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The Birth of National Sports Coverage

An Examination of the *New York Herald's* Use of the Telegraph to Report America's First "Championship" Boxing Match in 1849

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When "Uncle Joe" Elliott of the New York Herald filed his story on Tom Hyer's victory over Yankee Sullivan in the first American championship prizefight in 1849, he not only was recording history, he also was making it. Elliott's story was the first telegraphic transmission of a major sporting event. This article is an examination of how the Herald's use of the telegraph marked the birth of national sports coverage in the United States.

An unusual bit of sports history occurred on February 7, 1849, and it had implications far beyond the event itself. On that date, a 6-foot, 3-inch "Adonis" by the name of Tom Hyer brutally beat "Yankee" Sullivan in a bare-knuckles boxing match on the snowy farm field in Kent County, Maryland, about 40 miles from Baltimore ("Full and Authentic Account," p. 1). To boxing historians, this was important because Hyer was proclaimed "the Champion of America," a phrase that cultural historian Elliott Gorn (1986, p. 95) has written "signified something new, a single, unified title owned by the one man who unequivocally could best all others." Hyer had made history by becoming America's first officially recognized heavyweight boxing champion.¹

Less noticed but more important to the modern sports media in the United States was the presence at the fight of "Uncle Joe" Elliott, a delivery room employee for the *New York Herald* who

had been pressed into duty to cover a boxing match that his newspaper had helped bring about. Like the fighters themselves, who were battling to become the first American boxing champion, Elliott also made history that day. He transmitted the telegraphic report of the bout, making this the first sports event to be covered nationally (Nugent, 1929, p. 336).²

Elliott's transmission from Baltimore to the *Herald* newsroom in New York ("By telegraph," 1849) read:

Baltimore, Feb. 8, A.M.

The fight took place yesterday about 5 P.M. at Roach's Point, Kent county, Maryland.

Hyer won in fifteen rounds.

Sullivan is badly punished, but not dangerously.

Time occupied, about sixteen minutes. (p. 2)

That day, newsboys had no trouble selling copies of the *Herald* to New Yorkers eager to read the outcome of the highly publicized contest between two men who had publicly feuded for years. "For hours our fast presses threw off sheet after sheet, ten thousand per hour, until the anxiety of the public was sufficiently gratified," the *Herald* boasted in an editorial ("The Great Prize Fight," 1849, p. 2).

Of more significance, readers in other cities across the nation received the news in their daily newspapers the same day it was published in New York. In addition to "such sporting centers as New York, Buffalo, Baltimore, and New Orleans," accounts of the fight were carried in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where the Cumberland Valley *Sentinel* reported "'the wonderful excitement in the public mind' as crowds waited anxiously for the results" (Betts, 1974, p. 56).

From the telegraphic coverage of this boxing match, one can trace the development of national sports coverage in the United States. Organized sports were in their infancy in the first half of

the nineteenth century, and before the Hyer-Sullivan prizefight, the few sports articles that were carried in newspapers either concerned local news or were accounts reprinted from other newspapers days or even weeks after the events had taken place.

The time delay in receiving news was a barrier to developing interest in a sports event outside of the place where it occurred. The telegraph changed that, making it what James Carey (1989, p. 203) called “a watershed in communication” as it “permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation.” This point is illustrated by the average time lag between an event in Washington and a news account of it in Boston: It was 18 days in 1790, 6.2 days in 1817, and 2.8 days in 1841 (Lowe & Moryadas, 1975, pp. 11-12). In Carey’s words, “the telegraph freed communication from the constraints of geography” (1989, p. 204).

Once the telegraph allowed for overnight reporting of events across the nation, sports matches began to command wider audiences and to gain in popularity. John Rickards Betts (1953a) wrote of the development of newspaper sports reporting in America that after the Civil War:

The expansion of sporting news in ensuing years was directly related to the more general usage of telegraphy, which made possible instantaneous reporting of ball games, horse races, prize fights, yachting regattas, and other events. Box scores, betting odds, and all kinds of messages were relayed from one city to another, and by 1870 daily reports were published in many metropolitan papers.” (p. 239)

This article is an examination of the telegraphic reports in the *New York Herald* that signaled the beginning of national sports reporting, with an attempt to determine: 1. How these telegraphic reports were used in terms of their length and placement; 2. How these telegraphic dispatches compared to the more traditional articles on the event in their length, detail and writing style; and 3. How did the *Herald’s* coverage of the prizefight through the use

of the telegraph compare with that of a rival newspaper, the *New York Tribune*?

