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News, Time and Imagined Community in Colonial Australia

Peter Putnis

This article discusses the changing temporal contexts of overseas news in Australia's colonial press. The history of overseas news – its timeliness, periodicity, and its forms - is enmeshed in international communication history and, specifically, in the history of Australia's changing time/space relations with the rest of the world as new technologies, particularly the telegraph, became available. From the point of view of editors and publishers, these changing relations presented major challenges of time management. More broadly, these changing relations (often thought of as involving time/space compression) progressively altered the temporality of colonial engagement, both imaginary and real, with the rest of the world as knowledge of the 'new' came to be increasingly shared within common time frames.

KEYWORDS time; press history; Australia; communications technology; British Empire; news flow

Introduction

The title of this paper alludes to Benedict Anderson's influential book, first published in 1983 (but also in a revised edition in 1991), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* in which, inter alia, he argued that the spread of vernacular print capitalism was a pre-condition for the development of the 'imagined communities' that are nations and that the press, particularly from the late eighteenth century, played a central role in sustaining national consciousness. For Anderson, the newspaper, along with the novel, provided the 'technical means for "re-presenting" the kind of imagined community that is the nation' (emphasis in original). The newspaper form created 'imagined linkages' amongst otherwise disconnected events (some local, some foreign) and provided readers with a customised constructed world which, via the newspaper's 'dailiness', was presented as a 'steady onward clocking' of events in time. Anderson saw the mode of apprehension this involved as being analogous to the experience of participating in the imagined community of a nation. Furthermore, he proposed the idea of daily newspaper readership as a synchronised mass ceremony which formed in actuality a 'community imagining'. While the ceremony may be performed by individuals in 'silent privacy', each communicant is nevertheless aware that it is being replicated simultaneously by thousands of other people she or he does not know personally but with whom they share this communal experience (Anderson 22-36). For Anderson, modern communication technology was essential to the sustainability of imagined communities. For example, he accounted for the 'failure' of the 'Spanish-American experience to generate a permanent Spanish-America-wide nationalism' in terms of the undeveloped state of capitalism and technology in the late eighteenth century in that region and also commented that the vast distances that the Spanish American Empire involved made the experience of 'simultaneity through time', necessary to national consciousness, difficult to attain (63).

It is not my purpose in this paper to critique Anderson's theory of nationalism or to apply his ideas directly to the story of the emergence of nationalism in Australia. I do,

however, wish, following Anderson, to explore how newspapers have enabled communities to imaginatively participate, on a recurring regular basis, in a 'larger world', and also reflect on some of the conditions of such participation in a particular context, that is in colonial Australia (though much that I say is relevant to all settler societies). Perhaps the most important such condition, in the colonial context, relates to time. When we speak of participation in a larger world from the perspective of colonial Australia, we mean, primarily, maintenance of links with Britain and involvement in her global affairs as a part of the British Empire. But given the geographical spread of the Empire and the state of transoceanic communication networks around the time of the European settlement of Australia, any such participation, imaginative or real, was necessarily delayed and, if interactive, spread over extended periods of time. The kind of simultaneity of experience thought by Anderson to be so important to the sustainability of an imagined community could only be attained in hindsight as shared memory or history though it did, as communication technology developed, become an ideal to be strived for in current news as well. Despite this, British settlers in Australia did participate in the imagined community of the British Empire from the early years of settlement, albeit that the informational time-gap between them and their homeland was an important factor in shaping their particular apprehension of it. This participation was boosted by the publication, from March 1803, of the first newspaper, the officially controlled *Sydney Gazette*, which reported extensively on Britain's fortunes in the Napoleonic Wars – conflicts which, in their maritime aspect at least, had ramifications even for far away Sydney.

For the colonial press and its readers the 'new' and the 'latest' arose out of two quite different temporal contexts. Local time governed the regular production and consumption cycle of colonial news. News from overseas, dependent on uncertain shipping, was imbued with an 'information time-gap' – the time taken to transport news from London to the colony. As information flow to Australia from Britain in the early decades of European settlement was more serendipitous than systematic, the time gap was unpredictable, varying greatly – sometimes over a year, sometimes less than six months. Importantly, the early newspapers saw as part of their role the precise registering of these time-gaps through the provision of date-lines for news sources and precise timing for actual news events, particularly when the news was important. Hence, news from overseas announced, in tandem with its content, the prevailing relationships in time between distant parts of the world and the colonies and so functioned in society as a prime marker of this ever-changing relationship. While colonial readers experienced local and overseas news events in two different time frames, these, of course, operated within a common calendar, thus allowing the later chronological ordering of them.¹

This paper explores the changing temporal contexts of overseas news in Australia's colonial press in the first century of European settlement. The history of overseas news – its timeliness, periodicity, and its forms – is enmeshed in international communications history and, specifically, in the history of Australia's changing time/space relations with the rest of the world (often thought of as involving time/space compression) as new technologies, particularly the telegraph, became available.

