

The Ecology of Wireless Newspapers: Publishing on Islands and Ships, 1899-1913

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Abstract

The phenomenon of “wireless newspapers” at the beginning of the twentieth century combined journalism and airwave transmissions. Years before radio became a mainstream medium, newspapers used and promoted wireless telegraphy to send stories for publication on sea-going vessels and on two islands off the coast of the United States. Drawing on archival research, this historical study uses the concept of media ecology to analyze the factors involved in the introduction and fate of a new technology designed to meet the demand for the latest information.

Keywords

new media, wireless telegraphy, journalism history, electronic publishing

The growth of electronic publishing has upset long-standing economic and editorial routines of the newspaper industry. As publishers seek viable revenue streams from producing online content, consumers use an array of personal electronic devices to access information wherever they go. Transitions in the media industries, however, do not occur simply because new technologies are available. Many factors contribute to the success or failure of marriages of journalism and technologies of distribution. Efforts to establish the first “wireless newspapers” demonstrate the dynamics involved in using innovative technologies to reach readers.

Publishers experimented with ways to deliver content over the airwaves a generation before the advent of regular radio news broadcasting. In 1903, the *Los Angeles*

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Times and the *Providence Daily Journal* transmitted news via wireless telegraphy to islands where it was printed and distributed as a morning newspaper. Both publications used “wireless” in their titles to emphasize adoption of the latest media technology. After the debut of its *Wireless* on California’s Catalina Island, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote “the event is a unique one in the history of journalism and marks the beginning of an epoch in the dissemination of news to isolated places.”¹

Guiglielmo Marconi also recognized that wireless telegraphy could deliver news to readers in previously inaccessible locations. In 1903, his company started publishing small-format newspapers on vessels of the Cunard Line. Powerful transmitters in England and the United States broadcast news on a regular schedule so that passengers, even in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, could keep up with the latest happenings in politics, sports, and the stock market. At the dawn of the twentieth century, wireless telegraphy was an impressive technology that promised to greatly expand the reach of the press. The wireless newspapers on islands and ships represented one of the first ways in which journalists adopted the new technology of communication.

This study relies on the related intellectual traditions of media ecology and medium theory. The ecological approach to media studies draws from the works of Innis, McLuhan, and Postman and focuses attention on the entire context in which technologies develop and exist, rather than trying to identify discrete effects of specific technologies. In an analysis of the intersection of culture and communications, Susman similarly advocates an ecological perspective and argues that scholars should avoid “rigid and awkward causal terms” and focus instead on “the crucial issue of *relationships*.”² According to Susman, a framework that is cognizant of the context in which media technologies develop, as well as their form and content, reveals “that the most radical change in form may still retain the most traditional content.”³

Moran applies a media ecology perspective to the history of human communications and identifies a series of paradigm shifts, such as the move from oral communication to writing, then to printing. Echoing Susman’s observation about the persistence of content despite ostensibly grand change, Moran focuses on the amorphous boundary that distinguishes innovation from incremental change.⁴ With this concept at the fore, Moran characterizes each paradigm shift as an “evolution-revolution,” emphasizing that every innovation is based on past practice. To better understand these paradigm shifts, consideration must be given to the context, people, messages, media, impacts, and limitations of each. Given the incomplete nature of the historical record for wireless telegraphy in the early twentieth century, a full account of all of factors is not possible, but a holistic approach can be taken.

Meyrowitz, a scholar influenced by the perspective of media ecology, coined the term “medium theory.” His emphasis, though, is on the specific affordances and characteristics of each medium. As an example, Meyrowitz contrasts printed and handwritten manuscripts.⁵ Although both are a means of preserving and distributing text, the technology of printing makes broad dissemination of information much easier. The same information could be circulated in a society, but the effects may be different if it is disseminated via print instead of handwritten manuscripts, or by extension, by radio

broadcasts. With this insight in mind, this study looks at “wireless newspapers” as a new kind of publication, one that owed something to the printed papers of the day but that also foreshadowed the purely electronic newspapers that were yet to come.

Literature Review

The history of journalism shows information delivery systems becoming more developed, more interconnected, faster, and more ubiquitous.⁶ Conventional wisdom often fixates on certain technologies, characterizing them as great leaps forward in speed, though a more critical assessment sees change occurring at an incremental rate. After the telegraph became entrenched in American society, critics spoke of the “annihilation of time and space,” though Blondheim observes that the same process could be linked to the revolution in transportation technologies that occurred in the preceding decades.⁷

The development of America’s information infrastructure must then be seen in relation to developments in transportation technology. In a retelling of nineteenth-century history, John devotes special attention to the role of railroads and the telegraph in laying the foundation for the modern information age.⁸ Sterne also writes of the continuing links between communication and transportation systems, in pointed contrast to Carey’s claim that telegraphy tore the two concepts asunder.⁹