The research involved is an examination of the telegraphic reports and other stories and editorials concerning the Sullivan vs. Hyer prizefight appearing in the *Herald* and *Tribune* between February 7, 1849, and February 10, 1849. These were two of the six New York newspapers that banded together in 1848 to share telegraphic resources, forming the New York Associated Press. The others were the *Sun*, *Courier and Enquirer*, *Journal of Commerce*, and *Express*. The *Herald* was chosen for this study because it has been credited as the first newspaper to use the telegraph to report on a prizefight. Of the other New York AP members, the *Tribune* was chosen because its editor, Horace Greeley, rivaled the *Herald's* James Gordon Bennett as one of the most influential and important figures in eighteenth century American journalism, and the *Tribune*, like the *Herald*, was one of the successful penny newspapers started in the 1830s.

Both men also understood the impact the telegraph could have on the newspaper business. Calder M. Pickett has written that because of Bennett's appreciation of technology, the *Herald* "showed amazing growth in the early years of the telegraph" (1960, p. 402). According to Beard and Beard, Greeley, who also was quick to adopt new technology, was said to have told Samuel Morse, the inventor of the electric telegraph, "You are going to turn the newspaper office upside down with your invention" (as cited in Pickett, 1960, p. 403). However, the *Tribune* differed from the *Herald* in its opposition to prizefighting, so it was anticipated there would be a contrast in the coverage of Sullivan vs. Hyer.

Introduction of the Telegraph and Its Use by the *New York Herald*

Morse unveiled his electric telegraph on May 25, 1844, nine years after Bennett had published the first edition of his *New York Herald*. The American telegraph service began that day when a line

was completed from Washington to Baltimore, and over it Morse transmitted the message, "What hath God wrought?" The second message he sent was more prophetic. According to Morse's assistant, Alfred Vail, Morse transmitted the query "Have you any news?" from Washington to Baltimore (as cited in Blondheim, 1994, p. 33). The ability to send news by telegraph was demonstrated that same month when the Baltimore *Patriot* published the first telegraphic dispatch in a newspaper, a short item on a Congressional motion (Mott, 1964, p. 247).

It was only natural that Bennett would be among the first to capitalize on the benefits offered by the telegraph, as he had built his newspaper into one of the most successful in New York partially through his aggressive efforts to gather and publish the news ahead of his competitors. The *Herald* was founded as a penny newspaper in 1835, two years after Benjamin Day began publishing his successful penny newspaper, the New York *Sun*. According to Oliver Carlson, in only 10 years Day's newspaper grew from a one-man operation to a staff of 13 editors and reporters (as cited in Blondheim, 1994, p. 58). When it celebrated its 10th anniversary, the *Herald* boasted it had a circulation of 12,000 on weekdays and 7,000 on Sundays, making it "the largest aggregate circulation of any journal in the civilized world" (Bleyer, 1927, p. 201).

The *Herald* had become one of the most successful penny newspapers because Bennett had "more variety in his local coverage, better foreign news, more of what he called 'theatrical chit-chat,' fresher and more personal editorial paragraphs adhering to no political party, and Wall Street reports more thorough and candid than any New York had ever known" (Mott, 1964, p. 230). According to James Crouthamel, the *Herald* also gave its readers "a steady diet of violence, crime, murder, suicide, seduction, and rape both in news reporting and gossip" (1989, p. 25).

Bennett sought to gain an additional edge over his rivals by beating them to the news. Among the methods he invested in were a horse express in an effort to get the news from Washington ahead of his rivals, a fleet of news boats that he claimed en-

abled the *Herald* to provide “the earliest and most complete” shipping news in New York (Crouthamel, 1989, p. 45), and chartered trains to bring him the foreign news from ships arriving in Boston (Bleyer, p. 197). Bennett’s desire to get the news first was so great that, according to Carlson he once contracted to pay Daniel H. Craig, “an innovative news entrepreneur, a bonus of \$500 for each hour European news sent by Craig to the *Herald* arrived ahead of the same news to other New York newspapers” (as cited in Blondheim, p. 19).

