News over Five Millennia

News over Five Millennia:

News Reporters, Historians, Messengers and Dramatists

By

Michael Palmer

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To Marie-Claire, “Rirette”

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INTRODUCTION

Heraclitus, according to Plato, stated: "All things pass and nothing stays…" He used the metaphor of the flow of a river: "You do not step twice into the same river."

The flow of news, the news-flow, is a recurrent image in journalism.

"Animals communicate basic news," claimed a preparatory text for the lavish but short-lived Newseum in Washington, DC (1997–2019). Mankind has always used many faculties to communicate news, three hundred thousand years ago as today. The controversial twentieth-century figure, Canadian Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980), whose staccato style bears the imprint of some of the media he studies, wrote of various technical apparatuses as "the extensions of man."[1]

Scholars studying the origins of language (spoken and, later, written) draw inferences from a wide range of evidence, even if the Linguistic Society of Paris, in 1866, banned any debates on the subject, a prohibition that long survived. Today, various hypotheses exist about how, why, when, and where language might have emerged. Unlike sounds made by animals, our species employs the tongue, lips and other moveable parts to speak. Human speech became possible around two thousand or three thousand years ago, when anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* emerged, seemingly, first in Africa, and the larynx descended in the body as man assumed an upright position.[2]

By recalling what is widely known, am I right, thus, to begin this history of news? I search far and wide and accept that my approach is unusual. From chapter three, the beginnings of the media age, news agency material provides coherence; in chapter one, reliable archival evidence is less, brilliant scholarship abounds. Chapter two, on news and the theatre in the age of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, the early seventeenth century, addresses issues about the transition from newsletters to early "newspapers."

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[1] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964). "The media, not their content, merit study," he wrote.

[2] In Europe, he emerged some forty thousand years ago.

What was news? What is news?

Few, today, would deny the omnipresence of a news culture, at least in so-called advanced Western societies and in those influenced by them. Defining news is complex, partly because it is so ephemeral and partly because of its identification, at times, inextricably with information, messages, data and much else, and with the "media"—a term used in its broadest sense—that relay it, by which one becomes informed. News content may be trivial or momentous; this complicates matters further. Its impact may concern only a few or a large public.

This book looks at news in several societies over a long time span. In recent decades, scholars from many disciplines have considered news in the past: Sian Lewis, for instance, examined *News and Society in the Greek Polis,* from the sixth to the fourth century BC.[3] She stresses that modern concepts of news should not be applied to news in ancient Greece, where the *polis*, or city-state, had relatively few inhabitants, but that, nonetheless, news and gossip, transmitted primarily by word of mouth, flowed constantly.

Many such studies consider information and communication along with news. For me, there are two indisputable features of news: immediacy and urgency. Immediacy, in that it concerns an event, a development that has just happened or just been learned;[4] urgency relates to the intention of the sender and to the speed of transmission, whether it be Pheidippides (530–490 BC), the Athenian runner who brought news of the victory over the Persians at Marathon,[5] or news agencies using the Internet and satellites.

Four "markers" or keywords fashion my approach: a focus on speed, public(ity), content and medium. "Publicity," both in the sense of rendering public (to "publics" of varying size) and advertising; content ("popular," "quality," general-interest, or specialist), and medium[6] (in the broadest sense—manuscript, print—ranging from Francis Bacon's "the medium of

[3] Sian Lewis, *News and Society in the Greek Polis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
[4] An event may have happened some time ago; it is when it is learned and publicized that, for many, it becomes news.
[5] Pheidippides, the messenger, is said, by Lucian, to have run to Athens with the news of victory over the Persians at Marathon, shouting, "Joy to you, we've won," and, then, to have died from exhaustion. The battle dates from 490 BCE; Lucian writes seven centuries later.
[6] Usefully rendered in French as s*upport.*

words"[7] to the internet and digitization); speech, image—hence, "audio-visual," "broadcast." "The medium of words" includes exchanges in interpersonal relations: "a bit of news," is a chapter title of C. P. Snow's 1968 novel *The Sleep of Reason.* Such "family news"—of circumscribed interest—exists alongside news related in the media, and increases constantly along with life-expectation and the world population.

Periods of uncertainty and fear—wars, revolutions, pandemics (plagues and Covid 19…), fires (including the 1666 Great Fire of London and the 2017 London Grenfell Tower) —favour news and rumour: in 1789, France, rumour seemed more abundant than news.

An event in a distant location, off the regular "media map" may or may not be known rapidly. But this rapidity ever-accelerates. On the one hand, "the soccer war" or "the Hundred Hours' War," opposing Honduras and El Salvador, in 1969, was little covered until the piece by Ryszard Kapuściński published after the event (1978).[8] On the other hand, on November 18, 1978, the killing of 909 people in Jonestown, a remote settlement in northwestern Guyana trying to avoid media scrutiny, became a top world news story within twenty-four hours. This was one of the largest losses of American civilian life (mostly Black Americans) in a deliberate act before September 11, 2001, when live TV covered planes crashing into the New York World Trade Centre. Today, intensive news-media coverage of the US is a truism. And, in November 1963, "the global village" of the, then, fashionable Marshall McLuhan appeared to share, as one, the news of the assassination of the US president J. F. Kennedy. The latest news report and its impact is often centre-stage in this book.