Scholars who have done research on the relationship between journalism and wired telegraphy have documented that newspapers were among the earliest proponents of the technology.¹⁰ The ability of newspapers to distribute updates and bulletins far and wide encouraged a standardization of writing styles with an emphasis on condensed, abbreviated information.¹¹ In addition, the telegraph encouraged a change in the nature of news consumption with readers accustomed to, and indeed expecting, the incessant stream of timely updates.¹² James Gordon Bennett, publisher of the *New York Herald*, was an avid telegraphy supporter who had an inaccurate prognosis for its impact. “The telegraph may not affect magazine literature,” he wrote, “but the mere newspapers—the circulators of intelligence merely—must submit to destiny, and go out of existence.”¹³

Marvin’s influential media history, *When Old Technologies Were New*, discusses the telegraph, along with other electric technologies, such as the telephone and electric light. Using a critical approach that owes something to the framework of media ecology, Marvin explores the public response to electric technologies of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ For Marvin, new forms of media disrupt our established notions of time, space, and social interaction, and as a result, our beliefs are “reexamined, challenged, and defended.”¹⁵ The responses to the wireless newspapers demonstrate a similar dynamic, and can shed light on the contemporary response to the latest methods of information delivery. According to Susman, critical responses to new media technologies are particularly insightful, as they reveal that audiences are not so “easily manipulated by powerful media,” and do not unquestionably accept each latest innovation.¹⁶

Research Questions and Method

Aside from fleeting references in prior scholarship, the phenomenon of wireless newspapers has never been studied.¹⁷ This research analyzes the various technical, economic, and social factors that influenced the development of wireless newspapers. Drawing from Moran's characterization of media history as a series of evolution-revolutions, the present study seeks to identify the ways in which wireless newspapers represented innovative practice, along with their connection to existing news routines. Were these publications something truly new, or rather slight modifications of something well established? In addition, the study highlights the public reaction to the transmission of news via wireless telegraphy at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The George C. Clark Collection of Radioana at the Smithsonian Museum of American History and the Marconi Archives at the University of Oxford have original copies of one of the island-newspapers, and numerous issues and reproductions of ship-newspapers. Additional sources include the Lee de Forest Papers in the Perham Collection at History San Jose, along with trade journals and newspapers.

Publishing on Ships

The first documented wireless ship-newspaper was the *Transatlantic Times* published on November 15, 1899, aboard the *St. Paul*, which was ferrying Marconi from the United States to England.¹⁸ The ship did not receive messages until it was sixty-six miles from the Marconi station on the Isle of Wight because the distance of wireless transmission was quite limited at the time. News bulletins were printed on one side of the single page of the *Transatlantic Times*, Vol. 1, No. 1. The first story was simply an acknowledgment that wireless messages had been received, while other bulletins provided sparse updates about the Boer War that had begun a month earlier. Additional items, which were not received by the wireless equipment and could have been typeset earlier, were a short masthead listing the multiple editors and a lengthy paragraph praising Marconi.¹⁹

Despite the numbering of the *Transatlantic Times* (which suggested that subsequent issues would soon follow), regular publication of ship-newspapers was delayed until the Marconi Company established high-power transmitting stations in Poldhu in Cornwall, England, and in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.²⁰ Ships could then conceivably remain in contact with land-based wireless stations throughout the Atlantic crossing. In January 1903, *Editor and Publisher* announced that the Marconi Company was about to begin transmitting news to transatlantic ships for the publication of newspapers. A representative for the Cunard Line denied any knowledge of the venture. Cunard was the logical home of the promised ship-newspapers because it was the only company that had equipped all of its vessels with Marconi equipment. Seven thousand applications had been received for the editorial staff of the ocean papers.²¹

The first Cunard newspaper appeared in February 1903 aboard the *Etruria* as it sailed to the United States with Marconi aboard. The *New York Times* and *Editor and Publisher* both claimed the event was a "first" despite the publication of the

Transatlantic Times in 1899.²² Only 120 words of news, supplied by Reuters, were transmitted to the ship. The *New York Times* reported that passengers were nonetheless impressed, and “things which had been the subject of conversation of the voyage up to that point were forgotten and all discussed the news.”²³

Later in 1903, the Marconi Company began regular publication of a ship-newspaper known as the *Cunard Bulletin*. The issue of October 3, 1903, published aboard the *Lucania* was a single page with “Marconigrams,” as the wireless messages were known, printed on the front and back. Passengers learned that wireless communication had been established with several other vessels, along with a handful of news updates about international politics and sports.²⁴ By May 7, 1904, the format had increased to four pages, though not all of the content was received via wireless telegraphy. In this expanded format, the second page was a column about the progress of wireless telegraphy, and the back page was a timetable for future voyages. In the *Cunard Bulletin* of May 21, 1904, the same items of content appeared again, in the same locations, interspersed with the “Marconigrams” that supplied fresh news.²⁵

On June 6, 1904, the publication changed its name to the *Cunard Daily Bulletin*, signifying the increase in frequency. The first issue was published aboard the *Campania* as it sailed from Liverpool to New York. Almost eight hundred copies of the debut issue sold for five cents each.²⁶ The format had been expanded to eight pages by this point and was expanded even further to sixteen pages in that same year.²⁷ The publication was available on many vessels of the Cunard Line, and the Marconi Company worked with other shipping companies as well. Other ship-newspapers include the following titles: *Atlantic Daily News*, *Das Atlantische Tageblatt*, *Journal de L'Atlantique*, *Diario del Atlantico*, *South Atlantic Gazette*, *The Wireless Mail*, *Compania Trasatlantica*, *Giornale Dell Atlantico*, *Ocean Gazette*, *Royal Line Mail*, and *Allan Line Daily News*.²⁸