The introduction of the telegraph and the spread of telegraph lines in the Northeast offered a faster, more reliable way to send the news. The Magnetic Telegraph Company’s line reached New York in 1846, and Bennett’s *Herald* and Greeley’s *Tribune* were the first to install telegraphs (Betts, 1953a, p. 238). Meanwhile, telegraph lines continued to spread across the country, providing more and more newspapers, and their communities, quick access to the news. By 1851, there were more than 50 telegraph companies in the United States, with each serving a different region. The Western Union was formed out of them in 1856 (Shaw, 1942, p. 96), and the first transcontinental telegraph line was completed in 1861, with the eastern and western lines meeting in Salt Lake City (Shaw, p. 97).

The Mexican war of 1846-47 stimulated much of the growth of the telegraphic network across the country, and Bennett made good use of the new technology. According to Don C. Heitz (1920, p. 123), the *Herald* was the only New York newspaper to send a correspondent to cover the war. However, Bennett still needed a way to get his dispatches back to New York in a timely manner. When the telegraph wire reached New Orleans, making it the closest telegraph office to the war, the *Herald* was one of the newspapers to lease a wire for its own use (Crouthamel, 1989, p. 46). Soon, however, the telegraph company limited each newspaper to only 15 minutes of transmission time. This rule encouraged cooperation by the newspapers, and in 1848, the *Herald* joined the *Sun*, *Tribune*, *Courier and Enquirer*, *Journal of Commerce* and *Express* in organizing a partnership to lease for their exclusive

use a telegraph line from Boston to New York to bring the member newspapers international news received from ships arriving in Boston. This was the origination of the New York Associated Press, at first an informal organization at first but later a more formal one that included correspondence at “all important points” (Mott, 1964, p. 251).

Sports and Sports Reporting in America Prior to 1850

At the time Morse introduced his electric telegraph, there were only a few spectator sports in America, among them boxing matches, horse races and rowing events. Although sports events, particularly horse racing and boxing, had begun attracting more spectators in the 1830s, most newspapers left the reporting of them to the sports weeklies that were emerging (Nugent, 1929, p. 335).

Although infrequent, there were occasional reports of sports events that appeared in American newspapers as far back as the eighteenth century. The *City Gazette* published notices for the Charleston Golf Club in 1796 (Heath & Gelfand, 1951, p. 9), and Mott has written that “probably the first prizefight story in an American paper” appeared in the March 5, 1733, *Boston Gazette* (1964, p. 53). On that date, the *Gazette* carried a paragraph from a London daily about John Faulconer knocking out Bob Russel in an eight-minute match. In 1816, Jacob Hyer, the father of Tom Hyer, beat Tom Beasley in a prizefight that Gorn termed significant in that “it was a historic event worth recording, in its being the earliest American fight kept alive as living memory of a heroic past (1986, p. 38).”

According to Gorn (1986, p. 39), the first “full newspaper coverage of an American fight” was carried by the *New York Evening Post* on July 10, 1823. This was a round-by-round account of the bout between an 18-year-old butcher and “a man whom they called the champion of Hickory Street.” The *Evening Post* described the butcher “strutting around the ring like a game-cock” and beating his opponent in eight rounds (as cited in Gorn, 1986, p. 39).

The New York *Post* reported on a boat race on June 11, 1811, and a foot race in 1824 (Gorn, 1986, p. 9), and the New York *Sun*, the New York *Transcript*, and the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* all carried stories on prizefights as well as horse races in the 1830s (Betts, 1953b, p. 43). The New York *Transcript* of February 4, 1835, went so far as to devote two columns to a 46-round prizefight, and the New York *Sun* reported on “the Williamson-Phelan fight at Hoboken” in 1835 (Lee, 1937, p. 609). The New York *Weekly Mercury* picked up on the interest in sports by covering prizefights and trotting matches in the 1840s (Betts, 1953b, p. 43). The Western newspapers also were including occasional sports reports in their news coverage. The first sports story to appear in the Chicago *Tribune* was on July 4, 1847, when it reported how Isbell, a “colored barber,” beat a “white man on a horse and an Indian on foot” in a race (Ward, 1953, pp. 3-4; Wendt, 1979, p. 452).