First News

Most of the first European settlers – the more that one thousand Britons (759 of them convicts) who left Portsmouth on the 13 May 1787 and who journeyed for over eight months to reach the coast of the region Captain Cook had named New South Wales – probably felt that the length of the journey, the time taken, and the isolation of their destination meant that they had been totally disconnected from their homeland. While there has been considerable debate on the question of whether the establishment of the Colony had some larger strategic purpose in addition to the immediate one of relieving Britain’s overcrowded goals, it seems most likely that what later became known as the First Fleet was initially planned as a one off experiment (see, for example, Mackay; Martin). There was no initial commitment by the British Government to the maintenance of regular communication between Britain and her new colony. Indeed, it was not till June 1790, more than three years after the First Fleet’s departure from Britain, that further ships arrived in New South Wales bringing much needed supplies as well as letters and news. Watkin Tench, a Captain-Lieutenant in the corps of marines stationed in New South Wales, remarked how the commencement of 1790 had been marked by ‘impatience of news from Europe’ and a feeling of being ‘entirely cut off’ from ‘intelligence of our friends and connections.’ Yet the marines remained ‘on the tiptoe of expectation’: ‘If thunder broke at a distance, or a fowling-piece of louder than ordinary report resounded in the woods, “a gun from a ship” was echoed on every side and nothing but hurry and agitation prevailed’ (Tench 119-20). When a ship, the *Lady Juliana*, finally did arrive on 3 June, Tench memorably tells us that, ‘News burst upon us like meridian splendour on a blind man. We were overwhelmed with it: public, private, general, particular’. He continued: ‘Nor was it until some days had elapsed that we were able to methodise it or reduce it into form. We now heard for the first time of our sovereign’s illness [the madness of King George III] and his happy restoration to health. The French revolution of 1789, with all the attendant circumstances of that wonderful and unexpected event, succeeded to amaze us’ (127-8).

Tench’s description of receiving the news after such a time gap is telling in the way it captures a quite singular experience arising from his particular circumstances. It also presages responses to news which recurred many times in colonial Australia over subsequent decades. The periodical arrival of news was a major event much anticipated by the community. The timing of its arrival was irregular though, of course, in later decades much effort was expended in trying to regularise it through scheduled mail services. When the news did arrive, it generally came in large quantities and covered an extended period of time. It needed, as Tench says, to be ‘methodised’ before its import could be fully appreciated. On occasion the spread of time covered by the news could be reassuring (the sovereign was ill but later he was restored to health) but, because the time span of the news which arrived was quite arbitrary, readers were quite likely to receive just the beginning of a story rather than a full account and so be ‘left hanging’, as it were, until the next instalment arrived.

From the very earliest days of settlement there was pressure on the British Government to establish more regular communication links between Britain and her new colony and so consolidate this further geographical extension of the British imperial community. The British authorities informed Governor Phillip that, from 1791, convicts would be sent to New South Wales in two embarkations per year, thus

affording ‘the means of keeping up a regular intercourse between this country and the settlements under your government.’² There were also hopes, expressed in 1792 and subsequently realised, that the establishment of a whale fishery would ‘be a means of extending communication betwixt’ New South Wales and ‘this country [Britain] (as well as others) much beyond that ... which attains at present.’³

Modernity and the Settlement of New South Wales

While the initial isolation of New South Wales was extreme, the colony became linked quite quickly to emerging global shipping and communication networks though for many decades at a ‘temporal disadvantage’ and, because of limited channels of communication, particularly vulnerable to mechanisms of control and monopolies of knowledge. The settlement of New South Wales was possible because of the relatively new precision in navigation that had been enabled by the reliable measurement of longitude. Davison has commented that ‘the age that saw the European discovery of Australia was the age of the clock’ (9). He has pointed out that, ‘the navigators and the military officers who laid the foundations of Australian settlement were contemporary experts in the measurement of time’ (1). Indeed, a subsidiary purpose of the new colony was to keep British-related time in the South Seas via the establishment of an astronomical observatory. More generally, the enlightenment project of mapping the earth’s surface according to the geometrical grid of latitude and longitude set parameters whereby relations in time and space across an Empire could be understood and, as new technologies were developed, increasingly managed. The settlement of New South Wales was, using Harold Innis’ conceptual framework, the product of a space-binding culture (Carey 160; Innis 3-11; 170).

The settlement of Australia also occurred in a period by which a culture of news periodicity had been largely established in Britain (Sommerville 10). It was an age of extensive periodical publishing and was at the beginning of a phase of major growth in the world’s press. A small printing press was brought to Australia with the First Fleet which was used from 1795 to print government orders. Furthermore, a number of the officers in the First Fleet, including Governor Phillip, had contracts with London publishers to produce first-hand accounts of the settlement often in diary form. A number of these volumes became the best sellers of their day and ran to several editions generating a kind of ‘space-binding’ participation in the venture. The first of these, Watkin Tench’s *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay*, was published on 24 April 1789⁴ just a few weeks after the Fleet’s safe arrival in New South Wales, in January 1788, was first reported in the *Times* of 27 March 1789. Newspapers were, of course, a well established form and, while they primarily served local readerships, those published in port cities also served as news sources for far distant papers. Newspapers like the *Times*, as well as bringing news items from many parts of the world to their local readers, also functioned as a vehicle for the further distribution of that news beyond Britain’s shores. Colonial newspapers, in turn, generated stories for metropolitan ones. So when the *Sydney Gazette* commenced publication in 1803 there was already a nascent transoceanic news distribution mechanism in place which it could tap into and to which it could contribute, albeit that its participation was limited by the relative infrequency of shipping into Sydney.

The Napoleonic Wars in the *Sydney Gazette*

During the early period of settlement in New South Wales the Napoleonic Wars heightened interest in news from overseas. However, as the time taken for news from Britain to arrive varied from around five months to over a year, it was difficult to establish the state of the war even to the extent of knowing who was at war with whom at any particular time. This made it difficult for the Governor when it came to knowing how to deal with foreign vessels.