As the format grew, the wireless news retained its spot in the interior pages. With this arrangement, the cover page and feature stories could be printed in advance with the timely wireless news inserted prior to distribution. Content was frequently re-used. Feature stories had information about Cunard vessels, wireless telegraphy, and foreign countries. Another common item was a list of all the first-class passengers who were aboard. The wireless ship-papers also featured many advertisements, including ones for port hotels and luxury products. By 1908, the standard arrangement was to frame the interior pages with pre-printed advertisements, leaving a blank space for the wireless news that was to come later.²⁹

The *Marconigraph*, the house journal of the British Marconi Company, provided detailed information regarding the early ship-papers. A June 1911 article uses a typically laudatory tone to praise the *Atlantic Daily News* for providing conversation fodder for the passengers and for preventing the embarrassment of being ignorant of current events on arrival.³⁰ An article from September 1911 expanded on the theme of information access: “Nowadays . . . there is no such thing as freedom from business for the man of affairs.” This account emphasized that whereas an ocean voyage had once been an opportunity to escape from the worries of the everyday world, wireless telegraphy annihilated this atmosphere of refuge.³¹

The same article included a detailed account of the production process for ship-papers, along with a description of the Marconi transmitting station at Cape Cod. Because each news transmission had to be repeated to ensure that every recipient got the message, the Morse-coded messages were punched into long strips that were fed into an automated transmitter. Every evening at 10 p.m., the immense electrical generators were turned on and the broadcasts began. The first generation of wireless transmitters needed a massive electrical spark to send out the long-distance messages. The violent pyrotechnic displays could be seen fifteen miles away, and the power plant was dubbed “Marconi’s thunder factory.”³²

Other entrepreneurs copied the idea of supplying news to ocean vessels. Lee de Forest, an inventor who saw himself in a continual race against Marconi for fame, had his own version. As early as 1902, he equipped several fishing ships in the New York area with wireless receivers to provide stock market updates to businessmen who went out for the day.³³ In December 1905, the American De Forest Wireless Company announced the creation of the *Aerogram*, a ship-newspaper for vessels that used its system of wireless.³⁴ By 1906, some ships had, in fact, adopted de Forest’s version of a ship-paper.³⁵

On the other side of the continent, the *Wireless* was reportedly the first ship-paper to appear in the Pacific Ocean. The publication appeared in June 1907 on a vessel sailing from Seattle to the Bering Sea.³⁶ Evidence suggests that the paper was a joint operation between the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and the Massie Wireless Telegraphy Company. A 1913 summary of ocean journalism mentions a “noteworthy” publication called the *Wireless Herald* that was published on an Alaskan steamship; this may be a reference to the aforementioned publication, or another similarly titled one.³⁷ The word “wireless” had a great aura of mystery at the time and was used more than once as the title for a publication. A ship-paper that appeared on the Great Lakes bore the apparently inappropriate title of the *Ocean Wireless News*.³⁸ Eventually ship-papers became less of a novelty and were able to fulfill, to some degree, the promise of keeping people informed while they were at sea.

Catalina Island

Residents of Catalina Island, located twenty-two miles off the coast of Southern California, found regular communication with the mainland difficult before the development of wireless technology. In one attempt to solve the problem, the owners of the island trained pigeons to carry messages to and from Los Angeles. According to *Scientific American*, “the pigeon houses were so arranged that when a bird arrived with a message it rang an electric alarm in the receiver’s home or office, thus calling him up.”³⁹ One of the problems with the system was that hunters were known to shoot the birds. Ships arrived on the island two or three times a day during the summer vacation season but did not sail during times of inclement weather. Undersea telegraph cables, which were used elsewhere at the time, were considered not feasible because of the depth of the ocean in the area.⁴⁰ The emerging wireless technology appeared to be a solution for providing news promptly.

In May 1902, the Pacific Wireless Telegraph Company began work on two wireless stations, one on the mainland at San Pedro and one in the island's resort town of Avalon. The original plan was to use the technology of the Marconi Company, but the equipment did not function particularly well, and a new system was devised.⁴¹ C. E. Howell, the wireless operator in Avalon, wrote a firsthand account of the operation in 1903 and identified a problem with the "coherer," a mechanism that detected the wireless signals.⁴² As a response, an electrician devised a replacement apparatus for the task. The *Los Angeles Times* praised the revised system as purely American, a none-too-subtle jab at the Italian Marconi.⁴³ The San Pedro and Avalon wireless commenced regular operation in August 1902.⁴⁴ One historian believes that they were the first stations in the United States to accept commercial wireless traffic.⁴⁵

The editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, H. G. Otis, had the idea for the island-news-paper.⁴⁶ While some summer resorts received newspaper stories via landline telegraphs, Otis realized that wireless telegraphy could be used for distribution over water.⁴⁷ The *Times* correspondent stationed at Catalina was responsible for gathering news from the island itself, combining it with the wireless news and producing the physical newspapers. Other stories were supplied by *Times* reporters and the Associated Press. Transmissions to the island, however, had to be delayed until the information had been published by the *Times*.⁴⁸