Another sport that appeared on the scene in the 1840s was baseball, and although Alexander Cartwright, generally regarded as the “father” of the game, did not draw up his rules for the game until 1845 (Seymour, 1960, p. 15), the old *Sunday Mercury*, which started as the *Sunday Morning Visitor*, reported on what it termed a baseball game as early as 1842 (Heath & Gelfand, p. 10).

Probably no daily newspaper of the 1830s and 1840s was more aggressive in its sports coverage than was Bennett’s *Herald*. In addition to violence and crime, Bennett also included sporting articles in his news coverage. The *Herald* reported on the Long Island racing season of 1837 in stories written by “Old Turfman,” and, according to Crouthamel “other papers published advertisements for the racetracks and terse race results, but none of them treated horse racing as a news story as Bennett did (1989, p. 38).” This was particularly true in 1845, when the *Herald* “treated the challenge between the southern horse Peytona and the northern Fashion as a sectional clash” (Crouthamel, 1989, pp. 38-39). Bennett’s newspaper commissioned eight reporters to cover the race (Betts, 1953b, p. 43), and it ran a two-column advance story on the front page the day before the race and four extra editions the day of the event (Bleyer, p. 197).

The *Herald's* aggressive coverage of boxing was controversial on occasion. In 1842, Christopher Lilly fought Thomas McCoy before 2,000 spectators in Westchester, New York, and beat him so savagely that after two hours, 41 minutes and 119 rounds, McCoy collapsed and died in the ring. Lilly fled to Canada to escape prosecution, but among those arrested and found guilty of fourth-degree manslaughter was Yankee Sullivan, who had served as a second for Lilly. The *Herald*, which had actively reported on the match, responded by circulating "a petition of clemency of the convicts on the condition 'that no more such scenes are enacted — and that Sullivan and all shall reform hereafter'" (Gorn, 1986, pp. 77-78). Sullivan did receive a governor's pardon, but the *Herald* itself came under sharp criticism, especially from Greeley's *Tribune*, which reported that McCoy's mother held Bennett's newspaper responsible for her son's death (Gorn, 1986, p. 79).

Undeterred, the *Herald* was equally aggressive in its reporting when Sullivan resumed his boxing career by fighting Ben Caunt at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in 1847. On that occasion, the *Herald* employed a team of "pony-express" riders to relay reports of Sullivan's victor from Virginia to New York (Betts, 1953b, pp. 43-44).

By the time the long-running feud between Yankee Sullivan and Thomas Hyer culminated in their grudge match on a snowy Maryland field in 1849, Bennett already had demonstrated a willingness to make extraordinary efforts to provide his readers with the most comprehensive and quickest coverage of such events. On this occasion, however, he would not have to rely on fast horses to rush the news into print. Instead, he had the new electric telegraph.

Match-Making: The *Herald's* Role in Bringing About the Sullivan-Hyer Fight

In its coverage of the events leading up to the fight, the *Herald* ("The prize-fight between Sullivan and Hyer," 1849) reported that among its advertisements on June 1, 1848, was one that carried

the heading, "A Card" (p. 1). It was in the form of a letter from a reader who claimed that six weeks earlier he had been "assailed in a most cowardly manner" while in a saloon on the corner of Park place and Broadway "in a condition rendering me unable to defend myself." The reader identified his attacker as "a man of the name of Hyer." Subsequent public accounts of this incident had compelled the reader to respond publicly to the attacks on his character and his manhood. According to the *Herald*, the advertisement concluded with the statement:

I am no "Irish braggart" or "bully," although I am an Irishman and believe I can show myself worthy of my country whenever I am required. If there are any who think they can make me "cry enough, like a whipped child," if No. 9 Chatham street is not too far out of the way, I will be happy to have them call and make the experiment. As for Hyer, I can "flax him out" without any exertion. (p. 1)

The ad was signed by "James Sullivan," better known to the sporting public of New York as "Yankee" Sullivan, an Irish-American saloon owner and pugilist of renown, having won six prizefights in England and five in America. Sullivan's letter prompted the following response, which according to the *Herald* (1849), ran in its advertisements the next day under the heading, "A Reply":