There was great excitement in Sydney in November 1804 when two mysterious ships arrived off the Heads which were thought to be part of an enemy squadron. The New South Wales Corps and the Loyal Association of volunteers were called to arms. The ships, however, proved to be a British privateer ushering in her Dutch Prize (*Sydney Gazette* – hereafter *SG*, 18 November 1804). Subsequently, a Court of Vice-Admiralty was convened and, based on an Admiralty order received from Britain the previous November, the Dutch ship was determined as being the ‘lawful prize’ of the British privateer. The ship and its cargo were declared to be the property of the captors and were subsequently auctioned off in Sydney (*SG*, 2 December 1804).

The situation was rather more complicated when another British privateer, the *Harrington*, captured two Spanish merchant ships in October 1804 off the coast of Peru and then left them partly disabled off the southern coast of New South Wales. The *Harrington* arrived in Sydney on 4 March 1805 and staked its claim to its prize. But what was the status of these Spanish ships? News had been received from New York in late December 1804 of the ‘great probability’ of a declaration of war with Spain but no confirmation had been received. In the circumstances Governor King issued a proclamation indicating that the Spanish ships should be brought to Sydney and would be kept there until it became known whether a state of war had existed or not at the time they had been captured. In the meantime, they should be allowed to continue to hoist the Spanish flag. In May 1805 the ships were escorted into Sydney harbour with their national colours flying. They were saluted by three cheers. By then a state of war had existed between Britain and Spain for some four months but this declaration, which had taken place in January 1805, was not officially reported in Sydney till the following year (*SG*, 30 December 1804; 10 March 1805; 19 May 1805; 20 April 1806).

Despite the disadvantages of distance, the *Sydney Gazette* fostered local participation in the imagined community of British Empire. In its descriptions of Britain’s military exploits, it invited the community to follow Britain’s military achievements as best it could and to share in Britain’s victories. Of Britain’s naval successes in 1804 it wrote in typical style and sentiment: ‘So late as the accounts newly arrived extend we have the most unfeigned satisfaction in contemplating the conclusions they afford. Great Britain is represented to the delighted imagination in the ample enjoyment of prosperity amid the clash of arms’ (*SG*, 17 March 1805). It also, on occasion, invited its readers to share in public mourning at events in Britain, in the process denying, as it were, any dilution of fellow-feeling because of distance and the passing of time. When news of the death of George III on 29 January 1821 reached Sydney on 15 July, the editor spared no ink in preparing, as was the custom, a black bordered special ‘mourning edition’ of the paper (*SG*, 19 July 1821), as he did again when, some six months later, news of the demise of Queen Charlotte arrived. He lamented on that

occasion that he had all too often in recent years been called upon to exhibit this 'pageantry of Death' (SG, 29 December 1821).

Attempts to Regularise News Flow

For colonial Australians improvement in communication links with Britain and the rest of the world was a critical social, political and economic priority. Newspapers, not surprisingly, were at the forefront of the push for more regular and timely communication. They also sought, in the face of intense competition over who would be first with the news, to optimise their use of available communication links both through their own efforts and, from the early 1860s, through the use of international news agencies.⁵

For George Howe, the founder of the *Sydney Gazette*, gaining access to overseas newspapers was fortuitous. He began one report on the latest developments in Britain's war with France with the comment that he had recently 'been favoured with a transient glance at several English Papers' and so was able to give readers an update (SG, 24 June 1804). The colony's second newspaper, the independently-minded *Australian*, which commenced publication as a four page weekly in October 1824, adopted a more systematic approach aimed at achieving a more 'historically complete' account of major British news (*Australian*, 28 October 1824). The editor, Robert Wardell, who had previously been the editor of a London evening newspaper, the *Statesman*, and had only recently arrived in the colony, stated in the first issue that 'such precautionary steps as were necessary' had been taken 'for securing a constant and early supply of intelligence from various parts of the world' (14 October 1824). Quite what these steps were is unclear, though they certainly involved retaining an agent in London whose duty was to forward papers from there in a timely fashion.⁶

Despatched papers were organised by the agent into a time series of daily papers covering the period since the previous despatch. The latest paper in the series was usually about four months old. Hence, for example, the *Australian's* edition of 27 January 1825 noted, 'We have received a box of English Papers by the last arrival, containing several series from July to the 2nd October inclusive' and then proceeded to excerpt news highlights from the newly received papers. Of course, receiving such a large amount of material covering, in this case, a period of over three months presented major logistic difficulties. How could this 'overwhelming mass of English newspapers' (as the editor described them on, 7 April 1825), received periodically, be most effectively utilised, given available space in a four page colonial weekly?⁷

In the first decades of the nineteenth century efforts to systematise the flow of news remained hampered by the lack of a dedicated mail service between Britain and her Australian colonies. Until the 1840s letters and newspapers arrived via merchant ships, whalers, or transports under 'ship's letter' arrangements made by the British Post Office. Alternatively, parcels of newspapers could be sent via 'private hands' usually through special arrangement with ships' captains. The first dedicated mail service between Britain and Australia, a monthly sailing packet service under contract to the British Admiralty, commenced in 1844. Duration was highly variable ranging, for the first three journeys from Gravesend to Sydney, between 113 and 134 days. There was general dissatisfaction with the service as these sailing packets took, on average, twelve days longer than the average for private ships (Robinson 188). This

led to increasing agitation for a steamship service. In 1848 the British Government called for tenders and the upshot was that two steamship services, one every second month via Suez and another every second month via the Cape of Good Hope, commenced in 1852 with steaming time from London estimated to be (depending on the route) between 70 and 75 days. However, the Crimean War intervened. The General Screw Steam Shipping Company, which operated the Cape route, was 'unable to furnish a ship for the December [1853] sailing because of demand for transports to carry troops to the Black Sea. The Crimean War also put a stop to the service of P & O via Singapore' (Robinson, 194). As a temporary measure, sailing packets were resumed and, in 1856, averaged 84 days for the outward voyage and 93 days for the homeward voyage via Cape Horn. A steamship service was recommenced in 1857 but again the service proved to be highly unreliable, repeatedly failing to meet the contracted sailing times (White 192).

