Imperial Media

Worth, Aaron

Published by The Ohio State University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/29386

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1085377
Reflecting, in his *Outline of History* (1920), upon the past glories of imperial China, and particularly upon its precocious invention of gunpowder, H. G. Wells marvels that the Chinese “[do] not to this day dominate the world culturally and politically” (555). In speculating about the possible causes of this once-great civilization’s putative stagnation, Wells rejects any facilely racialist explanation, invoking only to dismiss, for example, the theory of an innately “conservative” Asian brain, biologically predisposed towards cultural stasis. Rather, he locates the seeds of China’s “backwardness,” and therefore the distal cause of its imperial retrogression, at the level of distributed consciousness—namely, in Chinese media, specifically the writing systems which, in Wells’s judgment, must inhibit rather than facilitate the kind of advanced thought and action indispensable to a people with designs of global “domination.” The symbolic technologies of the Chinese, in other words—their “pictographs, ideograms, and phonograms”—in effect become the tea leaves through whose scrutiny Wells believes he may read the fate of the society that has devised them. Earlier, he had called the Chinese script-system “an instrument which is probably too elaborate in structure, too laborious in use, and too inflexible in its form to meet the modern need for simple, swift, exact, and lucid communications,” a fact with ominous implications for its future as a world “power”:
Now, it is manifest that here in the Chinese writing is a very peculiar and complex system of sign-writing. A very great number of characters have to be learnt and the mind habituated to their use. The power it possesses to carry ideas and discussion is still ungauged by western standards, but we may doubt whether it will ever be possible to establish such a wide, common mentality as the simpler and swifter alphabets of the western civilizations permit. In China it created a special reading-class, the mandarins, who were also the ruling and official class. Their necessary concentration upon words and classical forms, rather than upon ideas and realities, seems . . . to have greatly hampered the social and economic development of China. Probably it is the complexity of her speech and writing, more than any other imaginable cause, that has made China to-day politically, socially, and individually a vast pool of backward people rather than the foremost power in the whole world.¹

More than any other imaginable cause—the most unreconstructed McLuhanite could scarcely adopt a more uncompromising stance with respect to the power of technologies of communication to shape profoundly the cultures within which they operate.²

In fact, the confident diagnosis offered in the above passage constitutes a wholly representative moment within Wells's history of everything; it is a text informed by a thoroughgoing technological determinism, as well as an abiding belief in the tendency of communications technologies in particular to influence the essential character, and ultimate destiny, of imperial systems. Wells devotes much space to the emergence of various media, from alluvial clay and papyrus to submarine telegraph cables, usually in imperial contexts: in an early chapter focused on the empires of antiquity, each is typically introduced by a description including an account of its characteristic media, from Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics to the Peruvian quipus, while a subsequent chapter on writing systems reads rather like a roll-call of those same empires. Media often function for Wells as lenses for descrying the essence of a culture: he adduces, for example, a supposed resemblance between Mayan writing and the scribbling of European madmen in pronouncing the pre-Columbian civilizations to have been irrational, essentially “aberrant” (their “obsession” with bloodshed seems to follow as a matter of course from the unnatural “elaboration” of their script) (Wells, Outline, 194–95). But technologies of communication appear in more active roles as well: when Wells comes to discuss the European colonial enterprises of the modern era (China's loss is their gain), he credits, or blames, “the increased speed and certainty of transport and telegraphic communications,”
seemingly above all other factors, for their emergence (ibid., 1168). And the United States, in Wells's view, owes its (paradoxically) organic unity entirely to the nineteenth century’s “new means of communication, the steamboat and railway and . . . electric telegraph” (ibid., 1131).³ The Civil War, indeed, appears as a kind of ripple or glitch in the otherwise smooth evolution of networks: “At the beginning of the war there was no railway to the Pacific coast; now the railways spread like a swiftly growing plant until they had clutched and held and woven all the vast territories of the United States into one now indissoluble mental and material unity” (ibid., 1140–41).

But while the Outline was a text whose composition was avowedly spurred by the Great War, the crucible of such ideas should be sought earlier, at the end of the nineteenth century, the period during which Wells produced the pioneering fiction for which he is best remembered. The half-decade or so during which virtually all of Wells’s enduring scientific romances appeared, in rapid succession (The Time Machine [1895], The Island of Doctor Moreau [1896], The Invisible Man [1897], The War of the Worlds [1898], When the Sleeper Wakes [1899], and The First Men in the Moon [1901]), as well as his first forays into the realm of cultural and social prophesy (particularly his 1901 Anticipations), saw the British Empire approaching its high-water mark; meanwhile, the evolution of modern media continued to accelerate (the cinema proper was developed, for instance, and the radio invented). As I will show, Wells drew heavily on the latter conceptual domain in framing his (largely critical) ideas about the former. Accordingly, I propose here to treat the fin-de-siècle writing of Wells as a particularly rich and striking example of the kind of conceptual interchange that is the subject of this book.

