

Commentary

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In 1981, I spent a difficult and wondrous summer on the mean and glorious streets of Belfast, Northern Ireland, taking photographs of the civil unrest known as “The Troubles.” The work became part of my master’s degree project at the University of Minnesota. When I got back to the States in September, I was supposed to stay with a reporter friend of mine in Atlantic City who said I could share his fancy hotel room. He was in town to cover Miss Louisiana during the Miss America beauty pageant for *The Times-Picayune* newspaper. There were only a couple of minor hitches. I had misjudged my timing and arrived a day early. My friend wasn’t there. Plus, I only had a few dollars in my pocket. My charge card was maxed out and declined for a room at a cheap motel. I slept that night during a drizzle on a metal floor within a walled top of a playground’s slide.

I woke up the next morning to a life-affirming sunrise, called my mother, asked for help, and picked up a hundred dollars waiting for me at the Western Union office. Later that day, I had one of the best cheeseburgers I had ever eaten in my life at The Jem, a downtown diner. Its slogan was, “One of America’s Famous Restaurants.” I agree, but it’s no longer there.

Four years later, the telegraph once again sparked an idea in my life.

Fifteen years after “the introduction of the telegraph by Morse and his associates . . . the telegraph’s worth changed from a device to beat out the competition by publishing telegraphic news reports faster than anyone else, to a practical journalistic tool for the gathering of news from throughout the land.”

“Without a doubt, the introduction of the telegraph caused world-wide changes in the ways people thought about time and space.”

“For journalists, the introduction of the telegraph marked an exciting time in journalism history . . . but were all the changes . . . a direct result of the telegraph, or simply an on-going process of systemic change within the newspaper industry?”

While working toward my PhD at Indiana University, the three quotations on telegraphy came from a research paper I submitted for a seminar class under the supervision of Dr. David Nord.¹

Thirty years later, substitute augmented reality, smartphones, the web, or social media (your choice) for “telegraph” or “telegraphy,” and you have the start of an updated new media and journalism lecture for your next graduate seminar.

Richard B. Kielbowicz went much further in the current *Monograph* than my feeble grad school effort to link journalism history with a new technology and the concepts of time and space. We should all be glad he did.

He makes clear the link between technology and faster communications and its lack of researcher consideration, “Oddly, timeliness has not attracted the kind of attention that journalism and communication historians have lavished on objectivity as a news value. . . .” Early on, his piece also makes an important connection between public and private ownership. After the first commercial line, the Magnetic Telegraph Company was sold by Congress in 1847, Kielbowicz writes, “This ushered in a regulatory regime in which private communication services handled news transmission, gradually displacing a public service that had been open to all” For us, this fact should also usher in a familiar warning about the web—what started as a government/education collaboration has morphed into a largely commercial entity. It should be no surprise that nine of the top ten websites listed on Alexa.com are dot-com entities.² With such a commodified concentration, the costs for access can only rise. Well-written histories such as the one in your hands can help us make connections. Most importantly, those links give us insights into issues large, small, objective, and personal.

And so, this historical view of telegraphy causes me to link to a lady behind a bullet-proof glass counter in a New Jersey Western Union office and a seminar class in Bloomington. Regrettably, the memories are a bit too distant to muster many insights. I simply don’t remember much from the specifics of Professor Nord’s seminar for which the quotations were written. However, I do remember a valuable lesson that I learned from him and other mentors—Jim Brown, Will Counts, Dave Weaver, Cleve Wilhoit, and others within the walls of Ernie Pyle Hall—how to be a professor.

Over the years, I didn’t keep my research papers from any of my seminars, and I must admit that I don’t have any of my student papers either. The only reason I can quote from the telegraphy paper is that I was mailed a surprise package from Dave Nord that contained copies of my work.

Answer this for me: Do you think you would go to the trouble upon your retirement to collect leftover papers from a dark section of a metal file cabinet, find addresses, and send them to your former students? Such a demonstration of kindness and respect is my takeaway from this monograph. On occasion, atoms trump bits.

Paul Martin Lester
Editor-in-Chief

Notes

1. Lester, P., “The Piecemeal Revolution of Telegraphic Journalism,” An unpublished seminar paper submitted during Week 8 for a J650 seminar at Indiana University, Copies upon request, October 22, 1985.
2. Alexa, “The Top 500 Sites on the Web,” 2014, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>.