Re-arranging News

During the 1850s and 1860s the transmission of news from overseas to the Australian colonies remained hostage to ever-changing mail shipping routes and schedules. Furthermore, the published schedules for the arrival of mails were rarely met. The periodicity of news arrivals varied greatly; their timing was unpredictable. Hence the currency of each news arrival was also variable. For Australians, the news of the world was refracted through a kind of 'chop and change' time machine. News produced on a daily basis for British readers usually arrived in Australia in (more or less) monthly instalments. As the anticipated time of arrival of the mail approached, the experience of 'waiting for news' intensified. In each instalment up to two months of news might arrive on a single day. If it was obtained by a reader or newspaper editor as a time series of daily papers it could be (and probably was) read backwards starting with the most recent news. Furthermore, as pointed out earlier, the time span of the instalment received was quite arbitrary in relation to the unfolding of events themselves.⁸ Following each instalment there was an extended time gap during which the reader and the community as a whole were left to imagine the course that events went on to take. Rather than Anderson's 'steady onward clocking' of events in time they were serialised in a quite irregular way.

Let us consider two examples from the 1850s, the first illustrating a form of 'time compression' and the second an effect of 'extended misinformation'.

A striking instance of 'temporal re-shaping' occurred in April, 1853 when eighteen days of British news was compacted into a single news day in Melbourne. At the time, steamships were making their initial experimental runs to Australia, via the Cape and via Suez, while the usually slower sailing packets via the Cape were also still operating. The P & O steamship *Chusan* had arrived in Melbourne from Singapore on 15 March, 1853 carrying news from London to 24 December, 1852. Then came the usual long 'waiting time' before the next news instalment, in this case till 20 April, 1853 when the sailing ship *Kent* arrived with news from London to 27 January. But much to everyone's surprise the very next day saw another arrival, that of the General Screw Steam Shipping Company's *Harbinger*. This efficient steamship brought London news, via the Cape, to the 14 February. The editor of the Melbourne *Argus* was overwhelmed: 'We have thus eighteen days later English news than we had even yesterday' (22 April 1853). For the editor of the *Argus*, this occurrence

evoked the feeling, not unusual at the time, that his age was one of miraculous invention resulting in an ever-increasing pace in world affairs. Accelerated transmission of news was part of this new world. He expounded:

Time works wonders ... There are special eras in which time puts forth its wonder-working faculty with such multiplied force, that miracles cease to be the exception and prove the rule ... The recent news from Europe has crowded upon us so rapidly that only after a little reflection are we able to realise its momentous interest ... The long and tantalising interval which preceded the arrival of the news by the *Kent*, has been more than compensated by the swiftness with which the *Harbinger* followed in her wake.

The editor emphasised that, given new developments in steamship technology, steamers could arrive from New York and London in what he saw as an ‘incredibly short time.’ As far as news was concerned, there was, given the most recent experience, ‘no predicting “what a day may bring forth”’ (*Argus*, 23 April 1853). However, as indicated earlier, the Crimean War put paid to hopes for improvement in the speed and regularity of mail services to Australia as available steamships were diverted to supplying that war. It was particularly galling to find that, just at the time when news was most wanted, its supply was retarded, though many took consolation in the idea that the loss of steamship mail services to Britain could be seen as an Australian sacrifice towards the war effort.

My second example relates to the misreporting of the fall of Sebastopol in the Australian press in December 1854. This misinformation was received in London by telegraph and reported in the *Times* of 2 October 1854. However, official reports contradicting the news were published in a *London Gazette Extraordinary* on 5 October. Thus the ‘period of misinformation’ in London was three days. As it happened, the Australian mail left London on 4 October carrying the unconfirmed telegraph report (but not, of course, the correction) to Sydney where it arrived on the morning of 9 December 1854. The *Empire* immediately issued a second edition which it claimed sold ‘upwards of 10,000 copies’. It recorded:

For two hours afterwards the large front room of the *Empire* office was crowded to suffocation, and, though supplied by a steam engine, the demand could not be met; in many instances, the papers were literally torn to pieces in the struggles to obtain a copy...we believe a greater number of copies was distributed among the public than was ever printed of any previous publication in the colony. (*Empire*, 11 December 1854)

While both the *Empire* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* were careful to point out that official confirmation of the fall of Sebastopol had not been received, for the following weeks they repeatedly published news articles and editorials from outdated British newspapers detailing the story, together with their own laudatory editorials and commentaries which were written in a post-war tone of victory. The news that Sebastopol had not in fact fallen to the Allies did not reach Sydney until 30 December, meaning that the ‘period of misinformation’ (and misguided celebration) had lasted 21 days compared with the 3 days during which the British public was

deceived. Following this incident, the Australian press was particularly wary about trusting information which had only been received via a telegraphic message.

Inglis has pointed out that 'Australian colonists responded to the Crimean War with an ardent loyalty from which there was little audible dissent' (Inglis *Australian Colonists* 178-9). The point added here is that apprehension of the war and the structure and modality of the response to it in the Australian colonies was conditioned by various, quite complex temporal displacements and re-constructions arising from prevailing communication technologies and media forms.