Yesterday morning it was falsely stated in one of the advertisements of this paper, signed "James Sullivan," that I had assaulted him in an unjustifiable manner, and at a disadvantage . . . I wish merely to state that this fellow Sullivan assaulted me, and that I chastised him for it, as I can and shall do again on similar provocation, to him or any one else who improperly assails me. I have only to add that Mr. Sullivan will find me always much readie [sic] to meet him anywhere than in the newspapers; anywhere, however. I am his master. (p. 1)

Thus was issued and accepted on the pages of the *Herald* the challenge that resulted in the prizefight between Yankee Sullivan and

Tom Hyer that would determine the champion boxer in America. According to the *Herald*, the incident in question was a chance meeting between the two men at a restaurant in April 1848 (p. 1). Sullivan, "with too much spirit in him," taunted Hyer, who responded by inviting Sullivan to the cellar to settle the matter. There, Hyer beat the drunken Sullivan "into insensitivity," and, according to the *Herald*, as word spread around town, crowds gathered the next few days to get a glimpse of Hyer, "the man who had whipped Yankee Sullivan, as he paraded 'from one drinking house to another'" (p. 1). This angered Sullivan and his backers, and in the following days the cronies of both men "took to carrying knives and guns in anticipation of trouble" (p. 1).

It was a showdown that had been anticipated for years, as the *Herald* documented in a front page devoted entirely to the prizefight ("The prize-fight between Sullivan and Hyer," 1849). According to the *Herald*, the 34-year-old Sullivan, "a fighting man from his top knot to his toes" had become "a man of mark" in the prizefighting arena when as a young man he went to England and won six bouts. Returning to New York in 1841, he opened a tavern known as "the Sawdust House" on Division Street, but he continued his boxing career by winning five more fights in America over the next six years. Meanwhile, Hyer, who had gained "considerable pugilistic fame in the chance encounters he had from time to time met with in the street," responded to a challenge from one of Sullivan's friends known as "Country McCluskey" in 1841 and beat him in a two-hour, 55-minute fight. That established Hyer as a rival to Sullivan's supremacy in the ring, but, according to the *Herald*, Hyer refused to fight again for a purse less than \$3,000, which was more than Sullivan's backers could raise.

It was believed that Sullivan had fought his last fight in 1847 when he beat Robert Caunt, "literally knocking his opponent dumb" ("The prize-fight between Sullivan and Hyer," 1849). Not only did Sullivan have a thriving business in his tavern but also interest in boxing waned during the Mexican War. Still, the *Herald* reported that Sullivan "could not restrain himself from looking awry

at Hyer whenever he came in contact with him,” and even after getting the worst of it during their encounter in the saloon, Sullivan continued to believe that he could “flax out” his younger rival. Hyer and his backers were equally confident, claiming that no man could withstand a blow from his “sledgehammer” fist “if received on the temple or neck” (“Amusing particulars,” 1849, p. 2).

The *Herald* not only stimulated public interest in the match through its extensive coverage, it also boasted of its role in bringing about the showdown. The newspaper called the advertisements run by Sullivan and Hyer “warlike correspondence” and commended them “to the philosophers and politicians of the age.” The *Herald* (“Amusing particulars,” 1849, p. 2) compared the ads to “the brusque exchange between General Taylor and Santa Anna,” the opposing generals in the Mexican War.

In addition, the *Herald* printed all 28 parts of the “Articles of Agreement” governing the fight that had been agreed to in August 1848, two months after the advertisements ran. The newspaper also ran a lengthy article (“Some of,” 1849) that claimed the “first public ring fight which ever took place in this country” occurred in 1816, when Jacob Hyer, the father of Tom Hyer, fought Tom Beasley, who won “by an accident” when the elder Hyer broke his arm. (p. 1) The other front-page stories were “Training for the Fight,” which included the training methods of the two men, and “Tom Hyer, In His Youthful Days,” a poem by “a Bowery poet.”

