

Gale Primary Sources

Start at the source.

“By the HERALD’s Special Wire!”: Technology and Speed in Transnational News

Clare Pettitt

King’s College London



Various source media, International Herald Tribune Historical Archive 1887-2013

“information is speed”

Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor* (1995)ⁱ

James Bennett, and his son, Gordon Bennett, who ran the New York Herald and then simultaneously the *New York Herald European Edition* (later renamed as the *International Herald Tribune*), were remarkable in their early understanding of the possibilities of electronic communication for creating news. In their newspapers, they exploited the speed of the new transatlantic cables in a way which makes them very significant figures in the creation of a culture of non-stop global news. They understood that delayed information exponentially loses its value. They were perhaps the first to see that information is speed. And they understood better than other newspaper proprietors at the time the potential for selling speed in the form of a newspaper.

The Bennetts in New York

The *Herald European Edition* was a sister paper to the hugely successful and game-changing New York Herald launched by James Bennett Sr. in 1835. Bennett started the original *New York Herald* on a humble editor's desk made of a plank of wood laid across the top of two barrels in a cheap basement office. By the time he handed the business over to his son James Gordon Bennett Jnr (known as Gordon Bennett) in 1866, it was hugely profitable and the family was among the expanding aristocracy of new American money. The paper is most often remembered for its proto-tabloid tactics. In its early days, it famously published an interview with the Madame of a brothel on Thomas

Street where a young prostitute, Helen Jewett, had been murdered. Such novel and sensational reporting drove the paper's circulation up to 10,000. The New York Herald did well out of the Civil War; with 63 reporters in the field, it became a trusted source of war news. Post-war, the American economy boomed and Bennett Snr. was among the first to realise the importance to a growing economy of fresh financial news, daily Wall Street reports and detailed shipping news.ⁱⁱ He started the practice of sending boats out to meet incoming ships to collect the news from abroad. He made his newspaper useful to its readers in new ways. He understood that speed and news were conjoined concepts in what would come to be called the Gilded Age, and that financial investments depended on good market information.

The year that Gordon Bennett took over as Managing Editor, 1866, was also the year that the Atlantic Cable was finally successfully laid (after four failed attempts), a submarine telegraph cable which linked Europe and America, and the *New York Herald* immediately saw the potential of the cable as a news medium. Within a day of the cable opening to public use, the paper reported the whole of King William of Prussia's speech on his victory at Königgrätz, which it arranged to be cabled in full at a cost of 36,000 francs.ⁱⁱⁱ Transatlantic reporting had been a slow and uneven process before the transatlantic cable. Even the fastest steamships in the 1860s took two or three weeks to cross the ocean. Now it was possible to report the political, financial and society news from the Old World almost as it happened. One of the first things that the young Gordon Bennett, still only 26 years old, did as Managing Editor was to launch a second evening edition of the paper, the

Evening Telegram, the title suggesting a quick, speedy update on the morning's news. The *Evening Telegram* was printed on pink paper with four to six column pages and it sold cheaply for one cent. It ran large black headlines, then a novelty, and offered a column called 'Cable News', and another called 'Telegraphic Bulletins.' It was never as successful as the *Herald* itself, but it is important because it gives the first clue that Gordon Bennett, idle, rich and often drunk though he was, had innovative business ideas and considerable commercial energy. He was ahead of his time. Later, the newspaper magnates, Hearst and Pulitzer would re-apply some of the features of the *Evening Telegram* in their own papers with more success. Gordon Bennett liked to make his own news. He famously called Henry Morton Stanley into his New York office on 27 October 1869 and instructed him to "FIND LIVINGSTONE", whatever the cost." In 1875 Bennett funded a failed attempt to discover the northwest passage; and he bankrolled the 1879-1881 expedition by George Washington De Long to find the North Pole. De Long and his party died of starvation after their ship, the *Jeannette*, named after Bennett's sister, was crushed by ice and the crew tried to walk to Siberia. But disasters sell papers and the *Herald* continued to flourish.

