

Jenna Supp-Montgomerie, **When the Medium Was the Mission: The Atlantic Telegraph and the Religious Origins of Network Culture**, New York: New York University Press, 2021, 295 pp., \$35.00 (paperback).

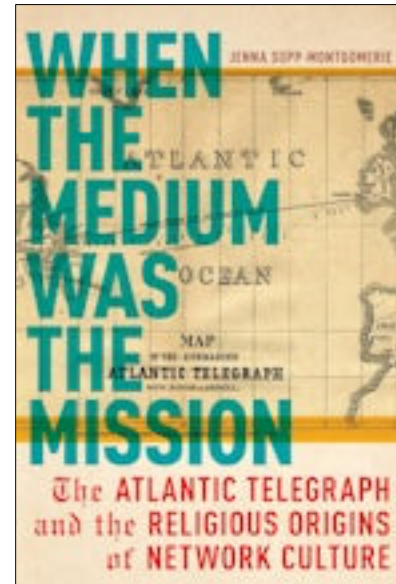
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Scholars of religion and media have long contemplated the ramifications of communication processes on the rises and falls of various faiths globally. But what happens when a new technology is discursively adorned in appeals to faith and the divine? In her new book, *When the Medium Was the Mission: The Atlantic Telegraph and the Religious Origins of Network Culture*, author Jenna Supp-Montgomerie tackles this question by revisiting a fascinating era in global history while reconfiguring the way we might think contemporarily about the impact and symbolism of communication network infrastructure.

The author highlights how she initially set out to make sense of “media studies’ peculiar disciplinary obsession with the telegraph” (p. xi). That sets the tone for Supp-Montgomerie’s entertaining approach to this nexus of faith and infrastructure. “Beware the siren song of the telegraph—it will capture the least suspecting” (p. xi), she warns fellow communication scholars. But Supp-Montgomerie, an associate professor of religious studies and communication studies at the University of Iowa, could not resist. During the early days of the research, she came across one newspaper headline about the Atlantic Telegraph Cable of 1858 that carried more than a whiff of hyperbole: “The World’s Holiday. NO MORE DISTANCE! NO MORE WAR! . . . Glory to God in the Highest” (p. xi).

This proclamation sets the stage for the interplay between forces of technology, spirituality, and social transformation that helped define the era. The telegraph was seen as a supernatural force, equipped with an ability to conquer geography but also to recalibrate civilization for the better. Invoking briefly the medium-centric worldview of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, the author connects this rhetoric to an enthusiasm for a “new global village” (p. xii) that is only made possible by the marriage of technology and Christianity.

Yet that headline still seems contemporarily over-the-top and retroactively counterproductive given the rise and fall (and frequent failure) of telegraphy networks. Supp-Montgomerie explains this as a sort of network dualism involving network connections and disconnections, with the latter being relevant here “not because they disrupt networks . . . but because they disrupt the religiously empowered myth that networks connect” (p. 3). Not to be discouraged, however, Supp-Montgomerie moves forward with inspiration from another Canadian media theorist, John Durham Peters, and a compelling focal point for case study analysis (more on that later).



For McLuhan enthusiasts looking for a treatise on network structures of 19th-century America—or perhaps a faith-based exploration of the media ecologist’s famous catchphrase that inspired the book’s title—this might come as something of a disappointment. In some ways, McLuhan’s vision of technological determinism serves as a foil to the author’s interest in the connectivity between technology, infrastructure, and the social world, though Supp-Montgomerie does take up his interest in the socio-psychological impacts of mediated technology. Indeed, she promises early on “not to load the telegraph with a determinism it cannot carry” (p. 29). Instead, her scholarly energy is diffused through understanding an overflowing ecosystem of “things, people, practices, energy, and dreams” articulated in media reports to “attend to the materiality of media and the immateriality of technology” (p. 29). Here, the author has set out ambitiously to construct a discursive-material dynamic devoted to spiritual-technological deliberations.

Supp-Montgomerie is less interested in media as vehicles for content than their ability “to determine what counts as information, entertainment, messages, and data and what sorts of subjects and relationships are made intelligible by these forms of communication” (p. 27). The questions about transformations in human civilization in conjunction with global networks are of greater importance than inquiries regarding the technological transmissions themselves. Along with renderings of time, space, and power, Peters’s invocation of a “dualism of ‘communication’—at once bridge and chasm” (p. 76) catalyzes the author’s own research and is a useful tool for analysis. This complex relationship between discursive and material cultures helps connect the advent of the telegraphy age to communicative, social, and technological outcomes. It also paints the picture of a world obsessed over the formation of a God-given utopia that counted on a transoceanic cable network to mitigate distance and foster global community. And yes, all of this does conjure up more recent, turn-of-the-millennium discourses about the hopeful future for the Internet and the deliberative binary that positions it as utopian or dystopian (noted here is that McLuhan’s own rendering of “global village” was hardly utopian, unlike the faithful telegraphy promoters of a century previous).