Competition and Fractured Time

In the 1850s and 1860s rival colonial papers were dependent for receipt of overseas news on the same mail services and other shipping. This did not, however, prevent intense competition amongst rival papers to be first to actually secure news from arriving ships. During the Crimean War the *Sydney Morning Herald* had a special boat built for the purpose of intercepting incoming ships so as to gain a march on rivals. As journalist F.C. Brewer recalled: 'The Herald ... kept a crew always in readiness night and day. It was not an uncommon occurrence for the reporters to board vessels outside the [Sydney] Heads as far down as Coogee, in order to secure any or even all the papers on board the incoming vessels not actually in the postal bags or boxes' (John Fairfax & Sons Ltd. 173-4).

One important development, which enhanced the timeliness and accessibility of news, was the establishment of specialised steamship newspapers, published in London for distribution in the colonies. These newspapers structured their periodicity and production deadlines according to steamship mail schedules. They were published on the eve of the departure of the mails from London and they reported news covering the period since the last mail departure to the relevant destination. They also included convenient digests of news. These adjuncts to global steamship mail services became large business enterprises and were an important news medium of the British Empire, particularly before the use of the telegraph became widespread. *Home News*, established initially for the Indian market in 1847, started an Australian edition in 1852 in conjunction with the commencement of the mail steamship service. The *European Mail*, which commenced publication in 1868, established a special edition for Australia and New Zealand in 1870.

As well as having significant circulations in the colonies in their own right, these papers were used extensively as sources of news by local presses. These papers systematised the serialisation of news in accordance with the various periodicities (depending on the frequency of mail services to a particular destination) of their means of transmission (scheduled mail steamships). However, while periodicity and date of publication varied across different editions, as did transmission times, the enterprises as a whole can nevertheless be seen as an early example of global synchronisation in news production and distribution, in this case based on the global time/space relations of the steamship network.⁹

Of course, the telegraph revolutionised the time/space relations of news distribution. While Australia was not connected to the international telegraph network till 1872, overseas news presented in telegraphic form began to appear regularly in the

Australian press from the late 1850s via so-called 'mailed telegrams'. The bulk of overseas news destined for Australia was despatched by mail by London-based correspondents or copied from English newspapers on their arrival in Australia. However, from the late 1850s this news was supplemented by later news which had been telegraphed from London, after the departure of the mail, to ports en route such as Malta, Alexandria and, from the mid 1860s, Point de Galle, in what is now Sri Lanka. As the telegraphic network extended eastwards the time taken for the transmission of this very latest news to Australia was progressively reduced. In the late 1860s the mail from London took around 50 days, while the use of mail plus telegraph could reduce transmission time to around three weeks.

Throughout the 1860s colonial Australians received two kinds of overseas news – 'steam only' and 'telegraph assisted'. Both kinds arrived concurrently by mail steamer and were published by the same paper around the same time thus portraying a kind of 'fractured time.'¹⁰ The former carried news of events in Europe up to around 50 days previously while the latter could provide up to around '20 days later news'. The former provided full accounts of events in Europe while the latter were often in the form of tantalising headlines which raised many more questions than they answered. The true import of these brief, often alarmist, messages could only be clarified after the arrival of the following mail, usually about a month later. Newspapers highlighted their 'time wars' by headlining their most recent news as being so many days later than what either they or their rivals had previously published. Even the inconsequential could seem urgent if it was the 'latest'. Mark Turner has remarked of the multifarious nineteenth century periodical press, and its offering of 'different schedules and patterns for the shape of everyday life', that the press 'both represented anxieties about the shifting nature of time and participated in creating those anxieties' (Turner 187). In agreeing with this point, I would add that the process carried an additional dimension in colonial societies where living in local time alone was not seen as an option by most and where shifting temporal relations with the imperial centre (which was thought of as 'home') always inhered in time consciousness.

As I have argued elsewhere, the phenomenon of 'mailed telegrams', coupled with infrequent and irregular mails, gave rise to a distinctly colonial experience of global crises, characterised by a high degree of uncertainty and by vulnerability to alarmist speculation (Putnis *War With America*). The two available 'news lenses' – 'steam only' and 'telegraph assisted' – were not commensurate. While the arrival of a new mail might clarify questions raised by the telegrams carried by the previous mail, it was likely that it also carried worrying new telegrams particularly given the unsettled state of Europe and America in the 1860s. A community could be kept in a state of uncertainty for many weeks as it waited for clarifying news. This could even extend to not knowing whether it was at war or not! Such was the case in January 1862 when news of the diplomatic crisis between Britain the Northern Federal States of America (the 'United States'), known as the Trent affair, reached Australia via a telegram headed 'Rumoured War with America' (*Argus*, 11 January 1862). The *Melbourne Age* complained, with evident frustration, that 'we cannot tell whether we are at peace or at war' (17 January 1862), while the *Melbourne Argus* speculated that war was an 'extreme probability' (1 March 1862) and warned that privateers from California, where news of any declaration of war would arrive well before the people of Melbourne would know about it, could be poised to strike colonial shipping. Authoritative reassurance that war had in fact been averted only arrived sixty-one

days later, twice the usual ‘uncertainty interval’, as a mail was missed because the steamship broke down in the Indian ocean. By that time the *Argus* had gone so far as to call for the surveillance and compulsory registration of all United States citizens residing in Victoria and for a range of restrictions to be placed upon those who sympathised with the Northern States and were therefore ‘foes in the impending conflict.’ (1 March 1862). As in other nineteenth century ‘invasion scares’, the incompleteness and irregularity of news provoked a tendency to overestimate risk.

