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The Medium and Its Message: Reporting the Austro-Prussian War in the *Times of India*¹

Amelia Bonea *

Abstract: »Das Medium und seine Botschaft: Die Berichterstattung des Deutschen Krieges von 1866 in der *Times of India*«. This paper explores the multifarious relations between technologies of communication and the messages they convey. The focus of the paper is on the electric telegraph, but the steamship, the other technology used to transmit messages between Britain and India during the mid-nineteenth century, is also considered. The messages examined are news about the Austro-Prussian War published in the *Times of India*, one of the leading Indian newspapers of the period. Through a comparative analysis which takes into account both the content and the form of war news, as well as the routes of communication along which news traveled, the paper explores the ways in which these technologies of communication and the environment in which they were used conditioned the message and constructed fields of vision for readers of the newspaper.

Keywords: Austro-Prussian War, *Times of India*, news, newspapers, Reuters, electric telegraph, steamship.

(Mis-)Conceptions of Telegraphy and News

The electric telegraph has attracted considerable popular and scholarly interest since its invention almost two centuries ago. During the nineteenth century, attitudes towards the new technology ranged from the most enthusiastic to the most critical, depending on the socio-economic and political positioning of the commentators, as well as the scientific milieu to which they belonged. Apart from being among the earliest beneficiaries of telegraphy, the newspaper press in Britain and other parts of the British Empire offered an excellent platform for such displays of technological enthusiasm or pessimism. An article published in June 1870 by the *Daily Telegraph*, on the occasion of the successful opening of the direct submarine line to India, is a good illustration of the former type of attitude. Partaking in the sense of joy and momentous historical event of those present at John Pender's house in London to celebrate the success, the newspaper hailed the electric telegraph for its manifold benefits.

¹ I especially thank Riho Isaka, Michael Mann and Irena Vladimírsky for their helpful comments and suggestions on this paper. Any errors are my own.

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Among these were the abilities to “preserve our empire by warning us of mutiny,” “outstrip the passage of the storm and save whole navies and flotillas,” “bring to our breakfast-table news from all regions of the earth” and, generally-speaking, to “telegraph [time] out of existence.”²

Other commentators, however, expressed more nuanced views towards telegraphy and questioned its rather taken-for-granted benefits for news and news reporting. One such example can be found in the issue of 11 October 1862 of the *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, a prominent London magazine which aimed to educate its readers through articles and stories on subjects as varied as history, science, religion and language.³ Criticizing people who manipulated news to their own ends and pointing out that “rapid transmission” and “accuracy of news” did not always go hand in hand, the author reminded readers, somehow against the predominant spirit of his time, that technological progress did not necessarily lead to moral or social improvement. The following paragraph illustrates well the journalist’s reluctance to embrace uncritically the latest technology of news transmission. The skeptical gaze he extends to the electric telegraph seems to suggest that its blessings for news reporting and British newspapers have not been unmixed:

Those ‘sensation paragraphs’ [telegraphic news] to which nine-tenths of us turn as naturally as the compass points to the north, are not of very ancient pedigree. They made a feeble beginning in the days of the Irish famine and the Anti-corn law meetings, but the year 1848 forced them into tropical luxuriance. Then we first began to think a paper tame and dull unless it could announce in huge letters the toppling of thrones, the flight of kings, here a massacre, there a bloodless revolt, elsewhere a desperate strife across barricades. When revolutions were replaced by wars, we came to enjoy our battles, carefully seasoned for our taste by the purveyors of telegrams, and to the present day, these headings in big staring letters form the main attraction of a newspaper in most eyes. There is a peculiar knack in the construction of these startling paragraphs. They are generally sonorous, and adapted to rivet the attention, but will not always bear analysis. They do not invariably convey news, but sometimes merely the counterfeit of news. Such paragraphs are wooden nutmegs, not genuine literary spice; and yet even they serve to illustrate the depth and breadth of the almost universal craving for news.

Apart from offering a fascinating insight into nineteenth-century perceptions of telegraphy and news, the above passage represents a fitting starting point for this paper, as it encourages us to reflect on a problem which continues to be of

² *Daily Telegraph*, June 24, 1870, quoted in *Souvenir of the Inaugural Fete* (London, 1870), 46-50. John Pender, described by Winseck and Pike as “the world’s most prominent cable baron,” was at the time chairman of the British Indian Submarine Company, one of the ventures he set up for the purpose of linking Britain with India by submarine cable. See Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860-1930* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 21-30.

³ “News,” *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, October 11, 1862.

particular interest to scholars – namely, how do we conceptualize the relation between the telegraph and newspapers? As the above examples suggest, during the nineteenth century many people regarded the telegraph as possessing transformative powers in relation to the press – the power to change the form of the newspaper, as well as popular perceptions of time, space and news. Some people did question the overall beneficial character in the workings of telegraphy, but they did not dispute the widely-held belief that this new form of communication altered news reporting and previous journalistic practices. Interestingly, this nexus of telegraphy and press continues to be taken for granted in much contemporary scholarship which chooses to explain it in terms of the “impact” or “influence” of telegraphy on the press and regards the telegraph as a veritable agent of change in the field of journalism. Is it adequate, however, to reduce the interplay of telegraphy and press to a linear, cause-and-effect relation – in other words, to speak only about “technological impacts” – or was this relationship more complex and hard to grasp?

