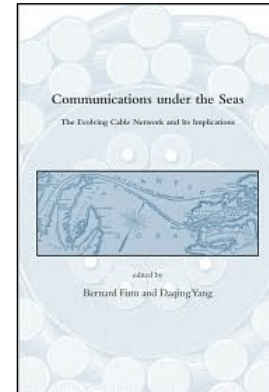


Bernard Finn and Daqing Yang (Eds.), **Communication Under the Seas: The Evolving Cable Network and Its Implications**, MIT Press, 2009, 360 pp., \$29.22 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Jonathan D. Aronson
University of Southern California

Communication geeks revel in the history of technology networks and innovation. While many of my friends and colleagues inhale railroad history and minutiae, alternative obsessions center on both the historical spread of submarine cables as well as satellite communication networks. This volume brings together the cream of the crop of historians concerned with the early spread of undersea cables.

History is too often neglected in the rush of the “now.” That’s unfortunate because although technologies change, the politics and economics surrounding innovation are familiar and repeat themselves.



In this edited collection, based on a 2002 conference of leading historians of undersea telegraph cable developments, Bernard Finn and Daqing Yang provide a rich and textured celebration of the early development of the submarine cable network that girdles the planet and ushered in today’s interconnected global communication infrastructure. Lessons learned during the development of the global cable network between 1850 and 1950 remain relevant today.

The first three papers focus on the technical breakthroughs that made undersea point-to-point communication possible in the early 1850s. Of particular note in this group is Jeff Hecht’s paper on the technology and competitive in fighting between the cable and satellite industries associated with the laying of the first fiber-optic submarine cables during the 1980s. The first of these was AT&T’s transatlantic telephone cable, TAT-7, that began operation December 1988 and opened the way for the cable business to reassert its importance vis-à-vis satellites. Fiber-optic submarine cables ultimately provided the bandwidth that allowed for the huge expansion of outsourcing from the United States to India and elsewhere.

The next four papers “explore the ways in which governments and private companies interacted in the process of establishing a viable communications network with truly global reach” (p. 7). Case studies focus on the early relationship between cable companies and the International Telecommunication Union, the origins of Cable & Wireless, the interaction of the Great Northern Telegraph Company and smaller nations outside the European and transatlantic markets, and the impact of early submarine cable development on Franco-American diplomatic relations.

The three papers that follow examine how governments used their cable networks to enhance their strategic, military, and diplomatic interests. These papers examine how the introduction of reliable,

rapid communications across great distances changed the conduct of foreign policy and international relations during peace and war. In particular, Daniel Headrick catalogues how British and, to an extent, American cable traffic strategy was used to maintain and consolidate their strategic and military advantage between 1851 and 1945. In parallel, Daqing Yang explores how Japan's cable dominance in the Pacific helped it to extend its colonial grasp of Taiwan after 1895, and to control China and Southeast Asia in the 1930s and 1940s.

The concluding chapter, by Peter Hugill, provides an overview of the geopolitical implications of the submarine cable network from a Wallerstinian perspective.

Communication Under the Seas is a book by specialists for specialists and technology enthusiasts. It deserves wider readership because it reminds us that lessons learned and not forgotten can provide valuable insights.