

Culture and Communications in the Early Nineteenth Century

Communication is, as John Durham Peters observes in his intellectual history of the topic, "...one of the characteristic concepts of the twentieth century."¹ The concept of communication has been of persistent interest to scholars throughout the last hundred years, from philosophers to political scientists to psychologists, as well as those that study the distinctly twentieth-century fields of marketing and public relations. But while the explosion of academic interest in the topic of communication that Peters describes dates back to the time after World War I, and finds its roots in the late nineteenth century, communications has only recently begun to emerge as an important concept for many historians, especially among cultural historians and historians of technology.

Communications provides historians with some their most valuable resources. Letters, newspapers, books—the majority of many of our sources are artifacts of particular communications technologies, shaped by the particular moment in the history of communications in which they were created. And yet, they are often treated as if they are simply neutral containers, vessels that transfer information from one place and time to another. Yet this is not the case—communications technologies shape culture and are in turn shaped by culture. They impact and shape the way that different messages are transmitted, even as cultural forms reiterate in one medium after another. This paper is a look at the relationship of culture and communications in the early nineteenth century, drawing from the historiography of the topic to argue that we must, when

¹John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001), 1.

looking at cultural forms, be mindful of the communications technologies through which they are transmitted, while simultaneously contextualizing them within a broader communications environment of the time.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Communications

To look at the role of communications in history, we must first ask ourselves what we mean by the term “communications.” This is a difficult question, as the term is often used in many different ways. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams points to the multivalent nature of the term: “In the main period of development of roads, canals, and railways, **communications** was often the abstract general term for these physical facilities.”² That is, its meaning was much closer to its Latin root: *communicare*, to share or make common—a term most often linked to tangible goods and physical duties rather than symbols or ideas.³ Williams points out the sharp division between *transportation* and *communication* wasn’t truly firm until the mid-twentieth century, and further advises that “In controversy about communications systems and communications theory it is often useful to recall the unresolved range of the original noun of action, represented at its extremes by *transmit*, a one-way action, and *share*... a common or mutual process.” And points out that the many intermediate senses of the term can often be interpreted in either direction, to very different consequences.⁴

² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 72. Emphasis in original.

³ Peters, 7.

⁴ Williams, 1985. 72-73.

So what *is* communications? Aiming for a sufficiently broad working definition, I would describe communications as the instrumental deployment of technologies (and their accompanying social and cultural practices) by which individuals or groups transmit information to other individuals or groups.

Even such a seemingly straightforward definition requires some unpacking. Technology is another multivalent, difficult term, even among historians who study it. In general, I am attracted to Alex Roland's definition of technology as "systematic, purposeful manipulation of the material world." According to Roland, technology "...has four components: materials, technique, power, and tools or machines. Thus technology is the process of applying *power* by some *technique* through the medium of some *tool* or machine to alter some *material* in a useful way."⁵ Yet Roland's definition is in certain cases still too narrow. James Given has argued that even "political activity can be understood as a form of technology, as a body of specific techniques for manipulating social relations."⁶ While Given's definition may seem problematically broad, it does allow for technologies which are not a given tool, but an organizational structure.

One example which makes this clearer would be the United States Post Office Department of the Early Republic. The postal system involved a set of specific technologies—the saddlebag and portmanteau that held the mail in transit, the mail case for sorting mail by destination or recipient—but it is also useful to think of the postal system *itself* as a technology. The appointment of postmasters in various cities

⁵ Alex Roland, "Theories and Models of Technological Change: Semantics and Substance." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 1992), 83.

⁶ James Given, "The Inquisitors of Languedoc and the Medieval Technology of Power." *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 2 (April 1, 1989), 337.

and towns, the hub-and-spoke system by which mail traveled, arriving in in one postmaster's office, sorted by destination, and sent along to the next postmaster in that general ordinal direction—all of this constituted a technology by which mail traveled across a still-sparsely inhabited nation. And yet the overall *organizational structure* was as important—if not more important—than any individual tool to the ability of the mail to arrive at its intended location. The systemic arrangement of human behaviors can be a technology. In other words, if we return to Roland's definition, the *tool* of a technology can be an organizational structure, rather than a physical object.

If our definition of communications is centered around technologies, it must also include those technologies' accompanying social and cultural practices. In the history of technology, advocates of the social construction of technology (SCOT) have, in recent years, argued that technologies must be understood within a social milieu: culture shapes the priorities of research and development, and the success or failure of a technology is contingent upon the acceptance of users. Users often ultimately determine whether and how a technology is used. Ronald Kline gives an example of this phenomenon in his discussion of rural telephone users in the early twentieth century. Rural users highly prized the sociability that came with the ability to have multiparty calls and to "listen in" on their neighbors on party lines. Phone companies, which felt that this was an improper use of the technology that placed too much stress on the early network, adapted multiple strategies to discourage such behavior, even including legislation in some states. But ultimately, the only way that this type of behavior was ended was by advances in the technology that allowed the phone providers to eliminate

the party line in favor of individual lines for households.⁷ Users determine the cultural and social practices that constitute “proper” use of a technology. These practices bound communications technologies in ways that are completely foreign to the actual technology itself.

It is widely accepted by cultural historians, in the wake of structuralism and post-structuralism, that everything is a “text,” all human activities are inherently part of a sign system that can be read, interpreted, and deconstructed. So if everything can be read, how is everything not “communications?” This is a difficult question, but an important one. I would argue that in part, it comes down to the social understanding of the technology being so deployed. Foodways and fashion can be read as texts, they involve a technological component, and they can be used to communicate ideas, but they are not communications, because the transmission of ideas is a second-order function for these cultural activities. They sometimes are used to communicate an idea, and can always be read, but they are not technologies that by design transmit ideas.