In this paper I would like to suggest, by discussing the ways in which the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 was reported in the *Times of India*, that we need to consider alternative angles of vision in examining the interplay of telegraphy and press. A change in our position as observers might create exactly the kind of “parallax effect” (to use Faye Ginsburg’s apt metaphor) needed to get a different perspective on the problem we examine.⁴ Rather than focusing on the impact or effect of the telegraph and, by extension, technology, on society and people, it might be more productive to think about technologies as tools which mediate human interaction with the physical and/or social world. Angela Zito’s observation that “[e]very social practice moves through and is carried upon a material framework or vehicle”⁵ can be applied to technologies as well. Examined from this perspective, technologies of communication such as the telegraph appear, simultaneously, both as material tools which carried information from one geographic location to the other and as mediators of social relations; they offer “frameworks” through which reality can be perceived and interpreted.⁶

Exploring news about the Austro-Prussian War at the intersection of telegraphy and newspapers allows us to see that the telegraph was only one of many technologies – the steamship being the other important example – which combined to mediate perceptions of that event and constructed different

⁴ Faye Ginsburg, “Culture/Media: A (Mild) Polemic,” *Anthropology Today* 10 (1994): 5.

⁵ Angela Zito, “Religion is Media,” in *Rethinking Religion 101: Critical Issues in Religious Studies*, eds. Bradford Verter and Johannes Wolfart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). <<http://www.uu.blymiller.com/shaag/media.pdf>> (accessed October 15, 2009).

⁶ Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency and Design*, trans. Robert P. Crease (University Park, PA.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 125-29.

fields of vision for the readers of the *Times of India*. This approach also unveils the possibilities and the limitations of telegraphy as a medium of communication and shows that its ability to mediate was circumscribed not only by its technical characteristics, but also by the characteristics of the “environment” in which it operated. The mediational power of telegraphy was, in other words, shaped by the socio-cultural, political and/or economic positions of the actors between which it was mediating.

Although at first glance the Austro-Prussian War might appear as an event of little relevance to India, especially since Britain was not directly involved in this conflict, it represents in fact an ideal site to explore the relation between telegraphy and press. Despite the war’s remoteness from the subcontinent, the *Times of India* availed itself of the latest communication technologies and constantly strived to provide its readers with fast and accurate information about the event. This was not only because of the political or informational value of war news, although conflicts among the various European Powers had direct bearing on Britain’s own security and position on the international arena and represented, therefore, topics of great interest to the British public both at home and in the colonies. For the readers of the *Times of India*, though, war news was equally important for their commercial dimension, as wars in Europe had the potential to disrupt trade and economic relations with and within India, a fact reflected in the number of telegrams reporting on the state of the market which the newspaper published during this period.⁷

The Austro-Prussian War also coincided with an important development in the history of newspapers and news reporting in India: although the use of telegraphy for news transmission was already common practice among many English-language newspapers in India, it was during this war that the first Reuter credit appeared in the *Times of India*. The telegraph as a medium of communication was particularly well-suited for the transmission of war news because it provided that element of speed which was crucial to such situations of crisis, to the extent that acquiring the right piece of information at the right time could make the difference between victory or defeat. And since change (or the lack of it) is essential to news, war has always been an ideal subject to report on. Apart from the element of sensationalism it entailed, it was also the one site where change was most likely to occur, often at an unexpected pace.

The following section of the paper maps the trajectories of news circulation between Britain and India by describing the actual channels of communication along which news traveled during the second half of the nineteenth century: the overland mail route and the telegraph routes. The paper then continues with a

⁷ According to Graham Storey, the Bombay cotton market was in a “state of great agitation” during that period as the cotton boom caused by the American Civil War was about to come to an end and the dramatic drop in cotton prices brought many merchants to bankruptcy. See Graham Storey, *Reuters’ Century, 1851-1951* (London: Max Parish, 1951), 63.

brief history of the *Times of India* and an examination of the ways in which the newspaper availed itself of the existing channels of communication to obtain and publish international news. This section also outlines the beginnings of the newspaper's cooperation with Reuters and the increasingly important role the agency came to play in India as a supplier of international news. Against this historical background, the last section of the paper examines in detail the coverage of the Austro-Prussian War by the *Times of India*. The analysis takes into account both the content and the form of news.

Channels of Communication between Britain and India during the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The decade from 1860 to 1870 was a period of significant developments in the history of global communications, the most remarkable of which were, undoubtedly, the successful laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable in 1866 and the opening of the Suez Channel in 1869. Communication between India and Britain kept pace with the technological advancements of the period. By the end of the decade, technologies as diverse as steamships, railways, and the electric telegraph combined to mediate the flow of information between colony and imperial metropolis and brought them closer to each other, both administratively and commercially. *The London Journal*, in an article published in June 1870, summarized the situation cogently, albeit in a self-important tone:

By the aid of steam we have shortened the distance between our shores and India, as to time, by one-half; by the overland route, we have postal communication in thirty days; by the Suez canal, which at one period some of our 'great' men foolishly decided, but which all people of sense now gratefully accept as an accomplished fact, we are rendered independent of the tedious passage by the Cape; and, lastly but not least, through the electric telegraph, we have brought India into the very cabinets of our Ministers, and the counting-houses of our merchants.⁸

Indeed, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, mails regularly took between four to six months to complete the voyage between England and India via the Cape and they were despatched at various intervals by East India Company ships (the so-called East Indiamen), as well as H. M. ships and privately-owned vessels.⁹ With the introduction of steamers and the establishment of the

⁸ *The London Journal*, June 1, 1870.

