

1 Cityscapes in the Age of Global News

Out in the Argentine Pampas, in February of 1905, two *gauchos* talk about the week's events. While sharing a *mate*, one of them remarks upon the names of Russian cities appearing in the "Telegrams" section of the newspaper: Sebastopol, Moscow, Saint Petersburg. "Such beautiful names of cities and towns," his friend Don Pedro responds. He goes on to say that they sound upper-class. Everyone there must be "bourgeois." The names also remind him of aromatic drinks, or cosmetic powders. One could search the Pampas in vain for similar sounds, he laments. The names of *criollo* towns cannot compare with those of such refined, faraway cities. His friend disagrees. There's nothing wrong with *criollo* names, he says. This land is generous. There's nothing to complain about. And, after all, "What do you know about those places?"¹

Published in the popular magazine *PBT* in Buenos Aires, this parody was directed at the many casual conversations triggered among local readers by news from distant cities. Of course, those readers were heavily concentrated in large towns, but the expansion of international content was such that it was humorously assumed to reach even those rural characters who were expected to know the least about the outside world. *Cities and News* looks at this exhilarating and confusing moment when glimpses of distant urban centers became an everyday occurrence thanks to structural changes in the way information was produced and made available. It does so based on a general premise: at the turn of the twentieth century, the triumph of news as the organizing principle of content played an important part in shaping the notions of the world offered to readers, and this world had a heavy urban slant.

The intersection between the urban environment and modern journalism has long been understood in all its meaningfulness. The much-grown metropolis of the late nineteenth century was the chief producer of news. Cities were the stage for politics, where the main public figures had their base and where institutions provided a window through which to follow debates and the spectacle of power struggles. Even if there was a war happening somewhere in the open fields, the main news about it was produced in the city, which reflected heavily upon the news itself. The city was also the natural environment of social and cultural life, with theater seasons providing a popular feature of coverage, and burgeoning literary circuits offering a home for those interested in poetry and fiction (including many journalists working on modern newspapers). Ballrooms, parks and racetracks were other stages for the wealthy and fashionable, while the poor concentrated in great numbers in other areas of the same cities. Indeed,

¹ *PBT*, February 4, 1905, p. 32. The term *gaucho* refers to rural cowboys from the South American Pampas.

the large city of the industrial era was an experiment in the coexistence of different social and ethnic groups, as well as, ultimately, a place of conflict and violence. There was political violence, to be sure – riots and incidents between citizens and state forces, for example. And there was also much accidental violence, with fires suddenly raging in precarious buildings and motor vehicles creating new dangers in the streets. It is little surprise that newspapers sprang up at the core of many great cities across the world, where reporters could capture such a wealth of attractive information for an ever-growing reading public, and reflect the chaos and density of urban life, becoming a crucial part of its fabric in the process. As the work of Chicago School pioneer Robert Park showed early on, the study of the urban environment can hardly be separated from that of the press: the newspaper is where the city was first written – the privileged place that encrypted modern urban daily life.²

Analyses of the multiple intersections of the city and the press have underscored the symbolic power of this medium and how it demarcated so many dimensions of everyday life for those who lived between the 1800s and the 1900s. Creating mental itineraries, defining ideas of danger and security, distinguishing zones as legible and illegible, healthy or unhealthy: the capacity of the modern press to produce hierarchical and complex senses of place is one of its established features. So is its power to nourish distinctive urban identities.³ Focusing mainly on the dominant centers of the communication system – Paris, London, Berlin, New York – those studying the history of the nineteenth-century press have not generally been interested in the ability of newspapers and periodicals to produce representations of cities other than their own.⁴ This feature is surprising considering that the rise of newspaper culture coincided with that of foreign correspondents, cable technologies and global news agencies. How did all this intervene in everyday representations of the city? How did new urban “scapes” – their character, their streets and forms, their luminous spaces and dark corners – find an expression? And how did these notions relate to the known world of work, social life or political participation?

