The Electro Magnetic Telegraph – A Great Revolution Approaching. So ran the headline of a glowing editorial that James Gordon Bennett featured in the New York Herald in May 1845. Though the country’s first telegraph link – a forty-mile line between Washington, D.C., and Baltimore – had been open to the public on a fee-for-service basis for only a month, and while New York City had yet to be linked with the nation’s capital, it seemed self-evident to Bennett that the new medium was destined to have ‘the most extraordinary effects.’ Prominent among them would be the rapid obsolescence of the handwritten letter. Now that the public had an alternative to the post office, Bennett predicted, the ‘present system of epistolary correspondence’ would be ‘entirely revolutionized’ and the ‘mail system’ entirely ‘broken up.’ Who in the future would bother to pen a handwritten letter that might take days to arrive, now that it had become possible to communicate immediately over the wires?

Bennett’s prognosis was characteristic of mid-nineteenth-century pronouncements concerning the relationship between the telegraph and the communications media that predated it. Commentator after commentator predicted that the new medium would render letter-writing superfluous and usher in a new era of instantaneous communications that would have far-reaching consequences for politics, commerce, and culture. Once the telegraph network had been filled out, gushed Maine journalist and one-time Congressman Francis O. J. Smith in the same month, only newspapers and the other ‘heavier, grosser matters of correspondence’ would continue to go in the mail. Henceforth, every interest – political, social, commercial, and industrial – would find in the new medium a ‘sine qua non’ as ‘indispensable to success as the morning napkin is to comfort and cleanliness.’ The ‘truth’ is, Bennett pronounced in July 1845, ‘the telegraph will supersede the present system of communicating intelligence by mail.’ And for the press he elaborated, the consequences of this shift would be especially dramatic. Once it became possible for journalists to obtain up-to-date information instantaneously from any location to which telegraph wires had been strung, the multitude of newspapers that aspired to be mere ‘vehicles of intelligence’ would be ‘destroyed.’

Bennett and Smith were, of course, wrong about the allegedly imminent obsolescence of the handwritten letter. In fact, at virtually the same moment that they were predicting that the telegraph would supersede the mail, Congress enacted the landmark Post Office Act of 1845, which, by radically lowering the basic letter-postage rate, prompted a major uptick in postal correspondence that would usher in a golden age of epistolatory in the United States. Notwithstanding this boom in letter-writing, however, the ruminations of telegraph enthusiasts like Bennett and Smith were at least in one sense perceptive. For they underscored the symbiosis that existed in nineteenth-century
America between two literary genres that are often treated in isolation: the handwritten letter and the telegraphic dispatch, or what would soon become known as the telegram. The nature of this symbiosis is the central theme of this chapter, which surveys the relationship between the letter and the telegram in order to gain a better understanding of the character and significance of an oft-overlooked dimension of the nineteenth-century informational environment.

It is perhaps unsurprising that in recent decades the telegraph has been often compared, either explicitly or implicitly, with more recent communications media—not only email, but also radio, television, and text messaging. All of these media rely on electricity, and the telegraph was the first electrically mediated communications medium. Expansive claims about the consequences of the telegraph abound. It has been, for example, credited with the streamlining of journalistic prose, the proliferation of organic metaphors for the human body, and the popularization of novel kinds of spirituality. Few have made the analogy between past and present quite so baldly as the journalist who, in 1998, labeled the telegraph the 'Victorian Internet'.

Such analogies persist, and, with them, a panoply of misleading assumptions. The Internet has become since the 1990s a mass service that is broadly accessible to the entire population. The telegraph, on the other hand, remained throughout the nineteenth century a specialty service for an exclusive clientele. The capacity of telegraph wires was limited, costs were high, and network providers ordinarily charged by the word. The typical telegram consisted of fewer than ten words and, to economize on bandwidth, was often sent in code. Moreover, no telegram was truly private. Every message was sent over a public wire, and the vast majority presupposed the engagement of at least two highly skilled operators to code and decode the message, as well as one of the thousands of messenger boys telegraph companies employed to ensure that messages were promptly delivered by hunting down their recipients. Not until 1910, with the much-ballyhooed rollout of an inexpensive 'night letter,' would the country's leading network provider, Western Union, reconfigure the telegraph as a social medium for ordinary people. This was true even though telegraph critics had been urging lawmakers to establish a cheap and accessible 'postal telegraph' since the mid-nineteenth century. The British public had enjoyed the benefits of cheap telegraphy since 1870, but before the second decade of the twentieth century, most Americans regarded the receipt of a telegram as a harbinger of urgent, and typically bad, news—rather than, as has become common with email today, a ubiquitous feature of everyday life.

In this respect, forecasters like Bennett and Smith had it backwards. For in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was the letter, and not the telegram, that became the primary medium for long-distance communications. The Post Office Act of 1845 did far more than the telegraph to hasten the emergence of 'modern communications' in the United States: by drastically lowering the basic letter rate, it established the institutional preconditions for an unprecedented explosion in correspondence that would touch virtually every segment of the population. It is not the telegraph, in short, but the mail, that deserves to be remembered as the true Victorian Internet.

