Global connections in transcultural research

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Global connections in transcultural research

Thoughts from a historian’s perspective

Roland Wenzlhuemer

Connections and the connected

In this chapter I argue that the conceptual understanding of the term ‘connection’ in transcultural research should be amended. Global connections are mediators that themselves have an impact on that which is connected. The latter must not be mistaken for the connection itself. In order to identify mediating potential, connections and the connected need to be considered in tandem. Furthermore, connections exist in the plural and gain their mediating potential in relation to other forms of connections and disconnections. Such an integrated concept of connections will allow us to look at processes of exchange and interaction from a fresh perspective.

In the last four decades or so, the concept of culture in the humanities has undergone at least two significant phases of transformation. In the course of what has often simplistically been called the ‘cultural turn’, the idea of what culture is began to change in the 1970s and 1980s. The term was reinterpreted in the sense that culture did not merely refer to a canon of valuable and widely representative expressions of ‘high culture’, but became a denominator for shared ‘webs of significance’ (Geertz 1973) in a more general regard. This first shift in meaning already contained the seed for the second conceptual adjustment that started to gain more and more momentum in the last two decades. Jettisoning a ‘high culture’ understanding of the term at the same time freed culture from a national straightjacket. Approaching the concept as ‘webs of significance’, as shared meaning in a broader sense, put the spotlight on new questions: where does one culture end and another culture start (see Maran, in this volume)? What happens when different cultures come into contact? Or, how does culture change? Over time, an understanding of culture as a largely self-contained and stable unit proved to be unsuitable for the study of such issues. More and more, researchers in the humanities started to think of culture as highly dynamic, constituted by interaction, circulation and reconfiguration. From this perspective, culture is constantly changing, moving, adapting – and it is doing this through contact and exchange beyond real or perceived borders. This is one of the principal assumptions of transcultural studies.
In the last decades, this strain of research has examined the border-crossing movements of people, things or ideas; different forms of cultural transfers; a host of cultural contact zones (see Firges and Graf and Grüner, all in this volume), acts of translation (see Flüchter and Tontini in this volume) and cultural brokerage (see Jaspert in this volume), to give just a few eclectic examples. In historical research, for instance, several new fields have emerged that explicitly focus on the history of cultural transfers (Espagne and Werner 1988); on entangled history (Eppe et al. 2011; Randeria 1999; Randeria and Conrad 2002; Subrahmanyan 1997); histoire croisée (Werner and Zimmermann 2006); or transcultural history (Herren-Oesch et al. 2012). These and several other neighbouring approaches build on the significance of cross-cultural contacts in history. They come together under the umbrella of global history, which is, if we follow some of the leading researchers in the field, interested mainly in global connections and comparisons (Bayly 2004; Conrad 2013: 9; O’Brien 2006: 4). The two terms are fundamentally different in scope. For the historical sciences, comparison, be it global or not, is a method. It is an instrument of enquiry.† This leaves global or transregional connections as the principal objects of study of the field. Global history asks how such connections were created by historical actors and how they in turn influenced them in their actions and their perception of the world. Connections provide the building blocks for the phenomena of contact and exchange typically studied by historians in the field. It is a truism that some sort of connection is a precondition for all forms of exchange and interaction. When people, things or ideas move, what they do is create a connection – sometimes fragile, sometimes more stable – between their origin(s) and their destination. In short, global history is interested in the significance of transregional connections in history.

Accordingly, connection as a term is in wide and prominent use in historical research. Connections are recognized as key elements in concepts such as transfers, entanglements or contact zones, all of which have seen a fair share of theorizing in the last decades. Often, however, the term is employed in a descriptive rather than an analytical manner and our conceptual understanding of transregional connections as the fundamental components of global exchange and interaction remains rudimentary. So far, too little attention has been given to a more systematic and conceptually informed evaluation of the term. What is a connection? And, even more importantly, what is a global or transregional connection? How do local and global connections differ analytically? How do connections become historically potent phenomena? Do connections have a time and a space of their own? And building on this, where is their place in history? Finally, how do they relate to that which is connected? Issues such as these implicitly inform many studies in global history, but have rarely been addressed in a systematic fashion.