Indeed, such questions have been conceptualized apropos of both urban modernity and more recent stages in the globalization of culture. Studies of

² Recent rereadings of Park’s work (himself a former journalist) have emphasized the central place of journalism and communication in his sociology of the city: Martínez Gutiérrez, “Donde la ciudad se escribe”; Muhlmann and Plenel, *Le journaliste et le sociologue*.

³ Fritsche, *Reading Berlin 1900*; Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis*; Kalifa et al., *La civilisation du journal*; Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*.

⁴ I refer to studies of the modern press as such, leaving aside analyses of literary fiction published in the periodical press, whose representational powers have long been acknowledged and discussed and thus provide an important framework of reference for this analysis.

the “cityscape” of the early 1900s have helped to capture the unintended and fragmented images produced by the modern urban environment, a fractured mode of representation that puzzled urban theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin and was different from the intentional, artistic and continuous “landscape.”⁵ On a different level, the notion of “scape” captures the dissemination of such figures across distant places, and the complex process through which imagined worlds are recreated beyond national boundaries.⁶ Combined with intrinsic fragmentation, then, the concept introduces the notion of large-scale movement, of mixed repertoires of images and narratives finding their way through new technologies to audiences embedded in their own contexts of meaning. Such an approach strongly resonates with changes that are at the core of nineteenth-century developments in communication. Studies on the impact of the telegraph, to mention just one example, highlight the predicament of the consumers of newspapers and magazines who decoded increasing amounts of information from faraway places, following a path that was anything but simple.⁷ The capacity of the printed media to inform readers about remote locations was beyond question for those who witnessed the revolution in communications. “The world has been recently discovered for the mass of civilized mankind,” observed British political economist J. A. Hobson in 1906, when referring to the facilitation of news through the press and telegraph services that had occurred in the previous years.⁸ Intrinsic to this development is the broad question defined by Roger Chartier when evoking the history of globalization not only as that of an increase in circulations of goods and populations but also of the evolution of a diffuse consciousness of the world by those who remained in one place.⁹

Such an endeavor takes its cue from the significant problems raised by studies that have reflected historically on communication and sense of place.¹⁰ In this vein, *Cities and News* adopts a hypothesis on the power of late nineteenth-century news to intervene in the construction of world horizons by creating specific scapes around information. Based on this premise, it brings the rich intersection between the press and the urban imagination closer to the complex set of variables opened by findings in the history of communication and transport networks in that period, a field that has grown remarkably in recent

⁵ Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity*.

⁶ First introduced in the much-evoked work of the anthropologist of contemporary globalization Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” the concept underlies a complex system that includes ethnoscares, technoscares, financescares, mediascares and ideoscares.

⁷ Carey, *Communication as Culture*, p. 21.

⁸ Quoted in Bell, “Cyborg Imperium, c. 1900,” pp. 50–52.

⁹ Chartier, “La conscience de la globalité. Commentaire.”

¹⁰ Rantanen, “The New Sense of Place in 19th Century News.”

years.¹¹ It assumes that the new distribution of information amplified and diversified the universe of representations, expanding the spectrum of topics and ranges used to describe the city. In this context, it observes the ways in which the increasing priority of news as press content – at the expense of opinion columns or literary fiction, for example – provided a selective principle for graphic and narrative materials, turning the urban milieu into a more or less explicit presence around many topics – festivities, funerals, wars, revolutions, natural disasters. The expansion of international “current events” had the effect of reorganizing urban repertoires: feeding ideas about which cities constituted “the world,” about their general outlook and, by extension, about the reader’s own urban setting.

To observe this transformation, our point of view will be the Atlantic seaboard of South America, with the primary focus on Buenos Aires, the region’s main press market, where newspapers and magazines displayed a highly ambitious informative scope. Distant from the dominant poles of the global network (London, Paris), the Argentine capital was at the same time intensely connected. Its inhabitants were immersed in a teeming media ecology, in which the effects of the communications revolution were felt with particular intensity. News from afar worked its way into local frameworks of heterogeneous meanings, often requiring a great deal of artifice to ensure even the most basic effectiveness. As we shall see, the weight of the distance separating these communities of readers from the events in question would manifest itself in various ways, but especially in the lag time between physical and telegraphic circulation, putting into stark relief the persistence of geography.