Stories from the *Times* were telegraphed to the Western Union office in San Pedro, approximately twenty-five miles south of Los Angeles. The wireless station of the Pacific Company at the time, however, was located two miles away, on a spot with a higher elevation. Howell, the operator of the Avalon station, recalled that the first day's transmission began later than anticipated because a messenger had to deliver the news from the San Pedro Western Union office to the transmitter.⁴⁹ After the wireless signals had been received in Avalon, a messenger carried the news to the actual printing plant.⁵⁰ Many journalists of the day praised the *Wireless* as an almost otherworldly achievement, but an expanded view of its operation reveals that a significant amount of human effort and infrastructure lay behind the project.

The first issue of the *Wireless*, a four-page, 8-by-11 inch tabloid, was printed on Catalina on March 25, 1903. The first page was devoted entirely to wireless news. Three columns of text were arranged under various subject headings, including ones for Los Angeles, Pacific, General Eastern, and Foreign news. Each section contained a series of single-sentence updates.⁵¹ The format recalled sections for "telegraphic news" that had been appearing in American newspapers for a few decades.⁵² The updates of the *Wireless* were so abbreviated that one contemporary observer quipped that they did not constitute "the kernel of the news, but the distilled essence of the kernel."⁵³ A small announcement at the bottom of the front page informed readers that "full details" were available in the *Los Angeles Times*, which would arrive later in the day at Avalon via ship. The rest of the four-page publication consisted of news from the island itself.

That first issue was on the streets of Avalon by 10:30 a.m. The official price was three cents, though demand for the first issue was so high that some copies reportedly sold for a dollar.⁵⁴ Additional copies were printed to meet the demand. One week later,

the format of the paper was expanded to 10.5 by 14.5 inches, allowing for four columns of text. The printing procedure was streamlined so that the papers were available by 7:00 a.m.⁵⁵ Daily publication was maintained for several months. The paper was particularly valuable on days when storms made it impossible for ships to reach the island.

The *Los Angeles Times* publicized its new media spin-off and received positive reactions from as far away as Germany. A compilation of press clippings was printed on April 19. Many of the other papers duplicated the *Times*' own effusive language.⁵⁶ Several of the articles, for example, claimed that the *Wireless* was "the first newspaper to receive messages via wireless telegraphy."⁵⁷ The *Philadelphia Record* repeated the *Times*' own description of the publication as "the beginning of an epoch in the dissemination of news in isolated places." A similar collection of enthusiastic press statements appeared the following month. The *Baltimore News* exclaimed "there can scarcely be any miracle of science to astonish us after this fact."⁵⁸

Launching its island-newspaper when the name Marconi was synonymous with "wireless communication," the *Times* emphasized that a distinct system of wireless telegraphy was being used. One article in the paper, for example, made the mocking observation that while the *London Times* was in the midst of experimenting with Marconi's wireless telegrams, the *Wireless* was already in full-fledged operation on Catalina.⁵⁹ Continuing its self-glorification, the *Los Angeles Times* criticized the *Block Island Wireless*, the island-newspaper started a few months later by the *Providence Daily Journal* as an imitation that "lacks the dressy appearance of the *Santa Catalina Wireless*, being printed on a cheap quality of newspaper and affecting the style of a small country daily."⁶⁰

C. E. Howell, operator of the Avalon station, also stressed the superiority of the Pacific Company's technology in his celebratory account of the operation. He claimed that a vessel equipped with Marconi equipment sailed near Catalina but was unable to receive the wireless signals of the newspaper because of an inferior tuning system.⁶¹ The earliest wireless transmitters were essentially "untuned" as they broadcast over a wide swath of the electromagnetic spectrum. Tuning was one of the first major issues facing the nascent wireless industry before radio signals were restricted to specific wavelengths. Howell's article asserted that in the critical development of tuning, the Pacific Company's system was superior to that of Marconi.

On October 1, little more than five months after the first issue of the *Wireless*, the *Times* announced that publication was suspended for the winter.⁶² The management remained quite enthusiastic and noted that the *Boston Globe* and other publications had inquired about duplicating the effort. Even the *Providence Daily Journal* was said to be interested because of dissatisfaction with the de Forest wireless system used for its Block Island newspaper. The *Wireless* did not resume publication. One factor may have been that the Pacific Wireless Telegraph Company was acquired in January 1904 by the De Forest Wireless Telegraph Company.⁶³

The Catalina paper did demonstrate the potential of a new method of content distribution. For Howell, wireless telegraphy had proven itself an effective distribution system for news and all that was remained was "extension, amplification, and perfection."⁶⁴

The technology, he believed, could be installed in urban centers for daily transmissions to smaller, remote publications, particularly those that could not be easily reached by telegraph cable. Near the conclusion of Howell's 1903 article, he insisted that the *Wireless* marked the "beginning of an epoch in the dissemination of news."⁶⁵

