

# “Speaking Distance”: Fantasies of Immediacy and the Transatlantic Telegraph

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines literary responses to transatlantic telegraphy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The successful laying of the Atlantic cable in the mid-nineteenth century spurred hopes that the telegraph would bring political and personal union across transatlantic distances, and I begin by showing how popular responses to the 1858 and 1866 Atlantic cables used imagery of “face-to-face” communication to represent political union. I then turn to examine how these “fantasies of technological immediacy” were reconfigured in striking ways by literary accounts of transatlantic telegraphy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Focusing on novels by Edith Wharton and Henry James, I show how these authors draw on earlier fantasies of telegraphic “immediacy” to question assumptions about the telegraph’s capacity to bring people together across the expanse of the Atlantic. By doing so, they expose inherent flaws and uncertainties associated with long-distance, cross-oceanic telegraphy.

**KEYWORDS:** Transatlantic, Atlantic Cable, technologies, communication, nineteenth century.

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## I. Introduction: The Telegraph's "Golden Age"

The successful laying of the Atlantic cable in the mid-nineteenth century was an era-defining moment in what historian David Nickles terms "the golden age of the telegraph" (5). Nickles dates this "golden age" to the years 1850-1914, and literary representations of the Atlantic cable during this time offer fascinating insights into perceptions of travel and communication across the Atlantic region. This article demonstrates the significance of transatlantic telegraphy in the novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton, whose wealthy protagonists make regular use of the Atlantic cable, sometimes with troubling or unexpected consequences. James and Wharton's privileged characters trace the cable's transition from "eighth wonder of the world" to practical communications device, capturing the effects of telegraphy's transition "from marvel to routine" (Menke, *Telegraphic Realism* 196). The novels I discuss here challenge mid-century assumptions and speculations about the cable's impact on transatlantic communication, while offering new approaches to the potential—and problems—of telegraphic contact in the Atlantic region.

Simone Müller argues that "on a *personal level*, the cable's influence changed people's perceptions of time, distance, and the relationships between nations and continents" ("Cabling" 509, emphasis added). Both James and Wharton illustrate shifting perceptions of time and distance by exposing specific challenges of transatlantic telegraphy for interpersonal communications. The examples I discuss here demonstrate the pitfalls and failings of the long-distance telegraph, in order to deconstruct the kind of "fantasies of technological immediacy" celebrated in the early years of the transatlantic telegraph (Pettitt 611). I begin by examining popular responses to the Atlantic cable in the mid-nineteenth century, analysing how contemporary media accounts used imagery of individuals brought "face-to-face" across a transatlantic gulf to represent the cable as a symbolic union between Britain and America. I then turn to show how this impetus is reconfigured in James and Wharton's portrayal of *personal* uses of transatlantic telegraphy in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, focusing on the effects of telegraphy's relative speed and urgency. Finally, I show how the fictional accounts I discuss here are fraught with awareness of complicating factors in the use of telegraphy, as Wharton and James reveal the transatlantic telegram's potential to both exaggerate and subvert illusions of closeness

across the Atlantic.

## II. Fantasies of Immediacy

In 1858, newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic ocean celebrated the successful connection of the first transatlantic telegraph cable. Picker describes the transatlantic telegraph as “a new phenomenon altogether, in scope, in cost, in effort, and as a spark for what might be called the Victorian material imagination” (34), and the scale of imaginative impact is evident in contemporary responses to the cable. Many commentators hailed the cable’s completion as an opportunity to dissolve the effects of geographical distance, while media representations were jubilant about its potential to usher in new relations between America and the United Kingdom. Claire Pettitt argues that mid-century accounts of the effort to lay a successful Atlantic cable reveal increasing public awareness of “a powerful fantasy about the mediation of all distance” (611), hailing the telegraph as an opportunity to break down the challenges of oceanic distance. As Pettitt notes, the idealised view of the cable’s capacity to collapse distance was quickly challenged by the realities of lived experience. However, although the first Atlantic cable malfunctioned after less than a month, the emphasis on unity and connection in 1858 set the tone for the more successful 1866 cable. The continuing tension between “fantasy” and “lived experience” is evident in the representations I discuss here, particularly where authors deploy fictional scenarios to both advocate and repudiate fantasies of technological immediacy in the context of transatlantic telecommunications.