Culture and Communications: An Ecological Approach

Broadly speaking, there are two primary ways that scholars have looked at the relationship between culture and communications—the media theory approach, which looks at the way that communications media have served to shape and transform culture and even fundamentally alter the mind, and the cultural theorists, who see communications as a medium through which culture is transmitted. It is my contention

⁷ Kline, Ronald. “Resisting Consumer Technology in Rural America: The Telephone and Electrification.” In *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technologies*, edited by Nelly Oudshoorn and T. J. Pinch, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003) 53-58.

that both of these approaches can add to our understanding of the interaction of communications and culture, and that we need to do more work to integrate these approaches, to try to establish a more integrative approach to the study of communications.

Harold Innis was a Canadian economic historian whose research focused on the role of economic staples and empire. In the first thirty years of his career, he focused on these themes with a focus on specific staples of the Canadian economy, such as the fur trade and cod fishing, with an eye to the way these economic activities shaped British imperial interests in the area. Even in these studies, his interest can be seen as relating to “communications” in the older sense of the term, as movement and exchange of goods— and indeed, in the period when the fur trade and cod fishing were primary staples of the Canadian economy, the Hudson Bay, Mississippi, and St. Lawrence were primary conduits of information as well as goods.

However, when Innis began looking into the wood pulp industry, his focus shifted somewhat to communications in the sense we tend to understand it today. In his 1950 monograph *Empire and Communications*, Innis reacted strongly against a perceived creeping United States colonialism based on the US’s status as a central purchaser of Canadian wood pulp to feed its ever-growing communications industry, which in turn had strong impact on public opinion. Innis expresses a deep discomfort with “a new type of imperialism imposed on common law in which sovereignty is preserved *de jure* and used to expand imperialism *de facto*.” Canada, he asserted, had been “used as a means of penetrating the British Commonwealth.”⁸

⁸ Harold A. Innis, *Empire and Communications*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 195.

Innis's book was not simply a reaction against the expanding imperialism of the Cold War United States, however, as Innis did not limit his book to an account of just the wood pulp industry in Canada. Instead, he traced a history of various empires to their media of communication, looking at Egypt's use of both stone and papyrus, Greece's extensive oral culture, the use of papyrus to bolster the growth of the Roman bureaucracy, the movement from parchment to paper in the late Middle Ages, finally ending with the rise of pulp paper as a replacement for rag stock. In this sweeping account, Innis came to believe that "Monopolies of knowledge... developed and declined partly in relation to the medium of communication on which they were built,"⁹ and that various media, as he would state overtly in the title of his next book, had inherent biases:

The concepts of time and space reflect the significance of media to civilization. Media that emphasize time are those that are durable in character, such as parchment, clay, and stone. The heavy materials are suited to the development of architecture and sculpture. Media that emphasize space are apt to be less durable and light in character, such as papyrus and paper. The latter are suited to wide areas in administration and trade.¹⁰

To Innis, the physical characteristics of different media biased them toward different sorts of empires, they shaped human civilization by their inherent physical attributes.

Innis's younger colleague at the University of Toronto, Marshall McLuhan, definitely claimed a kinship to Innis's work. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan described Innis as "the first person to hit upon the process of change as implicit in the forms of media technology," and described his work as "a footnote of explanation to his

⁹ Innis, 192.

¹⁰ Innis, 26-27.

work.”¹¹ He later wrote introductions to editions of Innis’s *Empire and Communication* and *The Bias of Communications*. Some view the connection between the two authors as tangential at best, however. According to James Carey, “All they have in common is that both unwittingly contributed to what later became a subject matter. Innis was an economist... His central concepts are economic ones, or at least the extensions of economic concepts into the domain of culture... The focal point of McLuhan’s work was the direct alteration of persons in their inner natures via technologies...”¹² Daniel Czitrom, however, has argued that McLuhan’s work after his first book, *The Mechanical Bride*, bears a certain amount of Innis’s influence. Where the first volume was basically a New Critical approach to analyzing the subject matter of advertising, after that, “McLuhan borrowed from Innis the tools with which to extend an aesthetic doctrine into an all-encompassing theory of social change. Innis’s historical and economic studies provided the intellectual legitimacy for McLuhan’s grand leap from investigating the forms of transmitted messages to the forms of transmission themselves.”¹³

There is definitely a case for looking at Innis as an intellectual predecessor of McLuhan—in many ways, it is a small jump from Innis’s assertion that media have biases to McLuhan’s famous pronouncement that “the medium is the message.” But in temperament and approach, he was quite different. Coming from a background in literary criticism, prone to bold, aphoristic, and endlessly quotable pronouncements,

¹¹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962) 63-65.

¹² James W. Carey, “The Bias of Communications: The Classic Work on Communication by the Man Who Inspired Marshall McLuhan.” *Canadian Historical Review* 74, no. 3 (September 1993), 441.

¹³ Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983) 172.

McLuhan was a public intellectual and agent provocateur who, in the 1960s, became the face of media studies, at a time when people were questioning the impact of living in a world profoundly changed by media, especially television.

For McLuhan, the information or signifying acts conveyed by a communications medium was not merely secondary, it was almost irrelevant. "...The 'message' of any medium or technology," he argued, "is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs."¹⁴ While McLuhan's "scale," "pace," and "pattern" in some way echoed Innis's discussion of media's biases toward time or space, Innis was still very conscious of the content conveyed by media, whether they be Roman edicts to the hinterland or the content of the American print media and their influence on Canadian public opinion. To McLuhan, however, the medium took center stage, as "...the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph."¹⁵ In the context of this infinite regression, McLuhan's approach was to interpret the media not as technologies for the conveyance of information or thoughts, but as any technology that extended the human senses. Thus the first medium he discussed at any length in *Understanding Media* is not writing or television, but the electric light.

