



## Quelle

Anonymer Leserbrief an die Times of London, „The Post Office and the Telegraphs“ (7. Dezember 1870); [Transkript]<sup>1</sup>

To the Editor of the Times.

Sir, – I observe that the Post Office clerks who have charge of the telegraphs have been holding a meeting to suggest improvements in the conduct of the service. To judge by my experience, there are some improvements they might contrive to introduce without any such ceremony; and it may be useful if you will let me give your readers an instance of the manner in which telegraphic business is now conducted in the City of London.

I had occasion to telegraph to Calcutta between 9 and 10 in the evening. I was in doubt what offices would be open at that hour, but I thought it would be safe to apply at Head-Quarters, so I went straight to the General Post Office. It was closed; but there was a plate on the door stating that between 8 and 12 p.m. messages were received at the telegraph office in Cornhill, after that hour until the morning at the office in Telegraph-street. I confess I thought it odd that in the centre of the heart of the British Empire a man should thus be sent from pillar to post, according to the hours of the night, in order to find the right end of the electric wire which is now the very nerve of the social body. But we are becoming drilled into submission to such circuitous regulations, and I proceeded without a murmur to Cornhill.

Here, at the central telegraphic office of the City of London for the first four hours of the night, the whole apparent force of the department consisted of one clerk. This gentleman was civil, but not vigorous, and looked, indeed, as if he might with benefit to himself have been one of the clerks at the General Post Office who go to bed so early. I asked him the price of a telegram to Calcutta. ‘Calcutta!’ he said, and looked very much as if I had asked to telegraph to Fernando Po. He turned, however, to a book on the counter, which he searched very deliberately. Now, Sir, Calcutta is not an unknown place. I thought it was the capital of British India, and that it was in close and constant communication with the City of London. The clerk in charge at the central office might have expected to know the cost of telegraphing thither, and the best way of doing so, without a special search. However, he found Calcutta in his Directory, and told me the charge would be 1l. 17s. for ten words, but what it would be for more than ten words he could scarcely say. I asked if I should write my message on the usual form. ‘No,’ he said, ‘you must write it on a Falmouth and Gibraltar form.’ Where were the Falmouth and Gibraltar forms? Again he had to search, and he searched high and low, and right and left, in order to find me the form for telegraphing from Cornhill to Calcutta. He lighted a paper torch, and peered into a dark cupboard; but it was no good. The means did not exist at Cornhill of sending a message to Calcutta. At last he said, ‘Do you know where the Falmouth and Gibraltar office is? You may as well go there. We should have to turn the message over to them.’ And then he directed me with easy politeness to Broad-street.

I was more concerned at that moment to get my message off than to criticize the ways of the Post Office, so I went one step further, to Broad-street. There, upon saying that I wanted to telegraph to Calcutta, a gentleman stepped forward, and again, in the old tone of surprise, said, ‘Calcutta!’ I began to think I must, after all, be doing something very strange in telegraphing to Calcutta that the proposal should be so perplexing to the telegraph clerks. But this gentleman had reason for

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymer Leserbrief an die Times of London, „The Post Office and the Telegraphs“ (7. Dezember 1870), S. 6. Die Transkription dieser Quelle wurde von Roland Wenzlhuemer vorgenommen.

his surprise. He was at least as polite as the gentleman on Cornhill, and there was an absence of official languor about him which was refreshing. He informed me that the Falmouth line was broken between Lisbon and Gibraltar, that it would consequently take five or six days to telegraph to Calcutta, and that his company advised the public for the present to send their messages through Persia by the Indo-European Company, whose office was in Telegraph-street. When I said I had just been sent to him from the postal office in Cornhill, he replied that the Post Office had been duly informed of the break in the line, and that they ought to have sent me at once to the other company. I was of the same opinion.

So I went, as a fourth attempt, to Telegraph-street, and there, in the office of the Indo-European Company, I found – wonderful to state – not only one, but two clerks, who received my message, and said it would probably be in Calcutta in three hours. I told them of my pursuit of Calcutta under difficulties, and they said the Post Office seemed to have some prejudice against them, and that other persons had made the same complaint of being sent on a fruitless errand to Broad-street.

Now, Sir, the whole thing was so very free and easy that I feel more amusement than vexation at my experience. That a Government official should prosecute a languid search at 10 o'clock in the evening to discover the means of communication between the City of London and the capital of British India, and should be, after all, unsuccessful; that a customer of the department should be asked to 'turn over' his message for himself to the Colonial Company because the Department would have to do it if he didn't; that he should have to go to four places before sending the message, and, after all, should owe no thanks to the Post Office for sending it; all this seems to me so singularly out of the common way as to have a touch of the humorous. But I should think this method of administration was not conducive to the success of the Post Office telegraphs. It is certainly not business, and no private firm who wished to encourage custom would allow their work to be done in such fashion. Mr. Scudamore seems, in short, to have enough to do at present without troubling himself to preside over official Parliaments.

I am, Sir, yours faithfully,

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London, Dec. 6.

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Auf diese Quelle bezieht sich ein einführender und erläuternder Essay von Wenzlhuemer, Roland: „I had occasion to telegraph to Calcutta“: Die Telegrafie und ihre Rolle in der Globalisierung im 19. Jahrhundert. In: Themenportal Europäische Geschichte (2011), URL: <<http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2011/Article=513>>.