Block Island

In 1901, the *New York Herald* installed Marconi wireless equipment on a lightship anchored near Nantucket Island.⁶⁶ The system provided the newspaper with early reports on ship arrivals and allowed it to scoop its competition. In Rhode Island, the *Providence Daily Journal* sought to establish a similar system, perhaps inspired by the *New York Herald*. Nearby Block Island was thought to be a good location for such an observation point. The newspaper had previously laid an undersea cable to the island, but it did not work satisfactorily.⁶⁷ To solve the communication problem, the *Providence Daily Journal* signed a contract with the De Forest Wireless Telegraph Company. By December 1902, construction had begun on a wireless station on Block Island and on another in Port Judith, Rhode Island, located at the tip of a peninsula jutting into the Atlantic.⁶⁸ Messages were regularly exchanged between Point Judith and Block Island by early June 1903.

On June 1, 1903, the *Providence Daily Journal* began printing a new column, "Block Island Ship News by Wireless Telegraph." The column, which appeared intermittently, occasionally acknowledged the equipment provided by the De Forest Wireless Telegraph Company. When a violent storm knocked down the antenna on Block Island soon after it was completed, a resourceful wireless operator connected the receiving equipment directly to a telephone wire that was strung for several miles along the edge of the island. The wireless signals could still be heard, even louder than before.⁶⁹ The discovery prompted many stations, including trans-oceanic ones, to adopt horizontal antenna arrangements.⁷⁰

The *Providence Daily Journal* wanted to use the Block Island wireless station to reach subscribers who spent their summers on the island, as well as to collect news.⁷¹ The first issue of the *Journal's Block Island Wireless* was published on July 9, 1903. A line of text below the title proclaimed that it was "one of the two daily newspapers in the world whose news dispatches come by wireless telegraph."⁷² With a remote publishing system that mimicked the one in California, the *Journal* sent daily updates through a landline telegraph thirty-five miles south to Point Judith. The de Forest wireless transmitter then sent the information twelve miles across the ocean to Block Island. The printed product was a five-cent, four-page newspaper containing "wireless" news supplied by the Associated Press, stock market updates, and baseball scores. The paper also had updates from the island, and many advertisements.

One notable difference between the two island papers was the number of words transmitted each day. The *Providence Daily Journal* claimed that its transmissions contained two thousand words, more than double the number of the Pacific Company.⁷³ The *Block Island Wireless* was economical in its use of words but not as much as the newspaper in Catalina.

The news received in Block Island was reformatted to be brief. The lead story of the July 9, 1903, issue of the *Providence Daily Journal*, for instance, was “Life Hangs by a Thread,” a lengthy story about the ailing Pope Leo XIII. The inaugural issue of the *Wireless* of the same day began the same story with the shorter headline of “Pope Failing.” The story was only five sentences but included an image of the pope. Although pictures were not yet transmitted via wireless telegraphy, the island publisher could have easily stocked a selection of ready-made illustrations, especially of individuals such as Pope Leo who had been in the news for weeks. The *Wireless* stressed international news and financial information. A large column running down the middle of the front page was devoted entirely to stock market quotations and baseball scores.

Boxing matches, which were a great attraction for radio broadcasting in the 1920s, also received attention on the island.⁷⁴ On August 16, 1903, the *Block Island Wireless* used a high-profile bout in San Francisco to direct attention to its ability to deliver news rapidly. The *Providence Daily Journal* called its coverage a “feat unequaled by any newspaper in the world.”⁷⁵ Ringside updates were carried to Point Judith via telegraph cables and then transmitted to the island. The *Journal* proudly noted that “persons on Block Island had the news at the same time that it was served to the thousands gathered about the bulletin board at the *Providence Journal* office.”⁷⁶ Even though the story was eventually delivered to readers via printed reports and signs, the updates of the boxing match were at least partially delivered by wireless telegraphy. This 1903 boxing match indicates that the transition from wireless telegraphy to full-fledged radio broadcasting was not as dramatic as has been depicted by previous scholars.

De Forest later remarked that his Block Island venture boosted his company stock price.⁷⁷ He was one of the most prolific and successful inventors in radio’s early era, but his association with stock fraud marred his reputation. Wireless companies often inflated stock prices by making outrageous claims about their technology, or by building stations that never operated.⁷⁸ De Forest’s company was accused of such underhanded tactics, but much of the blame might be placed on Abraham White, manager of the American De Forest Wireless Telegraph Company.⁷⁹ De Forest’s company promoted the sale of its stock in ads that appeared in the *Providence Daily Journal*. The relationship with the newspaper was frequently mentioned in the ads as an endorsement of de Forest’s technology. One large ad, from August 10, 1903, emphasized that the U.S. government, the Associated Press, and the *Providence Daily Journal* all used de Forest’s system.⁸⁰

The specifics of the financial arrangement between the *Providence Daily Journal* and de Forest are now difficult to determine, but 1903 ads suggest a close working relationship. Beginning on July 1, the newspaper regularly advertised its service of sending “aerograms” to Block Island for a fee. Corresponding ads in the *Block Island Wireless* informed residents that they could likewise send “aerograms” back to Rhode Island. Although the ads make no mention of de Forest or his technology, “aerogram” was the name used by de Forest’s company for its wireless telegram service. While newspapers do have a long history of quickly adopting new technologies of communication, the service was unusual for a newspaper to conduct and placed the publisher in

competition with other means of sending personal messages. The ads for the aerogram service stopped at the end of August 1903, the same time that *Block Island Wireless* ceased publication.

