Telegraphy and the downfall of the Kelly Gang

Abstract
Four historical vignettes are provided from the period 1875 to 1880 from the Proceedings of the Telegraph Electrical Society of Victoria— the lineal antecedent of today’s TelSoc (Australian Telecommunications Society). The extracts cover Alexander Graham Bell’s invention of the telephone, Telegraphy at the downfall of the Kelly Gang, the speed of the Morse system, and the curious phenomenon of “Fighting by Telegraph.”

Introduction to the historical extracts

Peter Gerrand’s article in the June issue of the Australian Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy (Gerrand 2014 [5]) traced the opening of the first telegraph office in the Southern Hemisphere back to Melbourne, Australia on 3rd March 1854.

Twenty years later in 1874 (and two years before Alexander Graham Bell patented the telephone), several like-minded telegraph workers and country postmasters formed the Telegraph Electrical Society of Victoria. The purpose was for mutual discussion of day to day telegraph problems and the advancement of their technical and practical knowledge (Credlin 1938 [6]).

The Proceedings of the Society were published on a quarterly basis and lecture pamphlets were reproduced in newspapers of the day such as The Argus. This paper features four extracts from those Proceedings, which resonate into the modern era.

The first extract, entitled “Novel Telegraphy in Canada” [7], was published in 1876.

It perspicaciously described Dr Bell’s invention of the telephone as “very satisfactory” and “[it] will certainly be the greatest mechanical discovery since the telegraph.”

The second extract, entitled “Extermination of the Kelly Gang” [8], was published in 1880.

It described two Posts and Telegraph personnel who attended the siege at Glenrowan. One bravely climbed a pole while bullets were flying to establish a telegraph connection to Melbourne, and the other relayed continuous
The third extract, entitled "Speed of Working the Morse Instrument?" [9], was published in 1875. It discussed the top speed of Morse messages on the busiest telegraph lines in New York, USA. Not to be outdone, the Victorian operators covering the Melbourne Cup demonstrated they could send messages at double that speed.

The fourth and final extract, entitled "Fighting by Telegraph?" [10], was published in 1880. It is a curious article describing the fighting by operators over telegraph lines, before reliable duplex systems were introduced.

These extracts were all published later in a Society paper entitled "Centenary of Telecommunication Societies in Australia?, written by J.E. Sander for the Telecommunication Journal of Australia, the predecessor of this Journal, in 1974 (Sander 1974 [11]).

References


The historical extracts
Figure 1 ? Novel Telegraphy in Canada
Figure 2: Extermination of the Kelly Gang
Some interesting details of the speed of working the Morse system are given by Mr. F. L. Pope in *The Telegrapher*. Six days' work on five of the busiest lines in the New York office resulted in the transmission of 5,753 messages, containing 234,546 words. This gives an average of 191 messages of 40.8 words (7,800 words), as the work of one line for one day. The average number of words per message seems high, but it is evidently caused by the occurrence of long press messages. Two instances of fast transmission of ordinary messages are given, viz.:

- 330 messages in 6 hours 30 minutes, 50.7 per hour
- 136 " 2 hours, 68 per hour.

As it may be interesting to some of our readers to know what has been done in Victoria, we may mention that, on the occasion of the last Melbourne Cup race, 216 messages were sent from the Racecourse to Melbourne, on one of the wires, in 1 hour and 58 minutes, being at the rate of 109.8 per hour. At the Cup of the previous year, 135 messages were sent in 1 hour 5 minutes, being at the rate of 124.5 per hour. It must, however, be borne in mind that the average number of words in these race messages did not perhaps exceed 20 (address, signature, &c., included), and, on account of the frequent occurrence of the same names, abbreviations could be used to a great extent. As a matter of swift penmanship on the part of the receiving operator (he having written everything in full), these performances could not easily be surpassed.
Figure 4 - Fighting by Telegraph

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