⁹ John K. Sidebottom, *The Overland Mail: A Postal Historical Study of the Mail Route to India* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1948), 6-7. Sidebottom also draws our attention to the Company's long-lasting "quasi-official status in the matter of mail conveyance [...] indicated by the close relationship which at all times seems to have existed between the Company's London administration at East India House and the General Post Office" (ibid., 4).

overland route via the Isthmus of Suez and the Red Sea, the travelling time of mails was considerably shortened: in 1850, the voyage between London and Bombay took between 28 to 35 days, while by 1865, when the East India Company no longer existed and other commercial ventures had taken over mail delivery, it was further reduced to an average of 24 days.¹⁰

Once the superiority of the overland over the sea route was established, the East India Company came into competition with other entrepreneurs who sought to secure mail contracts with the British Government on various legs of the journey from England to India. In 1836, Thomas Waghorn, pioneer of the Suez route, delivered letters and newspapers to Bombay using a combination of English steamers, caravans and Indian Navy steamers along a route which passed Marseilles, Malta, Alexandria, Cairo and Suez. British newspapers were delivered to India for a total cost of 0/6d. (as against 5/5d. for single letters weighing less than one ounce) and they had to be “open at the ends, without any mark or writing except the address on the envelope, and not more than 7 days old.”¹¹ Despite such individual efforts, during this period the East India Company was practically in control of the Bombay-Suez line. This remained so until 1855 when, under government pressure, it ceded the monthly mail service between Bombay and Suez to the Peninsular and Oriental Company (hereafter P&O).

At the time of this takeover, P&O was already operating a fortnightly service on the Calcutta-Suez and China lines (the so-called India and China mails). The new mail contract stipulated that mails had to be delivered twice each way between Bombay and Suez every calendar month, a fact which virtually amounted to a weekly postal communication between England and India.¹² Before long, the P&O saw itself challenged on the Bombay-Suez line by other commercial ventures, such as the Bombay and Bengal Steamship Company.¹³ This rivalry over mail delivery was reflected in the manner in which newspapers such as the *Times of India* received their overland news at the time of the Austro-Prussian War: the “regular mail” service provided by steamers of the P&O was frequently complemented with mail delivered by various steamers of the Bombay and Bengal Steamship Company “in anticipation of the regular mail.”¹⁴

¹⁰ H. L. Hoskins, *British Routes to India* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1966), 412.

¹¹ *The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island*, vol. 1 (Bombay: The Times Press, 1909), 377, and Sidebottom, *The Overland Mail*, 65.

¹² *Report from the Select Committee on East India Communications* (London: HM Government, 1866), iv.

¹³ J. Forbes Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and His Business Network, 1823-93* (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2003), 60.

¹⁴ Compare, for example, the overland mail published in the *Times of India* of May 7, 1866 with the one published on July 10, 1866.

In 1866, when the British government set up a committee to investigate the state of postal and telegraphic communication with India, it was decided, for reasons of efficiency, that the fortnightly mails to Bombay and Calcutta should be replaced by a weekly service to Bombay.¹⁵ P&O's mail contract for the Bombay-Suez line was renewed a year later and the service became, therefore, weekly – this agreement made Bombay “the port of arrival and departure of all English mails” and thus effectively bolstered the port city's importance as a centre of news, a fact which also benefited the newspapers based in the city.¹⁶

The journey of the overland mail consisted of two legs. The first, from London to Alexandria, followed one of two possible routes: Southampton-Gibraltar-Malta-Alexandria and London-Calais-Paris-Marseilles-Alexandria, with an additional route passing through Ostend, Brussels, Cologne, Brindisi, and Alexandria opened in 1870. The second leg of the journey covered the distance from Alexandria to Bombay and involved the crossing of the desert to Suez, which in the early days was done by cart or camels and from 1857 onwards, by railway; the final stage of this leg was represented by the steamship journey from Suez to Bombay.¹⁷ Since 1859, the practice had been to employ clerks who sorted the homeward-bound mails on steamers on their way from Alexandria to Southampton or Marseilles and thus speed up the process of mail delivery from London to their various destinations. Although attempts were made to establish a similar service for the India-bound mails, they were initially discarded on the ground of high cost and the fact that “English clerks could not sort letters correctly for stations in India, where there were many places with the same name.”¹⁸ It was in 1868, with the renewing of P&O's contract, that sorters began to be employed on steamers which travelled east of Suez; the system was apparently so successful that upon each steamer's arrival in Bombay, mail could be immediately forwarded to the various offices in India, thus saving the six-hour delay time required for sorting the mail in the port.¹⁹

The construction of an extensive network of telegraph lines further reduced the amount of time it took messages to travel between Britain and India, although this had less impact on the circulation of goods, military troops and passengers who continued to be dependent on the overland mail routes. Inter-

¹⁵ *Report of the Select Committee*, iv.

¹⁶ Freda Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism: The P&O Company and the Politics of Empire from Its Origins to 1867* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 105, and *The Gazetteer of Bombay*, vol. 1, 377-78.

¹⁷ Daniel Headrick, “British Imperial Postal Networks” (paper read at the International Economic History Conference, Helsinki, August 2006), 4, and Hoskins, *British Routes to India*, 408.

¹⁸ G. Clarke, *The Post Office of India and Its Story* (London: John Lane; New York: John Lane Company, 1921), 127.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 127-28.

estingly, the telegraph routes followed roughly the already established routes of the overland mail. During the mid-1860s, two telegraphic routes linked Britain with India. The first was the so-called Russian route, opened in early 1864, which consisted of three major segments: a European segment, via Hague and Berlin, a Russian segment, which passed through Tiflis and Julpha, from where it crossed into Persian territory and ended at Bushire (this last part represented the Persian segment). The route was completed by a submarine line which connected the head of the Persian Gulf to Karachi, where the lines of the Indo-European Telegraph Department started.²⁰