This definition of media as extensions of the human senses, or even of our very nervous system outside our bodies, was revealing of McLuhan's ambivalence toward the nature of media and technology generally. While one can read a real hope in the notion of media as a sort of cybernetic extension of man, that enable us to transcend

¹⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003.) 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 19.

time and space, McLuhan also worried about the effect of these extensions on the mind. For while media extended the mind, he also worried that they numbed other parts of it. Extension came with amputation, new forms of perception came at the cost of old forms.¹⁶

McLuhan was a product of his time, highly popular and influential on a large scale. His mass appeal was amplified by his media savvy as a public figure: McLuhan made frequent television appearances, despite his suspicion of the medium, released a record to accompany his book (with designer Quentin Fiore) *The Medium is the Massage*, and perhaps most iconically appeared in a cameo in Woody Allen's classic 1977 film *Annie Hall*. He was canny and adroit in his dealings with and negotiation of mass media, which he seems to have regarded as his best opportunity to spread his message. But this celebrity-academic status also served to fuel a deep backlash against his work.¹⁷

It would be understandable for historians not engaged with contemporary media theory, especially, to regard McLuhan as an historical footnote, a blind alley of media scholarship. His propensity for aphorism and prophetic pronouncements— often initially challenging but sometimes quite superficial upon critical analysis— in many ways place him within a historical milieu of the 1960s, a time when media-savvy would be prophets mingled freely with spiritual snake-oil salesmen and celebrities. But McLuhan's concerns about the extending nature of media and its accompanying losses has

¹⁶ Ibid. 66-70.

¹⁷ For a good discussion of McLuhan's use of mass media and the backlash against it, see James C. Morrison Jr, "Marshall McLuhan: No Prophet without Honor" in *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Public Intellectuals, Academia and the Media* ed. Saleem Ali and Robert Barsky. (Draft manuscript, <http://www.mit.edu/~saleem/ivory/ch2.htm>)

continued in the works of popular authors like Neil Postman, and more recently in books such as Sven Birkerts's *The Gutenberg Elegies*, David Weinberger's *Everything is Miscellaneous*, and Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows*. The interest in these concerns is not limited to non-academic writers, either: as the digital humanities have grown in stature in the last few years, questions about the way that new media and new technology influence thought and shape discourse are coming to have growing importance among American scholars in that field. Historians who are being pushed to revisit these questions by the emergence of the digital humanities would do well to look at the long tradition of media theory that has persisted in Canada and Germany especially since McLuhan's heyday.

Friedrich Kittler is perhaps one of the best examples of how contemporary media theory has embraced McLuhan's work and taken it even further. Kittler's early work was primarily focused on discourse, and on integrating French poststructuralist theory into German philosophy and letters. He later turned to looking at how technology transmits, influences, and alters discourse, and his work from this period integrates many of McLuhan's ideas into those of Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida. Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* brings together French critical theory, Canadian media theory by means of McLuhan and Innis, and German philosophy and a deep affinity for anglophone engineering pioneers from Edison to Turing. Kittler's technological determinism is apparent from the very beginning, as the book opens with the assertion that "Media determine our situation..."¹⁸

¹⁸ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), xxxix.

Kittler “collects, comments upon, and relays passages and texts that show how the novelty of technological media” such as the phonograph, cinema, and the typewriter, looking to literature and philosophy to find traces of the “terror of their novelty” in “the founding age of technological media...” While Kittler admits that “...stories of this kind cannot replace a history of technology,”¹⁹ *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* is a book that should be required reading for historians interested in the history of communications. Kittler’s interpretation, in the “Typewriter” chapter, of the changes in Friedrich Nietzsche’s writing as he moved from writing in manuscript to a Malling Hansen “writing ball” typewriter, to a female typist and secretary is a striking look at the impact of communications technology on culture, as well as the gendering of certain types of intellectual and information-work labor, and one hopes that it will inspire further research on the topic.

Given the cultural turn in late-twentieth-century historiography, it is unsurprising that many historians have rejected or ignored the technological determinist interpretations of communications theorists like Innis, McLuhan, and Kittler. Instead, many historians have looked at the ways that communications, rather than changing culture, can actually reinforce and even reify cultural constructs. This is certainly a valid and necessary critique, but I worry that this rejection has led many historians to look at communications as technologies without inherent biases, values, and contours. Even if, as the constructivists in the history of technology would suggest, these biases and values are determined in part by social forces. They are nevertheless important, and should be noted. Despite this, the way that many cultural historians have approached

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *xl*.

the impact of communications has been extremely productive. Largely these approaches have centered around the ways that communications media transmit culture, and the ways that the transmission of culture can have a transformative effect.

Jürgen Habermas's 1962 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has likewise been deeply influential among cultural historians for its concept of the public sphere. Habermas looked at the rise in the eighteenth century of a new order, a "bourgeois public sphere," which can be described as "the sphere of private people come together as a public," able to "engage... in a debate over the general rules governing the rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor."²⁰ Habermas argues that this claim upon the right to public debate and discussion had wide-ranging effects on the information, economic, and governmental regimes of the modern era.

Communications is key to Habermas's understanding of how and why this structural shift occurred, as well as to the nature of the public sphere itself. The rise of mercantile capitalism (itself deeply rooted to communications, if we recall that in the pre-telegraph era, the communication of goods and information were virtually synonymous²¹) necessitated a more efficient means of communicating commercial information to an emerging mercantile bourgeoisie. This created an economic demand for commercial news letters and political journals, which addressed trade and market issues as well as the doings of government, the occasions of dignitaries and royalty,

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991) 27.

²¹ "The most important fact about the telegraph is... It permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation." James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. (New York: Routledge, 1989) 203.

etc., thus drawing the merchant class into a publicity which had previously been only the realm of ruling elites.²² While he does not mention it explicitly, the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire's *Reichspost* and other private postal networks reinforced this communication of news. As the rising merchant class came into this world of public discourse, they began to presume a right to publicity— to speak to, disagree with, and engage in “rational-critical debate” about government and economy.