Nonetheless, it is understandable that cultural commentators like Bennett and Smith were so mistaken. When they wrote about the respective merits of the telegraph and the mail, they were, after all, by no means impartial observers. Bennett, like many newspaper editors, quite plausibly feared that the telegraph would disrupt his business model. As with most newspapers of the period, the Herald obtained much of
its copy though a federally subsidized newspaper exchange service that was operated by the U.S. Post Office Department. The service was free, the organization politically accountable, and the information abundant—in fact, there was no limit to the number of other newspapers that an editor could receive through the mail. The commercialization of the telegraph threatened these institutional arrangements. Since the new medium was faster—a key consideration for newspaper editors—it rendered the exchange service superfluous, raising for Bennett the unsettling prospect that a privately owned and operated network would henceforth become the primary source of the time-specific fillips of information on commerce and public life that were commonly called news. Henceforth, Bennett warned, newspapers would be at the mercy of corporate "monopolies" that they lacked the means to control. To forestall this disturbing eventuality, Bennett repeatedly urged Congress—albeit unsuccessfully—to buy out Samuel Morse's patent rights and graft the telegraph onto the Post Office Department. The Post Office was, at least in theory, self-supporting, he argued, and it obtained all but a tiny fraction of its revenue from the postage on letter mail. In Bennett's view, if letters were doomed, then Congress would have no choice but to act.

Francis O. J. Smith had, if anything, an even more obvious reason to hype the new medium. As a silent partner in Morse's venture, Smith owned a one-quarter stake in Morse's patent rights. If the government bought Morse out, Smith was guaranteed a financial windfall that would save him the trouble of figuring out how to make money from a venture that remained, in 1845, highly speculative. The extent to which both Bennett and Smith misread the future is made plain by the subsequent history of the telegraph and the mail. Despite the determined publicity campaign launched by industry critics to lobby for a 'postal telegraph,' the letter and the telegram had surprisingly little in common. Indeed, in hindsight, it is not obvious why a telegram should be characterized as a letter at all. In an age in which the carefully crafted letter was widely regarded as a mark of refinement, the vast majority of telegrams were short, artless, and banal. And unlike letters, they were written not in the hand of the author, but in that of the telegraph operator, a major drawback during a period when handwriting was widely regarded as an index of character.

The primary advantage that the telegram had over the letter was the superior speed of its delivery. Yet for many if not most mid-nineteenth-century letter-writers, the significance of this advantage was relatively modest, since the Post Office Department was rapidly taking advantage of the railroad, the steamboat, and other transportation improvements to convey at low cost millions of letters at speeds that were fast enough for all but a tiny percentage of users. The telegraph was so expensive, observed one commentator in 1856, that its use was necessarily restricted to the 'wealthier classes.' The mail, by contrast—being 'cheap, uniform, and certain'—was 'emphatically' the "institution of the middling and poorer classes of the community." Not surprisingly, the new medium would remain confined to merchants, journalists, and other wealthy insiders for decades to come. In the 1880s, for example, a mere 5 per cent of the revenue obtained by Western Union came from social correspondence. Fewer than 2 per cent of the American people, in the estimation of company president Norvin Green, would ever have the occasion to send a telegram at all.

The limitations of the telegraph as a social medium were not confined to its high cost. Although the champions of cheap telegraphy lauded the new medium as transparent, in fact, every telegram bore unmistakable signs of a human intermediary. Unlike
a posted letter, which provided its recipient with the tactile pleasure of handling an object that had been signed and sealed by someone known to them, and that had been touched by no one else during its transmission, the telegram was, as one critic observed in 1856, "incapable" of conveying the "private feelings and sentiments" of one friend to another. Letters, another commentator elaborated in 1884, had for their recipients a multitude of attributes that telegrams lacked. These included the physical pleasure of possessing a three-dimensional object whose penmanship constituted an unmistakable proof of the sender's presence. Telegrams, by contrast, were coldly informal, and often presented "names wrongly spelled," making them "about as well adapted for chirography" as a "buckwheat pancake." There were "thousands of businesses of private enterprise," Norvin Green declared six years later, in which the "people at large" were more interested, and in which, therefore, lawmakers had more cause to intervene if they wished to "lighten the burdens of the people." If the cost of sending a telegram were no greater than the cost of sending a letter, Green predicted, it was still unlikely that more than 10 per cent of Americans would make the switch. In the main, Green was correct: even after Western Union introduced its cheap and convenient "night letter" two decades later, the primary medium for long-distance social communication in the United States remained the posted letter, not the telegram.