A cartoon published to celebrate the 1858 Atlantic cable’s initial success captures the kind of transatlantic immediacy celebrated in the popular press at this time. Titled “The Laying of the Cable: John and Jonathan Joining Hands,” the image depicts a transatlantic handshake, where Brother Jonathan, emblem of New England, grasps the hand of Britain’s John Bull across the figuratively diminished gulf of the Atlantic ocean. On paper, the distance between these transatlantic representatives has been reduced to arm’s length, and the image’s visual dismissal of a vast geographical distance is corroborated by a speech bubble that contains Brother Jonathan’s pledge of unifying “Friendship” across the ocean:

May the feeling of Friendship which comes from my heart, and tingles to the very end of my fingers, be like the electric current which now unites our lands, and links our destiny with yours! (W & P)



**Fig. 1: *The Laying of the Cable—John and Jonathan Joining Hands* (1858)**

The greeting reworks the electric connectivity of the telegraph cable as a potent symbol of transatlantic connection. Its reference to tingling fingertips and insistence that the “electric current” of the cable both “unites” and “links” the two nations deliberately draws attention to the impression of physical contact between the two men. This use of sensory imagery is echoed in John’s response, which implies physical proximity in the announcement “happy to see and greet you, Jonathan!” (Baker and Godwin, emphasis added). John’s declaration that “You *feel* like bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!” invokes both familial connection and bodily closeness (Baker & Godwin, emphasis added). Expressed through imagery of touch and sight, the prospect

of an oceanic expanse reduced to the length of a man's arm conjures the impression that technological advances might figuratively dissolve the distance between both nations and individuals. The emphasis on friendship, unity and connectivity in this response to the prospect of a transatlantic cable speaks to the telegraph's capacity to present an illusion of a distance effectively collapsed by technological innovations.

The idea of an oceanic expanse diminished by new communication technologies is pervasive in much of the popular rhetoric that greeted the 1858 and 1866 cables. It is striking how many depictions use imagery of physical proximity to emphasise the Atlantic cable's capacity to provide a new communicative "immediacy." For example, Walt Whitman argued that "it is the sentiment of *union* that makes the popular heart beat and quiver" and illustrated his argument with imagery of physical union, promising that the cable "will link together nations that in heart and feeling are hereafter to be one" (Whitman 104-05). A contemporary account in an American illustrated newspaper used similar imagery to celebrate two nations brought "face to face" by the cable:

We can truly say that there is no longer an Atlantic to divide the Old and New Worlds; and when two great nations, are thus brought within speaking distance, the bold broad facts of national policy are more easily comprehended. ("The Atlantic Cable" 192)

As in the case of "John and Jonathan Joining Hands," this account emphasises the transatlantic greeting via imagery of physical proximity, imagining nations "within speaking distance" and therefore—the author hopes—less politically volatile and more open to commercial exchange.<sup>1</sup> Even following the 1858 cable's failure, this triumphant tone reappears in media accounts; the *Spectator* deemed the cable's eventual breakdown a waste of "a success which has startled the world," and ruefully mourned "the grand enterprise of the

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<sup>1</sup> The hyperbolic enthusiasm for the Atlantic cable is well documented. Sofia Ahlberg's *Atlantic Afterlives* offers a helpful summary of enthusiastic responses in the popular media on both sides of the ocean, with more examples of imagery of embodied proximity: "The New York *Evening Post* predicted that the Atlantic cable would 'make the great heart of humanity beat with a single pulse.' Also from the other side of the Atlantic, commentators referred to the cable as 'that strong cord of love.' London's *The Times* announced the end of an ocean: 'The Atlantic is dried up, and we become in reality as well as in wish one country'" (2). See also Gordon.

day” after the 1858 cable was confirmed inoperable (“The Atlantic Telegraph” 7). Such commentaries indicate a hyperbolic insistence on the cable as emblem of progress, with its potential to increase speed and ease of communication across the Atlantic ocean overshadowing the practical faults and challenges I discuss later in this article.

The pledges of friendship, unity and connectivity detailed above emphasise the cable’s capacity to cross dividing lines and collapse experiences of distance. They also position transatlantic telegraphy as a signifier of progress and futurity, as exemplified by the *Spectator*’s celebration of the cable as “grand enterprise of the day.” Like many subsequent developments in transatlantic telecommunications, the project of the Atlantic cable was firmly entwined with the demands of commerce and empire. As Glen O’Hara puts it, the project of laying international telegraph wires across oceanic dividing lines “would come to be seen as an Imperial and global communications revolution,” whose impact eventually “altered how Britons perceived the vast distances that separated them from colonies and Dominions” (O’Hara 610, 612). The short speeches in “The Laying of the Cable: John and Jonathan Joining Hands” echo rhetoric of imperial expansion. They emphasise the collapse of global distances in terms designed to suggest that this new communications technology may fundamentally alter socio-political relations between nations. In “The Laying of the Cable,” fantasies of immediacy are conveyed by the prospect of a colonising language imposed across the world; Jonathan hopes that “we yet shall see *all nations* speaking our language.” This casts the transatlantic link between America and Britain as a starting-point for global influence, just as John Bull pledges “unity” for “all the world and the rest of Mankind.” Such accounts use individual human figures brought “face-to-face” or “within speaking distance” to present the transatlantic cable as an opportunity to abandon the divisions of geographical distance in favour of global “unity.” The next section of this article considers the kind of personal interactions enabled by the Atlantic cable, to interrogate how imagery of transatlantic proximity works in depictions of personal, rather than political, communications.