Telegraphic Coverage of Sullivan vs. Hyer by the *Herald* and the *Tribune*

In addition to the extensive coverage the *Herald* gave to the build-up of the fight and details of the fighters and their training methods, there were two breaking news stories to be covered. One was the fight itself. But first, there was the drama that involved the fighters, their parties and the spectators eluding the authorities in Maryland in order to conduct the match. Poole’s Island, located in the Chesapeake Bay, “twenty-six miles below” Baltimore (“By

telegraph," 1849, p. 2), had been selected as the site of the match, which was to be held Wednesday, February 6, 1849. However, because prizefighting still was illegal in the state, authorities in Maryland obtained writs against the boats chartered to ferry the boxers and spectators from Baltimore to the island, and so the first fight news concerned the efforts to prevent the match from taking place.

Newspapers did not have specialized sports reporters at the time, nor did they always dispatch full-time reporters to cover what sporting events were deemed newsworthy. So it was that the distinction of providing the telegraphic coverage of the Sullivan-Hyer fight went to the delivery room superintendent, "Uncle Joe" Elliott (Nugent, 1929, p. 335).³

On Wednesday, February 7, 1849, the *Herald* published four short fight reports on Page 2 under the heading "By Telegraph." They ranged in length from one to five paragraphs, and each carried a "Baltimore, Feb. 6" dateline followed by the time of the report. The first, at "3 1/4 P.M." reported that Hyer and Sullivan had "eluded the police" and left Baltimore for Poole's Island, and that Governor Thomas of Maryland had chartered a steamboat and a party of 100 "armed and picked men, under command of High Constable Gifford," to pursue the boxers and prevent the fight ("By telegraph," p. 2).

The second report, at "5 P.M.," stated that the three steamboats chartered by the fighters had been "stopped by authorities" and that many spectators "are preparing to start for the island in carriages" ("By telegraph," p. 2) in anticipation of the fight, which had been rescheduled for 10 a.m. Wednesday. The final two reports, marked "evening" and "9 P.M.," were brief and added only that the captain of the steamer Boston had been arrested.

By comparison, the *Tribune* ("Fight between," 1849) provided only one telegraphic dispatch on the fight, that on Page 2, reporting the arrest of the captain of the steam boat "Boston." The *Tribune's* view of the event was reflected in two other items on Page 2. The first ("The Southern Mail," 1849), datelined Baltimore,

Feb. 6, began, "The Southern Mail brings nothing of importance" and then informed readers of the efforts being made in Baltimore to prevent the fight. A more pointed reference was made to the crowd attracted to the fight in the second story ("Things in Philadelphia," 1849) that described those departing to view Sullivan and Hyer as "[a]bout two hundred convicts, pickpockets and gamblers."

The *Herald* reports on Thursday, February 8, 1849, were similar to those of the previous day in that the telegraphic dispatches were short items giving breaking news as it developed. The immediacy of the news was evident in the times provided on the datelines of the two dispatches ("By telegraph," p. 2). The first, dated at "4 1/2, P.M.," began, "I have just returned from Carroll's Island." It went on to report the two fighters had reached Poole's Island, and that upon arrival, Hyer "complained of being sick." The second was dated "7 o'clock 55 min. P.M." and reported that all the parties involved except one of Sullivan's seconds had "escaped from the police." In addition to the short telegraphic dispatches, there were longer articles marked "By Mail" that provided less timely but more detailed news. The *Herald* also ran an interesting local item that reported a "rumor by telegraph" that in Baltimore someone was distributing handbills reporting that Hyer beat Sullivan in nine rounds and "knocked him blind" ("Amusing particulars," 1849, p. 2).

By comparison, the *Tribune* of February 8, 1849, ran four shorter telegraphic dispatches ("The prize-fight between Sullivan and Hyer," 1849") on Page 2. The first included the rumor that the fight had taken place and that Hyer was the victor, but it gave no further details. The second reported the two fighters had been arrested, the third admitted, "All is yet in a mystery about the Prize-Fight," and the fourth noted the men were now en route to Dover, Delaware, to fight there. A local item ("The prize-fight excitement," 1849) about the "general excitement" in New York over the fight condemned rival newspapers for collecting "all the ridiculous stories [about the fight] in circulation" and publishing

them, "with a repetition of the telegraphic intelligence of yesterday morning."

The contrast in coverage was even more dramatic on Friday, February 9, the day after the fight. The *Herald* devoted its entire front page to the event, although the telegraphic reports with the long-awaited results ran on Page 2. The *Tribune* did not mention the fight on Page 1, focusing instead on Congressional news and temperance in the Navy. Its fight coverage consisted of four telegraph dispatches, one mail item from Philadelphia and one local story, all on Page 2.