The story of Australia’s imaginary war with the United States in the early 1860s harks back to the era when the wreck or breakdown of a single ship could cut a whole community off from regular surveillance of and adjustment to world events. However, it was not much later that people in colonial Australia were eagerly anticipating radically changed terms of engagement with world events. ‘O, For a Cable’, exclaimed the *Adelaide Advertiser* in 1870 at the time of the Franco-Prussian War, ‘what would not Australia give for a telegraphic communication with Europe at such a crisis!’ (26 September 1870). The Franco-Prussian War was the first major conflict whose progress was routinely reported from the seat of battle by telegraph (Brown 223-4) constructing for readers what has been termed a ‘thickened present’, a ‘now’ no longer limited to the experience of one place. In this experience ‘now’ had become ‘an extended interval of time that could, indeed, must include events around the world’ (Kern 314). Leading British diplomat, Sir Robert Morier, famously complained that the horrors of the war were microscopically laid out to jostle the toast and muffins on every British breakfast table (Raymond 125). In America papers were publishing up to six editions per day, at various hours, as the telegraph news arrived (Putnis *Overseas News* 6.17). Australians could not yet fully participate as the overseas telegraph link was still two years away but the Melbourne *Argus* nevertheless enthused about the new global, almost real time ‘spectatorship’ that the telegraph network had enabled. It wrote, ‘never has so gigantic a duel been fought in the midst of so vast and magnificent an amphitheatre of spectators. For, by the aid of the electric telegraph, nearly the whole of civilised mankind have been enabled to watch the progress of the combat from day to day, and almost from hour to hour – have caught the contagious enthusiasm of the belligerence – and have witnessed a succession of events unparalleled both as regards the rapidity of their sequence and the momentousness of their results’ (26 September 1870). These words, in their reference to ‘contagious enthusiasm’, were, as we shall see, prophetic.

Time and News Value

The establishment of the telegraphic link between Australia and Europe in 1872 resulted in a quantum leap in the commercial value of news. As transmission costs to Australia were in the order of ten pounds per 20 word message, telegraphic news was a particularly expensive commodity. However, by its nature its value was ephemeral. In order to maximise value it needed to be the latest news preferably obtained on an exclusive basis. Exclusivity with respect to news of London’s commodity markets was particularly prized because of the advantageous position it could gain for local traders. As Rantanen has pointed out, the telegraph and the associated capacity to synchronise local times with Greenwich meantime, ‘profoundly changed the relationship between news and time, because the value of news could be measured against time that had been quantified.’ Speed became the all important news value. News agencies developed as specialists in using the telegraph network to ‘overcome

the geographical hindrances that earlier prevented rapid news transmission from remote places' (Rantanen 610). As telegraph technology and the imperatives of the news business converged, time, in ever finer calibrations, came to define news value and achievement. At the same time, efforts were made, successfully in the Australian colonies, to extend the durability of news and hence its value, through the introduction of special copyright laws on telegraphic news aimed at protecting private property rights in such news (Putnis *Struggle over Copyright*).

The submarine cable to Australia was a single line owned by the Eastern Extension Company, a British owned private concern which held a monopoly over telegraphic communication to Australia for thirty years till the establishment of the publicly owned Pacific Cable in 1902. The cable proved highly unreliable, breaking down regularly, sometimes for periods of over a week, in its first decade of operation (Livingston 95-100). Furthermore, there were widespread allegations of favouritism in the granting of access to the line and of the withholding of news so that those with access could gain commercial advantage. The community was uncertain about the degree of trust it should place in telegraphic messages. The early operations of the cable did little to engender confidence. In early 1873, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a report, based on a Reuters telegram, quoting London copper prices at 79 pounds. The previous most recent quotation had been at 88 pounds. The report, which proved to be erroneous, led to a crash in the price of shares in Australian copper producer, Peak Downs. The *Herald's* proprietor, John Fairfax, later defended publication of the quote even though he acknowledged that 'we did not believe it at the time'. He noted that the paper had included a cautionary statement indicating that the quote represented a considerable fall in price and that 'while there was no reason to doubt the accuracy of the quotation given by Reuter, we would counsel holders of shares to act with caution and wait for confirmation of the report'. Clearly the statement did not prevent a major sell off of the shares. To make matters worse, the error was not corrected for five days (when the price was quoted at 90 pounds) as the submarine cable was down for five days after the initial report (Report from the Select Committee 93 & 114-5).

James Carey has observed that under the influence of the telegraph 'news judgement had to be made routinized and the organization of the newsroom made factory-like' and that this led to the treatment of news as a commodity, 'something that could be transported, measured, reduced, and timed' (Carey 211). In Australia the telegraph connection particularly accentuated the importance of time management as an imperative of efficient news production. A key factor of success was the ability to integrate cycles of news production with often unpredictable cycles of telegraphic news transmission from London. Of course, one could choose to leave this matter entirely to the news agencies who were specialists in such time management. However, Australian newspapers were, in general, not content to do this, fearing they would become over-dependent on the dominant supplier, Reuters. They therefore established their own telegraphic correspondents who largely drew their reports from the London press, preferably by gaining access to galley proofs during the night prior to publication.

We can see from the business letters of the editor of the *Melbourne Age*, David Syme, which extend from 1871 till 1907, the extent to which the role of editor had become one of 'time-keeper' and what a constant struggle with time (time difference, optimal

time of despatch, time of transmission, timing of newspaper production in Melbourne) this involved. The challenge of managing time difference arose from the fact that Melbourne time (there was as yet no standard time in Australia)¹¹ was some ten hours ahead of Greenwich time. However, from a news point of view, this 'being ahead' looked like 'being later' when it came to the publication of European news. This time difference certainly complicated the management of news production.