### III. Speed and Commerce

In *How We Think*, N. Katherine Hayles associates telegraphy with a “regime of speed,” in an era when “messages and bodies travelled at unprecedented speeds” (124). The telegraph’s provision of high-speed contact across intervening distances is a crucial aspect of its impact on transatlantic relations and communications. Richard Menke illustrates the practical implications of telegraphy’s speed by quoting a mid-nineteenth century remark that “a person standing in London might hold a conversation with another at Edinburgh, put questions and receive answers, just as if they were seated together in one room” (*Telegraphic Realism* 173).<sup>2</sup> Discussing Henry James’s 1898 novella *In the Cage*, Menke notes the use of telegraphy for “virtually instantaneous communication,” placing telegraph apparatus at the centre of “rapid information flows that signal and perform the commerce of modern life” (192, 206). The “virtually instantaneous” telegrams depicted in James’s novella are sent across short distances, used by a London elite to exchange “extravagant chatter over their extravagant pleasures and sins” (*In the Cage* 129). This association of telegraphy with back-and-forth “chatter” introduces a key theme for depictions of transatlantic telegraphy: the speed of telegrams in comparison to letters for long-distance communication. *In the Cage* depicts an urgent telegram sent “as sharp as possible,” which “flashed straight away” (188) from the telegraph office; the Atlantic cable offered a comparable promise to exchange information at high speed and across previously formidable distances.

The speed of transfer enabled by the transatlantic telegraph is a crucial ingredient for the transatlantic “face-to-face” encounters imagined by mid-century responses to the Atlantic Cable; as David Nye observes, “before the telegraph, information travelled no faster than a horse or a sailing ship; afterwards it moved at the speed of light” (1073). James Carey’s comment that “the telegraph freed communication from the constraints of geography” is particularly significant for transatlantic communication (205), where the geographical constraints of the Atlantic ocean had long limited the speed and methods of contact. Christopher Hoag compares the telegraph’s high-speed

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<sup>2</sup> Menke discusses protagonists who “use the telegraph for secret, virtually instantaneous communication” (“Telegraphic Realism” 975). As Menke demonstrates in his analysis of James’s novella, both the speed and seeming instantaneity of the telegram are reliant on the interceding figure of the telegraph operator—another way that impressions of “immediacy” are broken down.

connection with the inconveniences of mail carried by shipping vessels across the Atlantic:

Before the telegraphic connection, information transfer was limited to vessels that carried mail over the Atlantic. The speed of the information transmission depended on the speed of the steamship, which could vary due to the vessel's design or the weather. . . . The average eastbound travel time, based on about 70 voyages of two steamship lines, was 11.9 days; westbound travel time was 13.2 days. . . . The fastest westbound steamers proceeded in about nine or ten days. (Hoag 346, 352)

Hoag offers a detailed study of the Atlantic cable's impact on transatlantic commerce, drawing attention to the revolutionary potential of the telegraph in terms of transatlantic commerce and exchange. Telegraphy avoided the vagaries of transatlantic shipping, and promised to overcome the instability of a communications network dependent on "design or the weather" (Hoag 346). As I show in the final section of this article, this speed came at a high cost, and regular use of transatlantic telegraphy remained the preserve of institutions, commercial enterprises, and very wealthy individuals. Nevertheless, the Atlantic Cable reduced the need to rely on mail carried on transatlantic crossings of between nine and thirteen days, and offered those who could afford it the opportunity to exchange information at speeds that had previously been impossible.

Descriptions of transatlantic telegraphy in Henry James's early works reaffirm its speed and efficiency. In *The American*, first serialised in 1876 and published in 1877, the telegraph features as a convenient way to spread news quickly. The American protagonist Christopher Newman infuriates the traditionalist sensibilities of his prospective Parisian mother-in-law by using the Atlantic Cable to broadcast news of his engagement across the United States, proudly declaring that "I haven't yet announced it here, but I cabled it this morning to America" (James, *The American* 195). Newman is determined that "the more people who know it the better" and treats the Atlantic Cable as a communication network to achieve the fast and extensive spread of his news. The message is wired to multiple destinations—"New York, to Saint Louis and to San Francisco"—which he helpfully glosses as "the principal cities"

(195). When Newman boasts about the “principal cities” his telegrams have reached, his words draw attention to the remarkable speed of delivery. They also reflect the transatlantic telegraph’s association with commerce and profit. To capture Newman’s enthusiasm at the fast responses he receives from America, James uses terms carefully designed to draw attention to the telegraph’s associations with commercial profit as well as its efficiency. Newman’s missives are “answered promptly and with interest,” punning on the business properties of “interest” to cast the messages in deliberately commercial terms. When three telegrams gather the “interest” of eight in reply, Newman is delighted to receive “no less than eight electrical outpourings, all concisely humorous,” and refers to them as the “fruit of his investment” (195).

