

Research on the origin of "CQ" by Bill Burns <https://atlantic-cable.com/>

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(title and first paragraph from many syndicated sources, all based on the original NY Sun story, not yet found)

1895, on CQ

Compiled by the International Bureau at Berne, and Intended to Govern Such Telegrams as Are Written in Cipher.

Here was begun in the last week or two a very thorough revision of the telegraphic cipher codes in use by people in this city doing business with European countries, says the New York Sun. The revision is in order to conform with a new regulation of the International Telegraph bureau, designed to put an end to the difficulties, disputes and inconveniences that have been connected with inter-national telegraphing for very many years.

The International Telegraph Bureau is a telegraphic clearing house and intelligence office located at Berne, Switzerland, of which all the Governments of Europe, and all the important nations of the rest of the civilized world, with the sole exception of the United States, are members. "Berne," as the bureau is generally referred to, is the central information bureau of the telegraph service of the whole world. Any interruption to a cable or land line, the opening of a new line, or rearrangement and shortening of an old one; all delays to telegraphic communication, anywhere and from any cause, such as storms or earthquakes, or censorship on telegrams because of war or civil disturbance in Cuba or Armenia, or anywhere else; anything and everything that improves or disturbs the telegraph service in any part of the world, is at once reported from the affected locality direct to Berne, and the information is promptly sent out from there to the head quarters of every Government and telegraph company, and so on to every telegraph office of importance in the world. While the United States is not represented at Berne, or in the international conventions, this country shares in the information, and is to a great extent under the domination of Berne. With a few exceptions all the cable lines in this hemisphere are owned by British companies, and in telegraphing to Cuba or South America even, Berne's territory is entered.

Berne is really the center of everything telegraphic, and "CQ," in the nomenclature of telegraphy, is the circumference of everything. Every city in the world has its code, recognized by Berne and known everywhere. Thus "LN" means London, "NY" New York, "BM," Bombay, "SZ" Suez, "CT" Calcutta, "MV" Monte Video, and so on. A message from Berne simply addressed "IQ" would quickly find its way to Iquique, away over in Chili. "CQ" means "all stations," and a telegram sent from Berne telling, perhaps, of an interruption of communication with Australia by reason of an earthquake in Java, addressed simply "C Q," would be passed from one government and telegraph company to another, and from centre to centre, until inside of twenty-four hours it would reach every office of importance in the world.

There has always been a difficulty between the telegraph service and its customers over the use of cipher words. Of course, where the cost of telegraphing runs to several dollars a word, every effort is made to be brief. Most elaborate and really wonderful codes have been constructed, some at a costing of thousands of dollars, by the aid of which one word is made to express a whole sentence, or paragraph, of commercial information. To such a science has this matter of codes been reduced that the bulk of telegrams passing between this country or England and distant places like China and Australia rarely consists of more than two or three words. Many hundreds contain only one word, besides the name and address. And one word often sums up a whole day's business. To insure accuracy and speed the convention decided many years ago that only legitimate words, belonging to one of eight languages, should be allowed in codes, and no word should contain more than ten letters. Arbitrary combinations of letters, such as xqp, or wzy, are only accepted on a basis of three letters to a word. While cable operators are not expected to know eight languages, yet there is something about a legitimate word from a modern language that makes it easily recognizable. It sounds all right on the Morse instrument and looks all right on the cable slip. A mutilated word is as readily distinguished, and stopped. The sender of a foreign telegram of eight words may use a word each from English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and Latin, but they must be good words, and not over ten letters long. The receiving clerk in a cable office will almost infallibly spot an illegitimate word, and, as he is held responsible, at the rate of several dollars a word for any wrong word he may pass, he lets very few indeed get by him.

But so elaborate have codes become that pretty nearly all the good, available, and safe words, not too much alike to cause confusion or liability to error, have been used up, and for many reasons the legitimacy of words is often called in question. Perhaps the sender of the telegram wants to use a word like immediately, in its normal sense. But that word contains eleven letters, and maybe from ignorance of the rule, or, perhaps, because of the money involved, the sender drops out an "m," and attempts to get "immediately" over the wires. But it is not likely to go far, for cable operators are about the most careful and expert craftsmen in the world. One interesting incident of this sort came up in an English office some years ago in relation to the word "pando" which appeared in a telegram offered for transmission to Bombay. Pando is a legitimate Latin word, but the telegram was otherwise in English, and the text showed beyond any doubt that "pando" stood for "P. & O." meaning the Peninsular and Oriental line of steamships running to Bombay. The cable company claimed that it was an evasion, and the sender finding out later that the word happened to be good Latin, insisted on the right to use it and have it counted a single word. But Berne upheld the company.

Such difficulties are continually arising. Others come from the similarity of many code words, where the difference of a letter, or a telegraphic dot, might mean a difference of thousands of dollars in a quotation. To avoid all such difficulties in the future, the last convention held at Paris in 1890 instructed the bureau at Berne to prepare a vocabulary which should, after a specified date, constitute the sole authority as to the legitimacy of code words. A corps of experts was set to work on this vocabulary, and after five years of really great labor the vocabulary has been completed. It contains 250,000 words of not more than ten letters each. Every word has been tested and compared, by chirographic and

telegraphic standards, and it is believed that under ordinary circumstances, no two words will become mixed or confused in any way. The amount of labor involved in this compilation will easily be appreciated when it is considered how much alike hundreds of words are. It is said that every word in the vocabulary differs in at least two letters from every other word in the 250,000.

The Berne vocabulary will not go into force until January 1, 1898, in order to give opportunity to users of codes to make their ciphers conform to it. But after that date any word not contained in the Berne book will not be accepted for transmission in Europe.

--N. Y. Sun.

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