As I have already suggested, Wells had an enduring fascination with (as well as a singularly expansive conception of) communications technologies. The new media of the day figure prominently in his fiction, and elaborate blends and extrapolations of Victorian technologies fill his future worlds. Moreover, Wells was attuned to the potentialities inherent in a wide range of natural forces and energies, which he viewed as potential channels of communication and traffic.⁴ (It is striking, indeed, how many of his classic novels are premised upon the exploitation, manipulation, or transformation of a particular such medium: gravity in The First Men in the Moon, time in The Time Machine, light in The Invisible Man, heat in The War of the Worlds.) Furthermore, the frequency with which Wells crafted figures of sensory amputation, isolation, and distortion, such as hypertrophied and atrophied sense-organs, suggests a particular concern with the contemporary deformation or renegotiation of the human sensorium. The Invisible Man, for instance, together with contemporaneous tales like “The Country of the
Blind,” can be read as McLuhanesque parables of sensory imbalance in the unstable media ecologies of the fin de siècle. (It is also suggestive that Wells began work on this tale of vanishing flesh and blood mere months after Röntgen’s discovery of X-rays was widely publicized, with photographs appearing showing the human body rendered all but invisible—Griffin’s discovery merely takes the process to its logical conclusion.)

But above all, as I suggest above, media became crucially important to Wells’s conceptualization of cultural, and particularly imperial, systems. They provided Wells with indispensable tools for thinking about empire, in both satires of contemporary imperialism like The War of the Worlds and The First Men in the Moon and his “prophetic” works from the same period, so often concerned with Britain’s cultural survival in the future. In the first two texts, upon which I will primarily focus here, Wells elaborates monitory parables that link near-infinite imperial expansion with the threat of imperial extinction, using the imaginative possibilities he discerned in technologies of communication. In the latter works, media become core ingredients of a vision of the future that constitutes, I suggest, a transposition or displacement of his own imperialist impulses. By studying Wells’s conceptual uses of media one can, I believe, learn much about how forms of imperial space and time were imagined at this moment in history. In so doing one may also be led to conclude that one of the most impressive accomplishments of such connective technologies may have inhered in their power to bind together what seem to us hopelessly contradictory, even paradoxical, ideological blends.

II.

When, in the aftermath of the Martians’ first, deadly use of their “Heat Ray,” the British Army are deployed to Woking, they bring with them, in addition to their field-guns and Maxims, a curious instrument “with a stand like a theodolite” (a surveying tool) (War, 58). The narrator has to be told that the unfamiliar object is a heliograph—also known as a “sun-telegraph”—a portable signaling device in the form of a tripod-mounted mirror, which uses reflected natural light to communicate in the field (widely used in the later nineteenth century until largely superannuated, its distinctive virtue of wirelessness mooted, by the new radio). Periodically the technology appears in the novel as an instrument of “warning” used by “devoted scouts” defending their homeland against the invader (ibid., 67) and, more symbolically, as a comforting emblem overhead. When the panicked curate asks the narrator, “What is that flicker in the sky?” he responds: “I told him that it was the
heliograph signalling—that it was the sign of human help and effort in the sky" (ibid., 71).

This depiction of the heliograph in the hands of plucky rebels who are courageously, if seemingly futilely, trying to repel a powerful imperial force may uncannily anticipate its use by the underdog Boers against the English a few years later. But it does not very comfortably square with its actual historical use by the British Empire during the few decades of its heyday. If the narrator of *The War of the Worlds* has never seen a heliograph before, it is for good reason: unlike, say, the telegraph (equally at home in Delhi or Birmingham), it was a technology overwhelmingly, if not solely, to be found in colonial contexts, in the service of projects of conquest and control. Its appearance on English soil in the novel would, then, have signaled to readers both the devastation of the domestic communications infrastructure and the fact that Albion had itself become a colonial space, the site of an imperial war of conquest, since the technology would have had fairly unambiguous resonances as a metonym of Empire. A look at the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry on the heliograph is revealing. Of the eight citations given, all of which date from between 1877 and 1899, nearly all are taken from newspaper and magazine accounts of contemporary military actions (plus one Kipling story) which, taken together, form a kind of radically truncated, but fairly representative, chronicle of British imperialist activity during that period, from Burma to the Sudan, from the Second Anglo-Afghan War to the Boer War. Other colonial and neocolonial powers were not slow to follow this lead: after “learn[ing] of British success in India,” for instance, the US Army used the heliograph against the Apaches, to decisive effect (Sterling, *Military Communications*, 210). The technology was, then, in reality a rather unequivocally imperial medium, largely devoted to the work of subjugation and widely associated with the colonial wars of the later nineteenth century.

I want to suggest that the heliograph should be read as a less monstrous analogue of, or precursor to, the Martians’ formidable Heat Ray itself—a weapon pointedly likened by Wells to “the parabolic mirror of a lighthouse,” and mounted on a great ambulatory tripod (*War*, 27). Figuratively, at least, it is a signaling device transformed wholly into a devastating prosthesis of Empire. Just as Wells confronts Britons with a possible future incarnation of themselves in his Martians (a possibility he first explored in his “Man in the Year Million,” a text referred to with comic obliquity within the novel), so does the Heat Ray represent the ultimate evolution of the “sun-telegraph,” the medium used by British forces in Afghanistan, India, and Africa: its light become pure heat, a signal become pure weapon.
For a novel that has been long, and surely correctly, identified as a deliberate critique of nineteenth-century, particularly British, imperialism (with readers from Isaac Asimov to Stephen Arata seeing in the novel a parable of “reverse colonization”), the British Empire is curiously absent from *The War of the Worlds*. There is, to be sure, the well-known reference to the “extermination” of Tasmanian aborigines in the first chapter, justly cited in such accounts (though even here “European immigrants,” rather than Britons specifically, are indicted). But I find no direct mention of any British (or for that matter European) colony, with the exception of Ireland, afterwards in the text, nor of Britain’s status as a global colonial power. This is surely because the British Empire is present in counterfactual form in the novel, externalized and symbolized as the Martians’ invading force itself; England, in effect, is confronted with its own possible (imperial) future. I want to argue in what follows that technologies of communication and transport are central to the imperial critique contained within the novel. As my above reading of the Heat Ray suggests, these technologies contribute to such a critique in the first place by helping Wells to contrast two distinct models of political and social organization, reflected in their respective relationships to media. Just as the Martians’ chief weapon is conceptually congruent with one of the later nineteenth century’s more conspicuously “imperial” media, so do their uses of media themselves suggest their understanding of these as above all forms of imperial weaponry, instruments of conquest rather than aids to communication. From their telescopes to their transport cylinders (metaphorically likened to “missiles” fired from an interplanetary “gun”) (*War*, 8, 6), Martian technologies of communication, transport, and perception are bent entirely towards the single end of colonial subjugation. At this historical juncture, of course, European powers were employing the telegraph, railway, and other technologies of communication in precisely this manner, as, again, the work of Daniel Headrick has shown. At the heart of British colonial supremacy was the use of media, among other technologies, as weapons. In Wells’s novel, however, there is little, if any, sense of these imperial networks’ existence at all (a strong indication, again, that the Martians’ colonial enterprise itself represents an imaginative externalization of the British imperial project).