However, Gordon Bennett's career was not destined to continue in New York. He had been brought up in great luxury in Paris by his mother and, when he arrived back in the US, he had quickly become a member of New York's "fast set." He was fast in more ways than one. He had a particular predilection for coach racing at breakneck speeds in the countryside at night, sometimes standing completely naked at the reins. He

was a founding member of the Coaching Club of New York along with other monied families such as the Vanderbilts (shipping and railroad money) and the Whitneys. The Bennetts, father and son, helped found the Belmont Park racetrack, and Gordon imported a polo team with equipment and instructors from England, and founded the Westchester Polo Club. He also participated in the first transatlantic yacht race in 1866, after betting \$90,000 at the Union Club that his yacht, the *Henrietta*, could beat his friends' yachts. His interest in expensive, high-speed, high risk sports would endure till the end of his life. But on New Year's Day 1877, Bennett blotted his copy book badly by arriving very drunk at a party at the house of his society fiancée, Caroline May, and proceeding to urinate into the fireplace in her parlour, apparently mistaking it for a urinal, before being escorted out in disgrace.' Caroline's brother, Frederick, reacted by thrashing Bennett with a horsewhip and a duel ensued from which both escaped without harm. But the engagement was broken off and Bennett was shunned by the high set. Furious, within the year he had moved back to Paris, never to return to live in America. From now on he was going to run his New York paper from the other side of the Atlantic.

Cable Wars

But to do this Bennett needed access to the transatlantic cable. In Paris in the early 1880s, Bennett entered into a 'cable war' with Jay Gould, who controlled Western Union and several newspapers such as the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Sun* and the *World*. By 1881, Gould controlled 90 per cent of the land-telegraph network in the US, and he had made an important link between submarine and land cables, by

laying two transatlantic cables in late December 1880. In 1882, a price war had brought Gould into the Atlantic Pool Monopoly. All of Bennett's messages to the *Herald* had to pass through Western Union cables and his news stories were therefore open to interception by his rival. Bennett determined to break this monopoly and when he met John William Mackay in the early 1880s, he saw his chance. Mackay had made a huge fortune out of silver mining in San Francisco and was ready to invest in this exorbitantly expensive project.

On 10 December 1883, Bennett and Mackay launched their Commercial Cable Company and equipped the Mackay-Bennett, a specially customised steamer, to lay a new transatlantic cable to compete with Gould's.^v As a result, Gould's Western Union was forced to reduce its cable tolls by almost 50 per cent. The Mackay-Bennett transatlantic cable gave the *Herald* an enormous advantage in terms of both the speed and the volume of its European news because Bennett was using the cable primarily for the communication of news, and Gould was running his cable as a commercial enterprise that was somewhat separate from his newspaper concerns. But the inevitable price war followed when the Atlantic Pool tried to break the new company by reducing their tariff to 6 pence per word, a rate which would eventually make it impossible for everyone to survive. Bennett and Mackay lost a lot of money but Mackay would not budge. They launched a second company in 1886, the Postal Telegraph Cable Company, which challenged the Western Union's monopoly on landlines. By 1887, the Commercial Cable Company had secured 50 per cent of Atlantic traffic. And by 1888, Bennett and Mackay had made an

agreement with the Atlantic Pool to agree a word-rate of one shilling.

These cable wars are crucial to the history of globalization. According to Simone Müller, they "redefined the parameters of the global cable system," and they marked a significant shift from a London-centred tele-world, to a more Anglo-American axis.^{vi} They also mark the moment when news became an integrated part of the cable business, which was Bennett's vision. The 1880s is the decade in which information becomes identified with speed and speed with information in ways which still resonate in our world now. Theorist Paul Virilio even goes so far as to say that "information is speed." Bennett would probably have agreed.