Lucy Brown writes that "the news as we understand it is a nineteenth century creation."[9] Yes and no. We shall begin even further back than what the scholar Andrew Pettigree calls "the invention of news"[10] and the US journalism professor Mitchell Stephens calls "the history of news,"[11] two

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[7] Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1605), book I, xvi.
[8] However, the news agencies AFP and Prensa Latina covered events closely. Cf. Alain Rouquié and Michel Vale, Rouquié, Alain, and Vale, Michel, "Honduras–El Salvador, the War of One Hundred Hours: A Case of Regional 'Disintegration,'" *International Journal of Politics* 3, no. 3 (FALL 1973).
[9] Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 1.
[10] Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 2014).
[11] Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

excellent studies, with different approaches and source materials.

Intimating, signalling and gossiping relayed news long before "the media" existed. What are now known by this word—for how much longer?—have existed, from news sheets onwards, for some five hundred years. The confusion between news and rumour is more ancient. The promotion of "objective news" is more recent; David Minditch argues it became "the supreme deity" of American journalism between the 1830s and 1890s.[12] The search for at least two different sources before a report carries conviction is also of recent vintage even if doubts about only one source of a report are ancient. An occurrence or happening mutates through the observer into an "event."

An event may be significant (at least, for some). Reports of events, not all significant, abound; not so the traces of professional newsmen's comments on these reports. I propose, after reading newsmen's remarks, to slightly modify the celebrated five **W**s—"who, what, where, when, why (and how)"—so that they read: "who or what does (or says) what to whom (or what) when, how, why?" (Some newsmen add "so what?") These questions preoccupy the journalist as they do, with a different perspective, the historian. A professional, the journalist also resembles the actor: both go from role to role; multiple stories, multiple roles. Credibility obsesses each: the actor has to appear to believe in his role; the journalist disbelieves many potential sources, but has to believe in one, or preferably two, even if, in the case of Woodward and Bernstein of Watergate fame, one is dubbed "deep throat."[13] Journalists risk prison to protect the identity of sources. The public willingly suspends belief when watching a play, a telefilm… It may want to believe what it accesses via a medium, but disbelief is easily triggered.

Another *leitmotif* of news is "whence": from what place or source does news come from? "Source" we have mentioned. The location of news is caught by the, seemingly apocryphal, nursery rhyme: "news comes from **N**orth, **E**ast, **W**est, and **S**outh." Around 1600, in Britain, the authorities opposed the printing of "domestic," i.e., British, news; most published news came from Europe; in post-Brexit Britain, news from Europe (save for war news) has fallen and what there is, is often negative. Over a (very) long timespan, the geographic origins of news changed as "the known world"[14] broadened.

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[12] David Minditch, *Just the Facts* (New York: New York U. P., 1998).

[13] And whose real identity emerged decades later.

[14] An expression used in ancient Greece and ancient Rome: The *oecumene* (English spelling; Greek*: οἰκουμένη, Oikouménē*) referred to the known, the inhabited or

Yet, since time immemorial, at least since man mastered language, the shout "fire!" is both a warning and news.

What may seem odd in my approach is to consider, together, news over a very long timespan with news-products and newsmen of international news agencies of the past two hundred years.

In 2019, *International News Agencies: A History* closed, more or less, my research on news agencies, begun in the mid-1970s. As a news historian, the relations between historians and newsmen, and their writings or productions, have long concerned me. Here, in retirement, I pull the two together.

Five thousand years ago, messages—of which there is still trace—came from, or for, "on high," authority, and also from, or for, merchants; some concerned people's livelihood (stocks of grain, numbers of livestock). Today's electronic exchanges between newsmen are far-removed from the bearers of messages, dispatched by their masters, several millennia ago, yet for both, speed is of the essence. Does news presuppose a public? The question is rarely put, most observers and academics assume "obviously." I am less convinced—hence, I begin with messengers delivering news-making messages to only one all-powerful person.