There is, moreover, a lesson to be discerned in the very morphology of the Martians, who have, in effect, themselves evolved into monstrous analogues of their own media, Spencerian blends of biological organism and radically centralized, radiate network. As Laura Otis has observed, the network metaphor was capable of alternately sustaining either the figure of imperial centralization or its less hierarchical opposite (*Networking*, 224–25). If the latter
ChapTer Three

(as she has demonstrated) frequently underlay nineteenth-century figurations of the body, Wells, writing near the high-water mark of empire, imagines organisms grotesquely embodying the former. As biological analogues of what Otis calls the “centralized webs [that] ‘wired’ empires” (ibid., 225), the Martians are early literalizations of the cliché of the expansionist (for instance, imperialist or fascist) “octopus,” a trope closely associated not only with military aggression but with sprawling webs of communication, with cables conceptualized as tentacles, grasping extensions of imperial power. The horrible bodies of the Martians, in other words, suggest a kind of cautionary just-so story for an imperial race: over time, Wells seems to say, we become our technologies, as well as the relationships they engender and embody.

By contrast, media technologies are conceptualized quite differently by Wells’s Britons. The English, first of all, think of media as above all (at the risk of sounding tautological) a means of communication: of establishing contact, for instance, even with the (utterly) alien. There is accordingly a radical asymmetry in the exchanges between Britons and Martians, with the former trying to signal the latter, who respond in turn with bursts of unmeaning destruction. Where theMartians mean conquest, the naïve earthlings see attempts at communication. When the Martians first fire their cylinders at Earth, “the vulgar idea” is that these flashes constitute a “signal” (Wells, War, 7). And when the first cylinder with its occupants lands, the narrator’s “mind [runs] fancifully on the possibilities of its containing manuscript, [and] on the difficulties in translation that might arise.” In London the newspaper headlines read: “A MESSAGE RECEIVED FROM MARS.” A “Deputation” subsequently “approach[es] them [the Martians] with signals, that we too were intelligent. . . . Flutter, flutter went the flag, first to the right, then to the left” (ibid., 23). The response is “a flash of light,” bursts of green “smoke” or “flame,” “the ghost of a beam of light,” a series of “hissing,” “humming,” and “droning” noises, and bursts of invisible heat which issue from the cylinder: the semblance of communication, perhaps, but unparsed into significance, and bringing instant death (ibid., 24). Later “Fresh attempts [are] made to signal,” but “The Martians took as much notice of such advances as we should take the lowing of a cow” (ibid., 39). The Martians, for their part, only talk to each other, their telepathic communication rather resembling the dedicated wires used as instruments of colonial control in British India, through whose channels Britons discussed the best ways to manage the natives.

Corresponding to this different conception of media on the part of the besieged British nation is a different performative function. Instead of instruments of subjugation, media serve as binding agents: as the novel makes abundantly clear, networks of communication knit the British social organism together. For Wells media literally “inform” societies, giving them shape
and coherence. Among other things *The War of the Worlds* provides a panoramic snapshot of Western technologies of communication and transport by century’s end, with newspapers, railways, telegraphs, and steamships all conspicuous presences in the narrative. And throughout the novel Wells presents a picture of a networked social and cultural totality, whose disintegration and subsequent reconstitution are repeatedly figured in terms of such technologies.

The devastation of England’s networks is indeed one of the Martians’ first tactical goals, as “They . . . cut every telegraph, and wrecked the railways” (ibid., 105). Wells devotes much time to descriptions of the destroyed railways in particular: early in the novel, the last image the reader encounters before the Martians’ landing is of “the brightness of the red, green, and yellow signal lights” of the railway, accompanied by the soothing, distant sounds of the trains themselves in the station, comforting indices of a “safe and tranquil” England (ibid., 9). After the first wave of destruction, the narrator, surveying the carnage from his study window, makes out a mangled train (its lamp still a “vivid glare” amid the wreckage) (ibid., 50) and a single “white railway signal,” a lonely survivor of the railway’s ruin (ibid., 54). Telegraphic communications, too, dwindle and finally vanish, and London’s busy, non-stop circulation of newspapers (the “fluttering” of “pink sheets”) (ibid., 78) comes to a sudden end, the last editions printed in still-wet ink (a detail which, by foregrounding its material basis, perhaps prefigures the medium’s imminent destruction). Wells later uses the same trope in a memorable image of the total dissolution of English social organization:

Directly below him [a] balloonist would have seen the network of streets far and wide, houses, churches, squares, crescents, gardens . . . spread out like a huge map, and in the southward blotted. Over Ealing, Richmond, Wimbledon, it would have seemed as if some monstrous pen had flung ink upon the chart. Steadily, incessantly, each black splash grew and spread, shooting out ramifications this way and that, now banking itself against rising ground, now pouring swiftly over a crest into a new-found valley, exactly as a gout of ink would spread itself upon blotting-paper. (ibid., 105)

Where there had been an ordered space of circulating information, there is now a centrifugally expanding Rorschach blot; in its flight, the population of the metropolis is likened to the degree zero of mediality: raw matter without informing symbol.

