

Mediapolis: Urban Histories/ Media Histories

News Architecture and the Telautograph on Park Row

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As David Henkin reminds us in *City Reading*, "Cities were built, in part, of words, words that took material form in public space." (5) Beyond this materiality of words, this paper considers important convergences in sound and motion in the delivery of news that presages more contemporary valences of multi-media. As Henkin argues, "The metropolitan press organized a community (and a public) around metaphors of space as well as metaphors of time." (129) In the triangular plot of land that faced Park Row in New York, space and time are no mere metaphors; news was tangibly spatial, temporal and often live.

During major announcements at the turn of the last century in New York, news could come in the form of words on paper, extras shouted by newsboys, or projected onto large canvases draped from the fronts of newspaper buildings along Park Row. Anticipating later developments in news tickers, zippers, and digital screens, these "live" uses of architectural facades move the site of news off the page and outside of the newsroom, and help us to see news as a spatial construct. Beyond the geometric symmetry of

the page, the circulation patterns of newsgathering and delivery, this more ephemeral form reveals a triangulation of news, audiences, and event that encourages a review of the modern concepts of interactivity and multimedia.

Park Row, also known as Printing House Square and Newspaper Row, was a few blocks in lower Manhattan, facing City Hall Park that was home to many newspaper offices. The park was bound by the post office, the Western Union building, and City Hall, and as such it was the center of public information dissemination in New York. The ascendant power of the press was clearly communicated by the skyscraper spectacle of ever-taller towers designed as emblems of modern urban communications and capitalist media. But the space in front of these buildings was just as significant to the development of modern communication as a newly up-to-the-minute, immersive, phenomenon.

Newspapers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could be extremely responsive to the immediacy of events, with the capacity to insert news flashes into an edition running on the presses in two minutes. This, combined with the printing of several updated editions per day, and in both morning and evening form, contributed to a near constant production news. Yet even with this massive outpouring of paper, building facades were used to fill in the gaps between editions.

Election nights were especially busy, but so were New Year's Eves, boxing matches, boat races, shipping news, natural and man-made disasters, war news or any other announcements with temporal reveals.

What makes news bulletins so important is their construction of a space of and for news; a geography of information that exists independently of the vicissitudes of news, animated by eager news consumers in a moment of reception that resists easy classification. With each building issuing simultaneous and competing messages, depending on the political persuasion of the paper and the efficiency of their telegraph operation, readers had a full menu to choose from in selecting their information input. If they were not loyal to one paper's boards over another, then the noise of the crowd in front of one board would effectively direct their attention there. These reactions to the posted news were rambunctious, to say the least, instantly registering approval or disapproval of what was being shown. The crowd was not only receiving news; it was by turns requesting and rejecting it. In a manner suggestive of early news customization, gatherers could select, filter and discard their information just by moving between boards.

The earliest bulletin boards used chalk against slate, prefabricated block letters, and handwritten messages on paper to post updates. Later, stereopticons projected spectacular messages, photographs, cartoons, maps and anything else that could be drawn on glass and illuminated against a canvas screen. Crushed crowds gathered to read the bulletins held back by rows of police on horseback, attempting to keep passages open for traffic. But there is more to this early interactive multimedia moment than the presence of a live audience in front of moving words and pictures. Another layer was provided by Elisha Gray's short-lived but nonetheless influential invention of the telautograph, which later morphed into the fax machine. The telautograph was "an instrument designed for reproducing writing, pictures, drawings or any other product of the pen by transmission over a telegraph wire."<sup>1</sup> Its first public demonstration was at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, where it captured the attention of scientists, journalists and fair-goers alike. It allowed anyone to be their own telegrapher, because it reproduced handwriting as it was written, obviating the need for a telegraph operator or Morse code. Because it delivered a message in the same hand

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<sup>1</sup> **PROF. ELISHA GRAY DEAD.** *Chicago Daily Tribune* Jan 22, 1901, pg. 3

as it had been sent, and left a copy of the message with both sender and receiver, it was considered superior to the telephone, and thought likely to dominate business transactions.

Despite being lauded for its capacity for private message transmission, it was in these very public demonstrations along Newspaper Row that it found fame. And as with so many other defunct media technologies, its use tells us a great deal about the function of writing and inscription at the turn of the century. Fusing words, numbers, photographs, maps, cartoons and spontaneous doodling, these different representational systems acting together satisfy many criteria of new media.

The postings on newspaper office facades were as much advertisements for the papers as their celebrated architecture. But the tall buildings along Park Row must be seen not only as the manifestations of an increasingly powerful media industry, but also as a group or ensemble that together constructed an important public space before them. The visibility of the buildings was a clear sign of the commercial power of the press, but they also enabled a tangible space in which the public was constituted. The aggregation of newspaper buildings functioned to establish the media as the producers of a town square and commons,

and the writing on its architecture ensured that the public sphere was no mere abstraction.