The deliberately commercial language in Newman’s reference to the “fruit of his investment” draws an overt association between telegraphy and commercial exchange. Indeed, James edited the 1907 version of his text to increase the acerbic commercial tone of his references to the medium of the telegraph. The account in the 1879 Macmillan edition links telegraphy with the language of commerce and investment, describing Newman’s telegrams as “received with interest . . . no less than eight gratulatory bulletins in return,” but lacks the emphasis of Newman’s own reference to the telegrams as “investment.” The later version has been edited to exaggerate and amplify the commercial overtones and references to speed and convenience. The seeming immediacy of Newman’s contact with America, the alacrity with which he receives multiple responses, and the use of deliberately commercial language to describe them, all draw attention to qualities of speed and profitability associated with use of the Atlantic cable.

The association of transatlantic telegraphy with profit and speed plays into conventional assumptions around the “Old” world of Europe and the “New” world of the US. In *The American*, Newman’s use of the telegraph is cast as a specifically American habit; indeed, he boasts that in the US he preferred to correspond “altogether by telegrams” (82). Newman’s addiction to the telegraph implies a dogged reluctance to adjust to his Parisian surroundings; it is one of several elements in the novel which depict a clash of brash New World futurism with sophisticated Old World conservatism. His enthusiasm for the telegraph, and insistence on spreading news of his engagement quickly, is set up in direct contrast with the approach of the Parisian Bellegarde family. Mark Goble reads this as “another way in which

Newman is ill-suited for the communicatively gothic Bellegardes, with their secretive letters and hand-written confessions” (Goble 207). The 1879 Macmillan edition draws attention to this telegraphy addict’s inability to recognise the intricacies of tenor and inflection in face-to-face conversation, noting the Marquise’s use of “a tone of which I am afraid that Newman but partly measured the impertinence” (James, *The American* 195). Newman’s naïve exchange with the Marquise Bellegarde, who drily queries whether he has “many” friends in Paris and assures him that her own acquaintances “won’t use the telegraph” suggests an eagerness for instant communication that partially blinds him to the complex emotions at work in the family he plans to marry into.

In Edith Wharton’s 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country*, transatlantic telegraphy continues to be used by wealthy American expatriates, both to spread news and to issue summons across the ocean. Whereas Newman’s telegraphy addiction features as a way of boasting of his new connection with the “Old World” of Paris, Wharton depicts a telegram sent from America as an urgent summons back to the responsibilities of life in New York. After escaping a dissatisfying marriage for the excitement of Paris, the American protagonist Undine Spragg finds herself summoned home to New York by letters from her husband, Ralph, and his sister Laura. She ignores these without compunction. However, in the midst of entertaining her extravagant admirer Peter Van Degen, Undine is interrupted by an urgent telegram from America, calling for her “immediate return” since her husband is “suddenly ill” (Wharton 152). The intervention reflects the telegram’s role as an urgent, more authoritative supplement to letters sent by the slower transatlantic steamships. Its intrusion on Undine’s circumstances provokes her to fury:

An angry suspicion flashed across her: what if the cable were a device of the Marvell women to bring her back? Perhaps it had been sent with Ralph’s connivance! . . . Yes, the cable was clearly an echo of Laura’s letter—mother and daughter had cooked it up to spoil her pleasure. Once the thought had occurred to her it struck root in her mind and began to throw out giant branches. (152)

The expansive infrastructure of the telegraph is echoed in the language used

here to describe Undine's response: its electric current in her "flash" of anger, its wired network in the "giant branches" of her suspicions. Undine hastily decides to ignore the news about her husband's health, discards the telegram and pledges herself to Van Degen. In this case, the speed of telegraphic communications reveals her lie. Undine later learns that her sister-in-law has cabled Van Degen with similar urgency, alerting him to Undine's unsentimental dismissal of her husband's illness. Wharton uses the telegraph's speed to indict her protagonist's self-serving dismissal of the transatlantic missive.

