

Get the message?

Your mobile phone vibrates in your pocket. 'Need to see you,' reads the screen. Nothing new, considering that texting is currently the most common form of long-distance communication. But how were messages conveyed in the past?

One of the first methods was the smoke signal. This practice was used by Chinese soldiers guarding the Great Wall to warn of the enemy's approach. The Greeks devised a whole alphabet of smoke signals for sending messages. But it was Native Americans who made the system mobile by carrying small bunches of dried grasses around with them. These could be lit quickly from any place at any time.

Moving on to messages transmitted by sound, an early technique was the drum. Drums are still used today in the rainforests of Africa, Papua New Guinea and Central and South America for broadcasting news. The instrument is made from a hollow log and this is hit with a stick. On receiving the message, each village passes it on to the next, which means that news can travel at up to 150 km an hour.

Another instrument traditionally used for long-distance communication is the alphorn. These four-metre long wooden horns were common in most mountainous regions of Europe and their deep rich sound could be heard over 6 km away. Farmers would use them to send messages across the valley as well as to call in their cows. Today, the alphorn is a form of entertainment, and Switzerland alone has around 4,000 players.

In some parts of the world, humans are able to convey messages over long distances without using instruments. On La Gomera, one of the Canary Islands, people use Silbo, or the 'whistling language' to communicate across the valleys. The language involves the use of the tongue, lips and hands to make sounds, which can travel up to 5 km. To ensure its continuation, Silbo is currently a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools on the island.

A look at long-distance communication would not be complete without mentioning the art of yodelling. This is a form of singing, in which the voice changes pitch very quickly, making it easily heard over long distances. It is believed that the technique was developed in the Swiss Alps, but it is also found in other places such as Central Africa. At one time, yodelling was popular in theatres and music halls, but this is no longer so.

1 What was most remarkable about the Greeks' system of smoke signals?

A It could communicate words.

6 Which of the statements about the alphorn is FALSE?

B It could be used instantly. C It could distract the enemy. D It could stop wars from breaking out. 2 What was most remarkable about the Native Americans' system of smoke signals? E It could communicate words. F It could be used instantly. G It could distract the enemy. H It could stop wars from breaking out. 3 What is common to all of the places where the drum is used for long-distance communication? I The land is covered by trees. J They are all on the same continent. K The people have very good hearing. L The inhabitants can run very fast. 4 What is the advantage of communicating by drum? A The length of the message. B The simplicity of the instrument. C The speed of the transmission. D The volume of the sound. 5 Which of the statements about the alphorn is TRUE? E An alphorn is the approximate length of one tall person. F At one time, alphorns could be found all over the world. G Farmers used them just for communication. The art of playing the alphorn is still alive today.	A An alphorn is the approximate length of two tall people. B Alphorns could be found in one particular continent. C Farmers used them just for communication. D The art of playing the alphorn is still alive today. 7 How do the people of La Gomera make the sounds of Silbo? A With an instrument. B With their mouths and their hands. C With their mouths only. D With their tongues only. 8 Why is Silbo unlikely to die out? A It is a very easy language. B It is passed down from parents to children. E It is taught in the island's schools. F It is the only way to communicate over long distances on the island. 9 What would be an accurate definition of 'yodelling'? A Moving frequently between high and low notes. B Shouting in a loud voice. C Singing a recognisable tune in harmony. D Using music with a really strong beat. 10 Today yodelling is still popular E as a form of entertainment. F as a means of communication in some areas. G as a technique used in opera. H as a way of calling animals.
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