The reconstitution of the English social organism is likewise figured in terms of the restoration of its communications networks, beginning with the telegraph:
One man—the first [to learn of the Martians’ demise]—had gone to St Martin’s-le-Grand, and . . . had contrived to telegraph to Paris. Thence the joyful news had flashed all over the world; a thousand cities, chilled by ghastly apprehensions, suddenly flashed into frantic illuminations; they knew of it in Dublin, Edinburgh, Manchester, Birmingham, at the time when I stood upon the verge of the pit. (ibid., 172)

In short order, the repair of the railway system follows, and the narrator buys a first copy of the *Daily Mail*, mostly “blank” and amateurishly produced by a “solitary compositor,” as though, being newly reborn, the press must pass again through an embryonic phase (ibid., 174).

The treatment of the telegraph, however, is particularly revealing. Communications, notably, are limited to nonimperial channels (those extensive and vitally important networks linking colonial center and periphery, which may as well not exist in this novel), as aid arrives in copious flows from “Across the Channel, across the Irish Sea, across the Atlantic” (ibid., 172). Improbably, no colonial possession not bound by ties of language and/or race is mentioned or even implied in the global reestablishment of telegraphic communications; the imperial reality of fin-de-siècle Britain remains largely occluded, or (again) transposed onto the Martians. At the close of Wells’s novel, the dominant trope is one of global community, a nascent version of Wells’s “world-state,” figured as a system of communication between and among interlocutors, rather than a system of exploitation modeled and abetted by cables extended from a controlling center. With the death of these cybernetic octopoi from the future, Britain’s own imperial future is imaginatively exorcised, as the novel ends with the suggestion of a world without colonies, one in which England may perhaps yet avoid the fate of the tentacular imperialists from outer space.

The second respect in which such technologies seem indispensable to the novel’s imperial critique involves Wells’s figuration of forms of imperial space and time, specifically his delineation, in his scientific romances critical of empire, of the parameters of an imperial chronotope linking expansion and duration in a broadly inverse relationship. Indeed, the colonial venture of Wells’s Martians nicely, even heuristically, exemplifies precisely such a dialectic. One who wanted to press Harold Innis’s core thesis—introduced in the last chapter—to its limits might argue that it is their lack of a terrestrial evolutionary history (a genetically transmitted tradition or “memory” of conditions on earth) that dooms both the Martians and their flora. But quite obviously, the invaders’ power is premised first of all upon the technological mastery of space, their expansionist project aided and abetted by
a host of strongly spatially biased media and modes of transport. From the preternaturally powerful telescopes that permit them to study life on earth (“instruments . . . such as we have scarcely dreamed of” [ibid., 4]), to their transport cylinders, swift-striding tripods, and flying machines, the Martians employ implosive, spatially oriented technologies of conquest. However, their dominion is of course radically evanescent, as the invaders succumb, in a manner presaged by the fate of the aggressive, but ephemeral, “red weed” they have brought with them, to bacterial infection. The rise and fall of the Martian Empire is, therefore, ably contained within the narrative confines of a slim novel, rather than a chronicle of Gibbonian length. Their interplanetary adventure thus combines virtually infinite expansion in space with shockingly brief dominion in time. In its suggestion of an inverse relationship between expansion and duration (one, again, framed in terms of implosive technologies dragooned into the service of empire) the novel serves as a monitory parable in an age of (as Wells saw them) irresponsibly expansionist powers.

III.

In his search for absolute “solitude” (he intends to try his hand at playwriting after self-inflicted business losses), Bedford, the feckless narrator of The First Men in the Moon, settles on Lympne in Kent. This former port in Roman Britain is now choked off from contact with the sea and bordered by stretches of nearly impassable clay, reduced thereby from a prominent node within an imperial network to a merely picturesque congeries of imperial relics, in the form of scattered Roman ruins. (And Lympne's inhospitality, as well as comparative irrelevance, to modern networks of communication also is suggested by the figure of a lone postman struggling to negotiate the local mud with boards strapped to his feet.) A note of imperial evanescence and decay is thus sounded almost immediately within the novel, in a passage that establishes an intimate connection between empires and the channels of traffic and communication that sustain them:

I doubt if the place would be there at all, if it were not a fading memory of things gone for ever. It was the big port of England in Roman times, Portus Lemanis, and now the sea is four miles away. . . . I used to stand on the hill and think of it all, the galleys and legions, the captives and officials, the women and traders, the speculators like myself, all the swarm and tumult that came clanking in and out of the harbour. . . . And where the port had been were the levels of the marsh . . . dotted here and there with tree
clumps and the church towers of old mediæval towns that are following Lemanis now towards extinction. (Wells, First Men, 7)