For Bennett, cheaper cable rates allowed him to start the *New York Herald, European Edition* in 1887 alongside the New York edition. Paris became the centre of a cabled web for Bennett, where he collected news from all over Europe, Africa and the Near East to send it on to New York. The editor of the London *Daily Mail*, Alfred Harmsworth, wrote in 1901:

'Mr. Bennett... publishes his journal simultaneously in two continents, with the Atlantic rolling between. Thus the views of the *New York Herald* are spread throughout Europe each day, almost as rapidly and effectively as they are in the United States. In passing one should remark that Mr. Bennett has adopted the singular but not unwise policy of conducting his American newspaper in Europe, whereby he not only secures the best news-service of any United States journal, but by persistent personal effort is able to wield a very considerable influence on European politics as they are affected by those of America, and *vice versa*.^{viii}

The speed of the *Herald's* news reporting was particularly pronounced in France, where nationalised communications systems were notoriously slow. As the *Herald* itself put it, “[n]othing could be worse than the French telephone – except, of course, the French telegraph ...A typical example of this department’s leisurely habits is found on page 2 this morning, in the shape of a long cable-gram sent off from Washington early on Saturday evening and delivered in the HERALD’s Paris offices yesterday [Sunday] long after the European edition had appeared.”¹⁶ Bennett believed in the superior efficiency of private enterprise.

The *Paris Herald* started as a four-page format, with most of the last page given over to advertisements. It was targeted at rich Americans vacationing in Europe, a class Bennett knew well. The famous train bleu had been in operation for four years from Calais to Paris where it picked up coaches from Berlin and St Petersburg and then ran overnight to the Riviera, taking well-heeled tourists to fashionable watering places. Americans visiting Europe were invited to register when they arrived at the *Herald* office at 49, avenue de l’Opéra, and then they could see their names printed in the paper the next day. This was a key move which reveals something of Bennett’s remarkable tactics in building markets and readerships. Bennett monitored his two papers closely and kept them looking and feeling modern. He was very quick to upgrade to modern production methods and formats. The *Herald* started to print photographs in 1890, and in the mid-90s, Christmas supplements and advertisements were illustrated in full colour, which was very unusual at the time. In 1898 Bennett imported the first Linotypes to be

used for typesetting on the European continent, and the *Herald* opened its own photo-engraving shop in 1908.¹⁷

The *Paris Herald*: Clubbability and Connectivity

Bennett was visionary in modelling his Paris newspaper as a kind of club. From the beginning the paper invited correspondence from its readers. Readers’ letters were often printed with editorial rejoinders. He created in-jokes which were regularly repeated in its pages. For example, he ordered the frequent reprint of the same cartoon about measuring a thermometer, and the same letter about converting from centigrade to Fahrenheit from “The Old Philadelphia Lady” appeared every day for nineteen years.¹⁸ Bennett paid to use the cable to announce the names of those Americans who would be arriving on incoming steamers and a column of shipping news announced arrivals and departures. He also initiated the first ‘real estate’ section in any newspaper, so that his readers could buy and sell their houses and yachts in his pages. In September 1889, Bennett opened a reading room at Avenue de l’Opéra called ‘Salle de dépêches et de lecture’: a news and reading room stocked liberally with French, British and American papers and magazines. The Commercial Cable Company’s offices were next door, so visitors to the reading room could cable to their friends and relatives across the Atlantic too. Bennett made the *Paris Herald* into a kind of clearing house for American travellers. A ‘Travellers’ Guide’ column listed trains between Paris and London, and Paris and Nice. Hotels who had mail for Americans who had left no forwarding address were invited to contact the *Paris Herald*, which put out a call to its American readership. Bennett commissioned, and paid handsomely for, “bright and gossipy” correspondence from all the fashionable

watering places of Europe.^{xii} By the early 1900s, the paper had grown to 6-8 pages. In 1892, a column called 'Yacht Movements' appeared: the *Herald* had contracted with Lloyds of London to receive news of all yacht sightings and landings, so that yachtsmen could track each other around the Riviera. Bennett once told C. Inman Barnard, "[b]ear in mind that the weather is more urgent than politics, social events, theaters, sports or anything else"^{xiii} The *Herald's* weather reports were superior to others because when there was a storm gathering across the Atlantic Bennett was in a uniquely well-networked position to warn his European or his American readers. As many of them were yachtsmen, this was a valuable service. 'Building an interactive brand' and 'creating a community' around a product is sometimes seen as a fairly recent development of market capitalism, but Bennett was a pioneer in understanding his customers and creating needs for them that he could then meet.