It is one thing to highlight the limitations of the telegram as a genre of correspondence, but quite another to ignore the high hopes with which the new medium would come to be invested. Among the topics that contemporaries found most intriguing was the likely relationship between the cost of sending a telegram and the evolution of the English language. The New York lawyer Conrad Swackhamer can fairly be said to have initiated this line of speculation with a remarkable essay entitled "Influence of the Telegraph upon Literature," which he published in the United States Magazine and Democratic Review in 1848. The subject of his essay, Swackhamer posited, was novel: most of the speculation about the new medium up to that point had focused on high-stakes contests over patent rights, contracts, and rights of way. Swackhamer, on the other hand, instead of reiterating these familiar concerns, tackled a "comparatively unimportant branch" of the topic — namely, the cultural consequences of the new medium. The telegraph, Swackhamer argued, had the potential to facilitate the "perfection" of literature by encouraging "FACILITY and CLEARNESS" of expression. Should telegraph users wish to emulate the "florid verbosity" of the essayist Samuel Johnson or the "polished sentences" of the journalist Joseph Addison, they would pay a premium for their literary pretensions. Writing, in this respect, would come to more closely resemble thought, and as it did, the more "perfectly" would language "perform its office," since: "Every useless ornament, every added grace which is not the very extreme of simplicity, is but a troublesome encumbrance." The "telegraphic style," Swackhamer concluded, was "terse, condensed, expressive, sparing of expletives and utterly ignorant of synonyms." Its influence, he predicted, would not be confined to the relatively small percentage of Americans for whom the new medium had become a necessity. In addition, it would be felt in every newspaper in the country that broadcast telegraphic news. That is, it would be
through the press that the influence of the 'telegraphic style' would be most widely felt, a process that was even more certain to render obsolete the stylistic flourishes of a Johnson or an Addison. Of the canonical English writers, Swackhamer suggested, only Shakespeare—who wrote with a 'Yankee directness' that revealed his 'prophetical vision of the future public taste'—provided a trustworthy template for the writers of the future. 33 All of the other literary giants of the past would soon be forgotten, for 'all that is great and memorable in the past grows dim in the distance,' while before us lie the 'isles of engines, where the human race are to live by machinery, and flash from point to point in polar magnetic chariots.' 34

Swackhamer's thinly veiled contempt for the English literary canon illustrates the extent to which ruminations on the telegraph often had more to do with aesthetic preferences than with the actual attributes of this new medium. Much the same might be said of later commentators. Ernest Hemingway, for example, famously attributed his spare writing style to the lessons he had learned as a foreign correspondent. 'Cablese,' as Hemingway termed it, helped form him as a writer. 35 Even so, the 'chastening of American prose style' that Edmund Wilson traced to the second half of the nineteenth century would almost certainly have occurred had the telegraph never been invented. 36 To be sure, writers such as Emily Dickinson, Frederick Douglass, and Walt Whitman did frequently use telegraphic metaphors in their prose. 37 Yet none of these writers actually composed many telegrams, a circumstance that implies—by Swackhamer's own logic—that the new medium had, at best, an indirect influence on their literary style. 'The uncertain and muted effects of the telegraph upon literary style,' as the telegraph historian David Hochfelder has observed, 'suggest that a technology's effects upon cultural production depend on the scope and intensity of its use. In the telegraph's case, the medium was only part of the message.' 38

The framing of generalizations about the stylistic features of letters and telegrams is constrained by a startling asymmetry. Carefully edited volumes of letters abound, yet comparable published collections of telegrams are virtually non-existent. This is presumably because nineteenth-century Americans lovingly saved the letters that they received, and editors have followed their lead. Countless posted letters are meticulously preserved in archives, where they have long been a major resource for scholars; archival collections of telegrams, in contrast, while hardly unknown, are relatively rare. 39 Lacking such resources, cultural historians have instead often generalized about the new medium on the basis of fictional telegrams, such as those dispatched by Ralph Touchett's mother in The Portrait of a Lady (1881), in which Henry James explains her mastery of the 'art of condensation' by referring to the fact that she 'chiefly communicates @. by means of telegrams.' 40

With the exception of highly specialized groups such as female telegraph operators, the usage patterns of telegraph users have only rarely been studied in detail. 41 One exception is President Abraham Lincoln. As the commander in chief of the Union army during the Civil War, Lincoln sent almost a thousand telegrams that have been preserved in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. 42 Given his office and the seriousness of the situation with which he was confronted, Lincoln was unconstrained by the issues of cost and access that dogged most American users of the telegraph. It is therefore all the more suggestive of his understanding of the medium that his telegrams were rarely more than a few sentences long, and were sometimes composed but not sent, in the conviction that they might fail to convey his precise meaning. 43
The telegram, as the leading scholar of this subject has concluded, sat on the ‘lowest rung’ of Lincoln’s ‘communications ladder,’ below the handwritten letter and the face-to-face conversation. For Lincoln, the primary value of the new medium lay not in the fact that it permitted him to reach out to his officers in the field, but rather in the information that he obtained from it about the progress of the war.