Habermas's work deals exclusively with Europe and primarily with Germany, and historians have noted that the evolution of the public sphere must be seen somewhat differently in the new world, occurring at a somewhat different rate and influenced by different market forces. Nevertheless, as historians have come to pay more attention to race, class, and gender, the concept of the public sphere has a distinct appeal to historians interested in issues of citizenship and democracy, as it can provide a much more nuanced understanding of these issues than citizenship or franchise strictly defined by law. Both inclusions and exclusions from the public sphere can be much more fluid than legalistic citizenship and civil rights, allowing historians new venues by which to explore the complexities of these issues. Groups often are able to assert some claim to the public sphere before they are granted full citizenship, but exclusions on the right to public discourse are also made upon groups that legally speaking benefit from citizenship. In this way, the public sphere has been adopted by many as a model that can challenge and disrupt a whiggish narrative of expanding franchise.

²² *Ibid.*, 20-23.

Like Habermas, whose work he builds upon, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, first published in 1983, has provided many cultural historians with a theoretical approach that provides a narrative that points to the way that culture shapes the state and politics. Anderson builds upon Habermas's ideas of the expanding market, print, and their relationship to the state, but focuses primarily on how individuals who had been historically divided by space, language, and other concerns came to see themselves as part of a larger nation-state. Anderson argues that print-capitalism—the market in printed materials—created an environment where individuals could move from a primarily oral, local consciousness a sense of national belonging, due to the creation of standardized linguistic communities that extended beyond the limits of the individual's contact or travels. New print consumers began to think of themselves in national terms.

These “imagined communities” of national consciousness were not without limits, however. The standardization of regional dialects in the growth in print capitalism created both an “us,” a sense of national belonging, and an “other,” a notion of those-that-are-not-of-the-nation, linguistic borders that relate to but do not necessarily match national borders. To Anderson, the adoption of standardized print vernaculars was essential to the creation of nationalism.²³ Anderson's central argument is not about communications—it is an argument about community, and about the nature of the state. But the centrality of print-capitalism to the development of these “imagined communities” of nationalism points to the way that one communications medium served as midwife to the notion of the modern nation-state.

²³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition. (New York: Verso, 1991) 44-45.

In both Habermas and Anderson, the role of communications is that of an enlarger of culture. Habermas's birth of the public sphere occurred because of a structural transformation in the market and communications that allowed for cultural claims on a new form of political subjectivity. In Anderson, the nation-state is culturally "imagined" into being by communities united by print culture. The dominant mode in most cultural histories dealing with communications is to engage with critical theory to trace out the way that cultural tropes, modes, or shifts play out and propagate through communications media.

While the determinism of many media theorists and the cultural approach to media are both heavily driven by theory, historians of technology have been much less theoretically rooted. This is not to say that there have not been debates about various theories in the history of technology, indeed there have,²⁴ but theoretical considerations have been largely secondary in the historiography of that field. Indeed, Alex Roland, president of the Society of Historians of Technology (SHOT), said as much in a 1997 address to that organization: "Women's History, for example, virtually requires a familiarity with feminist theory, just as labor history demands fluency in Marxism. But the history of technology strikes me as neither theory-driven nor theory-dependent. This is not for lack of sound theoretical work... Yet this theoretical literature has failed to congeal into a fixed set of approaches or foundations for our discourse."²⁵

²⁴ For a good overview of the theoretical debates in the historiography of technology, see R. A. Buchanan "Theory and Narrative in the History of Technology." *Technology and Culture* 32, no. 2 (April 1991): 365-376; and Eda Kranakis, "Surveying Technology and History: Essential Tensions and Postmodern Possibilities." *Technology & Culture* 46, no. 4 (October 2005): 805–812.

²⁵ Alex Roland, "What Hath Kranzberg Wrought? Or, Does the History of Technology Matter?" *Technology & Culture* 38, no. 3 (July 1997): 705.

Theory is not the driving force within the field of history of technology, as it is with the other groups discussed previously. Rather, the important factor that unites and defines historians of technology is an emphasis on technology as the product of history. Media theory looks at how technology shapes culture. Cultural histories of media look at how culture is transmitted via communications technologies and received by their audiences. The history of technology, when it looks at the culture, tends to look at how culture shapes the development of technology, or how users influence the shaping of technology. Again, Roland's address is instructive: "While we have concentrated over the last quarter century on explaining the nature of technological change, other historians want to understand technology as an engine of historical change. We have focused of late on the way in which context shapes technology; others want to know how technology shapes context."²⁶

Each of the approaches discussed in this section have their advantages and limitations. While outright determinism of any sort is a dangerous strategy in historical interpretation, it is undeniable that communications media have their own contours — that they do some things well and other things less well, and that these aspects shape how they are used, in turn shaping culture, as communication is inherently the transmission and navigation of culture. Likewise, looking at the ways that culture is transmitted, navigated, and shaped within communications media is a valuable strategy, and allows us to deconstruct and denaturalize cultural formations, and can be an invaluable inroad into how discourses shape society. Finally, historians of communications technology are right in believing that we must understand why a given

²⁶ Roland, 1997, 713.

technology developed in the way that it did if we are to truly understand how they work and why, questions that in turn have powerful effect on the way that culture is transmitted through the medium.

As more historians investigate the connection between culture and communications, I would argue that a more integrative approach is needed. Neil Postman coined the term “media ecology” in 1968, in an address to the National Council of Teachers of English. Postman was deeply determinist in his view of communications technologies, and described media ecology as the study of

...the interactions between people and their communications technology. More particularly, media ecology looks into the matter of how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how our interactions with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival. The word ecology implies the study of environments: their structure, content, and impact on people... Media ecology is the study of media as environments.²⁷

Postman’s use of the term is deeply entrenched in his own technological-determinist view media, as well as the time in which he was writing. After *Silent Spring* and just before the advent of Earth Day, it is easy to imagine Postman viewing television, for example, which he was not kind to throughout his work, as akin to DDT: a technology that was initially thought to be harmless that had poisoned the media ecosystem. There is an underlying assumption in Postman’s comments that there is some sort of “natural state” that is being disrupted that is particularly discomfoting. However, the notion of deep interconnectedness and unforeseen effects within a deeply complex system is very apt to understanding the workings of communications in history.