In fact, Bennett was often not even in Paris, but on his yacht, cruising in the Mediterranean and running his newspapers remotely by telegraph. If he was on the move, he made employees "sit at the end of a cable," and often he would call them imperiously to meet him, wherever he happened to be, so that "a never ending stream of editors and reporters was kept shuttling back and forth."^{xiv} The *Herald's* telegraph offices on both sides of the Atlantic were open day and night and his cables used Muirhead's duplex system, which meant that messages could be sent simultaneously from both sides, which made the speed of communication even faster. Bennett was early to realise that speedy electrical communications allowed him to exercise a new kind of remote control. The *Herald's* editorial

committee in New York met "with an empty chair and a fresh copy of the paper at the head of the table, as if Bennett might walk in at any moment."^{xv} He was still in control. When he was in Paris, Bennett got up at 5 a.m. and read all the cable dispatches that had arrived during the night from New York, and inspected all the copy for the New York paper and scrutinised a specially-marked up dummy copy of the Paris edition.^{xvi} As Simone Müller puts it, "[a]fter the [cable] disputes had been settled, Gordon Bennett emerged as the most visible representative of a 'global' news modernity based on technological speed."^{xvii}

From Exploration to Speed

In the late 1880s and 1890s, Bennett was becoming quite manically focused on increasing the speed of his news reporting. His newspapers themselves are full of references to the medium of their making: the cable. The circular logo of the Commercial Cable Company was carried prominently on the front page and a column called "Cable Flashes" appeared. When Bennett paid exorbitantly to secure the private use of a cable between London and Paris, he explained to his readers in 1887:

'By the HERALD's Special Wire!: For many years to come, until the need for special wires becomes a luxury of the past, the readers of this paper will find the above words at the top of its English despatches; and yet very few can appreciate the significance of that line or estimate the cost of a special wire between Paris and London.'^{xviii}

After this, many stories were preceded by the line, "By the HERALD's Special Wire!" As a result of this unprecedented level of connectivity, the Herald was also able to beat the British papers with dispatches from colonial wars.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Bennett turned his attention away from exploration and expeditions, such as Stanley's to find Livingstone, and focused instead on speed as the main subject of his papers. The paper made media speed into news in its own right:

'As fast as the pages fall from our correspondent's hand, the London operator sends them to the editor's table in Paris. Tic, tic, tic goes the instrument, and the words come out printed on the tape, which are cut up and pasted onto sheets of paper, and are, in the time it takes to write these words, put red-hot into the compositors' hands'^{xix}

The paper regularly celebrated the means of its own production, boasting of the speed with which it brought news to its readers. Bennett organised publicity stunts such as a transatlantic chess match played over the cable.^{xx} And when he bought two motor-vans early in the days of the automobile to distribute his paper to the Paris railway stations, not only were the vans illustrated in the Herald, but the Renault works where they were made were too, celebrating the modernity of these machines.

Technology and Sports News

Bennett also made a connection between two of his personal enthusiasms, both to do with speed: technological innovation and sports events. In 1889,