One realm in which telegrams did eventually come to rival letters was diplomacy. With the completion of a transatlantic telegraph cable in 1866, the U.S. State Department found it possible for the first time to communicate more or less in real time with other governments and its own diplomats in the field. Even here, price remained a constraint. The first encoded transatlantic message sent by Secretary of State William Seward cost the State Department $19,540, an enormous sum for which Seward was roundly criticized, and which was long remembered, along with his support for the annexation of Alaska, as one of ‘Seward’s follies.’ The high cost of cabling significantly limited the utility of this new medium. Yet even if used sparingly, the very fact of its existence had the effect of centralizing American diplomacy by limiting the discretion of foreign ministers. No longer could diplomats posted to distant countries plead ignorance of their superior’s intentions. This technical improvement could sometimes prove counterproductive, though. In a diplomatic crisis, for instance, rapid-fire telegraphic exchanges often only increased tensions, complicating the task of keeping the peace.

In looking back on his tenure as Britain’s ambassador to Washington during the American Civil War, Lord Richard Lyons reflected that had an Atlantic cable linked the United States and Great Britain during these years, diplomatic protocols would have collapsed and the two countries would almost certainly have come to blows. Subsequent events bore out Lyons’ concern. Thus the easy exchange of diplomats’ telegrams between the United States and Venezuela would be a key factor in the exacerbation of hostilities between those two countries in the 1890s. Instead of making communications more transparent, the telegram, as one historian of nineteenth-century international relations has put it, ‘undercut customary diplomacy’ and ‘cast an ominous cloud over the geopolitical environment.’

The advantages of the telegram as a means of communication were especially evident in the business world. The primary advantage of the telegraph over the mail was its speed, and time-specific information was the soul of commerce. Not surprisingly, merchants were early adopters of the new medium. Even so, a great deal of business communication continued to take place by letter. Even at Western Union, senior executives maintained massive letterbooks in which clerks recorded their outgoing correspondence. Business users preferred the mail not only because it was cheaper, more familiar, and more flexible, but also because it was widely perceived to be more secure. To be sure, many nineteenth-century business users sent telegrams in code, enhancing their confidentiality. Yet the new medium was emphatically not foolproof; codes could be broken, telegraph operators could make mistakes, and telegrams could be subpoenaed. The possibility that supposedly secret telegrams might become public knowledge was a recurrent concern. Long after a telegram had been received, the telegraph company that had sent it retained a transcript to provide evidence in court cases. Western Union, for example, retained copies of every outgoing telegram for at least two years after it had been sent. It is thus not surprising that even virtuoso telegraph users such as Jay Gould—a wily financier who displayed great ingenuity in using the telegraph to plant deceptive newspaper stories to advance his business interests—wrote out a
multitude of letters in his own distinctive hand, which his associates dubbed ‘blue jays’ on account of the color of their ink. Here, too, telegrams were, in the end, less important as a medium for outgoing communication than as a tool for monitoring time-sensitive developments in the wider world.

The single most important arena in which the letter and the telegram vied for dominance in nineteenth-century America was journalism, a realm in which the high-speed transmission of time-specific information had long been a priority. It was here that the relationship between the letter and the telegram was the most complicated, and where the influence of the telegraph on letter-writing was most widely discussed. The letter had, of course, been an important journalistic genre since at least the end of the seventeenth century. Both European and American newspapers routinely printed (and reprinted) individual paragraphs, as well as longer pieces, that had been sent to them by distant informants, who were commonly known as ‘letter-writers.’ In fact, newspapers themselves were often regarded as quasi-public epistles, a perception reflected in the frequent use of the term ‘News-Letter’ in their mastheads and prospectuses. In the United States, these practices were carried over into the early decades of the nineteenth century, when newspaper editors routinely ran items that consisted, in their entirety, of letters containing information on events in distant localities that had been sent to their office by trusted individuals living in the city or town from which they reported. Typically, the letter-writer was not identified by name. ‘We have copied to-day a letter on commerce in Boston ‘from an intelligent person,’ declared the editor of the Washington-based National Intelligencer in 1815: ‘Articles of this description ... should receive a cordial welcome, as tending to instruct the various sections of the country in each other’s resources and capacity for improvement, as well as to elicit, by temperate discussion, the best lights on the all-important topics connected with internal improvement.” This practice was so common that letter-writing contributors who were presumed to have specialized knowledge about particular topics had been known since the eighteenth century as ‘correspondents,’ a term that remains current in the journalistic profession today.