The second available route was the so-called Turkish route, completed in March 1865. This was preferred to the Russian route and it consisted of the segment from London to the Turkish frontier and the Constantinople-Baghdad-Fao-Karachi line or the alternative Constantinople-Baghdad-Teheran-Ispahan-Shiraz-Bushire-Karachi line. On the European leg of the journey, messages passed via Vienna or Turin, from where they were directed through Serbia or Wallachia, respectively Thessaloniki, to Constantinople. As members of the Committee on East India Communications observed in their report, a message had to pass through the hands of many foreign administrations on its way from London to India by either of the above routes.²¹ To avoid the inconveniences arising from this situation, a third telegraphic route known as the Red Sea route was officially opened in June 1870 and it became the preferred channel of communication between Britain and India as it was the fastest and most reliable, having the advantage of being entirely under British control. A telegram from London to Bombay by this route travelled first to Falmouth, then to Malta and Alexandria and finally reached India via the submarine cable of the Suez Canal.²² At the time of the opening of the Turkish route, the price of a twenty-word message travelling between India and Britain was £5 1s., a tariff which was reduced to £2 17s. in 1869.²³

The introduction of telegraphy added a new dimension to the circulation of news between Britain and India, but it did not displace previous modes of information transmission. The overland mail routes continued to be used long after the opening of telegraphic communication with the so-called East and newspapers in India, the *Times of India* included, took advantage of both means of communication to obtain news from the continent. This situation was, in

²⁰ *Report of the Select Committee*, x, and Winseck and Pike, *Communication and Empire*, 33.

²¹ *Report of the Select Committee*, ix-x.

²² A. Brasher, *The Telegraph to India: Suggestions to Senders of Messages* (London: E. Stanford, 1870), 6.

²³ James Anderson, "Statistics of Telegraphy," *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 35 (1872): 300.

fact, similar to the one in the United States, where mails were also maintained as a “viable alternative to the telegraph.”²⁴

The *Times of India* in the Age of Emerging News Agencies

The history of the *Times of India* is a long and complicated journey, whose beginnings testify to the ephemeral life of newspapers in mid-nineteenth century India. It began in 1838, when “a syndicate [...] composed of eleven European merchants in Bombay, Mr. (afterwards Sir) Jamsetji Jijibhoy, two eminent barristers and a member of the medical profession” decided to establish *The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce*, a bi-weekly paper turned into a daily in 1850.²⁵ In April 1856, the newspaper was bought by local Indian businessmen and within a year, the editor George Buist, whose vengeful and recalcitrant views on the Indian Mutiny had been deemed unacceptable by the new proprietors, was replaced by Robert Knight. A few years later, the newspaper changed hands again, this time by being sold to Knight who thus became the sole owner.²⁶

Buist went on to become the editor of another Bombay newspaper, *The Bombay Standard*, which was eventually incorporated into *The Bombay Times* in January 1860 to become *The Bombay Times and Standard*. This latter newspaper was now jointly owned by Knight and Matthias Mull, a printer and former business manager at *The Bombay Standard*. In November 1861, the newly-formed newspaper underwent yet another merger, this time with *The Bombay Telegraph and Courier*, and became the *Times of India*, under which name it continues to publish to this day.²⁷ Robert Knight, known for his critical attitude towards the government, eventually left the *Times of India* in 1864, due to a disagreement with Matthias Mull, and moved to Calcutta to become the founder and editor of another important newspaper, *The Statesman*.²⁸ At the time of the Austro-Prussian War, the editorship of the newspaper was held by Martin Wood, who had been leader writer and London correspondent for the *Lancaster Guardian* prior to his move to India. Wood served as editor of the *Times of India* until 1874 and during his stay in the subcontinent he also wrote for, founded and edited other Indian journals and acted as correspondent for various London journals.²⁹

²⁴ Richard B. Kielbowicz, “News Gathering by Mail in the Age of Telegraph: Adapting to a New Technology,” *Technology and Culture* 28 (1987): 28.

²⁵ *The Gazetteer of Bombay*, vol. 3, 147.

²⁶ Edwin Hirschmann, *Robert Knight: Reforming Editor in Victorian India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34-52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁸ Margarita Barns, *The Indian Press* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1940), 269-70.

²⁹ *The Gazetteer of Bombay*, vol. 3, 148, and C. E. Buckland, *Dictionary of Indian Biography* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Lim, 1906), 460.

During the 1860s, the *Times of India* was a four-page daily with a circulation of approximately 3,000 copies, of which a third were sold to various libraries in Bombay and the rest to the public for a price of four annas a copy.³⁰ The newspaper was printed using a rotary press, one of 25 printing presses existing in Bombay during that period.³¹ Each newspaper page carried seven columns of equal width, a column line usually accommodating between eight and ten words. Topical segmentation of news was also present: items were organized under several heads such as “New Advertisements,” “Commercial,” “Shipping,” “Military,” “Correspondence,” “Postal Notices,” “Local,” “Domestic Occurrences,” etc., and departments were separated from each other by a thick and thin double line. These departments were, however, less standardized than they are in contemporary newspapers and this had probably less to do with editorial indifference than with the fact that not all types of news were available on a daily basis. Whereas today the *Times of India* organizes news content according to geographical region (“India” and the “World”) and its subject matter (“Business,” “Science,” “Education,” “Environment,” etc.), with the latest and most important news on the front page, in 1866, the means of communication of news – by telegraph or overland mail – and the time when they were dispatched were very important principles for the organization of news content. This meant, for example, that news about the Austro-Prussian War published in a certain edition of the *Times of India* was literally scattered throughout the newspaper according to the manner in which it had been communicated, instead of being arranged under a single, easy-to-spot heading.

Apart from reports and articles clipped from various European papers which arrived regularly via the overland mail, during the Austro-Prussian War other important sources of overseas news for the newspaper were the telegrams it received from Julius Reuter’s news agency. Reuters’ engagement with India pre-dates, in fact, the establishment of direct telegraphic communication between the subcontinent and Britain. In 1858, the company was already making use of the available means of transportation, such as steamers, to deliver Indian news to British newspapers. The intelligence was of political and commercial nature and its source was either the Foreign Office or English-language newspapers published in India.³² In October 1859, Reuter started a special service to India based on an agreement with *The Bombay Times* and this was also the first instance when the company used the telegraph to transmit information between India and Britain. The expanding telegraphic network, however, was only one of the factors essential to Reuter’s news business. Equally indispensable was the establishment of a network of news agents at various Indian ports and the

³⁰ Uma Das Gupta, “The Indian Press 1870-1880: A Small World of Journalism,” *Modern Asian Studies* 11 (1977): 233-34.

