

Maritime newspapers and long-distance telegraphy (1905-1914) The on-board telegraph operator as a heroic figure (of journalism?) (Joël Langonné)

Abstract

In 2018, I published a study devoted to the newspapers published on transatlantic steamers in the early 20th century (Langonné, 2018). I indicated that by 1910, all the major transoceanic shipping companies were able to offer a daily newspaper to their first-class passengers. This newspaper contained in particular two pages of international dispatches, which reached the steamer via the long-distance telegraphy apparatus with which the ships had recently been equipped: Marconi apparatus.

I also discovered that all these newspapers belonged to a real maritime press group owned by this same Marconi. These newspapers were in fact one of the mediations through which Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company built and operated a global network of long-distance wireless telegraphy, going hand in hand with the exponential development of transoceanic shipping lines. From then on, these maritime newspapers took part – in their materiality, through their editorial content, and even symbolically – in an editorial dynamic typical of the Belle Époque, by virtue of which newspapers would be heralds of modernity (Pinson, 2016). But they also participated in something else.

“Seacraft models statecraft” recalls John Durham Peters (2015, p. 107): the ship covers an allegory of civilization. It is the world in a small way. Guglielmo Marconi understood this better than anyone. Thus, the inventor and captain of industry first conducted his experiments on a ship in order to then be able to “change the cognitive relationship to communication in general” (Thibault, 2010, p. 200). My work was based on a corpus of maritime newspaper archives consulted at the “Association French Lines” in Le Havre. This collection proved very useful in discovering this very particular press group, but it was only a first step in my research. Thus, I recently went to the Bodleian Library to consult the Marconi archives catalogue, and more specifically the collections relating to the press group publishing these maritime newspapers.

Your conference gives me the opportunity to present the advances made possible by the archives consulted in Oxford. To a certain extent, the press group made up of Marconi's maritime newspapers published newspapers without the help of journalists. It is therefore important to emphasize the place and role of those who made the newspaper, alone, on the ships: the on-board telegraph operators (Marconi telegraph operators). I would add that this description of the journalistic activity of the on-board telegraph operators is part of a long-term research. It continues a series of works started in a thesis and which attempts to describe a series of “support personnel” (Becker, 1982, p. X (preface)), “invisible” in the world of journalism (Langonné 2014): the editorial secretaries and the typographers (Langonné, 2019).

Taking into account the on-board telegraph operators as actors in the world of journalism allows, it seems to me, to confirm an important hypothesis put forward by Mélodie Simard Houde: the heroic construction of the figure of the reporter is not really attached to the use of the telegraph. The reporter's scenographies would draw him more as a letter writer than as a telegraph user (Simard-Houde, 2017). It is not certain, then, that at the turn of the 20th century, “the telegraph would become the legendary instrument of great reporters” (Therenty, 2006, p. 108). Consulting the archives of the Marconi collection indicates to us that in a certain way, the place is already taken. The telegraph already has its hero: it is the telegraphist.

It is therefore a question of describing this establishment of the telegraph operator as a heroic figure, by indicating how the mediation of maritime journalism (transoceanic and wireless) was able to participate in this dynamic. Because in the final analysis, this journalism without journalists proclaims the possibility and prosperity of wireless as a medium of a coming civilization. Civilization (Galaxy!) Marconi.

Bio

Professor Joël Langonné is a lecturer at the Université Catholique de l'Ouest, Angers. He holds a PhD from the University of Rennes 1 and is a member of Arènes (Rennes 1) and LEIPC (Universidade de Brasilia). In a series of studies, he attempts to describe news media over a long period as plastic and collaborative objects shaped by disparate assemblages that manifest themselves along a continuum of information production.