I see, I hear, I smell, I touch, I say; I write, I type, I print: a literate person, today, performs all these operations rapidly. But, even today, there is a time differential: to say what I see or hear is more rapid than to write an account or report of it; to print on my printer (as, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, printing on a rotary press) takes longer. In the past, while speaking and writing were always faster, typing, a nineteenth-century invention, was preceded by printing, Johannes Gutenberg's technical advance of the mid-fifteenth century. The batting of an eyelid may convey a signal to a small

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habitable world. In antiquity, it referred to the portions of the world known to Hellenic and later geographers, covering Africa, Europe, and Asia. Under the Roman Empire, it came to refer to civilisation itself, as well as the secular and religious imperial administration. Cartographers referred to the world map (*mappa mundi*). In China, cartographers focused, first, on China itself. From the European Renaissance and the Age of Discovery, knowledge of the world increased for both European and Chinese cartographers

"Known world" can be "media-related": cf. Stanley Barron and Roger Wallis, *The Known World of Broadcast News International News and the Electronic Media* (London: Routledge, 1990). This is the connotation most used in this book, as news agencies cover the world.

number of people. The transmission of the report, by a signal, by an animal, a messenger, a letter and other means, long depended on the vagaries of a variety of circumstances. Only in the nineteenth century did electromagnetic transmission resolve many spatio-temporal obstacles. From the nineteenth century onwards, sound, images, and printed characters were transmitted increasingly rapidly; satellite transmission and the internet are the major "accelerators" of the past half-century.

Some chapters, here, are much concerned with "recent, latest" news. And yet, even scholars studying the early European press—whether hand-written news-sheets, printed newsletters or the first newspapers—sometimes ask, with Brendan Dooley, "what is contemporaneity?" and answer: "the perception, shared by a number of human beings, of experiencing a particular event at more or less the same time." They suggest this occurred in the seventeenth century, long before, as today, the powerful and the merchant invested in accessing news fast.

"Fast" today is not the "fast" of the past. Delays and uncertainties long troubled those seeking fast access to apparently accurate news. Reputedly reliable news only became generally available in the dailies of London, Paris, New York and some other major cities in the nineteenth century. The apparently "instant" newsflash, via the internet, in 2022, like the daily rhythms fashioning many lives—"give us this day our daily newspaper," once joked France's Toscan du Plantier—lead, in this book, to an emphasis on news published this morning, on screens or the radio/TV, in the past few hours, minutes or seconds.

Other preliminary points: nowadays, news and the media that convey it often seem inseparable. There are elite, confidential, "quality" media, striving for a viable economic model on the internet and in the ostensibly "free" online age. Yet many connotations of the media link them to the "popular," the "mass" public, even if, for a time, phrases like "narrow-casting" emerged alongside "broadcasting."

Perceptions of "the public" in the distant past, before, say, the sixteenth century, are obscure: one may write, first, of various élites, often those exercising various forms of power and those (often more literate) who served them and, second, others—slaves, peasants, "common folk," the Latin *plebs*. Most people spoke; few read; fewer wrote. Information, albeit fragmentary, about literacy only dates, roughly, from the sixteenth century. It appears the literacy rate in England in the 1640s was around 30 % for

males;[15] in most countries more men could read than women.

"Popular" and "mass-circulation" are adjectives often used when discussing the nineteenth- and twentieth-century press, twentieth-century radio and television, and the news they related.[16] Fragmentary sources for circulations made it possible to write dailies with print-runs numbering in the 10,000s, in New York and Paris in the 1830s, and in the 100,000s, in New York, London and Paris by the 1880s to 1890s: the Parisian daily *Le Petit Journal* printed a million copies in 1887. The popular dailies of these three metropolises varied in the number of pages, but not in sales-price. The ingredients or formulae of what was perceived as "news with popular appeal" appeared substantially similar. This issue will feature often.

Conventions and Keywords (including news agencies) and Abbreviations

Many of the following news keywords entered English around 1500, but some were much more recently employed.

Copy. Latin**,** *copia*: plenty; medieval Latin: transcript. Manuscript or printed matter prepared for printing, 1485. Here, all newsmen's material (manuscript, print, electronic, audiovisual).

Datum, data. In English, attested, 1646; from the past participle of the Latin verb, *dare*: to give. An item of information, a fact, a statistic, alone, is a **datum**, the singular form of the more commonly used **data**.

Data are units of information, often numerical. In a more technical sense, data are a set of values of qualitative or quantitative variables about one or more persons or objects, while a **datum** (singular of data) is a single value of a single variable.

Although the terms "data" and "information" are often used interchangeably, distinctions exist. Popular publications may refer to data transformed into information when considered in context or in analysis. In academic treatments of the subject data are mere units of information.

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[15] Cf. Chapter 5.

[16] Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow: Fontana / Croom Helm, 1976): commented changing senses and connotations of the words "mass" and "media."

Despatch/dispatch. "Despatch" is the British variant of the term; "dispatch" the American; it retains the standard form used since the 1500s. "Despatch" is becoming rare as an alternate spelling for "dispatch." Hence, a news dispatch (French: dépêche).

Event. Latin *eventus*. An occurrence, happening; an act, deed (due to man or nature) or speech may be an event. The substantive was attested in English in 1573. An event, when perceived as improbable, unusual, unlikely—like *canard*s in the early modern period or the subject of human-interest stories, between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries—may lead into a long-running news-topic, a saga of events.