This lack of a feasible conceptual approach is a consequence of our perspective on connections. We usually think of connections mainly in terms of the people, places or things that they bring in touch with each other. In practice, we conceptualize connections from their endpoints. Rather than about the connection itself, we think about that which is connected. It is there that we look for effects of contact and exchange. If researchers in this context have spoken about the ‘inbetween’ or some form of ‘third space’ (Bhabha 1994), what they meant was usually the result of a connection, of being in touch. The connection itself is part of the picture, but remains in the background. We see it as an intermediary in the sense of actor-network theory, an enabler that brings its endpoints in touch but does not create or transform meaning by itself (Latour 2005). I suggest that this way of thinking about connections should be amended. In order to better gauge the historical significance of transregional connections, we will have to think of connections as mediators rather than mere intermediaries, to stay in the terminology of actor-network theory. For Bruno Latour, ‘[m]ediators transform, translate,
distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry’ (Latour 2005: 39). This is what connections always do. They do not merely bring their endpoints in contact, they interject themselves between that which is connected and thereby gain a strong bearing on the interaction. Connections have temporal and spatial dimensions of their own. While these dimensions can be of different degrees, they turn connections into sociocultural arenas in which things happen; in which people can feel, think and act; in which the relationship and interaction between their endpoints is negotiated.

Thinking of connections as intermediaries means to treat them as relatively lifeless links, while that which is connected merits all analytical attention. However, if we conceive of connections as mediators, we will have to recalibrate our focus. We will have to look more directly at that which connects; that which happens in-between, during the communication process, between the endpoints. Connections should be seen as historical phenomena in their own right. At the same time, however, we must not lose sight of that which is connected. An exclusive focus on the connection itself would deprive it of its principal quality. Thus, we need to consider connections and that which is connected in tandem and in constant mutual reference. What is more, connections develop their historical significance in the plural. They become meaningful and gain their mediating potential in reference or difference to other connections or disconnections.

In the following I will refer to examples from my own research to illustrate why historians together with their colleagues from other humanities disciplines should turn their attention from that which is connected to the connection itself. I will briefly discuss the role of intercontinental steamship passages and of telegraphic communication in the context of nineteenth-century processes of globalization. The steamer and the telegraph are both emblematic technologies in this regard. In their time, they greatly facilitated the global movement of people, things and information. They made these flows cheaper and quicker. In historical research, they are usually (and rightly) treated as important new connectors that brought about a thorough transformation of global space in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What is often forgotten, however, is that the channels that both these technologies provided – the steamship passage and the telegraphic message – deserve to be studied as historical arenas in their own right. In the following it shall be demonstrated why, by showing how they as particular forms of connections shaped the connected.

Global connections exemplified

The maritime field carries great significance for global history approaches. Regional and transregional connections, most importantly in the form of ship passages, are key elements of study for maritime historians. Often, however, maritime history’s main focus has rested on the ends of the passage. It has been concerned with that which is connected rather than with the connections themselves. For instance, the field has a longstanding interest in port cities as archetypical contact zones and melting pots. They are seminal portals of global migration, trade and intellectual exchange and, thus, ideally suited to study what happens when different cultures get in touch. If one wants to widen this scope and incorporate port cities in a broader regional context, maritime history has introduced the notion of the seascape that refers to a region connected across the sea (Bentley et al. 2007; Reinwald and Deutsch 2002). Fernand Braudel’s idea of the Mediterranean world has provided inspiration here (Braudel 1949). In recent decades, the Atlantic world (Armitage and Braddick 2002; Gilroy 2002; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; O’Rourke and Williamson 1999; Rediker 2004) and the Indian Ocean rim (Bose 2006; Larson 2009; McPherson 1993; Ray and Alpers 2007; Vink 2007) have also been studied from
a similar perspective. Both port cities as well as the seascapes that they are part of are products of myriad connections that originate or terminate there. This has, of course, been duly acknowledged in research. Nevertheless, the focus of such research has often remained on ocean littorals, on liminal spaces and contact zones that arise from transoceanic connections. Ship passages have for long been studied as enabling factors that bring A and B together, but rarely as arenas of study in themselves. Despite the defining role of global connections for the field, even in maritime history attention has concentrated on origin and destination, on start and end of the process. In recent decades, however, maritime history has seen attempts to recalibrate its analytical focus. In several subfields and in particular in the context of studies on the maritime slave trade, more attention has been paid to the ship itself. Seaborne historical actors – sailors, pirates or slaves – and their lives on board of a ship have slowly come to the fore. These studies have identified the ship as a distinct historical environment and the passage as formative for the historical actors.