The letter remained a distinct journalistic genre even after the telegraph changed its relationship to the reporting of current events. Once editors became accustomed to receiving a steady diet of time-specific information over the wires, they stopped relying on letter-writing correspondents for the most up-to-date news. The telegraph, as media critic James W. Carey has explained, ‘eliminated’ any need for the composition by out-of-town correspondents of lengthy letters that ‘announced events, described them in detail, and analyzed their substance.” Carey exaggerated when he contended that the resulting newspaper prose was ‘lean and unadorned’: in fact, telegrams were often rewritten in-house to make news stories more prolix. Yet he was right to highlight the emergence, following the commercialization of the telegraph, of the ‘stringer,’ a new kind of pay-as-you-go, out-of-town journalist (named after the ‘string’ of column inches that they submitted to their newspapers every month to settle their accounts). Stringers ‘supplied the bare facts’ via telegraph to a distant colleague, who transformed these facts into copy. The resulting bifurcation of story and storyteller, in Carey’s view, had a pervasive effect on journalistic prose. As he puts it, in an oft-cited passage:

The wire services demanded language stripped of the local, the regional and the colloquial. They demanded something closer to a ‘scientific’ language, one of strict denotation where the connotative features of utterance were under
control ... If a story was to be understood in the same way from Maine to California, language had to be flattened out and standardized. The telegraph, therefore, led to the disappearance of forms of speech and styles of journalism and storytelling — the tall story, the hoax, much humor, irony, and satire — that depended on a more traditional use of language.\textsuperscript{58}

Although Carey overstates the influence of the telegraph on journalistic prose, his hypothesis can nonetheless be supported by evidence gleaned from the press. Telegrams 'require an epigrammatic brevity and conciseness which is fatal to the elegant dignity of the old school of writing,' remarked a San Francisco journalist in an article that was reprinted in the \textit{New York Times} in 1869: 'The gentlemen who make up reports for the newspapers of a continent by the glare of a hundred gaslights in the fourth-story office of the New-York Associated Press have no opportunity for rhetorical flourish or literary ornamentation.'\textsuperscript{59}

In fact, the publication of narratively complex letters in newspapers did not cease; rather, journalistic letter-writing assumed a different form. Henceforth, the out-of-town letters that newspaper editors ran typically consisted of a discursive commentary from an identifiable, though often pseudonymous, reporter who reflected on ongoing issues that readers were assumed to already know something about from other sources. The Civil War marked the coming of age for a remarkable generation of talented journalists who composed highly distinctive letters of this kind, mostly under pen names: among them 'Gath' (George Alfred Townsend), 'Striker' (Uriah Hunt Painter), and, of course, 'Mark Twain' (Samuel L. Clemens) — a journalist-turned-novelist whose literary style had been decisively shaped by the letter-writing conventions of the mid-nineteenth-century newspaper press.\textsuperscript{60}

The influence of the telegraph on the American newspaper is, in short, easily overplayed. The secondary or 'deck' headline, for example, an innovation sometimes assumed to have followed the commercialization of the telegraph, actually antedated the new medium, while its close cousin, the inverted pyramid lead, would not become common even at metropolitan papers until several decades after telegrams had become a newseroom staple.\textsuperscript{61} Moreover, the journalist who rewrote the information obtained via telegraph from a far-away reporter could just as easily alter as accept the presentation of 'bare facts' contained in the reporter's dispatch. It was, in fact, customary for telegraphically transmitted news items to be rewritten in-house, which helps explain why they were just as likely to be referred to as 'wires' or 'news feeds,' than as discrete 'dispatches' or 'telegrams.' To align the contents of these communications with the journalistic norms of the publication that they would appear in, the editors of the larger metropolitan newspapers became accustomed by century's end to employing an in-house 'rewrite man' to provide context and incidental detail.\textsuperscript{62} The rewrite man at the \textit{New York Herald}, for example, was celebrated for larding the notoriously terse, and extremely expensive, Atlantic cable dispatches with 'magniloquent verbosity' in order to conceal the original text's parsimony and impress upon readers the 'reckless outlay' that Bennett had made to bring them the news.\textsuperscript{63}

The persistence of the out-of-town letter owed something to the oft-lamented unreliability of telegraphic news. The 'ruling faults' of telegraphic reporting, reflected the \textit{New Orleans Times-Picayune}, in 1850, was its haste: 'The reporter seizes upon rumors and hurries them off, or wishes to communicate conjectures or opinions which have an
authentic air to him, and seem to have an important bearing on the current events before him. Subjective opinions were hard to detect and rumors transmitted by telegraph were often transmogrified into 'bare fact.' If an editor received a telegraphic dispatch, the Times-Picayune elaborated, he was inclined to treat the information it contained as representing 'fixed facts' or 'positive assertions,' when in reality it might be a mere 'speculation' written to suit the 'local views' of its author. Sometimes dispatches found their way into print not because of their news value, but simply because they had been expensive to procure. 'These mistakes are costly to the press,' explained the Times-Picayune, 'they disturb and harass the public mind, and make the telegraph nearly useless as a reliable source of public intelligence, and at times a positive injury.' Much news sent by telegraph now-a-days, concluded one Cleveland journalist three years later, in summarizing what had by this time become a widely held view, is 'pretty extensively mixed up ... It is a compound of rumors, contradictions, and qualifications.