A **media event.** i) also known as a pseudo-event, is an event, activity, or experience conducted for the purpose of media publicity; ii) any event that is covered in the media or manufactured with the media in mind.[17]

History. From the ancient Greek *histôr* came the Latin *historia*, the French *histoire*; in thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman French: *estoire*. In English, at first, history also ranged from "a story of events to a narrative of past events." In early English, *history* and *story* both applied to an account either of imagined events or to events supposed to be true. From the fifteenth century, *history* applied to an account of past real events, and *story* to include more informal accounts of past events and tales of imagined events. History signifying organised knowledge of the past evolved from the earlier sense of a specific written account.

The French etymologist Émile Benveniste recalled that *histôr* was a witness: "he knows because he saw." His role recalls that of a referee, a judge, fifth-century BCE Herodotus, who sought to preserve the memory of what both the Greeks and the foreigners ("the barbarians") did, has something of the referee, even if the historian is not a judge but he who inquires.

Information. Latin: *informare*; old French: *information.* To be told of something, Middle English. Practical information may be of use, but lacks urgency.

[17] Cf. Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (New York: Random House, 1962); Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events*. *The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1992); Jocelyne Arquembourg, *Le temps des événements médiatiques* (Brussels: De Boeck Supérieur, 2003).

Intelligence. News, 1450. The use of "intelligence" for "news," was still current in the nineteenth century.

Intelligence, with its overtones of spying, was an activity recorded in Antiquity.

Used in names of British newspapers from the seventeenth century, e.g., *Public intelligencer.*

Modern US dictionaries define an intelligencer as a secret agent or spy and as a bringer of news. The confusion between the two senses plagues journalists; there have been occasions when journalists have acted as "intelligence agents," *i.e.*, spies. The best-known British case is Harold "Kim" Philby, recruited by Soviet intelligence in 1934, whose cover included acting as correspondent of *The Times* during the Spanish civil war while affecting a Francoist stance.

An early head of France's AFP (1947–50, 1950–54), Maurice Nègre, who, in the 1930s, had left his post as Havas bureau chief in Bucharest for that of head of intelligence in the French embassy, acted for the French Resistance during the German Occupation by infiltrating Vichy collaborationist government circles; he was not averse, in the late '40s to early '50s, as a fervent anti-Communist, to seeing his AFP correspondents, in locations including French colonial possessions, threatened by independence movements, acting as intelligence service informers. The US CIA once suspected RTR journalists of spying; later, East German (RDA) Stasi files helped reveal a Reuter Berlin correspondent as a spy. Russian agency correspondents suspected of spying are periodically expelled from Western capitals.

Medium, media. "Through the medium of words," wrote Francis Bacon in 1605, "medium" coming from the Latin medium: "the middle, midst, centre."

In America, an insurance company, in 1929, published *Radio as an Advertising medium*. Partly because of the impact, in the 1960s, of the writings of the Canadian Marshall McLuhan, the term "media" gained currency. Thus, "medium," a seventeenth-century word in British English, was re-appropriated in the twentieth century by American English.

Message. *Circa* 1300, "a communication transmitted via a messenger, a notice sent through some agency," from Old French *message*: "message, news, tidings, embassy" (eleventh century), from Medieval Latin *missaticum*,

from Latin *missus*: "a sending away, sending, dispatching; a throwing, hurling," noun from past participle of *mitter*: "to release, let go; send, throw." Specific religious sense of "divinely inspired communication via a prophet" (1540s).

News. As a plural for the adjective "new" or "new thing": an English adjective becoming a noun when made plural; this was probably influenced by the Old French nouveau, meaning "new" (which it still does); nouveau in its plural feminine leads to les nouvelles, "the news."

Before the fourteenth century, English speakers often used the word "tidings," the "announcement of an event." This Middle English version, dating before the tenth century, stems from the Old English term *tidung* meaning "event, occurrence, or a piece of news." An event, an announcement of an event and a report of an event = a piece of news, a news item.

The Latin *nova* and Old French *noveles* (around 1050) stress new things, novelties. Tidings, new information of recent events, reports of new occurrences. Construed as a singular, 1566. (twentieth-century BBC: "here is the news").

*Newe*s, 1551; "newes" and "news": interchangeable spellings: sixteenth to seventeenth century.

Terhi Rantanen notes, "in most languages, the…word for news refers to its temporality: *news* in English, *nouvelles* in French, *novosti* in Russian, *uutinen* in Finnish, *nyhet* in Swedish."[18] The words for "news" in other major European languages include: *noticias* in Spanish from the Latin *notus* = famous, known, noted; it may refer to roll-call or register, has the sense of fame, renown, celebrity; *nachrichten* in German is the plural of *nachricht,* message; in Italian, *una notizia*; in Arabic, *akhbar*, good tidings, *anba,* information; in Chinese, *xinwen.*

Andrew Pettigree studies the *news market*, 1400–1800, primarily in Europe,[19] and Mitchell Stephens studies news as a *commodity* over a long

[18] Terhi Rantanen, *When News Was New* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. 2009).
[19] Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 2014).

timespan.[20] Others, like Gerald Baldasty,[21] focus on a specific period, while Michael Schudson's work on news in the US combines the approaches of a journalism historian and a sociologist.[22]

Breaking news. Already, in the thirteenth century, "break" had the sense of disclose. The US TV channel CNN, in the 1980s, used it for fresh news of developing events and "news updates."