Ship passages have pronounced spatial and temporal dimensions defined by the space of the ship and the time of the passage. This makes it easier to see how the connection and that which is connected must not be confused or conflated. Even during the heyday of steam shipping, long-distance ship passages took time. In the late nineteenth century, a bundle of technological innovations had dramatically shortened the duration of a passage from, say, Europe to India. But still, passengers and crew had to spend at least three to four weeks on board a steamship on this route before they would arrive at, for instance, Bombay. Although substantially shorter, crossing the Atlantic by steamer also took about 10 days. This time on board was not ‘dead’ or ‘empty’, nor did people simply put their lives on ‘stand-by’ (Wenzlhuemer and Offermann 2012: 79–80): such assumptions merely reinforce a terra-centric notion that the only meaningful history – with the exceptions of battles or mutinies – occurs on land. Rather, as passengers, steerage and crew shared the confined space of the ship during transit, and interaction and exchange became practically unavoidable. Regardless of class and station, shipboard bodies were exposed to new and often deeply uncomfortable experiences (Pietsch 2010); social networks and even cultures were formed within the community of the ship, in many cases outliving the duration of the journey; isolated physically from land, ships became spaces of potential transgression as well as conformity. Therefore, the space and time of the passage provide an arena of transit in which we can study the connection as a mediator.

For passengers and crew alike, the time spent on board was formative in many respects. The distinctness of the transit and its significance regarding the perception of origin and destination comes to life in many contemporary commentaries on steamship travel. During his time as a colonial official in British-controlled Egypt, Lord Edward Cecil compiled a number of stories depicting the lighter side of life in colonial service. Published posthumously in 1921, *The Leisure of an Egyptian Official* is a compilation of episodes giving an insight into Cecil’s daily routine. The book also contains a longer passage entitled ‘Going on Leave’ in which the author describes how he prepares for going on leave to England. Cecil travelled from Cairo to Port Said where he embarked a steamer of the Island and Far East line calling there on its way from Asia to England. Cecil writes:

If an Englishman is in a railway carriage or a steamer or a hotel, he immediately regards it as his own, and is prepared to discourage or even resist any trespassers to the utmost of his powers. One is never more acutely aware of this than when one joins a steamer en route. As [we] crush forward up the ladder, we are greeted by a hum of muffled disapproval from passengers above on deck. I can hear portions of frank opinions which are obviously hostile to our travelling by this steamer anyway. [...] I hear a clear female voice say, ‘Well, thank
goodness, there are only a dozen of them’. To which another answers, ‘Yea but I suppose we shall hear nothing but mafish and malesh now. Why cannot they go by one of their own lines?’ These are obviously Anglo-Indians. We in Egypt profess to despise Anglo-Indians as people who are out of touch with Europe and essentially provincial, whilst they, on the other hand, talk with contempt of our size and village politics. One method of showing this lofty hostility is to pretend not to understand anything about the others’ country or language.