³¹ *The Gazetteer of Bombay*, vol. 3, 146.

³² D. Read, “Reuters and India,” (unpublished paper, Reuters Archives, 1994), 2.

people who occupied these positions were, in the beginning, local traders, Christian missionaries, and employees of the steamship companies, such as Edwin Dawes of P&O who acted as Reuter agent in Bombay in 1862.³³ Four years later, that is, in March 1866, Henry Collins set up the first Reuter office in Bombay.³⁴

By April 1866, the news agency had more than fifty subscribers in India, most of whom were merchants involved in the cotton trade and thus interested in the quotations of cotton prices from Liverpool and other English markets.³⁵ The list of subscribers continued to grow and it came to include the Viceroy of India, various Indian newspapers among which the *Times of India*, and other officials such as the Commissioner-in-Chief, the Governors of Bombay and Madras and the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal.³⁶ Reuters used the Indo-European telegraph system to despatch telegrams each week alternatively to Bombay or Galle, from where they were telegraphed to the Government at Simla “under the Clear the Line Signal.”³⁷

The newspaper world of nineteenth-century India was fraught with inequalities and access to Reuter’s services was, in fact, highly asymmetrical: well-to-do newspapers such as the *Times of India* could afford to pay the monthly subscription fee of Rs. 600, but smaller, provincial newspapers could not. As Graham Storey has pointed out,

[i]n India, long before the vernacular newspapers could afford Reuters’ news, no British-owned or British-read paper could be without it. For British merchants in India, China, and throughout the Far East, Reuters’ market prices and quotations became one of the necessities of existence. For the British in India, civil servants, Army officers, their families and appendages, Reuters’ telegrams in newspapers and clubs soon became a direct link with home. For many years, it was this population – and, increasingly, the Indian and Chinese merchants themselves – to whom Reuters’ Eastern services chiefly appealed.³⁸

Indeed, it was only in 1900 that the first Indian-owned newspaper, *The Bengalee*, subscribed to Reuters.³⁹ Under these circumstances, it was often the case that newspapers which could not afford to subscribe to the agency’s services simply copied the telegraphic news previously published in the big dailies. This situation was by no means restricted to India as, according to Lucy Brown, “London newspapers in the 1870s complained bitterly of the fact that news which they had collected at great cost could so easily be copied by the provin-

³³ Ibid., 3-5.

³⁴ Storey, *Reuters’ Century*, 62.

³⁵ Ibid., 62-63.

³⁶ Press Messages, Reuters, IOR/L/PWD/7/1056, File 368.

³⁷ Read, “Reuters and India,” 5.

³⁸ Storey, *Reuters’ Century*, 62.

³⁹ S. N. Banerjea, *A Nation in the Making* (1925; repr. Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1963), 157, quoted in Das Gupta, “The Indian Press 1870-1880,” 221.

cial papers, but they were unprotected by copyright and could find no effective remedy.”⁴⁰

Another little-known aspect of the history of the *Times of India* which further illustrates its privileged position among newspapers in India is its early cooperation with Reuter’s agency, which seems to date back to 1860. During that year, Reuters offered Robert Knight “his sole agency, not in the Western presidency only, but in all of India,”⁴¹ a fact which probably constituted the impetus for the establishment of a “Times of India Telegraphic Agency” by means of which Knight sold news, including Reuters telegrams, to various Indian newspapers, for a subscription fee of Rs. 500.⁴² As Reuters’ influence in India and around the world increased, Knight eventually decided to sell his enterprise to the agency. However, the fact that even the Viceroy of India received news from the *Times of India* before the cancellation of his agreement with the newspaper in July 1866 is revealing and illustrates the intricacies of the process of information flows in nineteenth-century India.⁴³

Reporting the Austro-Prussian War

The Austro-Prussian War, also known as the Seven Weeks’ War, was an affair which involved Prussia and Austria as main combatants and their respective allies: Italy on the Prussian side and Saxony, Bavaria, Hanover, Württemberg, Hesse-Kassel and Hesse-Darmstadt on the Austrian side.⁴⁴ The issue at stake was the leadership of the German Confederation and the war was a calculated move in Bismarck’s plan to bring to an end Austrian supremacy over the German-speaking states. The pretext for the war was the administration of the Duchies of Holstein and Schleswig. They formerly belonged to Denmark, but had been jointly administered by Prussia and Austria since 1864 and were annexed by Prussia during the early months of 1866.⁴⁵ The actual hostilities began on 15 June 1866, with Prussia’s invasion of Saxony, Hanover and Hesse-Kassel, and after a series of battles at Nachod (27 June), Trautenau (27 June) and Skalitz (28 June), the decisive encounter took place near Königgrätz, at a village called Sadowa, on 3 July. The battle, which pitted some 240,000 Austrian soldiers against a combined Prussian force of more than 250,000 people,

⁴⁰ Lucy Brown, “The Treatment of News in Mid-Victorian Newspapers,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 27 (1977): 39.

⁴¹ *Bombay Times and Standard*, April 12, 1860, quoted in Hirschmann, *Robert Knight*, 74.

⁴² Hirschmann, *Robert Knight*, 74.

⁴³ Read, “Reuters and India,” 7.

⁴⁴ Brian Bond, “The Austro-Prussian War 1866,” *History Today* 16 (1966): 538.