Good news. Rare. A French local paper (1870s) had a column *chronique du bien* with items like "a citizen handed to the police a lost wallet." Periodically, there are calls that the media report more good news.

News reports merit inclusion on the **news agenda.**

Newsmaker. A person in the news, however briefly.

Newsman. Attested, 1596: a bearer, collector, or writer of news. 1796: a man who sells or delivers newspapers. I use "newsman" as a generic term (including newswomen), thus, distinguishing people gathering, processing, transmitting news from the broader term "journalist."

Penny. English Id: pounds, shillings, pence, before decimilisation (1971). US penny ("penny press"1830s–). French: *un sou* = 5 cmes.

"Pix." A photo or other image.

Popular/quality. Newspapers have been dubbed "popular," "tabloid," "redtops," among other things, as opposed to "quality," "elite," or "serious." Paper formats change, which means "tabloid" is not always synonymous with "popular" and small format. And British, US and French parlance about these terms also varies. These terms lend themselves less easily to news websites, whose algorithms are measured in terms of clicks (metrics).

"Quac." RTR abbreviation for "news-quality controller."

Report. The AFP newsman P.-L. Bret recalled how the ancient Greeks observed that a report or account always presupposes a judgement by the beholder.

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[20] Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[21] Gerald Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).
[22] Michael Schudson, *Discovering The News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic books, 1982).

Serial. An instance of the interplay between journalism and literary production. "The multi-faceted Yougo serial" writes a RTR quality controller (WMC, July 3, 1992). The French *feuilleton,* initially, an early nineteenth-century regular weekly column by a critic, associated in the late 1830s with *roman feuilleton,* a serialized novel in a newspaper, called, in 1895, by Alfred Harmsworth, when in Paris, "fooliton."

Topic(al). News topic: "in the news."

Abbreviations

A.N.: Archives Nationales (France)**.**

BCE: Before the Common Era. Previously, the English-Latin hybrid "BC/AD"—"Before Christ / *Anno Domini*."

Cms: centimetres.

Cmes.: centimes (100 cmes. = I franc).

The New York "penny." US one-cent coin, often called the penny = one-hundredth of a US dollar.

The British "penny, shillings, pounds" used before the decimalization of coinage (1971), after which "Id." became "Ip." Pounds (100 p.) survived.

ICT: information communication technologies.

IPTC: International Press Telecommunications Council.

ll.: lines (in a play).

US or **U.S.**: USA, United States of America.[23]

UP: University Press.

NEWS agencies and/or their founders

AFP: Agence France-Presse (1944–>)

AP: The Associated Press (1846–>)

[23] In 1936, the London *Daily Express* began dropping full points in the "USA."

BBG: Bloomberg (1981–>)

DNB: Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro (1934–45)

Fabra: (1865); EFE (1939–): main Spanish news agency

HAVAS: (1832–1940) founder Charles Louis Havas (1783–1858)

INS: International News Service (1909-58))

Korrburo (1849-1914): the Telegraphen-Korrespondenz Bureau, also referred to by many other names (*Austrian Correspondence*, Österreichische Correspondenz, Kaiserlich und Königlich Telegraphen-Korrespondenz Bureau, K.u.k. Telegraphen-Korrespondenz-Bureau, or Korbureau, or Corrbureau, or simply KKTK) founded in the Austrian Empire, in 1849, by Joseph Tuvora (1820–72) under the auspices of the Austrian government

OFI: Office français d'information (1940–44)

PJR: Paul Julius Reuter (1816–99)

RTR: Reuters (1851), owned by Thomson Reuters (2008)

Stefani: Italian news agency (1853); ANSA (1945–>)

TASS: Russian government telegraph agency: SPTA (1904); PTA (1914); Soviet telegraph agency (1925); ITAR-TASS (1992); TASS (2014).

UP: United Press (1907-58)

UPI: United Press International (from 1958: merger of United Press and International News Service)[24]

WMC: World Media Comment (RTR)

[24] Acquired, in 2000, by News World Communications, a media conglomerate of the Unification movement founder Sun Myung Moon.

PART ONE:

NEWS BEFORE THE MEDIA

CHAPTER 1

SCENE-SETTING: NEWS OVER THE MILLENNIA; THE VERY DISTANT PAST

"Animals communicate basic news," claimed a preparatory text for the lavish but short-lived Newseum in Washington, DC (1997–2019). Mankind has used many faculties to communicate news, 300,000 years ago as today. The controversial, twentieth-century figure, Canada's Marshall McLuhan (1911–80),whose staccato style bears the imprint of some of the media he studies, wrote of various technical apparatuses as "the extensions of man."[1] While on controversies, it is clear that the world's population of men, women and children has greatly increased over the millennia, despite interruptions, such as massive deaths through plagues and wars, and that life expectancy has become greater; hence, the messages, news included, have increased, at probably an ever accelerating rate since the internet. As this book progresses, the emphasis will focus on professional newsmen and women.