(Cecil 1984: 259–60)

Throughout his memories, Cecil continues to reflect upon the social world encountered on his steamship travels. He mocks his cabin neighbours – ‘a drab-coloured Indian lady’ who looked ‘alarmed’ and immediately called the stewards ‘to lock her cabin up, as there are dreadful-looking people on board’ (Cecil 1984: 259–60) – and he frequently remarks on the relations between crew and passengers on board steamships. Accustomed to being treated with respect as a member of the colonial administration, Cecil was more than irritated to find passengers being ‘regarded as a sort of unsavoury pest with which a ship becomes infected whilst lying in port’ by many of the ship’s officers (Cecil 1984: 260–1). Even if we acknowledge that Cecil used exaggeration as a stylistic device to enhance ‘the amusement of his family’ (Cecil 1984: 5) for whom the memories were compiled, his observations clearly show that the steamship constituted a social world in its own right. It was a microcosm in which people of different social, cultural and professional backgrounds met, interacted, clashed and sought to secure their places during a long journey.

Another instructive comment on the sociocultural significance of steamship passages comes from the autobiography of Leonard Woolf, husband of Virginia Woolf, who served as a civil servant in Ceylon for seven years in the early twentieth century. He wrote about the start of his outward journey on the P. & O. liner Syria:

Within the boat there was the uncomfortable atmosphere of suspicion and reserve which is at first invariably the result when a number of English men and women, strangers to one another, find that they have to live together for a time in a train, a ship, a hotel. In those days it took, if I remember rightly, three weeks to sail from London to Colombo. By the time we reached Ceylon, we had developed from a fortuitous concourse of isolated human atoms into a complex community with an elaborate system of castes and classes. The initial suspicion and reserve had soon given place to intimate friendships, intrigues, affairs, passionate loves and hates.

(Woolf 1961: 12)

Interestingly, the quote shares some of the imagery of Cecil’s comment on shipboard life. And it is even more explicit as to the sociocultural transformations that occurred during such a week-long passage. Beyond bringing origin and destination in contact by enabling the intercontinental mobility, the connection – here in the form of the ship passage – constituted a distinct historical environment with its very own spatial and temporal parameters. In this way, the ship passage is a mediator rather than a mere intermediary.

Ship passages usually existed in reference to or difference from other forms of global connections and disconnections. Telegraph cables, for instance, often ran parallel to shipping routes. Railways linked port cities to the hinterland. Or radio waves ‘whispered’ across the ocean (Wenzlhuemer 2016). Ship passages were embedded in a plurality of connections. This becomes particularly tangible when we examine the different – and seemingly paradox – ways
in which the people on board related to the world during such a passage. On the one hand, the ship, by the movement it provided for the people, goods and information that it carried, created global connections. Ship passages were thus important constituents of globality and globalization. On the other hand, however, the ship was an isolated place during the open sea passage. Its connection with the rest of the world was thin and fragile. Before wireless technology became available on steamers, the only outside contact was short exchanges with other passing ships. And even with the advent of wireless telegraphy, the link to the world proved to be of low capacity and prone to different kinds of disturbances, as shall soon be seen in the example at hand. Passengers and crew on long-distance ocean crossings thus created global connections by their movements, while at the same time their own contact to the outside world depended on a changing combination of connection (e.g. by wireless) and disconnections (e.g. due to isolation at sea).

Due to its pronounced spatial and temporal dimensions and its embeddedness in a plurality of connections, long-distance ship passages underline how the connection itself needs to be reconceptualized if we want to understand how global connections impacted the course of history.

Looking at ship passages, the significance of the connection itself becomes clearly visible. Shifting our attention to the telegraph, I will try to support this from a different angle. Historians of technology and later researchers in global history have devoted a fair share of work to the telegraph. Again, they were mostly interested in that which was connected by the telegraph, not in the connection itself. They focused on the emergence of the network, its structure, its nodes, and identified centres and peripheries in the communicative space created by the telegraph. The mediating powers of the connection have so far received little attention.