The examples discussed so far show how perceptions of transatlantic telegraphy can shift from the convenience enjoyed by Christopher Newman to the oppressive "device" or "connivance" that infuriates Undine. Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors* (1903) explores a transition between these two stances. *The Ambassadors* features a protagonist who is initially reassured by the idea of high-speed contact with America. The American Lambert Strether has been dispatched to Paris from the small Midwestern town of Woollett, instructed by his fiancée to find and return with her errant son. James captures the marvellous speed and immediacy of transatlantic telegraphy when Strether imagines fast communications with America:

Again and again as the days passed he had had a sense of the pertinence of communicating quickly with Woollett—communicating with a quickness with which telegraphy alone would rhyme: the fruit really of a fine fancy in him for keeping things straight, for the happy forestalment of error. . . . The sweat of one's brow was just what one might buy one's self off from by keeping the ground free of the wild weed of delusion. It easily grew too fast, and the Atlantic cable now alone could race with it. (100)

Here, the references to "quickness," "communicating quickly," a delusion that "grew too fast," all indicate the telegram's potential for prompting swift contact across the Atlantic. James's description expresses a comparable sentiment, emphasising the notion that the cable can "race with" men's thoughts, in this case keeping time with the "wild weed of delusion." The cable is directly associated with spreading and expanding communicative

networks, and this imagery of speed and rhizomatic spread helps to imply the Atlantic cable's success as a means of communication.<sup>3</sup>In this moment, Strether finds himself caught up in, and reassured by, the possibility of swift telegraphic contact with Woollett.

At first in *The Ambassadors*, the telegraph's "quickness" appears to offer an opportunity to head off doubt and delusion. When Strether considers the cable's potential for "the happy forestalment of error" (100), he echoes a popular mid-century view that the telegraph's speed might help to prevent international misunderstandings. In 1858, the author of "The Atlantic Cable" argued that, on a national scale, the telegraph's speed and convenience would mean that "the bold broad facts of national policy are more easily comprehended," adding that the telegraph could also help to avoid errors or misapprehensions, since "if misunderstood, the error can be immediately corrected" ("The Atlantic Cable"). At first, *The Ambassadors* implies that this hope for political communication can work in similarly transformative ways in the personal sphere. However, although Strether contemplates the importance of telegraphing Woollett "again and again," he becomes increasingly enthralled by his new life in Paris, and simultaneously less willing to communicate with his fiancée across the Atlantic. Throughout the novel Strether composes, but often fails to send, communications and clarifications to his fiancée, and *The Ambassadors* traces the ways in which the telegraph's speed and efficiency can have unexpected and unwelcome consequences.

Like Undine in *The Custom of the Country*, Lemuel Strether eventually receives a peremptory summons back to America, which he describes as "the loudest possible call for me . . . a 'Come back by the first ship'" (*The Ambassadors* 231). The use of a telegram to utter the "loudest possible call" across the expanse of the Atlantic takes the mid-nineteenth century idea of individuals brought "within speaking distance" ("The Atlantic Cable") across the ocean and amplifies it to an urgent summons. Whereas the media responses discussed at the start of this article celebrate the prospect of

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<sup>3</sup> At this point the Atlantic cable was by no means "alone" in its capacity for swift transatlantic communication. By the time James published *The Ambassadors*, the Atlantic cable of 1866 had been joined by a growing network of communication routes across the ocean floor, described by John Steele Gordon as "a cat's cradle of submarine cables" (212), with fifteen transatlantic telegraph cables in place by 1900.

increased transatlantic contact on a national level, James uses the character of Lemuel Strether to convey significant anxieties about the role of the telegraph in monitoring personal behaviour and activities across the Atlantic. Strether suspects that his fiancée, Mrs. Newsome, may have been in frequent contact with his friend Waymarsh, speculating that “Yes—Waymarsh just *did* know about Mrs. Newsome’s cables” (*The Ambassadors* 341). At this moment, Strether pictures himself at the mercy of an interconnected web of missives:

Strether almost felt for the instant that it was to Mrs. Newsome herself the dinner had been given; and, for that matter, quite felt how she must have known about it and, as he might think, protected and consecrated it. He had a quick blurred view of daily cables, questions, answers, signals: clear enough was his vision of the expense that, when so wound up, the lady at home was prepared to incur. (341)

This account offers a new perspective on understandings of transatlantic speed and “immediacy”. The impression of Mrs. Newsome’s constant contact with representatives in Paris is expressed via Strether’s imagining her physical presence in Paris; the realities of transatlantic distance momentarily collapse as he acknowledges her overwhelming place in, and awareness of, events in Paris. This is a power play in which Strether’s fiancée uses the telegraph’s speed and convenience to make herself “powerfully felt in her absence . . . through her manipulative use of the telegraphed message” (Greenslade 105). The Atlantic Cable figuratively transports Mrs. Newsome across the Atlantic, while Strether’s “blurred view” of daily transatlantic communications draws attention to his lack of control over this web of communication. In both *The Ambassadors* and *The Custom of the Country*, the telegraph’s convenience and speed makes it difficult for characters to evade the responsibilities they might have hoped to abandon through transatlantic distance. Far from presenting a fantasy of immediacy, this is a nightmare of telegraphic intrusion.