²⁷ Neil Postman, “The Reformed English Curriculum.” In *High School 1980: The Shape of the Future in American Secondary Education*, edited by Alvin C Eurich and Academy for Educational Development, 160–168. (New York: Pitman Pub. Corp., 1970.) 161.

If communications media must be understood ecologically, they cannot be addressed individually. And some of the most exciting works in the recent historiography of communications have indeed represented a more integrative approach, refusing to be limited to a single communications technology or medium. W.T. Lhamon's *Raising Cain* and Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise* are both looks at the practice of blackface minstrelsy that foreground minstrelsy's slippery nature, bridging different media and different genres from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. Likewise, Linda Williams's *Playing the Race Card* looks at the trope of racial melodrama—a narrative mode connected with different stories about race, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to media coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial. In these books, continuities of cultural forms across different media are more important than the individual forms taken in each medium, though there are definitely significant differences between media uses—minstrelsy was a very different thing during the career of Jim Crow than it is in the radio show “Amos & Andy,” but the ability to make these trans-media shifts points to the profound strength of certain cultural formations, despite the power of shifting media forms.

Other historians have been even more wildly integrative. Paul Starr's *The Creation of the Media* is, despite being a work of synthesis and survey, one of the most important books on the history of communications in the last ten years. Starr looks at the history of communications in America from colonial times to the middle of the twentieth century, laying out a brilliant argument that the structure of communications in culture are often the result of “constitutive choices” made at moments when economic, technological, legal, and cultural forces align in certain ways. The effect of these

constitutive choices is not always understood at the time, or even foreseen, but they create a situation of path dependence, where structures “lock in” to one option to the exclusion of others, even when those other choices may seem better than the choice made in hindsight. Essentially, Starr makes a strong argument for the way that radical changes occur within a communications ecosystem that is understood from cultural, legal, economic, and technological points of view.

Culture and Communications in the US in the Early Nineteenth Century

What would such an ecological understanding of communications and culture look like when viewed as a driver of historical change? In this final section, I would like to sketch out some of the contours of such a historiography, looking at the United States in the Early Republic and Antebellum Era. While it might be unsurprising to most to describe the twentieth century as a period of multiple communications revolutions, I would argue that looking to the period between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, it becomes apparent that the entire history of the United States as a nation can be characterized as one of near-constant and revolutionary shifts in communications, and subsequently in the media ecology of the nation.

Communications was an essential factor in the cohesion of colonial American identity in the eighteenth century. This would become very important to the media ecology of the new nation. Ned Landsman has argued that the increased speed and efficiency of trade and communications brought colonial Americans into the British world of letters and print culture, introducing them to evangelicalism, the scientific revolution,

and the Enlightenment, effectively transforming them from “Colonials to Provincials.”²⁸ Michael Warner’s *The Letters of the Republic* has similarly traced the deep importance of print culture and textuality to eighteenth century anglophone America, arguing “that the national state grounded its legitimacy not just in the people or the rule of law... but in the very specific formations of print discourse...”²⁹ Looking at the American colonies in the period leading up to the Revolution, T.H. Breen argues in *The Marketplace of Revolution* that growing trade between the colonies, and the resulting patterns of trade and communications, bound the disparate colonies in common cause. Indeed, Breen’s treatment of boycotts points to their importance as communicative practices in the lead-up to the Revolution.

The importance of communications to colonial life and the growth of the Revolutionary movement in America left a strong imprint on the new nation. Two important sections in the constitution give evidence to this importance: the granting to Congress the right “To establish Post Offices and post Roads” in the enumerated powers of Congress in Section 8, and the First Amendment. As Paul Starr has noted in his history of communications in America, *The Creation of the Media*, the full implications of the free speech clause of the first amendment took quite some time to be a settled matter, but “the press clause in the amendment suggests that the Founders

²⁸ Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680-1760*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ Press, 1997.) 5.

²⁹ Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.) xiv.

were concerned not just with individual rights but also with the institutional role of the press.”³⁰

It was not until four years after ratification that Congress passed the first act pertaining to the post, the Post Office Act of 1792. According to historian Richard John,

The Post Office Act of 1792 shaped American postal policy in three major ways. First, it admitted newspapers into the mail on unusually favorable terms, hastening the rapid growth of the press. Second, it prohibited public officers from using their control over the means of communication as a surveillance technique. And third, it established a set of procedures that facilitated the extraordinarily rapid expansion of the postal network from the Atlantic seaboard into the transappalachian West. While the full implications of these changes would only become clear with the passage of time, taken together, they were much more than merely an incremental modification of the status quo.³¹

Indeed, John cites the Post Office Act of 1792 as beginning the nation’s first full-scale communications revolution, one that fundamentally changed the nation over the next 35 years. Each of these aspects of the act had profound effects: the insurance of the privacy of mailed materials was a radical change in a time when government surveillance of the mails was a regular occurrence.³² Taken together with the low rates for newspapers— rates so low that newspapers would become the bulk of the mail, subsidized by high letter mail rates— it becomes obvious that the Second United States Congress recognized the importance of the trusted and efficient movement of

³⁰ Paul Starr, *The creation of the media: political origins of modern communications*. (Evanston, Ill.: School of Communication, Northwestern University, 2004.) 75-76.

³¹ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.) 31.

³² Starr, 95.

information to the health of such a large, new nation.³³ Moreover, as John argues, building on Benedict Anderson and Habermas, these provisions also contributed to a radical expansion of the public sphere in the highly-literate new nation, and helped to build national identity by creating a nation of news and letters. Finally, the establishment of the Post Office Department in 1792 was the beginning of the first national bureaucracy in the Federal Government, and began a precedent of bureaucratic public service and internal improvements in the Early Republic, a time when many historians contend that government organs of such size and reach were unthinkable.