Questions about the integration of Latin American societies into the world – and the world into Latin American societies – are very old indeed, and have been at the heart of global history long before it acquired that name. In fact, they have inspired a vast tradition of studies interested in the first contacts with Spain and Portugal in the early sixteenth century, the development of a specific type of economic relationship with Europe and the intricate process of cultural hybridization that resulted.¹² This long, sinuous path was disrupted during the early

¹¹ Born from ground-breaking studies such as Daniel Headrick’s *The Invisible Weapon*, this field is today much developed thanks to a growing wealth of research providing critical insights into the hidden mechanisms of late 1800s communication and the circulation of information on a global scale. Several studies will be evoked as their specific contributions become relevant to this reconstruction. A useful essay on the North Atlantic cable system is Müller’s, “From Cabling the Atlantic to Wiring the World.” Substantive additions to this burgeoning field include Osterhammel’s, *The Transformation of the World*, pp. 710–722; and Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World*.

¹² On the singular path of Latin American historiography toward global history, see Sergio Serulnikov, “El secreto del mundo.” On the potential of a Latin American perspective in the global history agenda: Conrad, Zimmermann and Scarfi, “Latin America as a Laboratory.”

nineteenth-century revolutions of independence and their long wars. A new relationship with the world would be born from that process, based on notions of progress and modernity that inspired a major commitment to overseas export markets and aggressive immigration policies. The growing influence of English and (especially) French ideas, fashions and novels was seen as the cultural counterpart of this new opening to the world, displacing the references, tastes and consumption habits attached to colonial Creole-Iberian traditions.¹³

Assuming the broad strokes of this description, the following analysis works with the premise that, in urban South American societies, the understanding of this new relationship with the world went well beyond the substitution of one cultural metropolis by another. The evidence of a transformed informative environment made available to large majorities of readers suggests that greater numbers of people in Buenos Aires were beginning to make out the contours of a transformed world with a much-widened horizon that had a decidedly urban slant. This was not a rupture in itself. The development of the Spanish Empire had always had a pronounced urban tenor, as shown by the importance of its Atlantic capitals and ports, and the disproportionate influence of cities in the extended configuration of the map of Latin American culture.¹⁴ At the end of the nineteenth century, when the very definition of the world was being redrawn by the intersection of a new logic of communication with local criteria of relevance, that focus would remain concentrated on large cities, albeit in a rapidly expanding repertoire.

By putting attention on the incidence of news in this process, this exercise also seeks to engage in a dialogue with the history of South American cultural imaginaries, thus complementing the current trend of research developed within the frame of intellectual history and literary studies. In recent years, much attention has been paid to a perspective of “networks,” drawing a map of previously ignored links between the region’s capitals and those in the north, and also between cities within the region. A vast array of personal epistolaries, international conferences, reciprocal visits, bilateral projects and expanded diplomacy, and the new digital access to the body of correspondences and publications that accompanied these circulations, has established beyond any doubt the density of the relational fabric among the region’s late nineteenth-century elites. Meanwhile, a vast area of studies has developed around nineteenth-century travel writings and a few eminent newspaper correspondents. One by one, the addition of these threads has broadened narratives of cultural modernization.¹⁵

¹³ The best synthesis of this fundamental process remains Tulio Halperin Donghi’s *The Contemporary History of Latin America*.

¹⁴ On this point, see Romero’s masterful *Latinoamérica. Las ciudades y las ideas*, pp. 10–22.