The imperial center of gravity has of course shifted, in the intervening centuries, from Rome (the ultimate expansionist empire of antiquity) to former satellites like Britain. The channels of imperial traffic have expanded as well: Britain’s own dominion over the seas had, for instance, by century’s end come not only to appropriate the power of steam but also to incorporate the ocean’s depths, as well as its surfaces. And in its figuration of gravity, technologically harnessed for the purposes of transit, as itself a means of potential colonial exploitation, the novel seems to suggest not only the dependence of empires upon such channels but also the truth that these will continue to evolve in as-yet-unknowable ways: a point hammered home by the prominent place Wells accords the new wireless in his colonialist parable of the new century. There are a number of continuities between The First Men in the Moon and The War of the Worlds with respect to their treatment of media. Once again, for instance, they are used as differentiating markers, tropes suggesting the profound cultural differences between the two civilizations—(would-be) colonizer and colonized, respectively—that are brought into contact within the novel. And once again, technologies of communication are central to the construction of an imperial chronotope linking colonial expansion with cultural fragility.

As many have remarked, The First Men in the Moon, published in 1901 and serialized during the Boer War (which is referenced by Cavor in his discourse with an increasingly uneasy Grand Lunar), functions on one level, and fairly conspicuously, as a critique of, or comment upon, contemporary European, particularly British, imperialism. It is a kind of parable about the potential conquest and exploitation of the greatest satellite known to us. Upon their arrival on the moon (in one well-known episode), Bedford and Cavor soon find themselves weak with hunger, and decide to try some local fungi that, unfortunately, have powerfully intoxicating properties. Bedford’s mind, divested of inhibition, immediately begins to run on imperial possibilities, “projects of colonisation”: “We must annex this moon,” he begins to babble drunkenly. “This is part of the White Man’s Burthen. Cavor—we are—hic—Satap—mean Satraps! Nempire Caesar never dreamt. B’in all the newspapers. Cavorecia. Bedfordecia. Bedfordecia—hic—Limited. Mean—unlimited! Practically” (First Men, 82). As David Lake, who calls the novel an “anti-imperialist satire,” points out:

This satire would have been intensely topical in 1900–01. ‘Cavorecia’ and ‘Bedfordecia’ are clear parodies of ‘Rhodesia,’ the name bestowed in 1895
Numerous parallels between Wells's moon and southern Africa may be established, and I will not belabor them here, other than to suggest that it is probably no accident that Bedford perceives “kopjes” on the lunar surface, or that the hollow, inhabited moon constitutes a literalization of the predominant conceptual metaphor of Africa as having an “exterior” and an “interior,” a kind of shell to be penetrated. The figure of verticality also calls to mind the obsessive mining for gold and diamonds whose discovery had awakened Britain’s interest in its neglected African possessions in the first place: Wells imagines the moon as a space shot through with great holes and deep shafts, a land with tunnels studded with crystals which “scintillated like gems” (First Men, 103), and “gold as common as iron or wood” (ibid., 197). The connection with mining may explain, too, Wells's decision to limn the moon’s lucre-crammed interior with a pervasive blue phosphorescence, since prospecting by men like Rhodes had revealed the existence, deep below the surface, of a diamond-rich “blue earth,” which soon became idiomatic. Rhodes is reported to have remarked upon “the power that this blue ground would confer on the man who obtained control of it all” (Brendon, Decline, 194).

But the link in Wells’s mind between his protagonists and men like Rhodes (made all but explicit in the passage quoted above) suggests a further affinity, one of particular salience in the present context: namely, the association between expansionist projects and powerfully spatially biased technologies. Perhaps the most iconic image of Rhodes in British popular culture is, of course, the Punch cartoon (“The Rhodes Colossus”) which depicts “the visionary of British expansion” (ibid.) straddling Africa with extended arms. (Perhaps Wells had this famous image in mind when he envisioned Bedford and Cavor making their immense, low-gravity bounds from a “lichenous kopje”—they do seem rather like pygmyed Rhodeses as they take their “gargantuan strides” across the lunar landscape [Wells, First Men, 67–68].) What is less often remarked is the fact that those arms are stringing an impossibly long telegraph wire across the length of the continent. The image is, in other words, at the same time a reflection of Rhodes's preoccupation with the nineteenth century's paradigmatic territory-extending and -binding technologies, the telegraph and railway: a preoccupation exemplified in his dream of a “Cape to Cairo” network. Like Rhodes and other colonialists of the period, Wells’s protagonists are associated with the mastery of powerful spatially oriented media—crucially, the technological exploitation of gravity which enables their lunar voyage in the first place, and Cavor’s later use of the new
technology of radio to send messages back to the earth from the moon (after he has taken advantage of the Selenites’ trusting nature in building an improvised transmitter).

These two forces, I would suggest, function in the text as figures for the new media of the day (with gravity serving as an imaginative extrapolation of those of the future), as well as their probable recruitment by capitalist and imperialist projects. Bedford unequivocally views Cavor’s technological harnessing of gravity as a new means of colonialist exploitation, enabling one-way flows of purloined wealth from satellite to center (with “guns,” predictably, going in the other direction) (ibid., 118). According to the scientific logic of the novel, these forces are rigorously continuous, as the theoretical basis of Cavor’s discovery inheres in Wells’s inclusion of gravity within the great family of electromagnetic energies. In Cavor’s gloss, gravity is explicitly affiliated with both X-rays and radio waves—again, two of the most spectacular scientific discoveries of the previous decade:

“Radiant energy,” he [Cavor] made me [Bedford] understand, was anything like light or heat, or those Röntgen Rays there was so much talk about a year or so ago, or the electric waves of Marconi, or gravitation. All these things, he said, radiate out from centres, and act on bodies at a distance, whence comes the term “radiant energy.” (ibid., 16)

There is thus a certain Maxwellian symmetry informing the novel’s structure: gravity “waves” are used to transmit English bodies to the moon, and radio waves to transmit English words back again.