To prove the point that network advances carried a peculiar form of religiosity to them, Supp-Montgomerie points to Samuel Morse and his 1844 sending of the first public long-distance electric telegram in the United States. “What hath God wrought?” the telegram read, and Supp-Montgomerie holds the missive up as an example of how the first telegrams were “more liturgy than information, more ritual than transmission of content” (p. 1).

What follows is a journey through the era and the advent of technology, analyzed through a methodological mix of archival research, cultural history, and critical analysis to form a “media archaeology of networks” (p. 7). This approach transports the reader to some interesting historical contexts, including American nationalism, Ottoman technological advance, the British Empire, and Christian Communism. The latter term alludes to a key focal area for the book: the techno-utopian Oneida Community of central New York State. The religious communal society, striving for moral perfection in all facets of life, embraced the possibilities of telegraphy in building a perfect world on earth and a closer connection to God. While the Oneida society example arrives as something of a diversion after much high-level exploration of network infrastructure, it does important work in grounding—and humanizing—the project.

This is a serious tome that does the heavy lifting of untangling the era's history to shine light on the telegraph's international advance, and it does so with a three-pronged methodology and a theoretical platform that emphasizes Peters but also counts 10 other scholars of infrastructural media and technology for inspiration. Yet Supp-Montgomerie's breezy writing style bridges seemingly disparate sections together while immersing the reader in this colorful world of technological hope, divinity, and global promise. This careful yet grounded approach is owed in part to the ultimate demise of her research artifact. The rise and subsequent fall of the Atlantic Telegraph necessitates an almost apologetic narrative that makes the telegraphy project, but also the historic era, feel more accessible and authentic.

If there is a quibble to be had, it might go back to Supp-Montgomerie's theoretical platform. The invocation of Peters' renderings of networks as embedded within time, space, and power structures serves the project well. But the decision to distance the book from technological determinist concepts means that McLuhan's vision is mostly sidelined, the book's title notwithstanding. This absence extends to the Toronto School of Communication tradition. McLuhan's University of Toronto colleague, Harold Innis, comes to mind here. Innis, of course, developed a theory of international communication based on natural resources and transportation networks, including a dissertation devoted to the national and social implications of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The parallels between Innis's work and Supp-Montgomerie's tome are glaring. Innis, though, receives no mention. And yet Supp-Montgomerie reaffirms the relevancy of Innis and McLuhan with every turned page. As the book draws to a close with a look at the technological and communicative intricacies of the Atlantic Telegraph, Supp-Montgomerie dwells on the work of James Carey and the ritual model of communication, partially to explore "the rich entanglement of symbolic communication and kinetic transportation, between ideas and matter . . . the possibility of infrastructural analysis" (p. 195). Here, Carey's (1967) underrated essay for the *Antioch Review*, "Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan," makes for an excellent companion piece, especially as it connects media forms, faith, culture, and social organization. It also shows how their work influenced Carey's own. Perhaps Supp-Montgomerie has come around to the Innis-McLuhan paradigm after all?

Still, the author does an admirable job of connecting one era of technological advancement to the later advent of online media, noting that our digital age has lessened the role of the divine. If the telegraph represented the work of a higher power, more contemporary digital technologies are either themselves worshipped directly or have seized the mantle of heavenly inspiration. The book serves up one useful example here: A 1997 advertisement for digital network owner MCI, which positioned the Internet as an ageless, earth-bound utopia. The author also positions popular social media networks such as TikTok, Instagram, and X as serving a higher good in the name of community building, even as their harshest detractors position them as either dangerous or dystopic. Virtual reality and artificial intelligence deliberations have perhaps inevitably followed suit.

Supp-Montgomerie ultimately reminds us that techno-media discourses are imperfect at best but always worthy of our attention. The telegraph and the 1858 cable that inspired her work were "notable for making worlds out of fiction and having those worlds become persistent and durable even if resolutely impossible" (p. xiii). The medium was the mission after all.

### **References**

Carey, J. W. (1967). Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan. *The Antioch Review*, 27(1), 5–39.