¹⁵ This description suits a large portion of current studies on Latin American intellectual and cultural history as is evident from programmes in the much-expanded conferences on Latin

This study builds upon and hopes to complement that point of view by pointing to the power of news in the making of a South American world horizon made available to the great majority, while paying more than the usual attention to the intervening (material) paths of the written word and the printed image. It adopts Park's classic definition of news as an alternative (but widely available) source of knowledge. A short and independent unit of communication that can be easily comprehended, news is essentially transient and ephemeral and, as such, devoid of context other than that required to make it comprehensible and interesting. Despite its obvious limitations, the unsystematic and fragmentary type of knowledge produced by news is pervasive in modern societies and triggers daily conversations about the state of the world. "The typical reaction of an individual to the news is likely to be the desire to repeat it to someone," observes Park.¹⁶ Based on the evidence of the rise of news as the primary press content, the archive underlying this project is biased toward a collection of fragmentary documents on the distant city as they provided glimpses through a prism of disparate information. This same bias will complement the available scholarship by shedding light on certain news logics that diverted attention away from the great cultural capitals of Europe, Paris in particular, showing the ways in which other cities – some very distant; others closer to home – also fitted into the picture of the "world."

This cultural history of news seeks to avoid a naïve vision of the rules underlying the system of information that supplied newspapers and magazines in cities that were eccentric to the global metropolises of communication. It assumes that the content agenda was shaped by forces in which each instance (newspaper, journalist, news, cable companies) participated with unequal power. Likewise, it assumes that geographic location established possibilities and impossibilities that were difficult to reverse. Nevertheless, it attempts to move the scope of analysis beyond a linear history of domination (or of resistance to domination), or the economic and political history of its material basis. As Thérenty and Vaillant assert, even in the case of press circulation between metropolises and colonies, the effects resembled appropriation and hybridization more than they did domination, a distinction that is even more relevant in contexts outside of colonial systems.¹⁷ Moreover, it has been clearly demonstrated that communications infrastructures originally built for specific

American Intellectual History and the contents of the chief journals in the field, such as *Prismas. Revista de Historia Intelectual* (Bernal, Universidad de Quilmes). In the past years, important collections of travel writing edited and annotated by high-quality scholars have flourished. Several authors will be evoked in these pages for the specific contributions of their work.

¹⁶ Park, "News as a Form of Knowledge."

¹⁷ Thérenty and Vaillant, *Presse, nations et mondialisation au xix^e siècle*, p. 9.

purposes (war, imperial control, financial development) did not necessarily (or exclusively) generate the kind of content they were designed for. Indeed, the evidence points to a system that was polymorphous and heterogeneous, with ample room for autonomous development and unforeseen results.¹⁸

What follows is an analysis of news circulating across vast distances, and opening windows onto remote cities. Rather than approaching this picture through one exhaustive case study of reception, a set of five distinct news events is evoked, all originating in cities far from Buenos Aires: Rio de Janeiro, Monza, Beijing, Saint Petersburg and Valparaiso. While well aware of the sacrifice this choice entails in terms of extensive, fully detailed analysis of each case, it hopes to highlight the wide-ranging effects of the information network at the peak of its capacity, as well as the varied, fragmented horizon that it created. Cases have been selected to reflect a range of news that was typical of this period – state funerals, presidential visits, imperial wars, social revolutions, natural catastrophes – and which involved cities that owed their visibility to the emerging journalistic logic. *Cities and News* will observe how local appropriations of distant events contributed to the construction of a new world-horizon, as well as the ways in which this construct became intertwined with the everyday experience of readers as they turned to newspapers and magazines for information, opinion, advice and entertainment – just like those imaginary *gauchos* chatting about the news from Sebastopol or Saint Petersburg.

2 News of the World

In early 1849, the journalist and writer Domingo F. Sarmiento (1811–1888) complained in a newspaper in Santiago de Chile about the isolation that prevented him from reading the press from other countries. Recently returned from a trip to France and the United States, he compared the situation in the city of his political exile with that of the American ports of the North Atlantic, which received “enormous quantities of up-to-date newspapers and periodicals” by steamer.¹⁹ Why could Chileans not enjoy the same access to the written word? Sarmiento grumbled about the reasons: the anachronistic sailing ships, archaic bureaucracy and, more generally, a number of geographical, political and economic factors that held up the delivery of printed material for months, depriving Chile of the kind of circulation that, in his opinion, was one of the distinguishing characteristics of civilization.