Some 5,000 years ago, *circa* 3,000 to 2,000 BCE, what are now considered as mathematics and writing "began."[2] Researchers like Denise Schmandt-Besserat argue, from studying clay tokens in the Middle East (Mesopotamia), that inscribed marks on more-or-less round *bulles* or tokens, measures of quantities of objects such as sheep, later evolved into early written symbols.[3] Counting and writing have long been interconnected: *digitus* (Latin), *le doigt* (French), *digit* for finger or toe. Hence, number

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[1] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964). "The media, not their content, merit study," he wrote.

[2] "Beginings," "inventions" are useful but misleading terms when the processes involved were long evolutions. Already, in China, in the seventh millennium BCE, marks communicating limited information suggest traces of ideographic or early mnemonic symbols representing a few concepts.

[3] Another scholar, Hans J. Nissen, sometimes minimises the importance of writing as a turning point in Mesopotamian civilisation. Nissen 1988; Nissen *et al*.1993.

(English), used for counting, and *conter* and *un conte* (French) culminate in that etymological interplay associating an account of facts and an imaginary account or story that, in several languages, refers to facts, news and data.

Marks, symbols, signs, whatever the script, be it the progression from the Phoenician symbol  , that evolved, via classical Greek, into "A"; this symbol harks back to a bull, with its two horns. It took thousands of years for the letter "A" to emerge, and for a symbol to apply both to a letter and to a number, as in "V" (signifying "five" in Latin). While writing these words, news, using letters and figures, speeds across the world in nanoseconds.

Often considered the first-ever historian, author of "Enquiries" or "Histories,"[4] Herodotus of Halicarnassus, (*circa* 484 to 425 BCE), lived in Greece and travelled widely: Egypt, Libya, Syria, Babylonia, Susa in Elam, Lydia, and Phrygia, up the Hellespont, Byzantium, Thrace, Macedonia, beyond the Danube to Scythia, and as far as the Don River. He is invoked, today, as noted in the introduction, by geographers, anthropologists, historians and journalists. Sources preoccupy him: the first six paragraphs, or two sections in the Greek text, of Book one, in a standard English translation of *The Histories*[5] give two sources of what is related: "the Persian account (the Greeks have a different story)": Phoenicians carry off Io, the daughter of the Greek King of Argos; later, "tit for tat," Greeks carry off Europa, the Phoenician king's daughter.

Long and short paragraphs alternate throughout the text, recording a story that Herodotus read aloud to Greek audiences.[6] Announcing that he "exposes" his research findings, Herodotus, notes François Hartog, employs both terms referring to orality *(apodexis*) and writing *(gráphō).*[7] He told stories (*logoi*): some he believed, others not: "my duty is to report all that is said; but I am not obliged to believe it all alike."[8]

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[4] His own text was reconstructed long after its composition in the fifth century BCE.
[5] *Circa* 425 BCE, Herodotus, 1996.
[6] His fellow early historian, Thucydides, born around 460 BCE, records hearing him delivering an episode of his *Histories* at Olympia: then a young boy, Thucydides cried in wonder.
[7] François Hartog. *Le Miroir d'Hérodote. Essai sur la Représentation de L'autre*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980, 415–6.
[8] Book vii.152. Thucydides, sometimes called "the father of scientific history" and who criticised Herodotus' "tales," himself "reconstructed" speeches: "with reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others

Is he, thus, a "proto-journalist?"

Herodotus considers early writing or "media" and "messengers," millennia before Canada's twentieth-century Marshall McLuhan. For Herodotus, the Phoenician prince Cadmus reputedly introduced the Phoenician alphabet, "Phoenician letters" *phoinikeia grammata*, to the Greeks, notably the Ionians,[9] who adapted it to form their alphabet. He believes that previously the Greeks ignored writing. "Paper rolls also were called from of (*sic*) old 'parchments' by the Ionians, because formerly when paper was scarce they used instead, the skins of sheep and goats."[10] Medium and message, *à la* McLuhan, are considered together.[11]

A researcher working with McLuhan, Robert K. Logan, studying "the impact of the phonetic alphabet" and undertaking a very long-term overview, argues, "media and communication, including the alphabet… led the Greeks to deductive logic and abstract theoretical science…a medium of communication is not … a passive conduit for the transmission of information."[12] Such reasoning may seem far from the history of news, but reflects the imprint of the Toronto school of communication, led by Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, that long held sway in North American communication studies.[13] I follow, rather, the Herodotus "tradition" and the

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while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said." Book I, chapter I.