Conclusion

The trajectories of media technologies depend on factors such as competition, practicality, and public demand. Mosco and Nord examine many of the grandiose claims made about radio, television, and even pneumatic tubes, noting that in each case, predictions far exceeded reality.⁸¹ The wireless, electronic transmission of news, however, has in fact transformed the nature of information distribution. Once-sacred refuges, such as airplane flights, are no longer immune from the constant flow of information, similar to the 1911 observation from the *Marconigraph* about the availability of news on ships.⁸² With the proliferation of portable electronic devices, users can now access information in almost any conceivable location, though society continually debates the rules of etiquette that govern the use of mobile technology. The initial public response to wireless newspapers, which can be characterized as amazement with a bit of apprehension, reveals that this concern over ubiquitous information is not entirely new. Proponents of wireless newspapers, then, were not entirely wrong in predicting that news would one day be available to everyone, in nearly every location, though they were rather premature.

The place of island- and ship-papers within the longer histories of radio and journalism is a small one. The publications did provide inventors, including Marconi and de Forest, with valuable opportunities to refine their wireless systems, but the innovation did not inspire any radical changes for the larger newspaper industry or for writing styles, as telegraphy had done. The phenomenon does indicate, however, that newspapers were intrigued by the possibilities of wireless communication much sooner than previous media historians have realized. The need to condense news for an electronic format was evident. Although the increase in speed was celebrated, the delivery of news was not yet instantaneous because media organizations were still in the process of streamlining delivery. From this perspective, the evolution of news should be seen as a continuum, and the wireless newspapers represent one specific moment on this timeline.

Contemplating the peculiar nature of the wireless papers, which straddled both the older medium of print and an emerging electronic technology, provides us with an opportunity to reflect on new media in general. The papers illustrate McLuhan's maxim that "the content of any medium is always another medium."⁸³ Island-newspapers were not wholly original publications, but simply new incarnations of well-established ones that used an application of message transmission over the airwaves. Susman's claim about the persistence of content despite a change in form is particularly apropos here.

Yet, as medium theory would suggest, the parameters of every medium do exert some influence upon their content. The wireless island papers were abbreviated, reformatted publications that aimed to serve specific audiences at specific times. Many

modern forms of emerging media exhibit a similar dynamic. While new applications are distinct from their predecessors in certain ways, a significant amount of “new media content” originates from established news platforms. A good deal of Internet content, for example, is based on what has already appeared on television or in print.⁸⁴ Social media platforms meanwhile distribute content that has already appeared online.

The phenomenon of wireless newspapers is a vivid example of the evolution-revolution duality described by Moran. They were seen as exciting technological innovations at the time, but they were rooted in the established news infrastructure and routines of the day. The ocean newspapers were grafted onto an already complex, well-orchestrated transatlantic transportation network, and the island papers relied heavily on the established technology of the telegraph. A focus on the evolution-revolution duality is a useful corrective to the revolutionary perspective that is too often bestowed upon the latest media innovation. Each innovation is based on prior practice.

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6. For some scholarship that has used the “news-as-information” approach, see Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1989); Richard A. Schwarzlose, *The Nation's Newsbrokers*, Vol. I and II (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989); Pablo J. Boczkowski, *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004); Richard R. John, *Network Nation: Inventing American Telecommunications* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010); and James Gleick, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood* (NY: Pantheon Books, 2011.)
7. Menaheim Blondheim, *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 12.