The idea of sending information with the help of electricity has been around since the mid-eighteenth century. It took until the 1830s and early 1840s for the technology to mature and to find a suitable field of application in the control of railways. Building on tremendous advances in the understanding of electricity, Samuel Morse and Alfred Vail in the United States, as well as William Fothergill Cooke and Charles Wheatstone in the United Kingdom, first publicly demonstrated their fully functioning telegraph instruments in the year 1837. Their designs had been developed independently from each other and employed different methods of encoding and decoding information. Both models, however, used an electromagnetic device to detect electric current. Morse and Vail demonstrated their telegraph in a New York classroom, yet needed another five years to finally convince Congress to fund a first line between Washington and Baltimore. Cooke and Wheatstone exhibited their apparatus along a stretch of a London railway track. But just like Morse and Vail, they also needed years to persuade railway companies to let them build telegraph lines along their tracks. When these first non-experimental telegraph lines eventually opened in the United States and in Great Britain in the early 1840s, they soon proved to be efficient and useful. Both countries were gripped by a telegraph mania that lasted at least for the rest of the 1840s and the 1850s. Reasonably tight national telegraph networks started to emerge during this time – first in the United States and the United Kingdom, but soon in other, mostly European countries as well. Early in this process, first steps at the internationalization of the system were taken. In 1851, England and France were successfully linked by a submarine telegraph cable across the Channel. In the following years, other cables between the British Isles and mainland Europe followed. In 1865, Europe for the first time came into direct telegraphic contact with India. And a year later, the transatlantic cable connection – that had already been working for a few weeks in 1858 – was eventually established for good. The telegraph network had practically gone global.
The reason for this rapid expansion after a phase of technological inertia (Mokyr 1992) was that telegraphy had proved to be efficient and useful for several groups of historical actors. The business community was among the first to benefit from telegraphic communication. But the military and the administration also partook of telegraphy – especially, of course, in an imperial context when large distances needed to be covered. The original momentum, however, with which the initial inertia had been overcome had, at least in Britain, come from the railways. There, Cooke had eventually been able to convince the Great Western Railway company to let him expand the telegraph along their tracks from Paddington to the town of Slough near Windsor. Cooke paid all expenses out of his own pocket and was finally gratified with the public and financial success of the line. In turn, however, the Great Western – and later the London & Blackwall Railway – also benefitted greatly from the telegraph, which proved incredibly useful for the management of ‘ancillary single lines where traffic did not justify double track, by enabling them to be operated safely and efficiently’ (Kieve 1973: 33). It was this fruitful symbiosis between the railway and the telegraph that, among other factors, triggered the expansion of the telegraph network in the 1840s and 1850s, and that best illustrates the principal new quality in communication that the telegraph had brought about.

The telegraph transformed the relation between communication and transport through the dematerialization of long-distance information flows. The technology made it possible to encode information in immaterial electric impulses that could then be sent along a conductor – usually a wire or a set of wires. Technically, the dematerialization of information transmission led to the detachment of the movement of information from the movement of people, animals or things, all of which consist of matter and, therefore, adhere to certain rules of material movement. In short, it led to the large-scale detachment of communication from material transport. The fact that telegraphy achieved its technological breakthrough in the United Kingdom courtesy of the railways stands testimony to the significance of this detachment.

The separation of communication and transport had great implications regarding the potential speed of communication and it also had a strong bearing on the more general nature of communication. The telegraph transmitted information as a series of electric impulses. Code systems had to be developed that allowed for the transmission of information. Both Morse and needle code used the Roman alphabet as its basis. The latter could not even accommodate all letters in its first versions. In any case, Roman letters were associated with combinations of impulses that first needed to be encoded and later decoded. Ergo, a plain-text piece of information that needed to be transmitted (and had thus already been encoded in language and even letters) had to be further encoded in a series of electric impulses. In doing so, only the plain letters could be transmitted. Nothing more, nothing less. Any additional information resting in, for instance, the handwriting, manual corrections, notes in the margin or the kind of paper used (to name really but a few possible examples) was lost.