#### **IV. Cost and Uncertainty**

Although fictional and popular responses to telegraphy often emphasised its speed, convenience, and “virtually instantaneous communication” (Menke,

*Telegraphic Realism* 173), this is by no means the full story. The final section of this article turns to consider how the transatlantic context exposes specific problems and challenges in personal use of the telegraph, contradicting representations of the Atlantic cable bringing nations “face-to-face” and perceptions of telegraphy as a seamless experience of “virtually instantaneous communication.” The vagaries and inconsistencies of telegraphy are well-documented; Katherine Hayles observes that “telegraphy was extraordinarily vulnerable to the resistant materialities of physically embodied communication, with constant breakdown of instruments and transmission lines and persistent human error” (124). Claire Pettitt draws attention to the specific difficulties of the Atlantic cables, finding that “the fantasy of technological immediacy was repeatedly contradicted . . . by the failures of obdurate material” (611).<sup>4</sup> Even when this “obdurate material” did function reliably, use of the telegraph for transatlantic communications was fraught with challenges and complexities brought about by cost and infrastructure. These are explored in direct ways by James and Wharton, whose representations of long-distance telegraphy draw attention to complications in the “fantasies of immediacy” detailed in the first section of this article. They do so by acknowledging the practical implications of cost and infrastructure, as when Lemuel Strether has a clear “vision of the expense” paid out by his fiancée in order to keep track of his activities (*The Ambassadors* 341). The final section of this article shows how both James and Wharton deliberately exploit a conflict between ideals of “virtually instantaneous communication” and the realities of telegraphy’s economic cost and expressive limitations.

The prohibitive expense of telegraphy is a crucial factor in its use and representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In Edith Wharton’s 1912 novel *The Reef*, the aspiring actress Sophy Viner offers a vivid illustration of telegraphy’s inaccessibility for swathes of the population. After waiting in Paris for a message from friends she has hoped to visit, Sophy confesses to her wealthy companion George Darrow that they—and she—cannot afford to send a telegram:

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<sup>4</sup> The fragility of transatlantic telecommunications is evident in the aftermath of the 1858 cable’s initial success. The first message took sixteen hours to arrive, the cable “proved unreliable from the start” and had failed entirely within a month of its completion (O’Hara 619).

“But when I wrote yesterday I asked them to telegraph. I suppose they’re horribly hard up, the poor dears, and they thought a letter would do as well as a telegram.” The colour had risen to her face. “That’s why I wrote instead of telegraphing: I haven’t a penny to spare myself!” . . . She may have interpreted his change of colour as an involuntary protest at being initiated into such shabby details, for she went on with a laugh: “I suppose you can hardly understand what it means to have to stop and think whether one can afford a telegram?” (Wharton, *The Reef* 53)

Sophy’s blushing confession reiterates the telegraph’s status as a high-speed means of communication, but also draws attention to its association with wealth and prestige. Stranded in precarious circumstances, she has asked her friends to telegraph because a letter certainly will not “do as well as a telegram” where an urgent response is required (53). Sophy’s predicament neatly exposes the economic component in access to telegraphy. Her embarrassment reveals acute awareness that the inability to afford a telegram separates her from the conveniences of a more affluent world she aspires to join. The divisions of wealth and class implicit in Sophy’s admission are reaffirmed in the suggestion that she interprets Darrow’s “change of colour” as a response to her unveiling of these “shabby details”, where the shabbiness of relative poverty contrasts with Darrow’s own ease in the world. When she speculates that Darrow can’t conceive of having to “stop and think” before affording a telegram, Sophy captures a significant divide between her own circumstances and the small percentage of individuals, like Darrow, for whom the telegram has become a regular means of communication.

Sophy Viner’s confession that she cannot afford to send a telegram occurs in the relatively affordable context of land-based telegraphy. The implications for access to transatlantic telegraphy are stark, since for an individual in Sophy’s situation, a transatlantic telegram would be an almost unimaginable expense. Simone Müller draws attention to the high cost of sending long-distance telegrams, observing that “extra-European cable tariffs in particular were so exorbitantly high that only about three percent of the world’s population... could afford to send a telegram around the globe” (“Beyond the Means” 441). In the case of transatlantic communications, the

affluent cosmopolitan characters who populate the novels of Edith Wharton and Henry James—representing the “three percent” identified by Müller—refer frequently to the prohibitive expense of transatlantic telegraphy. Whereas Sophy Viner rightly speculates that Darrow has never had to “stop and think” about sending a land-based telegram, the more exorbitant transatlantic context introduces clear concerns about cost even among the most privileged characters. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Lydia Touchett refers outright to the cost of transatlantic telegraphy, when she claims that “I never know what I mean in my telegrams—especially those I send from America. Clearness is too expensive” (57). The reference to clarity as an expense, combined with the declaration that telegraphs from America must be “especially” unclear, undermines the kind of fantasies of immediacy that characterise earlier speculations about the Atlantic cable. Rather than bring individuals “within speaking distance,” fictional accounts of the transatlantic telegraph draw attention to the practicalities, costs and frustrations of this mode of contact.