But while Bedford’s visions of conquest bristle with boundless imperialist confidence, Cavor’s wireless transmissions, which dominate the last fifth or so of the novel, suggest a far less sanguine image of British expansion. Wells’s treatment of the radio, indeed, powerfully depicts the reverse of the expansionist medal: namely, the fact that the fantasy of “practically” “unlimited” (in Bedford’s phraseology) spatial dominion was always haunted by fears of cultural dispersion, evanescence, and fragmentation. Cavor’s communications are interspersed with commentary and, at times, interpretation by Bedford, necessary because of the extremely problematic nature of these messages as they are received on Earth (where they are recorded by phonograph, subsequently to be transcribed as writing). Bedford comments at some length upon the “curiously fragmentary message[s]” picked up by a “Dutch electrician” following in Tesla’s footsteps by pointing his radio equipment skyward—and particularly upon the factors contributing to this fragmentation. “Unhappily,” he muses, “they are only fragments, and the most momentous
of all the things that he had to tell humanity . . . have throbbed themselves away unrecorded into space” (ibid., 173). He goes on to adduce a host of further reasons for the messages’ frustrating incompleteness, complaining that Cavor’s “communication comes and goes in our records in an extremely fitful manner; it becomes blurred; it ‘fades out’ in a mysterious and altogether exasperating way. . . . Altogether we have probably lost quite half of the communications he made, and much we have is damaged, broken, and partly effaced. In the abstract that follows the reader must be prepared therefore for a considerable amount of break, hiatus, and change of topic” (ibid., 173–74).

To the high degree of ellipsis and semantic indeterminacy is added a considerable amount of redundancy, a fact which gives Bedford license to edit and shape the transmissions: “The messages of Cavor . . . are for the most part so much broken, and they abound so in repetitions, that they scarcely form a consecutive narrative” (ibid., 182).

It is worth noting that Bedford’s laments first of all reflect a pervasive association, in the early days of wireless, of loss, dispersion, and entropic waste with the very concept of “broadcasting” signals, as opposed to sending them directly from point A to point B: “In 1899 . . . The Electrician contended that ‘messages scattered broadcast only waste energy by travelling with futile persistence toward celestial space’” (Briggs and Burke, Social History, 155). As Thomas Richards suggests, in his reading of Tono-Bungay, Wells was perhaps uniquely attuned, among his contemporaries, to the emergent theme of entropy (Imperial Archive, 88). In Cavor’s disintegrating, noise-troubled broadcasts, I want to suggest, he uses this figure to craft a compelling tableau depicting cultural dispersion, perhaps annihilation.

Eventually (after the Selenites become aware, through the graphic descriptions of the ingenuously garrulous Cavor, of the bellicose habits of mankind) his transmissions are further garbled by the deliberate interference of the lunar natives, in the form of electromagnetic sabotage:

At this point a series of undulations . . . become confusingly predominant in the record . . . curiously suggestive of some operator deliberately seeking to mix them in with his message and render it illegible. . . . For a long time nothing can be made of this madly zigzagging trace; then quite abruptly the interruption ceases, leaves a few words clear, and then resumes . . . completely obliterating whatever Cavor was attempting to transmit. (Wells, First Men, 211)

This surreptitious work of effacement, the intentional blending of signal with noise, is ultimately succeeded (in Bedford’s imagination at least) by physical
assault, as Cavor is dragged bodily from his apparatus even as he is attempting to transmit the secret of making “Cavorite” back home:

And then suddenly, like a cry in the night, like a cry that is followed by a stillness, came the last message. It is the briefest fragment, the broken beginnings of two sentences.

The first was: “I was mad to let the Grand Lunar know—”

There was an interval of perhaps a minute. One imagines some interruption from without. A departure from the instrument—a dreadful hesitation among the looming masses of apparatus in that dim, blue-lit cavern—a sudden rush back to it, full of a resolve that came too late. Then, as if it were hastily transmitted, came: “Cavorite made as follows: take—”

There followed one word, a quite unmeaning word as it stands: “uless.”

And that is all.

It may be he made a hasty attempt to spell “useless” when his fate was close upon him. Whatever it was that was happening about that apparatus we cannot tell. Whatever it was we shall never, I know, receive another message from the moon. For my own part a vivid dream has come to my help, and I see . . . Cavor struggling in the grip of these insect Selenites, struggling ever more desperately and hopelessly as they press upon him, shouting, expostulating, perhaps even at last even fighting, and being forced backward step by step out of all speech or sign of his fellows, for evermore into the Unknown—into the dark, into that silence that has no end. . . . (ibid., 213)

This tableau, consciously or not, rather strikingly echoes the telegraph-office episode from the Indian Mutiny, discussed in chapter one. But the focus in these final scenes on linguistic fragmentation and loss, followed by radical indeterminacy (Cavor’s broadcast ends on a note of perpetual entropic suspension, with the “quite unmeaning” “uless”) and finally, a radio silence that figures death, resonates with particular force when read in the context of Wells’s imperial dialectic of space and time.