Writing to his nephew in London in 1877 Syme commented on how exclusive telegrams from London had given the *Age* an 'immense advantage' but that better arrangements were needed with respect to timing so as to capture the very latest news: 'The news takes from 20 to 24 hours to come here. So you can see when is the most suitable time for us to have them posted at your end.' In order to assist he enclosed a list of telegrams received over the previous few weeks giving the stamped date and time of the despatch of each telegram from London, the date and time of its arrival in Melbourne and Syme's calculation of the time taken for transmission. He suggested that the optimal time to despatch telegrams from London would be '10 p.m. or even later'. By then the London morning papers of the following day would have their news in and, provided access to this could be arranged, the telegrams would consist of the very latest available news.¹² But would the news arrive at a suitable time in the Melbourne production cycle? In fact, it proved very difficult to synchronise transmissions from London with the production cycle in Melbourne. Syme's letters to his London agents over the next twenty years reveal an intense frustration at his inability to precisely control the timing of news flow.

Marching in Time

We now return to the question of how changing conditions of communication shaped the terms of colonial Australia's engagement with Britain. News of Britain's various nineteenth century military engagements commonly elicited calls by the press for Australians to show their loyal support. Ken Inglis noted how, at the outset of the Crimean War, colonists 'responded ... as patriotic and imitative Britons.' Dissenters, arguing that the war was no business of the people of Sydney, 'were more isolated in their dissent ... [in Sydney] ... than they would have been in England' (Inglis *Australian Colonists* 259-60). During the war, colonial Australians donated over 140,000 pounds to the Patriotic Fund that was established for the widows and orphans of British soldiers. Distance and the conditions of communication links with Britain, which were notably worsened because of the war, do not seem to have lessened imperial fervour, at least judging by the tenor of press reports.

The next major imperial crisis to engage colonial Australians was the Indian uprising of 1857, notable from the perspective of Australian communication history by the fact that the steamship mail service via Suez had resumed by then and hence news of events in India was available from Indian papers picked up on route to Australia, rather than only via London. News of the revolt of the Indian cavalry at Meerut on 10 May, 1857 arrived in Melbourne on 6 July. It largely comprised so-called first-hand accounts of alleged Sepoy atrocities, including alleged indiscriminate massacres of women and children, published in the *Calcutta Englishman* and the *Bombay Times*. As well as publishing extended excerpts from these papers, the Melbourne *Argus* published a private letter from a British officer to his brother in Melbourne extolling revenge. 'What dire revenge our men will wreak on them!' he predicted (8 July 1857).

Not surprisingly, such vengeful sentiment found its likeness in colonial Australia. In Victoria a gathering of 'influential Melbourne men' was planned to consider how a volunteer force of up to five thousand might be assembled and sent to India to assist the British. The *Argus* commented how 'the ardour for Eastern service ... burns highly ... in many a breast in Victoria' but judged the proposal to be a 'generous but misleading enthusiasm' given the realities of the day, including those relating to the state of communication links with India: 'Months would elapse before a tithe of that number [five thousand] could be collected and disciplined and despatched in the shape of an organised corps; and it would be quite possible that, when all had been done, the Indian Government might decline our offer, with thanks' (19 October 1857). 'O, for a telegraph!' someone might have thought.

There was no such problem some thirty years later in 1885 when, during a crisis in Britain's imperial war in the Sudan, the idea of sending Australian troops to assist arose once again. Events in the Sudan such as the siege of Khartoum, its defence by General Gordon, and the fate of the British military expedition sent to relieve Khartoum were reported almost concurrently in the British and Australian press. News of the fall of Khartoum, published in the London *Times* on 6 February 1885, appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the same date. News of the death of the quintessential imperial hero, General Gordon, was announced in the *Times* of 11 February and in Sydney's afternoon papers of the same date. Shock and outrage were expressed and the question of what must be done to avenge Gordon was asked with equal vehemence and, importantly, at the same time in Sydney and London (Inglis Rehearsal 7). Just two days later the Acting Premier of New South Wales, William Dalley, knowing he had press support and sensing the 'contagious enthusiasm' developing in the community, cabled London offering a contingent of soldiers to fight in Sudan. 'Reply at once', he urged. The offer, he told the Governor, in a sentiment reflecting the new communication age, would 'testify to the readiness of the Colony to give instant and practical help to the Empire in an emergency' (quoted by Inglis Rehearsal 21). The quick decision was also spurred by telegraphic news, which later proved to be incorrect, that Canada had already made such an offer.

The relevant cable was released to the British press where the offer received much praise. The *Times* urged British acceptance of the offer, despite practical difficulties, for to decline it would be to 'deal a blow against a noble and most valuable sentiment' and would 'disgust both the colonies and the public feeling of this country' (18 February 1885). The British Government accepted the offer and, just over two weeks later, a force of over 700 men left Sydney for the Sudan. The telegraph had, as Ken Inglis has pointed out, 'opened up vast new possibilities for participation in warfare' (Inglis Rehearsal 10). The nineteenth century Australian historian, G.W. Rusden, commented of this first Australian government initiated participation in an imperial war that, 'Heart beat in unison with heart as the electric telegraph girdled the globe' (quoted by Inglis Rehearsal 24). Less romantically one might say that Australians now had conditions of international communication which enabled them to 'march in time' with their Imperial cousins in overseas wars if they so chose.