Lydia Touchett’s claim that “clearness is too expensive” captures the ramifications of telegraphy’s cost for the way in which transatlantic telegrams could be composed, received and interpreted. David Hochfelder finds that the considerable expense of long-distance telegrams, charged by the character, enforced “stricter brevity”:

Ocean cables were much more expensive to install and operate than landlines. They also had far less message-carrying capacity because of signal distortion and attenuation. Until the development of inductively loaded cables in the 1920s, transmission speeds rarely exceeded twenty words per minute. Thus the economics of cable telegraphy enforced much stricter brevity. . . . High rates over the cables, initially \$100 for twenty words, encouraged maximum linguistic compression. (81)

The impact of this need for “maximum linguistic compression” on interpersonal communications is neatly illustrated in *The Ambassadors*. As he contemplates how to share news of his encounter with his fiancée’s son Chad, Lemuel Strether plans out the “brief missive” he might dispatch back to Woollett. He first settles on an eight-word statement “Have at last seen him,

but oh dear!”, before reflecting that he might express this sentiment “more luminously and cheaply” by choosing to “tick out in four words” an even more truncated message: “Awfully old—grey hair” (100). Strether’s determination to condense a complex emotional response into a cheaper four-word sentence captures the tensions inherent to telegraphy’s status as a compressed medium. The moment draws attention to the abstract obscurity of the telegram and its failure as a means of conveying personal emotion. Strether’s feelings on meeting Chad are complex and multifarious; they are in no way captured by either the eight-word or the four-word message. The telegram’s ineffectiveness for conveying emotional complexity recurs in the work of both James and Wharton, and its particular qualities proves a significant tool for these authors’ efforts to represent instances of uncertainty and misunderstanding in transatlantic relations.

Both Wharton and James frequently depict telegrams as paltry or inscrutable messages. In James’s 1871 short story “A Passionate Pilgrim,” a three-word command to “Keep the American” is conveyed with “telegraphic curtness” (*Selected Tales* 575). In Wharton’s writing, the telegram is often used for long-distance commands. *The House of Mirth* (1905) has a “telegraphic reply” that “consisted simply in the injunction: ‘Assume that everything is as usual’” (Wharton 204); in *The Children* (1928), Mrs. Wheeler issues a telegraphic summons: “You must come to Paris immediately . . . do not disobey me” (130). The “vague phrasing” (130) of this latter telegram prompts its recipients to wonder at its meaning, reflecting a recurring situation in which characters are frequently troubled by the peremptory tone and lack of detail in the telegrams they receive. The narrator of James’s “Guest’s Confession” in 1872 is upset by “the telegraphic brevity of my step-brother’s missive” (*Selected Tales* 669), while 1874’s “Madame de Mauves” has a servant puzzled by a cryptic telegram consisting of “the single word, ‘Impossible’” (*Selected Tales* 901). In each of these instances, the perfunctory form of the telegram prompts a lack of explanation, caused in part by its expense and the insistence on a short-form format, and this in turn leads to puzzlement, uncertainty, or upset.

The “linguistic compression” of the telegram is a crucial plot point in Edith Wharton’s novel *The Reef*, which explores the emotional consequences of “telegraphic curtness.” *The Reef*’s opening line is a seemingly curt and peremptory telegram dispatched by the recently widowed Anna Leath to delay

the visit of her former lover, the American diplomat George Darrow. On the point of departing England to meet Anna in France, Darrow receives a brief missive: “Unexpected obstacle. Please don’t come till thirtieth. Anna” (5). As in the examples detailed above, the telegram’s inherent lack of detail causes consternation and alarm for its recipient. The apparent emotional reticence inherent to the telegram’s format prompts Darrow to speculate that it reveals a complete lack of care, as he bemoans the telegram’s curtness:

Not the shadow of an excuse or a regret; not even the perfunctory “have written” with which it is usual to soften such blows . . . she didn’t want him, and had taken the shortest way to tell him so. (10)

The consequences of this perceived indifference reverberate throughout the novel, as Anna’s perfunctory “telegraphic curtness” proves a toxic combination with Darrow’s impatience. As these two American expatriates struggle to re-establish a relationship on the other side of the Atlantic, Anna’s failure to follow up immediately with more detail prompts “humiliation” in Darrow. Just as James works the language of commerce into his account of Christopher Newman’s profligate telegraphy, Wharton invokes the economics of telegraphy to depict Darrow’s excess of emotions, contrasting Anna’s “frugal silence” with Darrow’s “prodigality of hopes and fears” (39). In this case, telegraphy’s potential for speed sits uncomfortably alongside the telegram’s lack of detail; Darrow has become so accustomed to fast responses and near-instant communications that a day seems too long to wait, and he impatiently berates Anna’s failure to have “followed up” her telegram “within twenty-four hours” (45). Anna’s explanatory letter eventually arrives, but only after a combination of humiliation and temptation have prompted Darrow to enter another, ill-advised assignation. Having waited impatiently for a telegram and burned Anna’s explanatory letter, Darrow later claims that “the only thing that matters is that we’re sitting here together” (90). In this moment, Darrow implies that a misunderstanding caused by “linguistic compression” can only be resolved by physical proximity.