Prosaically, of course, Wells’s emphasis on the fragmentary character of Cavor’s lunar transmissions serves the needs of his plot, by explaining why the secret of Cavorite must remain forever unknown. But it also contributes to a powerful final image of Cavor’s (English) words traveling near-infinite distances in space, while suffering a corresponding loss of integrity and coherency (including mutilation by native resistance), before finally vanishing altogether. Englishness (with language serving, as so often, as a cultural
or racial stand-in) has overextended itself, and flies broadcast, scattered and
distorted, across infinite space, destroying itself in the process. It is not dif-
ficult to detect a note of warning to an expansionist nation in this media-
inspired trope of dispersion and evanescence: the novel, which began with
fragments of imperial Roman culture embedded in the clay of vanished seas,
ends with fragments of English words graven in the wax of a revolving cylin-
der: “This intermittent trickle of messages, this whispering of a record needle”
(ibid., 197), giving way at last to silence.

IV.

The trope of damaged communication takes on a similar note of urgency
in Wells’s more temporally focused, “prophetic” texts from the same period
(both fictional and nonfictional), in the form of the specter of noise intro-
duced into historical, hereditary, and evolutionary narratives. There is accord-
ingly in these texts a contrapuntal emphasis placed on what Innis would call
time-biased media. Most famously, of course, in The Time Machine Wells
imagines temporality as itself a medium of transmission, the Time Travel-
ner’s vehicle being precisely analogous to the ship implied by the title of the
tale’s original incarnation (“The Chronic Argonauts”), as well as the manned
balloons adduced by the Traveller in his heuristic discussion of the essential
continuity of space and time. It is indeed upon this story’s core, proleptically
Einsteinian premise—that “duration” is in fact a form or mode of “extension,”
rather than its facile opposite—that Wells would erect the imaginative super-
structure of his own transposed imperial fantasies. He envisioned, in other
words, empires of time and space, of temporal as well as territorial extension,
in contradistinction to the rapidly expanding but evanescent bubbles repre-
sented, in his view, by the colonial projects of the nineteenth century.

Once again, the new communications technologies of the day provided
Wells with essential conceptual material for imagining the possible forms of
such futures, as he explored the problems of dissemination—cultural, ling-
guistic, and racial—over time, and with the role media might play as agents
or models of such transmissions. In two loosely connected fictions, for
instance, set two centuries in the future—When the Sleeper Wakes (1899)
and A Story of the Days to Come (1897/1899)—much attention is given to the
media of that future, and particularly to their role in preserving, or shap-
ing, British culture in the year 2100. In Sleeper, for instance, the eponymous
sleeper Graham comes to consciousness in a future society in which English
has become, for the underclasses at least, a corrupted, fragmentary “Pigeon” (sic) language, a tissue of “blurred and mangled distortions” confounding the interpretive powers of the bewildered, Victorian protagonist (Wells, *Sleeper*, 78). It is only “phonograph culture,” the exposure of the privileged classes to stored linguistic paradigms, that has allowed for the survival of the narrative’s own brand of “pure” (e.g. late Victorian, middle-class) English. As I discussed in chapter two, the “Edison era” saw the emergence of a host of “new inscriptive forms” such as the phonograph and kinematograph (Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*, 11). In Wells’s fictions of the future, these new media of inscription appear prominently, often in novel, blended configurations such as “kineto-tele-photographs” and “kinematograph-phonographs.” They are both culturally central (like the ubiquitous “Babble Machines” in *Sleeper*) and conspicuously involved in the active culture of the “race,” associated with the reconstruction or reproduction of Englishness in the face of distortion, mutation, or amalgamation with the “alien.” Upon encountering what seems to him a survival of the classic English “type” (“bluff” and “manly”), Graham is told that this ideal Briton has patterned himself after “phonographs and kinematographs”; he is, in other words, the product of late Victorian media premised upon the capture of voice and movement (Wells, *Sleeper*, 105).

These inscriptive media constitute a temporal counterpart to the radically space-biased technologies so prominently featured in the imperial parables from the same period, offering the promise of new capacities for the preservation of information, in new modalities—the spoken word, the moving image. They thus held out the possibility, ostensibly at least, for cultural, and by extension racial, preservation across vast spans of time, at a historical moment at which such questions of survival loomed large in the British imagination. Yet at the same time these texts suggest the essentially quixotic nature of the attempt to freeze cultural forms, like linguistic paradigms, in time, to transmit the signs of Englishness unblemished into the future. The treatment of the new media of inscription within these texts suggests the folly of such an archival logic, given the kinetic dispensation of evolutionary time, the ineluctable realities of linguistic and cultural drift. When, for example, the newly awakened Graham explores the gilded cage to which he has been forcibly conveyed, he soon notices the absence of written texts, discovering in their stead “the latter-day substitute[s] for [the] novel”—“peculiar double cylinders” like videotapes, on which are recorded filmed versions of stories, to be played on a television-like box. Among the library of stored narratives he finds three tales the contemporary reader would have recognized. Their labels, however, are at first blush profoundly confusing:
The lettering on the cylinders puzzled him. At first sight it seemed like Russian. Then he noticed a suggestion of mutilated English about certain of the words.