The young Sarmiento was tireless in the pursuit of his goals – and was rather exaggerated in the picture of isolation he painted, as recent studies have

¹⁸ Nikkles, *Under the Wire*, pp. 79–103; Britton, *Cables, Crises and the Press*.

¹⁹ “Correo,” *La Crónica*, 1 April 1849 in Sarmiento, *Obras Completas*, Vol. X, p. 94.

shown.²⁰ With an entire life and career before him, there would be ample time for other great journeys, to return to his native Argentina and be elected president and to use the power of that office to initiate major policies and projects, beginning with immigration, education, transportation and communications. Throughout this trajectory, he would remain in close contact with the city of his exile, so he would also have time to see changes in Santiago de Chile's relationship with the world. The laconic, self-absorbed society he had criticized so vehemently began to embrace subscription to press publications from other countries far beyond what he could have imagined in those early years.²¹

It may be that this change did not appear as great to Sarmiento as it really was, since he would follow the progress from Buenos Aires, where he lived during his years of maturity and greatest political activity. In that great South Atlantic port, the press (local and imported) was, in the 1880s, accessible to a wide range of readers, in numbers that clearly exceeded those of the literate elite. Since the early years of the century, in fact, ships dispatched from ports in the northern hemisphere had been delivering books, newspapers and magazines, and the pace of these deliveries had only grown. Imperfect as they are, the numbers reported by the (then) nascent national Post Office provide an outline of the growth in the last decades of the century. The 300,000 parcels of printed matter unloaded in 1879 had risen to one and a half million in 1887, shortly before Sarmiento's death. By 1896, it had grown to three and a half million, and then more than eight and a half million in 1900.²² This growth greatly exceeded the (also extraordinary) rise in the city's population, which nearly tripled (from 286,000 to 649,000) between 1880 and 1895 as a result of European immigration, reaching one and a half million in 1914.²³ If we assume that about three-quarters of that printed material remained in the city (as the Post Office numbers indicate), and that approximately two-thirds of the contents of those mail-bags were periodicals (as the statistics on reception by category suggest), this means

²⁰ On the regional circulation of letters and prints during the Chilean anti-Rosista exile: Blumenthal, *Exile and Nation-State Formation in Argentina and Chile, 1810–1862*, pp. 85–125. On access to European ideas: Jaksic, "Disciplinas y temáticas de la intelectualidad chilena en el siglo XIX," pp. 23–42.

²¹ Caimari, "La carta y el paquete."

²² The data used in this section come from the statistics of the Union Postale Universelle, *Statistique Générale, Service Postal publiées par le Bureau International* (Bern: Imprimerie Suter & Lierow, 1887–1900). Although not always consistent in the definition of categories, this information is congruent with the annual statistics of the Argentine Postal Office. Since this agency's monopoly on these circulations was not absolute, these are approximate figures intended to provide general trends. From the 1880s onwards, UPU statistics include books and newspapers in the same "printed" category, but projections of previous dates suggest that about two-thirds of the total were periodicals. Caimari, "Derrotar la distancia."

²³ Devoto, "La inmigración."

that, at the turn of the century, Buenos Aires was absorbing about eighteen million copies a year, equivalent to twenty-seven copies of imported periodicals per capita, far more than the one copy per inhabitant seen two decades earlier. At the turn of the century, Argentina was the fourth country in the world in terms of per capita circulation of letters and printed matter, according to the Universal Postal Union (UPU).²⁴

To a lesser extent, other cities in the region participated in the same phenomenon, since, on the way to Buenos Aires, those ships also unloaded many bags in other ports, such as Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro.²⁵ In the span of a single lifetime, these capitals' relationships with the world had changed completely. With differences according to each case, the data describe a very clear evolution: from the middle of the century onwards, and with gathering intensity, imported printed goods were becoming a widely accessible product. The evidence indicates that the distribution of these shipments was uneven, and that the bulk made it only as far as the larger cities, namely, those linked to the port systems and the networks of global circulation: Santiago and Valparaiso in Chile, Montevideo in Uruguay, Buenos Aires in Argentina, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in Brazil.