Even more importantly, the relatively complicated encoding of letters in electric impulses produced lengthy impulse patterns even if only a short message was to be transmitted. This clogged up the wires and, as a consequence, was very expensive for the sender. Therefore, the telegraph rewarded brevity in expression. The information to be sent should be to the point, stripped of linguistic ornaments and unnecessary remarks. Grammar and punctuation were mostly thrown overboard. In international business correspondence, code books were compiled that added one more layer of encoding to the relation between data and information. In the widely used ABC Telegraphic Code, for instance, the word Aigulet translated as ‘Is not likely to affect you in any manner’ (Clauson-Thue 1881: 13), and Bluster meant ‘The boxes were delivered in bad order’ (ibid.: 41). In this way, very complex messages could be packed into only a few words so that transmission was swift and relatively cheap. On the other hand,
however, all meaning beyond this standardized content was lost. A widely used booklet of guidelines about the composition of telegrams says:

Naturally, there is a right way and a wrong way of wording telegrams. The right way is economical, the wrong way, wasteful. If the telegram is packed full of unnecessary words, words which might be omitted without impairing the sense of the message, the sender has been guilty of economic waste.

(Ross 1928)

Both the transmission time and the cost of a telegram increase with its length and, therefore, being concise was important. Such rewards for brevity naturally impacted on the language used in telegrams. Messages often were short to the point of impoliteness but usually were not perceived as impolite as everyone involved in sending and receiving telegrams knew about their conversational limitations. Conciseness was considered more important than the established protocol which was suspended for telegrams. Due to the real or perceived need for brevity in telegraphic communication, often only very isolated pieces of information were chosen for transmission. These were completely stripped from any qualifying context. The telegraph and its particular rationale, therefore, pushed the decontextualization of information to hitherto unknown degrees. Only single selected pieces of information would be transmitted at a very high speed and then be re-contextualized by the recipient, while further qualifying information might either not come at all or only arrive days or weeks later, for instance, in a letter.

All of this is to say that the telegraph was a mediator between the places it brought in touch rather than a mere intermediary. Telegraphic connections were embedded in a plurality of other connections and unfolded their significance in relation to those. A well-known example from mid-nineteenth-century British India can serve to illustrate this: the so-called telegraph fraud.

In India, first steps towards the establishment of a domestic telegraph network had already been taken in the early 1850s. While its size and reliability remained limited well into the 1860s, the network was soon put to use in transregional business operations – sometimes in particularly creative (and illegal) ways, as the case of a ‘telegraph fraud’ occurring in India around that time illustrates. Quoting from the Bombay Gazette of 27 February 1861, Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper on 31 March 1861 reported on The Telegraph Frauds in India where ‘[a] few speculators in opium have caused messages to be most grossly falsified whilst passing through the wires between Galle and Bombay’. Apparently, two telegraph signallers, George Pecktall and William Allen, who had both been dismissed from service in the Indian telegraph office, had been approached by dubious speculators and hired to find a way to interfere with the telegraph system. Pecktall and Allen obliged, somehow managed to obtain a battery and signalling apparatus, ‘and proceeded to a spot in the immediate vicinity of the village Beebee chawaddee, about four or five miles off at the foot of the Katruj Ghaut, over which the telegraph wire from Sattar passes’. There, they cut the telegraph wire and inserted their own apparatus into the circuit which enabled them to intercept messages and forward them in falsified form. The messages concerned dealt with opium prices and ‘enormous sums of money were alleged to be made by the parties in the secret’. Despite the fact that the telegraph line had been temporarily disrupted and that suspiciously high profits were made, the fraud was only discovered when full information on opium prices reached Bombay by steamer from Galle.