Daniel Walker Howe, in his survey of the Jacksonian Era *What Hath God Wrought*, argues that John's "communications revolution" is a better guiding principal by which to look at the early nineteenth century than Charles Sellers's "market revolution." "During the thirty-three years that began in 1815, there would be greater strides in the improvement of communication than had taken place in all previous centuries. This revolution, with its attendant political and economic consequences, would be a driving force in the history of the era."³⁴ Indeed, as Breen and others have argued, colonial America was starting to come into a market economy in the pre-revolutionary era, and while this growth of the market economy grew and even quickened in the early nineteenth century, it was nowhere as radical a change as the shift engendered by the Post Office Act of 1792.

³³ For an excellent institutional treatment of the relationship between the US Post Office Department and the news media through the Antebellum Era, see Richard Burket Kielbowicz, *News in the mail: the press, Post Office, and public information, 1700-1860s*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989)

³⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: the Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 5.

The impact of the Post Office Act extends beyond just the mail. In subsidizing newspapers with low postage and allowing free exchange of reading copies between editors, newspapers became even more important to the expanding American reading public. Jeffery Pasley has argued in his *The Tyranny of Printers* that newspapers— at the time largely one-man affairs put together by a single editor and cribbing news and articles freely from other like-minded papers— were essential to the formation of the First Party System, that "Party newspapers embodied the parties in a quite literal sense." According to Pasley, "Each editor was his party's principal spokesman, supplier of ideology, and enforcer of discipline in the area and political level he served"³⁵ The 1798 Sedition Act, while it was meant to stifle partisan attacks on Federalist leaders, actually fueled the growth of the opposition newspaper network that it was intended to suppress. Newspapers encouraged feelings of party membership and encouraged popular participation in electoral politics, and as Pasley argues, actually *created* party politics. By the 1820s and 1830s, newspaper editors were second only to lawyers in terms of appointments to government positions. In this way, editors were promoters and beneficiaries of a less deferential politics.

An often-mentioned problem of the notion of literacy and reading as cornerstones of the public sphere is the exclusions it creates. Women, African Americans, and the illiterate poor are often excluded from the world of letters. However, there are also ways in which the engagement with reading produces a perceived belonging and right to publicity can be read as more inclusive. Mary Kelly's essay "Reading Women/Women Reading" points to the importance of reading as a practice of self-fashioning in

³⁵, Jeffrey L. Pasley, *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001.) 12-13.

Antebellum America. Kelly focuses on women's engagement with books, most likely because they were considered a more appropriate reading material for women than newspapers, but her findings nevertheless illustrate the ways that women:

shared discoveries, exchanged volumes, and suggested titles. Together they measured and interrogated responses. Some institutionalized this practice in literary societies, sewing clubs, and reading classes. There they made the books they read together a medium of exchange and they constructed a common world, the acquaintance with other women who shared their engagement with reading and their aspirations, that enabled reading women to fashion themselves.³⁶

Women— at least some women— though they may have been rare as speaking and writing subjects in the public sphere, were certainly able to construct themselves as part of the imagined community through engagement with print, and did so in significant numbers.

As for the African American community, James Sidbury's *Becoming African in America* is a fascinating account of black self-fashioning focused on the trope of African-ness and a pan-African identity among blacks in the Early Republic, before the embrace of racist whites of African colonization groups made the notion of "African-ness" an anathema. Looking at the works of African American writers, the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and early black-led African colonization schemes, Sidbury demonstrates that there was a black community of letters and that tropes such as a diasporic African identity were transmitted and transformed through it. Finally, while literacy rose consistently through the Early Republic and Antebellum Era, illiterate individuals certainly did face exclusion on this front— especially enslaved African Americans in the South. However, literacy is a notoriously problematic metric to gauge

³⁶ Mary Kelly, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America." *Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (September 1996): 403.

well in history, and it is difficult to assume too much about either inclusion or exclusion based on literacy numbers for this reason.³⁷

However problematic the category of literacy may be, the press began to address a far wider audience in the 1830s, with the advent of the penny press. The rise of the steam-powered press decreased the labor cost of printing while the Fourdrinier paper machine lowered the cost of paper (which was still made from rag stock until the 1860s). This allowed for yet another revolutionary moment in nineteenth century communications, the dropping of some newspapers' price from six cents to a single penny. As Michael Schudson has argued, the penny press represents a radical shift in the news industry: "The penny papers made their way in the world by seeking large circulation and the advertising it attracted, rather than by trusting to subscription fees and subsidies from political parties. This rationalized the economic structure of newspaper publishing."³⁸

With this rationalized model of publishing came a new model of journalism, no longer limited to reporting on commercial, foreign, and political news. To appeal to a mass readership, the penny press reshaped what was acceptable to publish as news. One way that this manifested itself was in reporting on the sometimes personal, sometimes quotidian affairs of the wealthy elites. They pushed the commonly-accepted

³⁷ There is varied body of work that addresses this topic, but two authors who tackle it with brevity, clarity, and adroitness would be Michael Schudson, *Discovering The News: A Social History Of American Newspapers*. (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 35-39; and David M. Henkin, *City Reading*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 20-23.

³⁸ Schudson, 18.

boarders of public and private, and would report on the personal habits of statesmen or the conduct of the wealthy at public events.³⁹

Another way that penny papers pulled at this boundary between public and private was reporting on crime. Previous to the penny press, accounts of criminal activity were not seen as fit material for newspapers. But in the penny papers, they were seen to be a matter of interest to the readers— and when the readers were *very* interested, the crime stories became quite sensationalized, drawn out, investigated and debated from every angle. Patricia Cline Cohen's *The Murder of Helen Jewett* is an excellent account of one of the first crime stories to seize the public interest— the 1836 murder of the prostitute Helen Jewett, in her bed, by one of her frequent customers. The story had sensational violence, sex, and it pitted a fallen woman against a man who worked among the growing class of young single male clerks in major urban areas, a man of good family standing.⁴⁰

Finally, the penny press was also susceptible to outright humbug and commercial manipulation. One particularly flagrant example is the “moon hoax” of 1835, when the *New York Sun* published a series of six articles about the discovery of life on the

³⁹ Ibid., 28-31.