To what extent did this access represent a change in societies where news from Europe had always been at the center of the diet of information? Born as the ports and capitals of the Ibero-American colonial system, these cities (which were only recently becoming large urban centers) had been marked by the extreme distance from their metropolises, and by a certain cultural and linguistic homogeneity. For three centuries, news from Madrid and Lisbon had been arriving with delays of two to three months. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, these materials reached their consumers along with news provided by epistolary correspondence, all of them read in sporadic waves following the rhythm of the shipping schedules, with full awareness of the temporal (spatial) gap that separated them from their origin. After independence, in the 1810s and 1820s, these cities' growing integration with the world would still bear traces of this relationship, with informational remittances maintaining the long cultural link with distant Europe. On the level of ideas, this link increasingly identified with England and France, leading to more interest in what was published there. Thus, before the great rise in the scale of circulation and the expansion of the press markets, the media economies of the early 1800s were nurturing an informed reading public interested in whatever news (political and economic, but also aesthetic and philosophical) came from European capitals.²⁶

²⁴ Argentine Republic, *Memoria del Ministerio del Interior*, 1900, p. 93.

²⁵ On French periodicals in Rio de Janeiro: Guimaraes, "From Liner to Telegraph."

²⁶ Goldgel, *Cuando lo nuevo conquistó América*, pp. 47–108.

Overlaid on this old predisposition were new factors that, with the advance of the century, led to concrete shifts in expectations regarding access to these goods. One important dimension spoke to the interests of economic elites, as they were attracted by the promise of a radical reformulation in which steam and telegraph technologies would reconfigure the rules of access to overseas markets in economies that were resolutely turning to international trade. Another element had to do with the expansion of European immigrant communities, a fact that would profoundly modify the universe of readers – first in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, then in São Paulo, and in dozens of small and medium-sized cities in their areas of influence. All of them would see, in the last two decades of the century, the emergence of high concentrations of recent arrivals, most of them from Mediterranean countries. In 1900, the Italian community of Buenos Aires was larger than that of the ten largest cities in the United States combined. São Paulo, Montevideo and Rosario each had more Italians than any North American city outside of New York. Immigrants from Spain were, in cities of the Argentine and Uruguayan Pampas, only slightly fewer.²⁷ This unique demographic shift would give birth to complex, hybrid cultures, in highly urbanized societies with distinct modern features. Indeed, the area comprising Southern Brazil, Uruguay and the Argentine Pampas has been considered to be a transnational region in itself, and it happens to coincide with some of the most developed publishing markets, the highest literacy rates and the latest infrastructure for connectivity with the outside world.²⁸

By the century's end, those widely spaced shipments of press and correspondence had become a steady stream of packages containing major newspapers, illustrated magazines, pieces on the latest Parisian fashion, literary and scientific periodicals, socialist and anarchist tracts, and much more. The expansion of the Hispanic and Luso-American market in the last three decades of the century was so enormous, in fact, that it would become a coveted horizon for publishers beyond Spain and Portugal, resulting in an important rise in the publishing industry in Spanish and Portuguese in France, with the participation of shipping companies capable of delivering their products to those distant ports.²⁹

Paradoxically, by the end of the century the availability of European printed matter had ceased to be as decisive as the young Sarmiento had imagined. By

²⁷ Moya, "Migration and the Historical Formation of Latin America in a Global Perspective," 48.

²⁸ Goebel, *Overlapping Geographies of Belonging*.

²⁹ Cooper-Richet, "La presse hispanophone parisienne au XIX siècle"; Fernández, "El monopolio del mercado internacional de impresos en castellano en el siglo XIX"; Barbier, "Le commerce international de la librairie française au XIXe siècle (1815–1913)." On the production of printed goods for the Brazilian market: Mollier, "Introduction," p. 12.