This brief example emphasizes the consequences that the radical de-contextualization of information could have. The capacity and code limitations of the telegraph influenced the choice of information that was to be transmitted. Stock and commodity prices were usually wired in the most concise form possible: the name of the company or good(s) and its price in figures. This
practice obliged both the requirements of the telegraph and of the business community whose members were interested in the fast transmission of the quotes. Therefore, next to no general economic context was transmitted between Galle and Bombay by telegraph. From the vast body of information and knowledge available at Galle, only a very specific selection of quantifiable information was communicated to Bombay telegraphically. There, the recipients had practically no means to check and verify this rudimentary information. More extensive background reports were sent to India in letters, but these arrived only quite some time after the telegrams. For the moment, the only available knowledge context for the price information to be integrated into was the experiences, assumptions, expectations and beliefs of the Bombay merchant community. The fake price information amalgamated with the existing knowledge about markets, commodities and the Galle opium trade to create a body of knowledge vastly different from that existing at Galle. The telegraph could provide no additional information that could have contributed to the earlier detection of the scam. Quite the contrary, it seems reasonable to assume that the fact that the falsified opium prices have been delivered by telegraph lent them particular credibility as this was the medium of choice of the business community and, of course, was held in high esteem by those who were affluent enough to use it.

That two telegraph operators with next to no experience in the financial or merchant business could tamper with the telegraphic messages at all has its reasons in the concise nature of electric communication as well. It would have been much harder to alter economic background information in a meaningful way that would not arouse suspicion with the Bombay merchants. Bare price figures, however, could be tampered with rather easily and quickly. Only single code signs needed to be altered – there was no in-built control mechanism such as a broader context that could have revealed the falsification. Of course, almost all channels of communication can be manipulated in one way or the other – directly or indirectly so. In the case of the telegraph, however, interception and falsification was particularly easy and successful as the de-contextualized information on the wire travelled so much faster than the context. In addition, the telegrams carried the meta-information of accuracy and timeliness. All of this combined to present the forged information as particularly palatable to the Bombay recipients.

The example of the telegraph fraud in British India illustrates quite clearly how the connections provided by the telegraph did much more than just bring two places, in this case Galle and Bombay, in touch. The nature of the connection impacted on what could be said and what could not be said. It was relevant for how people would communicate over great distances, which topics they chose to talk about and which information they privileged. In this way, the technology unfolded a much more complicated influence on communication than merely speeding it up. It was significant for the interpretation of the contents. The connection served as an intermediary that shaped the relation between origin and destination. The example also highlights how connections always need to be considered in the plural. The telegraph provided an additional channel of communication that rather complemented than superseded established forms of information exchange such as letter writing. It attracted users with specific communicational purposes who were prepared to pay relatively high rates, while other content was almost entirely left to the existing media. In short, the new system was integrated into an existing system of communication and transport technologies and had to relate to those. It constituted one among many means of exchanging information.

**Conceptualizing connections in transcultural research**

Both examples have been taken from historical research. They highlight from different angles the significance of the specific nature of a connection. What has been demonstrated in a
historical context with a focus on key technologies of globalization holds true for transcultural research in general as well. In a broad sense, transcultural research is interested in what happens when different cultures come into contact. In this regard, it is centrally concerned with the connections between these cultures and their relevance for the lives of the people. From a conceptual viewpoint, connections are the single smallest elements in this regard. Drawing on metaphors, we can think of them as either the atoms of transcultural research or as the lowest common denominator of the other conceptual terms already introduced above. The notions of cultural transfer, entanglements, contact zones or even networks all build on cross-cultural connections as their principal elements and assign them a particular socio-cultural role. It follows that a precise understanding of what we mean by transcultural connections is indispensable. What is a connection and when does it become transcultural? How is it established and how can it be maintained? What are its spatio-temporal characteristics and how do they give a specific connection its particular character? How and why do transcultural connections work differently than local, inner-cultural connections? Why are acts of border-crossing, of covering distances etc. so significant in this regard to justify a specific field of research? This and many other questions need to be kept in mind in transcultural research.