⁴⁵ See the *Times of India* editions of February 5, 1866, February 20, 1866, and March 3, 1866.

resulted in a Prussian victory.⁴⁶ The war was officially concluded on 23 August with the Treaty of Prague, which dissolved the old German Confederation and marked the end of Austrian supremacy over the German states. Although Austria was not required to make territorial concessions to Prussia as a result of this war, it did lose Venice to Italy. The Austro-Prussian War was the first step in the process of unification of the German states under Prussia's leadership, which culminated half a decade later in the Franco-Prussian War and the unification of Germany.

Rumours about a possible war in Europe had been circulating for some time in the European and Indian press before the actual outbreak of hostilities. Since March 1866, when the *Times of India*'s London correspondent first reported on Bismarck's moves towards "the destruction of the constitutional liberties of his country," the newspaper had been duly informing its readers about "the threatened war in Germany," "the quarrel between Austria and Prussia" or "the crisis in Germany."⁴⁷ Although reports about the political situation in Europe always reflected the journalist's own take on the unfolding of the events and journalists themselves were prone to make mistakes in their predictions, the fact that such reports could reach the reading public on a regular basis and thus prepare them for the possibility of a war was in itself proof of the improved system of communication between Britain and India. Unlike the Australian press which, half a decade later, still found itself startled by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War which came with "no note of warning,"⁴⁸ the editor of the *Times of India* expressed no surprise when news about the beginning of the war finally reached Bombay on 25 June 1866 via two Reuter telegrams.

Based on the means of communication used to transmit information, news about the Austro-Prussian War can be divided into two categories: those received by telegraph, that is, telegrams, and those received by the overland mail, which consisted of correspondents' reports and articles clipped from various European newspapers whose publication spanned a few editions of the *Times of India* after the arrival of the overland mail. Telegrams were published in the "By Indo-European Telegraph" section (usually on page 2 or 3 of the newspaper), while the publication of overland news began with an overview of all news items under the "Heads of Intelligence" section, followed, in the same or sometimes the next issue, by a "General Summary" which elaborated each piece of news in individual paragraphs. Reports from the newspaper's correspondent in London were published under the head of "European Affairs" and items clipped from overseas newspapers were usually published over a period

⁴⁶ Arden Bucholz, *Moltke and the German Wars, 1864-1871* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 113-38.

⁴⁷ *Times of India*, March 15, 1866, April 27, 1866, and May 7, 1866.

⁴⁸ Peter Putnis, "Overseas News in the Australian Press in 1870 and the Colonial Experience of the Franco-Prussian War," *History Australia* 4 (2007): 06.1.

of a few days on the last two pages of the *Times of India*, in chronological order.

Under the head-title “By Indo-European Telegraph,” the newspaper published telegrams from two different sources: the first category was represented by the “subscription telegrams”, while the second was represented by “Reuter’s telegrams.” The developments which led to the appearance of the first Reuter credit in the *Times of India* on 12 June 1866 have already been outlined. Here, it is important to mention that within a month from this date, “subscription telegrams” completely disappeared from the newspaper’s pages, a fact which meant, in effect, that Reuters had become the newspaper’s sole supplier of international telegraphic news. Although it has been impossible as yet to identify the exact source of these “subscription telegrams”, one possible scenario is that they originated with the Indo-European Telegraph Department since prior to the establishment of Reuters it was common practice for telegraph companies to provide newspapers with various news, especially market information.⁴⁹

Although the medium of telegraphy imposed a certain degree of standardization on the message, an examination of the form and content of “subscription” and “Reuter” war telegrams reveals that there was still room for variation, according to the socio-economic and political interests of those who used it. As Stuart Hall wrote,

[t]he media do not simply and transparently report events which are ‘naturally’ newsworthy *in themselves*. ‘News’ is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories” (emphasis in the original).⁵⁰

Indeed, news published by the *Times of India* was also not “newsworthy in themselves.”

As a rule, all telegrams were published in batches, in the chronological order of their dispatch; however, the order in which individual telegrams within a batch were arranged was different. Simply put, “Subscription Telegrams” were a listing of all telegrams sent, with news about the cotton market almost invariably at the top of the list and news about the war at the bottom. Great care was taken to publish the place of origin of the telegram (usually London) and the exact date and time when it was dispatched, but no effort was made to make war news stand out by emphasizing their position within a batch or by using headlines. Everything seems to point to the fact that as far as news “worthiness” went commercial news was “worthier” than war news.

⁴⁹ Winseck and Pike, *Communication and Empire*, 18.

⁵⁰ Stuart Hall, “The Social Production of News,” in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Macmillan, 1978), quoted in Roger Fowler, *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 12.

Reuter telegrams, on the other hand, tended to be the exact opposite of the above: war news was almost invariably at the top of the list and telegrams often carried capitalized headlines summarizing the events. Reuter's agents clearly invested more care into "packaging" their product, by attempting to make both the form and the content of news more attractive. The fact that they prioritized "sensational" events such as wars over commercial information also indicates that this news was aimed at a larger audience than just the merchant community of Bombay. William Mazzarella suggests that

[a]ll mediation involves the appearance of an ontological separation between form and content. This appearance, in turn, makes possible the apparently impartial authority that modern institutions rely on. And it helps to support the ideological proposition that media are simply formal, neutral tools that may be applied to any situation.⁵¹

The example of "subscription" and "Reuter" telegrams unmasks this ideological proposition by showing how the same medium produced a different message which reflected the range of interests of those using it. It also suggests that it is probably less rewarding to ask whether technologies are neutral in themselves than to try to establish the motives which urge humans to use certain technologies in a particular situation.