Bennett paid for the famous electrical engineer, Guglielmo Marconi to visit New York and to conduct experiments using his new wireless method of telegraphy. Marconi was commissioned to report the America's Cup yacht race by wireless for the *Herald*, working off the *Mackay-Bennett* moored off the Scotland Light, so that "[t]he news received on board through the air will be cabled direct to London and Paris, as well as New York. Thus the three great cities of the world will receive the same news practically simultaneously."^{xxi} In the weeks leading up to the race, readers were prepared for this stunt as the pages of the *Herald* were filled with news about Marconi's experiments first in England and then in New York.^{xxii} Descriptions and illustrations of his new system were published alongside portraits of him.^{xxiii} In the event, the yacht race itself was not finished when the allotted time expired, but Bennett made up for this underwhelming result by reporting on the success of wireless instead, "[i]n one instance only sixty seconds elapsed between the sending of a message from the steamship Ponce, which followed the racing yachts, and its receipt at the HERALD offices."^{xxiv} And he ran the Herald's triumph down the side of the front page: "'Herald' Dispatches by Wireless Telegraphy Ahead of all other Means. Wonderful Speed of Transmission. Many Bulletins Received Within Sixty Seconds from Sending. Both Accurate and Rapid. No Real Competitor, the Associated Press being Eight Minutes Behind."^{xxv}

Bennett saw the importance of the speedy reporting of sporting events and scores and a regular section started to appear on "Society, Automobile, Balloon, Football, and Racing News." In the mid-1890s the paper filled with cycling stories, claiming that the bicycle was

“the most potent agency of true democracy since the French Revolution!”^{xxvi} Now the poorest working-class cyclist could move from place to place. Mobility and speed was presented as a social good. From the late 1890s a section called ‘En Automobile’ appeared which registered the arrival of driving parties in all the fashionable resorts of Europe. In 1900, Bennett established the Coupe Internationale de l’Automobile which would later become the French Grand Prix. Bulletins about the race were pasted in the windows of the Paris office. In 1906, he established a cup for ballooning, the Coupe Internationale des Aeronautes, in 1907, a cup for motorboat races and in 1909, a Coupe Internationale de l’Aviation. The modernity of the paper was tied up with its promotion and coverage of these emerging international sporting fixtures. Bennett created new sports in order to report on them and to create news. In this he has left a long legacy to the popular press across the world, which has remained intimately connected to sport, both local and international, ever since. Bennett’s reputation as a rich playboy is well deserved, but it has occluded his significance as the far-sighted editor of a groundbreakingly modern, popular newspaper.^{xxvii}

Conclusion

When Bennett died, E.D. Dewitt, who had once been a General Manager of the *Herald*, wrote an affectionate piece about him and his “long distance vision.” Bennett

i Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor* (translated by Julie Rose) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995)

ii Information from Charles L. Robertson, *The International Herald Tribune: The First Hundred Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p.5.

iii The decisive battle of the Austro-Prussian War, in which the Kingdom of Prussia defeated the Austrian Empire. Taking place near

saw across long distances because he realised that in the age of electronic communications distance was shrinking. He saw that he could run a global newspaper from anywhere in the world. As media historian, Mary Anne Doane has pointed out, information has to be punctual or it ceases to be information.^{xxviii} Bennett was perhaps the first fully to exploit this idea, recognising that news is speed, and speed is news.

Königgrätz and Sadowa (Sadová) in Bohemia on 3 July 1866, it was an example of battlefield concentration, a convergence of multiple units at the same location to trap and destroy an enemy force between them.

iv See Clare Pettitt, ‘Dr. Livingstone, I Presume?’: *Missionaries, Journalists, Explorers and Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007)

v Some accounts say he urinated into a grand piano.

vi Bennett's cables were landed (possibly unsafely) at the gateway of New York and only continued underground to Wall Street to enhance the speed of message transmission.

vii Simone Müller, *Wiring the World: The Social and Cultural Creation of Global Telegraph Networks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p.131.

viii Alfred Harmsworth, 'The Simultaneous Newspapers of the Twentieth Century', *North American Review*, v.172, no. 530 (January 1901):72-90, p.80.

ix 'Delayed in Transmission', *New York Herald* [European Edition], 14 Sept. 1908, p. 4. *International Herald Tribune Historical Archive 1887-2013*, [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5Y2gz2](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5Y2gz2). Accessed 21 Nov. 2017.