⁴⁰ It is also, because of the serialized publication of the letters between Jewett and her murderer more than ten years after her death by the *New York Police Gazette*, a very astute look at practices of epistolary self-fashioning in the time between two people whose records would otherwise be lost to history.

It is also worth noting that the increased sensationalism of suddenly-cheaper newspapers coincides with and compliments an expanding world of other forms of sensationalistic, cheap print. For a good starting place to look at the similarities and interrelationships between the penny press, dime novels, and story-papers, one would do well to read Shelly Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*. (Berkeley Calif. ; London: University of California Press, 2002.)

moon.⁴¹ While it is not the central focus of the book, James Cook's *The Arts of Deception* gives great insight into how P.T. Barnum manipulated the penny press to his commercial advantage— often with conflicting reports from various fictional individuals, mailed to editors from various cities. Likewise, one could gain many accounts of this from Barnum's own autobiography: it was not something he was shy about. Editors were likely not particularly upset by such manipulations by individuals like Barnum, for two reasons: they were sensational content that drove readership, especially in cases like Barnum's, where they were used to generate debate and controversy. And a good story that drove readership, as we can see from the various occasional hoaxes, was not something that editors were adverse to, even when they might have suspicions about the report's veracity. Simultaneously, Barnum was an advertiser, and as Schudson has pointed out, advertising in the penny papers "became more strictly an economic exchange, not a moral one: older journals had often refused to print ads for what they believed to be objectionable advertising... Penny papers were self-righteous in defending their wide-open practices..."⁴² If a fraudulent report drove advertising, an editor might be willing to turn a blind eye.

In July of 1835, a mob of men entered the Charleston, South Carolina post office under cover of night and stole a large number of abolitionist mailings— periodicals advocating against slavery. The next night they burned the periodicals before a large audience of the city's whites, along with effigies of several leading abolitionists. The

⁴¹ While aimed at a broader popular audience, a good, readable account of the "moon hoax" can be found in Matthew Goodman, *The Sun and the Moon: The Remarkable True Account of Hoaxers, Showmen, Dueling Journalists, and Lunar Man-Bats in Nineteenth-Century New York*. (New York: Basic Books, 2008.)

⁴² Schudson, 19.

mailing of abolitionist literature was a crime in South Carolina, but not where the tracts were mailed, and not nationally. Nevertheless Postmaster General Amos Kendall, upon complaint from the local Postmasters in South Carolina, decided to enforce an embargo against abolitionist literature traveling to the South via the Post Office Department. To Richard John, this prohibition was the end of the revolution that began with the Post Office Act of 1792. In John's analysis, these events

...are best understood as the response of Southern slaveholders and their Northern antiabolitionist allies to the challenge that the prior expansion of the postal system posed to the conventional assumptions about the boundaries of American public life. The abolitionists had attempted to expand these boundaries to embrace the slavery issue, and the antiabolitionists frustrated their designs.⁴³

John's essential argument that the embargo on abolitionist literature was about a reaction of certain elites to the expansion of the public sphere engendered by the past forty-three years of expanding postal coverage is compelling. However his belief that this event effectively killed the egalitarian and democratizing force of the Post Office over the next thirty years may have been somewhat premature. David Henkin, in *The Postal Age*, very effectively argues that what we might even describe as a second postal revolution that resulted from the postal rate reductions of 1845 and 1851. These reductions switched from charging for letter mail by page to charging by weight, nearly eliminating charges for distance, discounting for prepayment,⁴⁴ and drastically reduced rates overall.⁴⁵ The effect of these reforms was that letter-writing was no longer

⁴³ John, 1998, 260.

⁴⁴ Stamps were not issued by the federal government until 1845 and not required until 1853. Prior to the stamp, many letters were paid upon delivery, a system that put the postal system at constant and frustrating economic liability, as there was no way to insure that individuals would pick up mail sent to them.

⁴⁵ David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006.) 22.

prohibitively expensive in order to subsidize periodical mail, and far more Americans were able to afford to write letters. Letter-writing dramatically increased, and the writing of letters among individuals of modest means for personal correspondence rather than business purposes became a common occurrence. At a time when the nation was expanding due to imperialism and growing more mobile, ties of friendship, kinship, and nationhood could be reinforced by this newly-affordable mode of communication.

While the egalitarian impulse in the American communications environment had not disappeared, we can see elite backlash against it in varied forms from 1835 on. Michael Schudson gives a brief but telling account of James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* and the "Moral War" against it that began in 1840. Bennett aimed, with the *Herald*, to attract a middle-class readership as well as a broader popular audience. One important way that he did this was with the "money article"— a new form of financial reporting that offered analysis rather than simply the raw facts of the old six-penny financial press. There is strong evidence that this technique worked, and that Bennett was in fact able to attract the middle-class audience that so often eluded the penny press publishers.

In 1840, the *Commercial Advertiser* attacked the *Albany Argus* for an article that stated that, while much of the *Herald's* content was not worth reading, the money article was influential and thus important. At that point, rather than lowering their own prices to a more competitive rate or incorporating a more analytical-narrative mode of reporting in the vein of Bennett's, the leading six-penny Wall Street papers did everything in their power to drive Bennett out of business. Papers openly accused the *Herald* of indecency, libel, and blasphemy. Hotels and clubs were directed to stop stocking the *Herald* or lose

their subscriptions to the financial papers. Advertisers were boycotted that would not stop paying for space in the *Herald*. Bennett and his paper survived, but they suffered a major drop in circulation for several years as a result of these attacks.⁴⁶ The deep animosity of these attacks belies the six-penny papers' situation: that of an entrenched old order threatened by a changing communications environment that was more radically egalitarian.