“Θi Man huwdbi Kiη,” forced itself on him as “The Man who would be King.” “Phonetic spelling,” he said. He remembered reading a story with that title, then he recalled the story vividly, one of the best stories in the world. . . . He puzzled out the titles of two adjacent cylinders. “The Heart of Darkness,” he had never heard of before nor “The Madonna of the Future”—no doubt if they were indeed stories, they were by post Victorian [sic] authors. (Wells, Sleeper, 39)

The trope of phonetic writing functions similarly in A Story of the Days to Come, which depicts a postliterate England (similarly full of kinematographs and phonographs), which has ostensibly arrested linguistic drift, at least in its privileged classes:

In spite of the intervening space of time, the English language was almost exactly the same as it had been in England under Victoria the Good. The invention of the phonograph and suchlike means of recording sound, and the gradual replacement of books by such contrivances, had . . . arrested the process of change in accent that had hitherto been so inevitable. (Wells, Story, 195)

Yet this statement is trenchantly undermined for the reader by the defamiliarizing effect of such spellings as “Mwres” for “Morris,” “Elizebeθ” for “Elizabeth,” and “ETS” for “hats”; markers of difference which mirror the larger changes time and technology have wrought in this rather dystopian future. (In the lower classes, without access to these technologies, language drift has proceeded apace, nearly to the point of unintelligibility.)

What alternatives did Wells envision? A world without difference—the antithesis of the diverse British Empire as he would characterize it in the Outline, and a world that, in his view, modern technologies of acceleration, with their power to compress time and space alike (in the Victorian cliché, to “annihilate” both), made tantalizingly possible. As Carolyn Marvin points out, fantasies abounded in the late nineteenth century of global networks that would annihilate not only space and time but difference; she discusses, for instance, an 1893 story by Julian Hawthorne that imagines future “communities of homogeneous culture, race, [and] language” (Marvin, When Old Technologies Were New, 201). Wells’s bestselling Anticipations develops the same themes in (disconcertingly earnest) nonfictional form. Subtitled “the Reac-
tion of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought,” it begins with a discussion of “means of communication” and “methods of transit,” as Wells paints a picture of global technological diffusion focusing upon networks of transit and telephony. In his first chapter, for instance, Wells asserts the historical autonomy of “the evolution of locomotion” as a historical determinant, noting that “upon transport, upon locomotion, may . . . hang the most momentous issues of politics and war” (Anticipations, 2). But perhaps the crucial medium in Anticipations proves to be language itself, which Wells envisioned as above all “an instrument of world unification” (Mattelart, Invention, 192), projecting what he saw as trends of linguistic, and accordingly cultural, homogenization forward to conjure up a vision of a networked world dominated by a single tongue. Wells predicted a future battle royal between English and French (with a few dark horses in the race) for global hegemony. He imagined a process of global homogenization beginning with the “arrest” of linguistic “differentiation” through “unifying” technologies (he writes of “a whole wonderland of novel, space-destroying appliances”) (Wells, Anticipations, 127).

But this is only prelude to his “New Republic,” the “world-state” of “kinetic men” which, in the text’s infamous conclusion, will oversee the extinction of “the people of the abyss” (ibid., 177–78). Wells’s “kinetic society,” with its focus on accelerated flows of social circulation within ever-expanding networks, as well as the technological compression of temporality, resembles Paul Virilio’s “dromocratic society” in many respects. In his “Essay on Dromology” (a term denoting a new theoretics of speed) Virilio anticipates that

[w]ith the realization of dromocratic-type progress, humanity will stop being diverse. It will tend to divide only into hopeful populations (who are allowed the hope that they will reach, in the future, someday, the speed that they are accumulating . . .) and despairing populations, blocked by the inferiority of their technological vehicles, living and subsisting in a finite world. (Speed and Politics, 47, emphasis original)

This prophesied eradication of diversity, which is to be replaced by a binary schema of dromological haves and have-nots, can be mapped without much difficulty (albeit with a very different distribution of authorial sympathies) onto the Wellsian vision, with its “kinetic men” shadowed by the swarming “people of the abyss” described in Anticipations, and figured in various guises in his fictions of the future. There are, to be sure, vital differences between the two visions. I draw the parallel in order to suggest that, in elaborating an essentially imperial dromology, Wells here conjures with a conception of
space and time different in crucial respects from those informing his anti-imperial romances of the same period.

For what, surely, is particularly likely to strike the modern reader is the perplexing lack of dissonance Wells perceived between these two simultaneously cultivated visions, between, on the one hand, his principled opposition to contemporary imperialism and, on the other, his enthusiastic advocacy of technologically saturated utopias premised upon the eradication of all difference. How, one wants to ask, did Wells reconcile such seemingly contradictory positions? In effect, by seeking a technological solution to an ideological problem: as a reading of texts like *Anticipations* shows, in writing about imperial systems Wells lets his technologically inflected chronotopes do much of his thinking for him. I have already discussed Menke's identification of a telegraphic chronotope in the age of realism. Of course, such tropes of infinite connectivity can—as I noted in chapter one—become highly problematic when applied to imperial contexts. Fortunately, media environments (particularly, one suspects, emergent or evolving ones) provide material for envisioning a multiplicity of such spatial and temporal relationships. For example, in his *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace* (2003), Jay Clayton compellingly explores the importance of information technologies to the imaginative conception of the dispensation he terms “genome time” (whose ancestry he speculatively traces to Wells, in *The Time Machine*) (176). And as his writing of this crucial period clearly shows, Wells was capable of deriving multiple imperial chronotopes from media ecologies, conceptual tools which quite literally helped him to think the often contradictory thought of the age of empire.

Menke notes a long-standing indictment against media technologies, namely, the claim that they “[paper] over the epistemological gaps between representation and reality” (*Telegraphic Realism*, 248). As the case of Wells shows, they can have the power to paper over, however imperfectly, ideological fissures as well; and few moments in modern history, perhaps, provide better examples of such fissiparousness than the age of imperialism.