[9] Inhabiting a region bordering the Aegean now in western Turkey.

[10] Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by George Rawlinson (London: Everyman, 1992), 404. The Macmillan 1914 edition has the following: "Also the Ionians from ancient time call paper "skins," because formerly, paper being scarce, they used skins of goat and sheep; nay, even in my own time many of the Barbarians write on such skins."

[11] Herodotus "was wrong about Kadmos." His "legendary account of the historical fact that the alphabet did come from Phoenicia" reflects that, at a time "of nascent historical thinking…, because Kadmos was the famous legendary migrant from Phoenicia, it was logical to assume that he brought with him Phoenicia's most celebrated export." Barry Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1991).

[12] Robert K. Logan, *The Alphabet Effect* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 24.

[13] Innis argued that a balance between the spoken word and writing contributed to the flourishing of Ancient Greece in the age of Plato (*circa* 428/427 or 424/423 to 348/347 BCE); gradually, the balance between the medium of speech and the

journalists and historians who read him.

Urgent information delivered by messengers, couriers, preceded the notion of news relayed by newsmen. Over time, the powerful—whether political, theocratic and religious, financial and commercial—wanted, and were served, information—news as fast as existing means of communication allowed. Traces of this have been unearthed in Mesopotamia and Egypt,[14] four to five thousand years ago. Historians of ancient Greece note the absence of what might be termed economic data, even if money, observed Herodotus, was first coined in Lydia (western Turkey), and major dramatists represent messengers delivering news—the "killing the messenger delivering bad news" theme, used by Shakespeare (*Antony and Cleopatra*), appears in Sophocles' *Antigone*: "no one loves the messenger who brings bad news."

The earliest known alphabetic (or "proto-alphabetic," proto-Sinaitic or proto-Canaanite) script is attested in the Sinai and in Canaan in the late Middle and Late Bronze Age (*circa* 2,100 to 1,500 BCE).

Ideograms, symbols of writing systems such as Egyptian hieroglyphs, Sumerian cuneiform and Chinese characters, represent elements of a particular language, mostly words or morphemes and are, thus, logograms. Early historical civilisations of the Near East, Africa, China, and Central America used some form of logographic writing.

Pictographic symbols depict the object referred to by the word, such as an icon of a bull denoting the Semitic word *ālep*: an ox. It is from *ālep* that the letter "A" ultimately emerged.

Current research suggests proto-writing dates to long before 3,000 BCE. Marks conveyed limited information in seventh-millennium-BCE China:

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medium of writing was disturbed, writing displacing the oral tradition.

[14] Pharaohs were God-kings, intermediaries or messengers between god(s) and people. In later ancient Egypt, the god Thoth was, among his many occupations, the god of writing. In a dialogue in *Phaedrus* of the Greek philosopher Plato, Socrates presents writing as likely to favour forgetfulness. Greek mythology has many representations of messengers as gods, beginning with Hermes, long perceived in modern times as the symbol or patron of newsmen: Hermes, reputedly born by the crossroads, was priapic, god of thieves and the messenger of the gods, especially Zeus. Inventor of weights and measures, he was the guardian of roads and crossroads, the god of travellers, thieves and orators. Many periodicals in early modern and modern Europe had titles including his Roman name "Mercury."

ideographic or early mnemonic symbols represent a limited number of concepts. In China, what is termed "a near-complete writing system" was developed. This script, known as the oracle bone script because of its appearance on bones used for divining, emerged around 1,400 BCE.

Researchers in the Near East examining *ostraca*, limestone flakes, find imagery of animals acting as humans, anthropomorphism, particularly during the Proto-Elamite period (3,200–2,700 BCE), possibly depicting a single event.

These traces in early civilisations have little or nothing to do with proto-news yet indicate how "inscribing/recording" an "event" entered people's consciousness.

In ancient civilisations, any information that arrived was welcomed, the more recent and authoritative the better. In what was later termed Mesopotamia, French assyriologists, André Parrot, Dominique Charpin and Jean-Marie Durand, unearthed and deciphered over 20,000 tablets in the royal palace of Mari, located in what is now eastern Syria. Dating from the eighteenth century BCE, under King Zimri-Lim, ally of the better-known Hammurabi, tablets bear inscriptions translated as "a hasty tablet," "public rumour," etc. J.-M. Durand identifies a "philosophy of information." The "messenger" who merely carries the written message is distinguished from he who learns and relates a spoken message; often the bearer of the tablet may confirm orally what is written; indeed, he may have witnessed the event written down, the written version merely serving to confirm the authenticity of what he relates. His oral presentation may be fine-tuned to adjust to the context he finds on arrival; "a skillful messenger establishes peace between kings."[15] Some messengers are ambassadors, diplomats. A term "*sâ Hamâtim*" is translated thus: "an urgent tablet."[16]