The *Herald's* front page coverage ("The Prize Fight Between Tom Hyer and Yankee Sullivan," 1849) reported that the bout had taken place "at Reach's Point, Kent county, Maryland" on Wednesday and it "appears that after sixteen rounds Yankee Sullivan was unable to come to time" (p. 1). However, the remainder of the story and page was filled with the pre-fight coverage and the first three lines of a story marked "By Mail" that reported Hyer had arrived in Philadelphia after the match ("Arrival of," 1849, p. 1).

The first details of the fight itself were included in four telegraphic reports ("By telegraph: The fight," 1849) on Page 2 of the *Herald's* February 9 edition. The first, filed at "8 A.M." on February 8, was only five lines and reported that the match had taken place and that Hyer won in "fifteen rounds." The second did not carry a time, but it ran for 27 lines and 15 paragraphs, repeating what was in the first dispatch and adding more information. This time, the duration of the fight was given as "sixteen rounds." The reporting was detailed but straightforward. For example:

Hyer, on the sixteenth round, caught Sullivan's head under his arm, and punished him until he was satisfied he was done for, and dropped him; when he was forcibly taken from the ring by his friends - Hyer claiming the victory, as Sullivan did not come up again in time." (p. 2)

This second dispatch also reported that both fighters suffered from the cold "as well as from the race they had from the authori-

ties during the day,” and that there were “but a few spectators.” The third dispatch, again with no time on the dateline, was only 15 lines. It changed the time of the match to “four o’clock” and, like the first dispatch, gave the number of rounds as 15. But the reporter also provided some indication as to how brutal the fight had been when he wrote that as a beaten Sullivan was withdrawn from the ring, his face had “the appearance of a butcher’s block” while Hyer was “not much punished.”

The *Herald’s* fourth and final telegraphic dispatch from Baltimore was 15 lines in length and carried no time on the dateline. In addition to again changing the duration of the fight back to 16 rounds, it provided additional details on the progress of the match. It reported that Hyer, who in the previous dispatch was described as unpunished, “was knocked down in the first round; both eyes were blacked.” Additionally, the reader is informed that in the 15th round, “Sullivan’s arm was injured,” and in the final round, “Hyer caught Sullivan’s head under his arm, holding it there, and beating him until Sullivan’s friends dragged him, whipped, from the ring.” After the match, both fighters “proceeded to Wilmington, thence homeward” (“By telegraph: The fight,” 1849).

While these four telegraph reports indicate they were filed by the *Herald* reporter, they were followed by a story headlined “Telegraphic Correspondence of the Phila. Bulletin” datelined “Baltimore, Feb. 8, 1849.” This story was 28 lines, slightly longer than the most detailed of the *Herald’s* own accounts. Much of the wording was similar to the *Herald* reports, but the *Bulletin* reporter wrote in a more informal, descriptive style to relate the action in the ring. For example, he reported that Sullivan “was whipped” and that in the third round, “Sullivan drove Hyer to the ropes, and, while hanging there, punished him pretty severely.” The reporter also reported that the 16th round “commenced with a desperate grapple” and that Hyer pulled Sullivan to him, “caught his hand ‘in chancery,’ that is, under his arm,” and then “punished him until Sullivan’s friends dragged him whipped from the ring.”

Continuing to add the latest news as it arrived, the *Herald’s*

next story was headlined, "Arrival of Sullivan in Baltimore, and His Departure." It reported that Sullivan had reached Baltimore, where he was taken to Mount Hope Hospital, and that "his life is said to be in danger." The dispatch continued:

He has a slight fracture of the skull, behind the left ear. One of his arms is broken, and his face is cut awfully. The scalp from the forehead, with the eyelid, has fallen on his cheek. (p. 2)

The following dispatch, with no headline but "P.M." added to the Baltimore dateline, informed Herald readers that Sullivan had left the hospital, and that he "is said to be seriously, but not dangerously, wounded." It also was reported that the Maryland attorney general had sent dispatches "to all the towns on the road" for Sullivan's arrest.