War telegrams in the *Times of India* were irregular – sometimes they were published on consecutive days, at other times gaps of as many as four days were registered – and they generally reported on events a week old, due to the fact that during this period it still took at least five days for a message to travel from Karachi to London via the Turkish or the Persian routes, while a third route through Russia was even slower.⁵² News by overland mail, on the other hand, was published almost fortnightly and it usually reported on events 3 to 4 weeks old, which reflected the amount of time it took the P&O to deliver mails to Bombay. In practice this meant that, the overland mail, just like the telegraph, made possible only an irregular coverage of the war, although the "gaps" in news were certainly longer than in the case of the telegraph. The fact, though, that both the telegraph and the steamer mail were used to transmit news was important, because they complemented each other and assured a fairly good coverage of the event by efficiently shortening such "gaps" in reporting.

There is no doubt that the telegraph intensified the flow of news towards the *Times of India*, but it did not necessarily make communication easier for the readers. Quite the contrary: because of the irregular times of delivery and because news by steamer mail were older than telegraphic news, the reader was always expected to go back and forth in time in order to understand how the war unfolded, because events were not delivered in a neat, chronological se-

⁵¹ William Mazzarella, "Culture, Globalization, Mediation," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 356.

⁵² Winseck and Pike, *Communication and Empire*, 4.

quence. To get a good understanding of the war, one had to follow each edition of the newspaper and also exercise his mind considerably, in order to make sense of the unstructured information offered. For example, after having been provided with various telegrams, correspondence reports and articles from the European press which sometimes made contradictory predictions about the possibility of a war, readers of the *Times of India* were finally informed about the outbreak of the war through a Reuter telegram on June 26, more than ten days after the actual commencement of hostilities.⁵³ Then, on July 10, the newspaper again informed its readers about the outbreak of the war by publishing news from two overland mails (of 11 and 18 June) – but by this time Reuter telegrams were already announcing in big capitalized headlines the “Cession of Venetia by Austria” and the “Acceptance of Mediation” for the conclusion of peace.⁵⁴

Contemporaries – especially newspaper correspondents – were aware of this awkward situation and the limitations of both methods of news transmission, the telegraph and the steamship. They often wrote that their reports might be outdated by the time they reach the newspaper and they knew that an increased flow of news towards the newspaper did not necessarily mean more accurate news. In his report of July 3, the newspaper’s London correspondent writes:

It may not be without its use to gather up for our readers the most authentic details we can of the [war] campaigns. If the continental telegraph flashes its intelligence with lightening speed, telegrams are not always to be relied on. Probably it is only the historian of a distant future who will record impartially and fully the campaigns of 1866.⁵⁵

This shows that, while the telegraph considerably improved communication times, it did not actually change much in terms of the accuracy of information: it was still difficult to receive first-hand, reliable accounts of battles, especially when, as it happened during the Austro-Prussian War, the combatants availed themselves of the opportunities offered by the telegraph to disseminate “false” news about the fate of battles. In his report of the battle of Königgrätz, the *Times of India*’s correspondent recounts how London penny journals reported the battle both as “Great Defeat of the Prussians” and “Great Defeat of the Austrians” and how even Reuter’s agents were misled by “official” declarations about the outcome of the war. The following paragraph from the correspondent’s report is a perfect illustration of the process by which journalists and, we can assume, readers as well, tried to make sense of the conflicting news about the battle which reached them:

What comes from Berlin as a victory comes from Vienna as a defeat – and the reverse. Holding the balance with all fairness, we were therefore, for some

⁵³ *Times of India*, June 25, 1866.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, July 10, 1866 and July 9, 1866.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, July 25, 1866.

time destined to believe that neither party had gained much advantage over the other. The “official” accounts contradict each other even more than the reports in the German newspapers. Mr. Reuter’s telegrams gave us yesterday the following as “official” from Vienna – “The Prussians were yesterday (Thursday, the 28th) completely defeated by the Austrian forces under General Von Gablenz. [...]” In the same column, we have an “official” from Berlin which tells us that “the Austrian corps under General Von Gablenz was completely broken up. [...]” Our own journals, one and all, comment upon the extreme difficulty of getting at the truth. But the difficulty somewhat disappears when people look more closely into the matter with an especial reference to dates. It seemed that up to the close of the 28th of June, the fighting was in favour of the Austrians, but that on the 29th and 30th the tide of victory was turned in favour of the Prussians. But even this now appears to be doubtful.⁵⁶

Such mishappenings in communication were not absent from the front lines as well. The Austro-Prussian War has often been described as a landmark in modern European warfare and military communications, due to the use of the needle-gun by the Prussian army and of technologies such as the railroads and the telegraph for transport, communication and strategic purposes.⁵⁷ Although the contribution of these technologies to Prussian victory tended to be overestimated in the beginning, commentators soon came to realize that “military ability”, that is, Prussia’s superior military organization, had also played a crucial role in winning the war.⁵⁸ The telegraph was indeed important in the process of communication on the battle field, as well as between the headquarters of the field army on one side and the Prussian king and Moltke, Chief of the General Staff, on the other. It is rather ironic to see that telegraph-mediated communication between two points separated by significant physical distance sometimes worked better than short-distance communication on the battle field. According to Brian Bond, Moltke, the Prussian king and the Great Headquarters did not join the field of war in Bohemia until June 30, where

he [Moltke] found it harder to keep informed of the situation than at his Berlin desk: the two huge armies had lost touch with each other and until the eve of Sadowa Moltke mistakenly believed Benedek’s main force to be behind the river Elbe.⁵⁹

It took the *Times of India* thirteen days to publish telegraphic accounts of the battle of Königgrätz, but readers had to wait more than one week after the publication of the telegrams to get the first detailed account of the event by the overland mail – a report from William Russell, the London *Times*’ correspondent at the Austrian Headquarters and, as he is often referred to, the “father” of

⁵⁶ Ibid., July 24, 1866.

⁵⁷ Bond, “The Austro-Prussian War 1866,” 546, and Bucholz, *Moltke and the German Wars*, 104-11.