8. Richard R. John, "Recasting the Information Infrastructure for the Industrial Age," in *A Nation Transformed by Information*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler and James W. Cortada (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 55-106.
9. Jonathan Sterne, "Transportation and Communication Together as You've Always Wanted Them," in *Thinking with James Carey: Essays on Communication, Transportation, History*, ed. Jeremy Packer and Craig Robertson (NY: Peter Lang, 2006), 117-35.
10. For an overview of academic studies of telegraphy and journalism, see chapter 3 of David Hochfelder's *The Telegraph in America, 1832-1920* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). See also Blondheim, *News over the Wires*.
11. Scholars debate the cause-and-effect relationship between telegraphy and writing styles, though there is general agreement that the growth of the inverted pyramid formula for news stories was related to the diffusion of telegraphy. See, for example, David T. Z. Mindich, "Edwin M. Stanton, the Inverted Pyramid, and Information Control," *Journalism Monographs*, Number 140 (August 1993); Horst Pottker, "News and Its Communicative Quality: The Inverted Pyramid—When and Why Did It Appear?" *Journalism Studies* 4 (4, 2003): 501-11.
12. This point is made in James Carey, "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (NY: Routledge, 1992): 201-230. Hochfelder makes the same observation even more directly in *The Telegraph in America, 1832-1920*, 91-96.
13. Cited in Blondheim, *News over the Wires*, 37.
14. When Marvin begins her analysis of electric light as a form of media, she cites the observations of Marshall McLuhan on the same topic. Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 158.
15. Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*, 4.
16. Susman, *Culture as History*, 255-256.
17. One earlier study examined the phenomenon of "steamship newspapers" in the late nineteenth century. The papers aimed to reach an international audience, but the publications were distributed by steamships, rather than being printed on board. Peter Putnis, "Shipping the Latest News across the Pacific in the 1870s: California's *News of the World*," *American Journalism* 30 (spring 2013): 235-59.
18. Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Wires and New Waves: The History of the Telegraph, Telephone, and Wireless* (NY: D. Appleton-Century, 1936), 444.
19. Description based on original copy of *Transatlantic Times*, Shelfmark 250, Marconi Archives, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (hereafter cited as Marconi Archives).
20. "The Progress of Ocean Journalism," in *The Yearbook of Wireless Telegraphy and Telephony 1913* (London: Marconi Press Agency, 1913), 559-61.
21. "The Mid-Ocean Daily," *Editor and Publisher*, January 10, 1903, 1.
22. "Atlantic Ocean's First Newspaper," *New York Times*, February 23, 1903, 1; "Published at Sea," *Editor and Publisher*, February 28, 1903, 1.
23. "Atlantic Ocean's First Newspaper."
24. Original copy of *Cunard Bulletin*, October 3, 1903, Shelfmark 251, Marconi Archives. The issues discussed in this paragraph were published aboard the *Campania*.
25. Original copies of *Cunard Bulletin*, Shelfmark 251, Marconi Archives.
26. "First True Mid-Sea Daily," *Editor and Publisher*, June 18, 1904, 1; an original copy of the *Cunard Daily Bulletin* from June 6, 1904, is in the Marconi Archives. A handwritten note along the top of the front page clarifies that on this date, the publication became a daily.

27. "The Ocean Passenger of Today," undated article written by Cunard Steamship Company, Shelfmark 250, Marconi Archives.
28. "The Progress of Ocean Journalism," *The Yearbook of Wireless Telegraphy and Telephony 1913*. Other titles come from sample issues that were kept by the Marconi Company and are now part of the Marconi Archives.
29. Miscellaneous copies of *Cunard Daily Bulletin* and other ship-newspapers, Shelfmark 252, Marconi Archives.
30. "The Transmission of News by Wireless Telegraphy to Vessels at Sea for Incorporation in 'The Atlantic Daily News,'" *Marconigraph*, June 1911, 20-22.
31. "Journalism at Sea: The Cape Cod Station," *Marconigraph*, September 1911, 4-9.
32. "Journalism at Sea: The Cape Cod Station," *Marconigraph*.
33. "Long Distance Communication without Tuning," *Electrical World and Engineer*, 40, December 27, 1902, 1051.
34. "De Forest Wireless Company to Have Newspaper in Ocean," *Tribune* (Austin, TX), December 15, 1905. This brief news article was reprinted in a document titled "Press Reports on De Forest Wireless Telegraphy," which was no doubt prepared by the inventor's company. Box no. 8, De Forest Papers, Perham Collection, History San Jose.
35. Stephen Chalmers, "Running a Newspaper aboard Ship with the Aid of the Wireless," *New York Times*, August 26, 1906, SM4.
36. Letter from A. A. Isbell (Pacific Coast General Manager of the Massie Wireless Telegraph Company) to Owen Culberton (Manager, Commercial Department of RCA), dated November 11, 1929. Series 133, Files pertaining to Photo-Radio, 1899-1947, Box 378. George C. Clark Collection of Radioana, Smithsonian Museum of American History, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Clark Collection).
37. "The Progress of Ocean Journalism," in *The Yearbook of Wireless Telegraphy and Telephony 1913*.
38. Typed notes titled "Additional Notes on Early Issues Radio Magazines on Shipboard by W.S. Fitzpatrick," Series 133, files pertaining to Photo-Radio, 1899-1947, Box 378, Clark Collection.
39. Charles Frederick, "Santa Catalina's Wireless Newspaper," *Scientific American*, 88 (May 9, 1903), 353.
40. Observation about depth of ocean from "Wireless Telegraph Message from President to King," *Electrical World and Engineer*, 41 (January 24, 1903), 161.
41. "Already Out of Swaddling Clothes," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1903, 6.
42. C. E. Howell, "The Wireless Daily Achieved," *The Independent*, 55, Part 2 (October 15, 1903), 2436-440.
43. "The Wireless Is a Winner," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1903, 6; "Already Out of Swaddling Clothes."
44. Howell says the stations opened for regular operation in August, "The Wireless Daily Achieved." Two newspaper articles from the *San Francisco Call* give some details on the work that was underway in the previous months. See "Wireless Telegraphy on the South Coast," *San Francisco Call*, June 6, 1902, 4, and also "Avalon to Have Wireless Plant," *San Francisco Call*, August 19, 1903.
45. Thorn L. Mayes, *Wireless Communication in the United States: The Early Development of American Radio Operating Companies* (East Greenwich, RI: New England Wireless and Steam Museum, 1989), 28.
46. Howell, "The Wireless Daily Achieved."