The shortcomings of telegraphic news prompted journalists to reconsider the merits of the posted letter. So long as editors received their news reports in the mail, reflected a contributor to the Alexandria Gazette in 1851, it had been hard to 'manufacture news': 'Men who wished to mislead the public knew that their letters would be accompanied by other letters, and perhaps by individuals who would give the lie to startling announcements.' Now that the press had come to rely on the telegraph, however, everything had changed, for many unattributable items found their way into print, making it well-nigh impossible to evaluate the accuracy of the information they contained. 'The man who gives publication to a false report,' the contributor concluded, 'should not be allowed to shield himself under the words "telegraphic dispatches."

The superiority of the letter over the telegram as a medium for news reporting remained a subject for comment half a century later. A hundred years ago, reminisced journalist and future New York Times editor Rollo Ogden in 1900, it had been customary for the European correspondents who provided American editors with foreign news to take for granted that their readers in the United States knew little about the wider world. In order to fill them in, they wrote the 'most delightful letters,' that were a 'very feast for curiosity,' since they were 'packed with information' about international affairs. Ever since the telegraph had spanned the Atlantic, however, this custom had fallen into abeyance, as the 'copious telegrams' that had increasingly found their way into print had lured newspaper readers into 'neglecting the 'true sources' of knowledge.' As a result, Ogden continued, the coverage of foreign news in major U.S. newspapers provided the 'mass of readers' with less 'real instruction to the mind' than they could have obtained in the 'slower but surer' days before the telegraph 'opened the line of least resistance along the Atlantic ooze': 'The jump to news-carrying by lightning instead of by letters has not only taken away the fresh mind of the observer, and put matter of fact in place of piquancy. It has thrown everything out of perspective.

While the shortcomings as a news source of the telegram as compared to the posted letter prompted a great deal of journalistic hand-wringing, one should be cautious about overemphasizing the differences between the two media. As paradoxical as it might at first appear, the economics of journalism-by-telegraph encouraged prolixity. As a consequence, as a contributor to the Writer opined in 1887, there was 'practically no difference' between a 'special dispatch' that a journalist sent 1,500 miles by telegraph and a local news report that the journalist gave to an editor in person. For stringers, the business was especially precarious: they received a fee for every item of news they
reported on that found its way into print (the going rate for first-time journalists in the 1890s was between $5 and $8 a column), giving them a financial incentive to bulk up their dispatches.\textsuperscript{74} In fact, the ‘faking’ of a news report by embellishing its details in order to make it seem more appealing to a distant editor (who, in many instances, had no independent way to determine its accuracy) had become so endemic by the late nineteenth century that its pros and cons were a frequent topic for discussion.\textsuperscript{75} Sending an editor the optimal amount of news involved a delicate balancing act. If the stringer sent what his editor regarded as an excessive amount of information, the newspaper might refuse to accept his telegram, saddling the stringer with the bill.\textsuperscript{76}

Moreover, although stringers customarily sent in their news reports by telegraph, even they would sometimes fall back on the mail. ‘Quaint and curious things,’ the journalist J. S. Ritenour advised his peers in 1890, should almost always go by post: if, for example, you have a news item on a boiler explosion at a ‘manufactory’ at which a half dozen men have been killed, you should not telegraph it in hastily.\textsuperscript{77} For only the ‘great papers,’ such as the metropolitan dailies in New York City, can afford to ‘be reckless in the matter of telegraphic expenses’ – and even they are not as prodigal as the rookie correspondent might assume.\textsuperscript{78} If the explosion occurred in the morning or forenoon, Ritenour concluded, send the report in by mail (‘This saves telegraph tolls’), and if the accident occurred late in the day, query the editor as to how much copy he wants, since ‘correspondents who observe care in the quantity and quality of their telegraphic news are always better appreciated and better paid than those who are reckless in these respects.’\textsuperscript{79}

For other journalists, and especially for those based outside the United States, letter-writing remained a matter of necessity rather than choice. In some instances, the limited facilities of the telegraph network in certain remote parts of the world obliged journalists to use the mail to report on events that were considered to be of great significance. James Gordon Bennett, Jr., racked up huge cable bills during the many years he ran the \textit{New York Herald} from an office in Paris, and spared no expense to enable his star reporter, Henry Morton Stanley, to locate the whereabouts of African explorer David Livingstone. Yet Stanley’s account of his encounter with Livingstone would not find its way into print for several weeks after the two men had met. The telegraph had yet to be extended to East Africa, leaving Stanley with no choice but to carry his story with him to Aden (now Yemen), from where the news of his discovery could finally be cabled to the United States. Less urgent stories, including the voluminous reporting that Stanley undertook in Africa during the period he was on his quest for Livingstone, were written up in letter-form and sent to the \textit{Herald} in the mail.\textsuperscript{80}