Messages often begin: "tell my Lord; thus speaks your servant…" or "tell Hammurabi…" One such message continues, "my Lord knows I command the Bedouins, and, just as a merchant crosses through both war and peace, the Bedouins travel through war and peace, learning in their travels what the country is saying."[17] Here, are associated news or rumour among the public and the well-informed merchant and nomads. Another tablet has, "when I

[15] Jean-Marie Durand, *Documents épistolaires du Palais de Mari Paris* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1997), 497.
[16] Ibid, 498.
[17] Ibid, 518.

heard the news, I shouted scandal."[18]

Located in the neighbouring region of southern Mesopotamia, Sumer recalls, for some, another of the historical and legendary sites from the distant past. In the 1950s, archaeologists like Jean-Jacques Glassner continued to further research on writing. The earliest texts, from the cities of Uruk and Jemdet Nasr, date to between *circa* 3,500 and 3,000 BCE. Passages in texts researched by Samuel Kramer and, later by, Glassner anticipate in one sense the remarks made by those deciphering the Mari tablets. A passage in the poem *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, dating from *circa* 2,100 BCE and focusing on the conflicts between Enmerkar, King of Unug-Kulaba (Uruk), and the unnamed King of Aratta (probably located in today's Armenia), notes the relationship between a message delivered in a verbal and written form. The poem records how a messenger from Enmarkar addresses the King of Aratta: "Enmerkar, the son of Utu, has given me a clay tablet. O lord of Aratta, after you have examined the clay tablet, after you have learned the content of the message, say whatever you will say to me, and I shall announce that message …After he had spoken thus to him, the lord of Aratta received his kiln-fired tablet from the messenger. The lord of Aratta looked at the tablet. The transmitted message was just nails, and his brow expressed anger. The lord of Aratta looked at his kiln-fired tablet." A later passage in the poem has, "the nail is inscribed." Assyriologists interpret this as a record of the first-ever written text, inscribed in cuneiform script, intended to help a forgetful messenger to convey the long message he has to deliver.

Likewise, around 2,000 BCE, the epic, or legend, of Gilgamesh, of which traces have been found on sites throughout the Near East (Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq) and one of whose predecessors was Enmerkar, has passages in which English and French translations refer to "news" and a "tale": "he brought back of a tale of before the Deluge"; "*il rapporta des nouvelles d'avant le Déluge*."[19] *Gilgamesh* also refers to a medium: "he set all his labours on a tablet of stone" (A. George).

Later, in ancient Greece, a passage in Homer's *The Illiad* (probably eighth century BCE) refers to a message, "marks of death," conveyed on a tablet.[20]

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[18] Ibid, 74.

[19] George, 1999; R. J. Tournay and A. Shaffer, *L'épopée de Gilgamesh. Introduction, Traduction et Notes. Littératures Anciennes du Proche Orient* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1994.

[20] Folding wooden tablets, *The Illiad*, vi, 168.

The alphabet first appeared there; it was probably devised from the Phoenician script, known following exchanges in the eastern Mediterranean. The Phoenician script had itself emerged from pictographic proto-Sinaitic or Canaanite script, attested in the Sinai and in Canaan in the late Middle and Late Bronze Age. Its simplicity—one symbol represents one sound, a small (twenty-two) number representing consonants, with vowel sounds implicit—brought success. This economy in the number of signs or symbols was compared to earlier methods; previously literacy proved the preserve of scribes, enjoying a monopoly of information conveyed solely to religious and royal masters.

Informed speculation about these processes abounds. The US financial theorist and neurologist William Bernstein writes of Semitic labourers extracting, from Egyptian script, "two dozen individual phonemes—elemental sounds, each represented by its own symbol, that is, a letter—that could be combined to yield any known word."[21]

Sian Lewis argues that there was no narrative history before Herodotus' *Histories* and warns against seeing modern connotations of "news" applied to the ancient Greek context. She focuses on the period after 350 BCE because thereafter Greek states developed contacts with Macedonia and were slowly incorporated into the empire of Alexander III of Macedon ("the Great"): the ways news and information were transmitted changed.[22] The notion of rapidity of transmission, the "latest" news, is difficult to find, save in the instance of Pheidippides, the long-distance courier (*hēmerodromos*) who, says Herodotus (6. 105 f.), ran from Athens to Sparta in 490 BCE to enlist help for the battle of Marathon, reaching his destination the "next day." Later, Lucian of Samosata (*circa* 125 to 180 BCE?), the Greek satirist, noted how this messenger ran back to Athens with news of the victory over the Persians at Marathon to the expectant magistrates, crying: "Joy to you, we've won," and there and then he died. This speedy message was good news for the Athenians; Pheidippides' death, bad news for his family and friends.

Many would consider that written messages in Mesopotamia and written allusions to messages in ancient Greece do not constitute "news." I argue that the relaying of a message conveying information about what is current,

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[21] William Bernstein, *Masters of the Word. How the Media Shaped History* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), 9.
[22] Sian Lewis, *News and Society in the Greek Polis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 7.