In practical terms, this amounts to a widening of focus when we study transcultural phenomena. As discussed, currently most research in this regard is concerned with that which is connected, not with the connection itself. Our attention rests on the endpoints of the connections we study. The procedural character of the connection, its own space and its own time remain understudied. To widen our focus means to look at the connection and that which is connected in tandem. It reveals how connections are historical arenas of their own, how they provide a distinct environment for historical actors that differs significantly from other environments (see ship passages), or how they shape the form and interpretation of the exchange (see telegraphy). It also reveals how transcultural connections always exist in the plural and how they derive their particular significance in their relation to other forms of contact and exchange. Ultimately, such a recalibration of the research focus will allow us to be much clearer about the specific quality of transcultural phenomena. After all, we often forget that societies are always products of connections. Humans as social beings depend and thrive on connections, some of them very local and immediate, others more expansive. Social communities are built up by a host of different connections between their members. Thus, the humanities are always concerned with the study of connections, no matter if one makes it explicit or not. Regarding the study of transcultural connections, we must then ask what distinguishes them analytically from other forms of connections. What is special about long-distance or border-crossing connections? How does the act of transgressing a boundary give them a new quality apparently not found in other forms of connections? What on first sight seems to be self-evident, is actually a fundamental conceptual issue in transcultural research. Taking a close and careful look at the connections themselves, examining them as mediators and assessing their role in a plurality of connections is a first and necessary step towards solving this issue.

Notes
1. The suitability of this instrument for the field of global history is not undisputed. The concept of *histoire croisée*, for instance, doubts that deeply interwoven subject matters can be meaningfully analysed by comparison.
2. For the notion of a contact zone see Pratt (1992).
4. Recently and expertly, for instance, in Miller (2012).
5. Most of these studies have been concerned either with the professional life of the crew, with pirates and pirate life or with the significance of the so-called middle passage in the slave trade. See, for instance, Ashmore (2013), Christopher et al. (2007), Diedrich et al. (1999), Hyslop (2009), Kempe (2010a, 2010b), Linebaugh and Rediker (2000), Rediker (1993, 2007), Smallwood (2007) and Steel (2011).

6. For a comprehensive history of telegraphy in the United States see the recent studies of David Hochfield (2012) and Richard John (2010).

7. The handiest introduction to the history of the telegraph in a British domestic context still comes from Jeffrey Kieve, while others have examined the different phases of development individually. Barton (2010), Kieve (1973), Perry (1997) and Roberts (n.d.).

8. See, for instance, Holtorf (2013) and Müller-Pohl (2010).


10. I have discussed the associations that the term ‘dematerialization’ carries and the benefits that applying the term brings elsewhere (Wenzlhuemer 2013).

11. This thought has been pioneered by Carey (1983).

12. Ross’s manual on style in telegrams does, however, mention one proposal to further increase brevity that was not adopted:

   A man high in American business life has been quoted as remarking that elimination of the word ‘please’ from all telegrams would save the American public millions of dollars annually. Despite this apparent endorsement of such procedure, however, it is unlikely that the public will lightly relinquish the use of this really valuable word. ‘Please’ is to the language of social and business intercourse what art and music are to everyday, humdrum existence. Fortunes might be saved by discounting the manufacture of musical instruments and by closing the art galleries, but no one thinks of suggesting such a procedure. By all means let us retain the word ‘please’ in our telegraphic correspondence.

   (Ross 1928)


14. In the Abstracts from the Annual Reports of the Superintendents of Circles for the Year 1862–1863, reference was made to the case. ‘On the 24th of January 1863, George Pectall [sic] [..] incautiously made some admission as to the party who bribed William Allen and himself to cut the wire in February 1861. With the assistance of the Police, it was ascertained that one Nim Chund Melap Chund, a Marwarree Merchant, was the instigator, and he was convicted in the High Court and sentenced on the 6th April to two years’ imprisonment with hard labour’ (British Library 1863).

15. This is a well-known phenomenon in the history of technology and has, for instance, been discussed in Edgerton (2007).

Bibliography