The limited facilities of the global telegraph network can only partially explain why New York \textit{World} reporter Nellie Bly failed to provide a detailed account of her celebrated round-the-world trip of 1888–9 until after she had returned to the United States. Far more important was the \textit{World’s} editorial strategy. Though the Pacific had yet to be spanned by telegraph, Bly’s route through Europe and South Asia was well served by cable. Nonetheless, Bly provided her editors with remarkably little copy while she was in transit. Her account of the crossing of the Atlantic, for example, which took the form of a letter that she sent to the \textit{World} in the mail, would not appear in print until she had arrived in Ceylon over a month later. With the exception of a small number of posted letters, and a series of perfunctory cables confirming her whereabouts, she effectively stayed silent until she had returned to the United States.\textsuperscript{81}
Cost may have been a factor: yet had Bly's editors wished Bly to provide the World with a day-by-day account via cable, they certainly had the resources to foot the bill. Instead, by keeping a celebrity reporter out of the spotlight, the World's editors cannily heightened the suspense that surrounded her return. Even in an age of rapid, globe-spanning communications, it could sometimes pay to keep readers waiting. To keep up the suspense, the World ran frequent stories about Bly's likely whereabouts, and even sponsored a game that offered prizes for those who guessed the precise date on which she would return, to which 100,000 readers replied.

Constraints of a different kind, limited news coverage of the period's military conflicts. The distinguished war correspondent George W. Smalley, for one, did not trust the telegraph with his first-hand account of the Battle of Antietam, fearful that key details would be censored or stolen. Instead, he hopped two trains, wrote up his report by oil lamp on the night he returned to New York City, and carried it in person the next morning to the Tribune. Smalley followed a similar procedure during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1, when, for analogous reasons, he sent by mail what journalism historian John Maxwell Hamilton has aptly termed 'discursive letter-style reports.' Once again, cost was not a determining factor — the Tribune readily paid out $125,000 in cable fees during this conflict; rather, the nub of the matter was Smalley's determination to retain control over his reporting. "The mere fact never contents the public. It wants the full story," Smalley later recounted, in looking back on this phase of his journalistic career. "There was never much chance of sending the full story by wire from the battlefield or from any town hard by; nor, indeed, from any capital; even from a neutral capital. Only when once in London was a correspondent master of the situation."

Smalley was right to be cautious. To monitor the use of the telegraph by the press, the federal government had established a censorship bureau during both the Civil War and the Spanish-American War. In each conflict, government censors prohibited the transmission of anonymous telegrams and blocked the circulation of any new reports that might reveal troop movements or dampen civilian morale. The publication of false information, such as the mistaken news report that President Lincoln had ordered the enlistment of 400,000 additional soldiers — a report that, it would later be revealed, had been concocted to shape the commodity markets — could lead to the temporary shutdown of the offending newspaper. Favorable military outcomes, on the other hand, such as the victory of the U.S. Navy over the Spanish fleet in Manila during the Spanish-American War, could prompt censors to work closely with journalists to get the story out as fast as possible. Press management, of course, long predated the telegraph. Patriots and loyalists alike had recruited for-hire 'letter-writers' to stir up political feeling by intentionally planting bogus stories in prominent newspapers during the American War of Independence, while British government officials had subsidized favorable news accounts of military triumphs since at least the War of the Spanish Succession. True, telegraphic news was faster, and, at least in theory, more ubiquitous than the pre-telegraphic communications media of the eighteenth century. Yet, as should be clear by now, it would be a mistake to conflate timeliness with the telegraph, or to assume that the telegraph had atechnologically determined influence on the journalistic craft.

One implication of this brief survey of the relationship between the letter and the telegram in nineteenth-century America is to encourage literary historians to expand...
their definition of letter-writing to embrace the composition, transmission, and revision of telegrams. Such an expanded definition makes sense for several reasons. Most basically, it reflects the commonsensical assumption of nineteenth-century Americans that letters and telegrams had certain features in common. The first telegrams, it is worth recalling, were modeled on letters — in fact, for a time, in a direct postal carry-over, they were even dubbed 'telegraphic dispatches' — while the reporters who used the new medium to transmit news stories assumed the venerable title of 'correspondent.' The 'postal telegraph' movement that originated in the 1840s and gained a substantial following in the 1870s and 1880s explicitly linked the two media in the popular imagination. For most Americans, of course, the posted letter would remain far more familiar than the telegram, yet the two media remained part of the same informational environment. Journalists often confronted a real choice between telegraphing (or cabling) in a story, or sending it in by mail. And, finally, and despite the unfortunate propensity of present-day commentators to make facile analogies between the telegraph and the Internet that are at best anachronistic, and at worst flat wrong, the popularization since the 1990s of email, text messaging, and other kinds of electrically mediated asynchronous communication should at the very least encourage us to ponder how the commercialization of the telegraph drew on and was sometimes shaped by conventions that had originated with the mail. The relationship between the letter and the telegram is far more nuanced, and far less predictable, than has often been supposed. The ability to transmit information faster than a horse could gallop changed some things, but not others. In order to understand fully the informational environment of nineteenth-century America, it is important to remember that new media did not necessarily supersede old media, that the oracular pronouncements of self-interested promoters should not be conflated with a fair-minded account of the course of events, and that cultural norms and institutional structures could often be just as consequential as technological imperatives and market incentives as agents of change.