⁵⁸ See for example a letter to the editor of *The Times* titled “The Needle-Gun” and reprinted in the *Times of India* edition of 11 August 1866.

⁵⁹ Bond, “The Austro-Prussian War 1866,” 546.

war reporting. Russell, an Irishman from Dublin, rose to fame during the Crimean War when, for three years, he followed the movements of the British army and wrote letters to the readers of *The Times* in which he described the horrors of the war.⁶⁰ After the beginning of the Austro-Prussian War, the editor of *The Times*, John T. Delane, asked Russell to join the Austrian army on the front. This he did on June 28, at Josephstadt, where he met Ludwig von Benedek, Commander-in-Chief of the Austrian army, who provided him with an interpreter.⁶¹ Two weeks after publishing Russell's report of the battle, the *Times of India* published another detailed account of the event, this time penned by Henry Hozier, the London *Times*' correspondent at the Prussian Headquarters.⁶²

Of course, the same piece of news sounded and appealed differently to the reader when communicated by telegraph and by steamer mail. The "languages" of the telegram and the correspondent's report were different but, again, not neutral. As Roger Fowler wrote,

[n]ews is a representation of the world in language; because language is a semiotic code, it imposes a structure of values, social and economic in origin, on whatever is represented, and so inevitably news [...] constructively patterns that of which it speaks.⁶³

We have already seen how different telegram forms reflected different socio-economic values and choices; the same was true for the content and the language of the telegram and the correspondent's letter in reporting the war. To begin with, a "subscription" telegram carried an average of 22 words and a "Reuter" telegram 27, whereas a correspondent's report usually spread over one or two newspaper pages. Events had to be "skeletonized" when reported by telegraph: telegrams carried the gist of the story and, at this stage at least, they did not carry political commentary or detailed descriptions of the battle.⁶⁴

The battle of Sadowa was reported by Reuter's agent, mindful of the cost of a telegram, as

[a]nother great battle [...] fought yesterday near the Fortress of Königgrätz in Bohemia, between the combined armies of Prussia and the Austrian troops, resulting in a complete victory for the former, who captured twenty guns after a battle of eight hours' duration.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ F. L. Bullard, *Famous War Correspondents* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1914), 31-40.

⁶¹ J. B. Atkins, *The Life of Sir William Howard Russell, The First Special Correspondent*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1911), 138.

⁶² *Times of India*, July 16, 1866, August 9, 1866, August 22, 1866. Atkins, *The Life of Sir William Howard Russell*, 138.

⁶³ Fowler, *Language in the News*, 4.

⁶⁴ Kielbowicz, "News Gathering by Mail in the Age of Telegraph," 33.

⁶⁵ *Times of India*, July 16, 1866.

This was a far cry from the elaborate and poetic language with which William Russell began his report of the Austrian defeat:

The sun that rose this morning on a gallant army full of hope and confidence in itself and its chief has just set amid masses of scarlet clouds behind the same army, baffled and disemfitted, flying before an enemy they had despised, and leaving behind them flames of burning villages that will redden the sky long after the last hue of twilight has faded.⁶⁶

Unable to leave the headquarters of the Austrian army because he lacked the required pass, Russell had observed the whole battle unfold before his eyes from a “lofty tower commanding the Prague gateway, whence Josephstadt on the north and the whole of the position of the Army were displayed as if on a raised map.”⁶⁷ His report of the battle was seasoned with political comment, but it was also dense in information and included detailed accounts of the movement of troops, the names of military combatants, the exact time and place of each military encounter.

The comparison of the correspondents’ reports and war telegrams during the Austro-Prussian War reveals the first signs of an epistemological shift which had begun to take place in Victorian journalism and which eventually resulted in news reporting shaking off its literary connections and focusing on the concise reporting of sensational events – the kind of journalism telegrams were already associated with. It was surely a different style of reporting which emphasized certain aspects of reality and obscured others. The same way technologies mediated and continue to mediate social relations by offering different – not better or worse, but different – frameworks through which to perceive and interpret reality.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Using as an example the reporting of the Austro-Prussian War in one of India’s most enduring newspapers, the *Times of India*, this paper has attempted to depart from previous modes of understanding the interrelation of telegraphy and press by exploring both the possibilities and the limitations of this mode of communication. The analysis has shown that the electric telegraph was not necessarily the revolutionary device that it often appeared (and still appears) to be and that the introduction and use of telegraphy for news transmission between Britain and India was, in fact, a slow and cumbersome process, fraught with asymmetries and inequalities. Far from replacing previous modes of news transmission, the new technology functioned along them. As the analysis of war news has shown, the *Times of India* used the telegraph and the steamship

⁶⁶ Ibid., August 9, 1866.

⁶⁷ Atkins, *The Life of Sir William Howard Russell*, 139.

⁶⁸ Verbeek, *What Things Do*, 144.

complementarily in reporting the Austro-Prussian War. This way of “combining” various technologies benefited not only the newspaper and its readers, but, ultimately, the whole imperial enterprise, as it “enhanced the state’s abilities to expand and dominate,” and it also “affected the timing of the Imperial state’s expansion, and featured significantly in the dynamics of commercial and industrial capitalism.”⁶⁹ By exploring the telegraph from a technical perspective, as the first in a long line of electronic media which made possible the transmission of information between Britain and India at hitherto unprecedented speeds, as well as from a socio-cultural perspective, as a mediator of human interaction with the physical and social world, the paper draws attention to the dynamic and complex nature of technology in general and the myriad ways in which it helps us to experience, understand and conceptualize the world.

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⁶⁹ Robert Kubicek, “British Expansion, Empire, and Technological Change,” in *The Nineteenth Century*, vol. 3 of *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, eds. Andrew Porter and Alaine Low (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 248.

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