x Bennett also experimented with a London edition. He leased a five-story building on Fleet Street and installed his own rotary press. The paper was to come out seven days a week. The London edition of the Herald first appeared on 2 February 1889 but it failed to find a place in an already crowded market and Bennett closed it down, at a considerable loss, in September 1890. See Robertson, p.71.

xi Bennett probably planted the letter himself as he was an enthusiast for the conversion of all temperature measurements into centigrade. See Robertson, pp.45-47.

xii Robertson, p.42.

xiii Robertson, p.46. Bennett was quite obsessed with the weather. He had thermometers hanging in all the trees on his Versailles estate and carried one in his pocket.

xiv 'Didn't See Mr. Bennett: Experiences of a Sunday Editor Who Went to Paris,' *Washington Post*, (8 July 1900) quoted in Simon J. Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System, 1876-1922* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 16. See Müller, p.139.

xv Steven. D. Lyons, 'James Gordon Bennett Jr. (1841-1918)' *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Volume 23 American Newspaper Journalists 1873-1900*, ed. Perry J. Ashley (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1983), pp.7-16, p.12.

xvi Robertson, pp.62-63.

xvii Simone M. Müller, *Wiring the World: the Social and Cultural Creation of Global Telegraph Networks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p.139.

xviii 'What a Wire Means.' *New York Herald* [European Edition], 12 Oct. 1887, p. 3. *International Herald Tribune Historical Archive 1887-2013*, [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5Y3MK7](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5Y3MK7). Accessed 21 Nov.

2017. The cable could only be leased between 9pm and 6am from the government and only for at least three hours at a time. It had to be operated by a government operator.

xix 'What a Wire Means.' p. 3.

xx [By the Herald's Special Wire] 'Annual Cable Chess Match over Atlantic.' *New York Herald* [European Edition], 20 Apr. 1901. *International Herald Tribune Historical Archive 1887-2013*, [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5Y5iwX](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5Y5iwX). Accessed 21 Nov. 2017.

xxi [By Commercial Cable to the Herald]. 'Signor Marconi at Work.' *New York Herald* [European Edition], 27 Sept. 1899, p. [1]. *International Herald Tribune Historical Archive 1887-2013*, [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5X25W6](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5X25W6). Accessed 17 Nov. 2017.

xxii 'Marconi Station Recently Fitted up at Bournemouth.' *New York Herald* [European Edition], 20 Aug. 1898, p. [1]. *International Herald Tribune Historical Archive 1887-2013*, [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5Wzx99](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5Wzx99). Accessed 17 Nov. 2017.

xxiii See, for example, [By Commercial Cable to the Herald]. 'Marconi System.' *New York Herald* [European Edition], 6 Oct. 1899, p. [1]. *International Herald Tribune Historical Archive 1887-2013*, [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5X2PhX](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5X2PhX). Accessed 17 Nov. 2017.

xxiv [By Commercial Cable to the Herald]. 'Marconi System's Success.' *New York Herald* [European Edition], 4 Oct. 1899, p. [1]. *International Herald Tribune Historical Archive 1887-2013*, [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5X2J74](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5X2J74). Accessed 17 Nov. 2017.

xxv 'Marconi System's Success', p. [1].

xxvi Robertson, p.49.

xxvii The *New York Herald* was eaten up by *The New York Tribune* in 1924 to become the *New York Herald Tribune*. In 1959, the newspaper was sold and its European edition was renamed the *International Herald Tribune* and run by *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. In 2013, it was renamed the *International New York Times*.

xxviii See Mary Anne Doane, 'Information, Crisis, Catastrophe' in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader* eds. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.251-264.

CITATION

Pettitt, Clare: ““By the HERALD’s Special Wire!”: Technology and Speed in Transnational News.” *International Herald Tribune Historical Archive 1887-2013*: Cengage Learning, 2017

© Cengage Learning 2017

**REQUEST A
FREE TRIAL**

**CONTACT YOUR
REPRESENTATIVE**

**FIND OUT MORE
ON OUR WEBSITE**