47. A "telegraph news service" is described in "Herald Bulletin Service for Summer Resort Hotels," *New York Herald*, October 8, 1899, 3, and also a similar article with the same headline from same publication on July 7, 1901, 3.
48. Howell, "The Wireless Daily Achieved."
49. Howell, "The Wireless Daily Achieved."
50. "Already Out of Swaddling Clothes."
51. Much of the information in this paragraph is based on a reproduction of the first page of the *Wireless*, as reprinted in Mayes, *Wireless Communication in the United States*, 216.
52. Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone, *The Form of News: A History* (NY: The Guilford Press, 2001), 103-105.
53. "The One Only Wireless Paper," *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1903, B11. This quote was reprinted from a paper located in Fern City, California.
54. Howell, "The Wireless Daily Achieved."
55. "Out of Swaddling Clothes," *Los Angeles Times*.
56. "Other Journals on the Wireless," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1903, 8.
57. Guglielmo Marconi provided wireless updates to the *New York Herald* for the 1899 America's Cup yacht race, and had previously done a similar stunt for the *Dublin Daily Express*. See L.S. Howeth, *History of Communications-Electronics in the United States Navy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 26. Another source also indicates that the *San Francisco Call* received wireless updates from a ship in August 1899. See Bart Lee, "Wireless Comes of Age on the West Coast," *Antique Wireless Association Review* 24 (2011): 241-282, 243. It is likely that other newspapers also experimented with wireless, if only briefly, prior to the *Los Angeles Times* 1903 claim about being "the first to receive news via wireless."
58. "The One Only Wireless Paper," *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1903, B11.
59. "Already Out of Swaddling Clothes," *Los Angeles Times*.
60. "Santa Catalina Island: Another Wireless Paper," *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 1903, A7.
61. Howell, "The Wireless Daily Achieved."
62. "Famed Wireless Suspended for Winter," *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1903, A7.
63. "Wireless Companies Merge," *New York Times*, January 10, 1904, 4.
64. Howell, "The Wireless Daily Achieved."
65. Howell, "The Wireless Daily Achieved."
66. Noah Arceneaux, "News on the Air: The *New York Herald*, Newspapers, and Wireless Telegraphy, 1899-1917," *American Journalism* 30 (spring 2013): 160-181.
67. "Long Distance Communication without Tuning," *Electrical World and Engineer*, 40, December 27, 1902, 1051.
68. "Long Distance Communication without Tuning," *Electrical World and Engineer*; see also "Wireless Telegraphy to Block Island," *Electrical World and Engineer*, 39, May 17, 1902, 860.
69. Lee de Forest, *Father of Radio* (Chicago, IL: Wilcox & Follet, 1950), 149-50; Lee de Forest, "The Life and Work of Lee de Forest," Part VI, *Radio News*, March 1925, 1636.
70. De Forest, "The Life and Work of Lee de Forest," *Radio News*. In his history of wireless telegraphy, Mayes wrote that inventor Walter Massie helped restore the de Forest station on Block Island, *Wireless Communication in the United States*, 77. Massie later established his own wireless telegraphy company and worked with the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* to establish a ship-newspaper in the Pacific.
71. De Forest, "The Life and Work of Lee de Forest," *Radio News*.

72. The *Providence Daily Journal* reprinted the cover page of the *Block Island Wireless* one day after the inaugural issue; reproduction appears on July 10, 1903, 4. There are also two complete issues of the *Block Island Wireless*, dated July 24 and 25, 1903, in Series 133, files pertaining to Photo-Radio, 1899-1947, Box 378, Clark Collection.
73. "The Wireless Makes Its Bow," *Providence Daily Journal*, July 10, 1903, 4.
74. Elena Razlogova, *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 11-32.
75. "Prize Fight Round by Round by Wireless Telegraph," *Providence Daily Journal*, August 17, 1903, 2.
76. "Prize Fight Round by Round by Wireless Telegraph," *Providence Daily Journal*.
77. De Forest, "The Life and Work of Lee de Forest," *Radio News*.
78. Frank Fayant, "The Wireless Telegraph Bubble," *Success Magazine*, January 1907, 49-52; Mayes, *Wireless Communication in the United States*, 27.
79. Mike Adams, *Lee de Forest: King of Radio, Television, and Film* (NY: Copernicus Books, 2011).
80. This ad appeared in the *Providence Daily Journal* on August 10, 1903, 8.
81. Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004); David Paul Nord, "The Ironies of Communications Technology: Why Predictions of the Future Often Go So Wrong," *The Cresset* 49 (March 1986): 15-20.
82. "Journalism at Sea: The Cape Cod Station," *Marconigraph*.
83. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, The Critical Edition* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 8.
84. Many academic studies include the observation that news organizations often use the newest technologies simply to distribute content created for an older format. For two such studies, see Lindsay Hoffman, "Is Internet Content Different after All? A Content Analysis of Mobilizing Information in Online and Print Newspapers," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 83 (spring 2006): 58-76, and Kris Boyle and Carol Zuegner, "News Staffs Use Twitter to Interact with Readers," *Newspaper Research Journal* 33 (fall 2012): 6-19.