Karen Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women* is a brilliant look at the rise of the "cult of sincerity" in the 1830s and 1840s, and its subsequent shift, within a generation, to a formalized artifice of self-presentation. Halttunen traces the rise of this sentiment of sincerity through advice manuals, fashion magazines, etiquette books, and parlor plays— in other words, through media by which people train themselves in self-fashioning and self-presentation, media in which they consume and internalize the semiotic codes by which they present themselves to the world. As some reviewers have noted, Halttunen's argument is somewhat weaker when looking for the *cause* of this shift. She tends to argue that it has to do with rising urbanism and the resulting uncertainty about the identity and character of those around you— the need to be cautious to avoid the stereotyped "confidence men and painted women" of the book's title.

This argument seems plausible if not fully convincing. But I would also argue that Halttunen's argument would be much strengthened by paying attention to the communications environment in which her subjects were fashioning their senses of self, and indeed to the very fact that the way they did so was by engagement with particular

⁴⁶ Schudson, 55.

types of media. If the period of the 1830s and the 1840s was a period in which there was backlash by elites about the expansion of the public sphere by a shifting media environment with strong egalitarian tendencies, then the types of books, magazines, and entertainments that Halttunen analyses can be interpreted as part of that backlash, as media marketed to those who wanted to reify difference and uphold class privilege, as well as to those who are looking for ways to slip into class privilege, to become part of elite culture.

Her sources were reactionary guidebooks, and the forms that the cult of sincerity took—modesty and gentility, the naturalized performance of Christian virtue—can be seen as a reaction to growing sensationalism, increased understanding of crime through the penny press, increased formalism in communications like letter-writing as letter mail became more affordable, etc. The cult of sincerity was about performing difference from the masses that were increasingly vocally claiming a place within the public sphere, a retrenchment to defend and even expand class difference. Indeed, it is worth noting that the “confidence men and painted women” who inspired so much anxiety, as much as they were a real possibility in an increasingly anonymous urban environment, were also cultural tropes that were playing out more and more frequently in the increasingly sensationalistic media.

This elite backlash against the enlarging public represented by the growing popular audience did not go unnoticed, either, and there was a counter-backlash. Laurence Levine has identified the Astor Place Riot in 1849 as one of the earliest moments in what he described as the “bifurcation of culture” in the middle to late nineteenth century, as elite audiences began a process of geographic separation from

the popular audience, stylistic departure from popular amusements, and finally the division of culture into “high” and “low.”⁴⁷ Yet looking at the event through the lens of communications suggests that these are factors that have been at play, in sometimes fairly dramatic confrontations, for at least fourteen years. A communications history approach could lend further understanding of the rivalry between the actors William Charles Mcready and William Forrest that precipitated the riot, as it played out in the press, as well as the response of the city in the aftermath: Levine cites multiple accounts from the penny press that seem to have interpreted the event as an act of aggression by elites, via the proxy of the militias that fired upon the crowd, against a broad public that was within its rights in expressing its rejection of Mcready’s perceived elitism and anti-Americanism.

The time after the Civil War would see many further shifts in the communications ecosystem that brought America ever closer to the more familiar twentieth century environment: the expansion of the telegraph and the advent of the telephone, the birth of the Railway Mail Service that all but ended the hub-and-spoke mail system that had existed since before the Revolution, the formation of the major news wire services and syndicates, and, toward the end of the century, the invention of the phonograph and motion pictures. The pace of rapid, frequent revolutionary shifts in the communications environment continued. But this was nothing new. It had been part of the history of the United States since the nation’s beginning.

⁴⁷ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.) 63-68.

The suppression of abolitionist mails, the “Moral War” against the *New York Herald*, the rise of the cult of sincerity, and the Astor Place Riot aren’t necessarily events that would seem inherently linked. But I hope I have shown how, when we look at the history of communications with an eye to the interrelatedness of various forms of communication, we can see how they were all part of a series of interrelated cultural moments. My intention with this historiography was not to be complete, but to sketch around a narrative thread that showed how the approach I am advocating might enrich our understanding of history. There were definitely threads in the history of the antebellum communications ecology that I omitted because they did not fit with the thread I was tracing out: the sabbatarian conflict over the post and the canal systems during the Second Great Awakening, for example, or the impact of the postal road system. While I delved into the increasing political and cultural import of editors in the Early Republic, I did not discuss the role of postmasters in politics, which is a glaring omission when one looks at the role some local postmasters played in party politics, and the fact that Postmasters General have been deeply influential on presidential policy and campaigning from the Jackson administration to Nixon. Perhaps most glaringly, I omitted the advent of the telegraph. My logic there was simply that, given my chronology, I didn’t want to drop the thread of the history of telegraphy at the Civil War, as much of the most compelling parts of that history go throughout the War, Reconstruction, and into the Progressive Era, as we see the emergence and maturation of the American telecommunications network.

Additionally, there are topics that are simply under-explored. I believe there should definitely be more work done on the nineteenth century system of lecture circuits

as a form of technologically-assisted and technologically-dependent form of communications. Likewise, the entire history of mail processing is a topic that has been critically under-researched by historians, a fact that is especially disappointing because no historians seem to have tried to mine the deep and idiosyncratic knowledge of philatelists interested in postal history— the study of stamps and covers to illuminate and illustrate the history of postal systems. The postal history community is in many cases neither trained to or concerned with contextualize their knowledge to larger historical issues, and even most historians of the postal system have given short shrift to the methods and technologies of postal sortation and transportation.

Despite these omissions and lacunae, I hope that this paper has illustrated my central arguments: that communications is an important aspect of cultural history that deserves further and deeper research, that the history the early nineteenth century, and indeed of the United States, can be traced in terms of a whole series of revolutionary shifts in the media ecology, and that when we are mindful of the interconnections and links between various forms of communications and the broader culture, connections can become apparent that would not have otherwise.

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