daniel C. Hallin / Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge 2004.

² Alexander Badenoch / Andreas Fickers, Introduction: Europe Materializing? Toward a Transnational History of European Infrastructures, in: Alexander Badenoch / Andreas Fickers (eds.), *Materializing Europe: Transnational Infrastructures and the Project of Europe*, Basingstoke 2010, pp. 1–25.

³ Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and*

process of identity formation among the Eastern and Associated Telegraph Cable Companies' workers, meaning that a multinational company may have a tied national identity (see Wendy Gagen's chapter). Telegraph wires froze in the cold of Northern Europe endangering not only the global but even the regional functioning, as Jonas Harvard points out. More generally, as reminded in Florian Sprenger's chapter, contemporaries experienced electricity in contradictory ways and slow speed or no speed were part of this imaginary.

How to reshape the history of telegraphy as an agent of globalization? First of all, applying new methodologies and new research fields to the history of telecommunications: from media and journalism studies to Friedrich Kittler's insights⁴; from the history of technology (Daniel Headrick and David Edgerton, for example, are often mentioned⁵) to the history of public sphere; from diplomatic and transnational studies to postmodern sociology. Second, searching through sources (such as political debates, technical journals, minutes of board of directors) in specific archives such ITU archives, private companies' records (especially newspapers and news agencies), national government archives. In terms of methodology and sources, contributors could have done more, as well as the two editors should have pushed the prestigious authors to focus more on the central topic of this book. As we all know, these are the risks of an edited volume.

Nevertheless, I think that this is a must-read book for historians of telecommunications and historians of globalization. The first ones could find alternative and sometimes not-telegraphic ways to think about the telegraph; the second could complicate the history of globalization, re-evaluating the role of the telegraph and better understanding counter-forces emerged through telegraph lines. Furthermore, historians of journalism, of public sphere, of imperialism, of colonialism, of gender and probably other historians could find this book inspiring in order to add communication in their histories. Beside globalization, this is the second general trend of contemporary history addressed in this edited book: rediscovering the past adding communicative dimensions, as communication may

help the (re)emergence of alternative histories.⁶

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Cyberspace, Cambridge 2004.

⁴ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford (CA) 1999.

⁵ Daniel R. Headrick, *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851–1945*, New York 1991; Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850–1940*, New York 1988; David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900*, London 2006.

⁶ John Durham Peters, *History as a Communication Problem*, in: Barbie Zelizer (ed.), *Explorations in Communication and History*, London 2008, pp. 19–34.