Compared with Morse code, which required specific expertise to send and receive telegrams, Louis-François Breguet’s dial telegraph was, on the face of it, a snap. No complicated code of dots and dashes to memorize—just move the pointer to the appropriate letter and send the signal. On the other end, the needle on the receiver [above] would point to that letter. Breguet’s 1842 invention drew on his knowledge of watchmaking—the family business—and its clocklike face was easier to read than William Cooke and Charles Wheatstone’s needle telegraph of 1837. Although Breguet’s design allowed for 25 letters—the letter W was left out—and 25 numbers, there was no room for the diacritical marks that are widely used in French and many other languages. Morse code, by contrast, could accommodate special characters, and for this and other reasons, it eventually prevailed.

For more on the history of telegraphy, go to https://spectrum.ieee.org/pastforward0918