The last decades of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a distinctly Australian nationalism culminating in Federation in 1901. For a significant minority nationalism was linked to greater separation from Britain and her Imperial entanglements. However, for the majority Australian national feeling sat comfortably

with Imperial solidarity (McGregor). Australian nationalism (unlike, recalling Anderson's argument, the eighteenth century nationalisms of South America) emerged in a period during which the sense of the British Empire as an entity also grew particularly strongly, underpinned by the technological revolution in communication and transportation.

C.A. Bodelsen has noted how, 'from the end of the sixties the assertion that steam and electricity have annihilated distance and thus done away with one of the greatest obstacles to the permanent unity of the Empire is mentioned in almost every book, pamphlet, or article on the colonial question' (Bodelsen 84).¹³ Significantly, an awareness of such 'space compression' framed the decision of the New South Wales Government to offer troops for the Sudan. As one New South Wales parliamentarian expressed it: 'The powers of concentration have been much increased. We are now as close to London or the Soudan as Inverness was to Manchester even during our own time. We must conform to the pressure of the changed circumstances if we are to take our place with credit in the world.'¹⁴

Conclusion

European settlement of Australia occurred at a time of increasing global interaction particularly within the widely dispersed English speaking world. These interactive networks, unlike the system of communication envisaged by Benedict Anderson in the context of his discussion of nationalism, were, for the most part, attenuated in time. However, while the operation of communications networks, whether based on shipping or the telegraph, were never thought to be as good as they should be and often generated 'communication anxiety', they nevertheless enabled colonial participation in the larger imagined community of the British Empire. The Australian press from its earliest days was outward looking in the sense that it saw itself as playing a major role in keeping the community abreast with affairs in Britain, the Empire and the rest of the world.

The colonial press and its readers were time bound in relation too two quite different temporal contexts – local time, which governed the production and consumption cycle of colonial news, and 'relational time' which governed the production and consumption cycle of 'home' and other overseas news. For colonial societies both types of news were important. However, the temporal terms of engagement with events, as enabled by the communication conditions of the day, were very different in each. This was in part a matter of the time gap between the availability of news in London and the colonies. Equally significant, however, were the unpredictability of news flow and the anxieties this created particularly in times of war. The history of overseas news in colonial Australia is enmeshed in international communication history and in the history of Australia's changing time/space relations with the rest of the world. From the point of view of editors these changing relations presented major challenges of time management. These changing relations also progressively altered the temporality of colonial engagement with the rest of the world as common knowledge of the 'new' came to be increasingly shared within common time frames.

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Notes

¹ The situation for the Aborigines was, of course, very different. Graeme Davison makes the interesting point that, ‘The fate of the Aborigines was to collide with a people whose conceptions of time had lately undergone a mighty revolution, and who were seized with an ambition to subject the whole world to the rule of the clock’ (Davison 9).

² Lord Grenville to Governor Phillip, 15 February 1791. *Historical Records of Australia, Vol. 1, 1788-1796* (Australia: The Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1914): 215.

³ Henry Dundas to Governor Phillip, 15 May 1792. *Historical Records of Australia, Vol. 1, 1788-1796*: 354.

⁴ Tench’s first volume, *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay*, was published in London on 24 April, 1789 by John Debrett. It recounts life in the colony (established on 26 January 1788) up to the beginning of July 1788. Tench’s manuscript would have been taken to London by one of the First Fleet convict transport ships which left New South Wales on the 13 July 1788 and arrived in London at the end of March 1789.

⁵ Reuters, established in London in 1851, supplied international news to the Australian press from the early 1860s. For the early history of Reuters in Australia see Putnis Reuters.

⁶ This is evident in a complaint made by the editor that a parcel of English papers addressed to the *Australian* had been intercepted by authorities in Hobart and not sent on. He commented: ‘Well might we feel surprised at the remissness of our agent in London – well might we wonder that those newspapers about which we had been so particular in giving minute instructions to be forwarded to us, had never reached us.’ In fact the editor knew that the true cause of the non-arrival of the papers lay with Hobart authorities. *Australian*, 23 December 1824.

⁷ The *Australian*, it should be noted, began as a weekly but commenced bi-weekly publication from April 1825.

⁸ This unplanned serialization might be usefully contrasted with the designed serialization of Victorian novels in relation to matters such as the structure of instalments and the management of suspense. On the effects of serialization on the Victorian novel see Hughes & Lund, *The Victorian Serial*. Serialized news was at times seen as being ‘novel-like’. The Melbourne *Argus* commented at the time of the Franco-Prussian War: ‘The news just received breaks off, like the end of a chapter in one of Charles Reade’s novels, in the midst of a thrilling incident’ and ‘has only served to intensify the eagerness with which everybody will look forward to the arrival of the next mail’ *Argus*, 21 September 1870.

⁹ By the end of 1870 the *European News* was published in eight separate editions for markets in Africa, Asia, Australasia, North America and South America. They were monthly, bi-monthly, or weekly, depending on the frequency of mail services to the particular region. (See Putnis British Transoceanic).

¹⁰ Australian historian Graeme Davison has suggested that ‘fast steamers and the extension of the submarine telegraph ... increased the sense of fractured time’ in colonial Australia (Davison 58).

¹¹ Time was standardized in Australia, via the establishment of time zones for Eastern, Central and Western Australia in 1895. (Davison 70-5).

¹² David Syme to his Nephew, 4 September 1877. David Syme Letterbooks, State Library of Victoria.

¹³ Most notably, John Robert Seeley’s *The Expansion of England*, a classic of British Empire ideology published in 1883, emphasized the importance of telegraphy in reducing the impact of distance across the Empire.

¹⁴ NSW Legislative Council member Richardson, NSW, *Parliamentary Debates*, 1885: 13.

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