Acknowledgments

For advice and suggestions, I would like to thank John Maxwell Hamilton, Thomas C. Jepsen, Nancy R. John, Brooke Kroeger, David Paul Nord, Matthew Pethers, and Andie Tucher. For research assistance, I am grateful to Lilly Cutrano and Jeffrey Nichols.

Notes

1. Bennett, 'The Electro Magnetic Telegraph,' 2. This article was unsigned, but we can assume Bennett was its author, since he had a long-standing interest in the telegraph, and customarily wrote the Herald's feature editorials.
2. Ibid. 2.
3. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. See Carey, Communication as Culture, 201–30; Otis, Networking; Sconce, Haunted Media.
9. See Standage, The Victorian Internet. For a similar postal-telegraphic back formation ('before telecommunications'), see Decker, Epistolary Practices.
10. See Downey, *Telegraph Messenger Boys*.
16. See ibid. 34–43.
19. Ibid.
22. ‘Popularizing the Telegraph,’ 84.
24. See ibid.
26. For the attribution to Swackhamer, see Nunberg, ‘All Thumbs,’ n.pag.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid. 412.
33. Ibid. 413.
34. Ibid.
35. Quoted in Hochfelder, *The Telegraph in America*, 73. In fact, Hemingway probably learned more about concision as a cub reporter on the *Kansas City Star* (see ibid. 98).
42. For a generous digitized sample of these telegrams, see Lincoln, ‘The Lincoln Telegrams Project.’ For a detailed survey of Lincoln’s use of the telegraph by one of his own telegraphers see Bates, *Lincoln in the Telegraph Office*.
44. See ibid. 182.
45. See ibid. 181.
46. See Weber, ‘Seward’s Other Folly.’
47. See Nickles, *Under the Wire*, 72–5.
49. See Yates, *Control through Communication*, 21–64.
50. This generalization is based on a page-by-page inspection of *Western Union Telegraph Company, Presidential Letterbooks and Writings*, Smithsonian Institution.
52. For more on these connections, see: Pettegree, *The Invention of the News*, 182–207; Randall, ‘Epistolary Rhetoric’; and Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*. 
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid. 161.
59. ‘American Journalism,’ 5.
63. Clarke, *My Life*, 125. I am grateful to Andie Tucher for the citation to Clarke’s memoir.
64. ‘Telegraph for the Press,’ 2.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. ‘Arrival of the Asia,’ 2.
68. ‘Telegraphic Rumors, &c.,’ 2.
69. Ibid.
71. Ibid. 393.
72. Ibid. 393, 391.
75. See Tucher, ‘The True, the False,’ 94.
76. See Hills, ‘Queries’ (1888), 118.
77. Ritenour, ‘Sending Despatches,’ 222.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid. 223.
80. See Hamilton, *Journalism’s Roving Eye*, 76–88. For transcriptions of Stanley’s posted
   dispatches, see Stanley, *Stanley’s Dispatches*.
82. See Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 150.
84. Ibid. 61.
85. See ibid.
87. See Lubow, *The Reporter Who Would Be King*, 166, and Hochfelder, *The Telegraph in
   America*, 90.
88. See Blondheim, ‘“Public Sentiment is Everything.”’
89. See Kielbowicz, ‘Regulating Timeliness,’ 51.
90. See: Slaughter, ‘The Paragraph as Information Technology,’ 258–70; Castronovo, *Propaganda
   1776*, 117–50; and Black, *Debating Foreign Policy*, 25–44.

**Works Cited**

‘Arrival of the Asia – Further from Turkey’ (1853), *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 20 October, 2.
Press.
Military Telegraph Corp During the Civil War*, ed. J. A. Rawley, Lincoln, NE: University of
Nebraska Press.


Clarke, J. I. C. (1925), My Life and Memories, New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.


‘Telegraph for the Press’ (1850), New Orleans Times-Picayune, 7 June, 2.

‘Telegraphic Rumors, &c.,’ (1851), Alexandria Gazette, 30 August, 2.


‘Washington,’ National Intelligencer, 18 April 1815, 1.


THE EDINBURGH COMPANION TO NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LETTERS AND LETTER-WRITING

Edited by Celeste-Marie Bernier, Judie Newman, and Matthew Pethers

EDINBURGH University Press
Edinburgh University Press is one of the leading university presses in the UK. We publish academic books and journals in our selected subject areas across the humanities and social sciences, combining cutting-edge scholarship with high editorial and production values to produce academic works of lasting importance. For more information visit our website: www.edinburghuniversitypress.com

© the chapters their several authors, 2016

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun -- Holyrood Road,
12(2f) Jackson's Entry,
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in 10/12 Adobe Sabon by
IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd, and
printed and bound in the United States of America

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 9292 7 (hardback)
ISBN 978 0 7486 9293 4 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 0 7486 9294 1 (epub)

The right of Celeste-Marie Bernier, Judie Newman, and Matthew Pethers to be identified as the editors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, and the Copyright and Related Rights Regulations 2003 (SI No. 2498).