The example of telegraphic curtness that opens *The Reef* is accidental on the part of the sender, and Anna is surprised when Darrow later queries her unexplained “obstacle” with sardonic bitterness. Elsewhere in Wharton’s

fiction, however, telegraphic compression functions as a means of actively establishing and maintaining emotional unavailability across a transatlantic distance. In *The Custom of the Country*, Ralph Marvell, the unfortunate husband of Undine Spragg, yearns for a letter from his wife across the Atlantic. He hopes for news in each “foreign mail,” before eventually succumbing to the telegraph as a last resort:

Week after week he swung between the extremes of hope and dejection, and at last, when the strain had become unbearable, he cabled her. The answer ran: “Very well best love writing”; but the promised letter never came . . . (157)

Here, Undine uses the compressed form of the telegram to deliberately establish and maintain emotional distance, while appearing to respond in proper terms. Ralph Marvell’s cable *does* elicit a response from his wife, and her reply performs a promise of emotional connection, with its statement of “best love” and the promise of further “writing.” Undine’s pledge of a further letter fulfils the hope George Darrow had wished for in *The Reef*, the perfunctory “have written” used the “soften” the blow of a rejection by telegram (4). However, Undine’s five-word telegram only functions as a placeholder for further information, a quick pledge of continuing devotion.

Undine’s use of telegraphy turns “telegraphic curtness” into an art of careful distancing. Describing Lydia Touchett’s inscrutable telegrams in James’s *A Portrait of a Lady*, Richard Menke finds that telegraphy “figures as a technology of inscription and compressive encryption, perfectly suited to the peremptory but mystifying messages Mrs Touchett send[s]” (*Telegraphic Realism* 195). In the case of Undine, Wharton takes this manipulation of the telegraphic style still further, to show how its compressed form can function as a kind of deliberate emotional encryption. Undine uses the perfunctory short-format of the transatlantic telegram as a way of maintaining a relationship at a distance, intentionally using the telegram to forestall and avoid any lengthy connection with her husband, while preserving his hope for future communications. In this instance, emotional reticence is mapped onto the constraints of the telegram itself, since “best love” requires no further elaboration or expression of affection in this format, and the “promised letter” is never written. The telegram’s necessarily short format becomes a means of

avoiding interpersonal entanglements, and a way of facilitating emotional inaccessibility.

*The Custom of the Country* draws an unfavourable contrast between the short form of the telegram and the expressiveness allowed by a letter. Undine's use of the telegram functions as a direct refutation of the letter, whose role is implied to be a longer, more emotionally complex form of discourse. When Undine fears she has lost the devotion of her second husband, she is partly alerted because his telegrams have become "brief and perfunctory" (250). Late in the novel, readers learn that Undine's neglected son Paul "did not even know that there was any method of communication between mothers and sons less laconic than that of the electric wire," and his naïve acceptance of the telegraphic form is contrasted unfavourably with letters sent by more devoted mothers (293). *The Custom of the Country* lambasts the abruptly "laconic" telegram as a medium insufficient to convey full depths of emotion, undermining suggestions of telegraphic "immediacy" by emphasising the truncated and restricted realities of telegraphic communication. Far from bringing individuals "face-to-face" or "within speaking distance", the enforced brevity and linguistic compression of messages sent across the ocean are shown to prompt rifts and frustration, undermining the much-vaunted hopes for "immediacy" in transatlantic relations celebrated in the mid-nineteenth century.

## V. Conclusion

For the authors I have discussed in this article, telegrams feature as a swift and convenient means of communicating across long distances, and for many this is a cause for celebration, which is expressed using language and imagery chosen to emphasise the telegraph's capacity to convey information at high speed and overcome the obstacle of oceanic distance. However, authorial responses to transatlantic telegraphy also draw attention to complicating factors that contradict assumptions about immediacy, proximity and the perceived collapse of Atlantic distance. Close analysis of literary representations of transatlantic telegraphy reveals a multifaceted nexus of concerns, including the intertwining of commerce with ideas of technological progress, attention to the prohibitive cost of transmitting messages, and fears about a loss of expressive potential in the truncated form of the telegram. As a

result, fictional accounts of transatlantic telegraphy can offer significant insights into the social and cultural implications of messages transmitted across the distance of the Atlantic ocean. Thinking telegraphically in the Atlantic context brings issues around transatlantic movement and communications into sharp relief, as the idealisation of technologies that might bring individuals and nations “face-to-face” or “within speaking distance” contrast with practical experiences of long-distance movement and communication.

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