The arrest of the trainers of the opposing fighters headlined the next dispatch ("Arrests of the Seconds, Etc."), but more information on Sullivan's condition also was included. This dispatch claimed he was in Mount Hope hospital, "dangerously ill," with one eye cut and one arm broken. The dispatch also added that in Philadelphia, Hyer was reported to have said "he should have killed Sullivan if they had fought another round." The final fight-related story ("The Excitement") concerned the reaction in New York, where "all downtown was in a swarm, like so many bees," as people awaited news from Baltimore. It also reported:

The greatest anxiety prevailed amongst those who had made bets; and there were as many anxious faces to be seen awaiting the news, from hour to hour, as may be seen in Wall or South street, whenever a steamer arrives by which news of a fluctuating cotton or gain market is expected. (p. 2)

The *Tribune's* coverage of the fight not only was on an inside page but it also was sparse. Its four telegraphic dispatches on Page 2 did not even lead the column titled "By Telegraph to the New-York Tribune." The four reports ran under the headline "The Prize Fight - Hyer Victorious" and were more orderly and less

contradictory than the *Herald* dispatches. The first, from Baltimore reported on the fight itself, including such details as, "It was terribly cold, and both suffered from it - as well as from the race they had from the authorities during the day." The second, also from Baltimore, revealed the parties had proceeded to Wilmington, "and thence homeward." The third, from Philadelphia, noted that Hyer had arrived in Philadelphia, where he was "followed by a very large crowd shouting and cheering him." The fourth, from Baltimore, reported the arrests of the two seconds and revealed that Sullivan was in Mount Hope Hospital, adding ominously, "It is said that one eye has been destroyed and his arm broken."

The only non-telegraphic fight reports in the *Tribune* were a pair of Page 2 items condemning the event and the public's reaction to it. The first was an editorial ("The prize-fight," 1849) commenting on the telegraphic dispatches regarding the excitement in Philadelphia when Hyer arrived there, the *Tribune* wrote, "[W]e learn that the people of brotherly love are nevertheless disposed to glorify in the most extravagant manner the result of the late postponed prize-fight" (p. 2). The *Tribune* also led its "By the Midnight Southern Mail" with a column headlined "Things in Philadelphia" with this observation on the commotion in Philadelphia:

Fame is a great thing, and if it cannot [be] achieved honestly, it would be better, according to the common opinion, to turn prize-fighters! (p. 2)

The *Herald's* detailed account of the fight did not appear until the next day, Saturday, February 10. Again, the coverage dominated Page 1, starting in the top left under the heading, "Full and Authentic Account of the Prize Fight Between Hyer and Sullivan, By our own Special Reporter," and running for two and one-half columns. Although the event now was two days old, the *Herald* story was written chronologically, first announcing that the fight had taken place and had been won by Hyer, then giving a detailed account of how the fighters eluded the authorities to stage the match on a barren island in the Chesapeake Bay, and finally

providing a round-by-round description of the fight itself. The reporting was extremely detailed, as illustrated by this passage on the first round:

At twenty minutes past four, this question was asked by Winrow [the referee], "Are you ready?" and being answered by Sullivan in the affirmative, the men walked up, shook hands, returned to their corners and waited the call of time. When the word was given, they moved quickly up to the stretch, and after a few feints from Sullivan, the hitting was commenced by Sullivan striking with his left hand at the body of Hyer, which however did not discomfort Hyer in the least. (p. 1)

Additional coverage of the reaction in New York and the arrest of Hyer by authorities in Philadelphia was on Page 2 in the "City Intelligencer" column. The *Herald* also commented on the rising social status of Hyer and the financial difficulties of Sullivan in an editorial.

The *Tribune* had no telegraphic news of the fight on this day, only a Page 2 mail item on the arrest of Hyer in Philadelphia.

Conclusions

When Samuel Morse invented his telegraph, he envisioned it making "one neighborhood of the whole country" (Blondheim, 1994, p. 4). Viewed in this context, the telegraph and its impact and use by the media fall under "the ritual view of communication," which Carey has written is "not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs." (1999, p. 18) This would mean the fight between Tom Hyer and Yankee Sullivan went beyond a sports event of local interest and became what today would be termed a "sports spectacular" commanding national attention. It stands as an early example that illustrates Carey's belief that in a ritual view, "news is not information but drama ... and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it" (p. 21).

On the one hand, the *New York Herald* aggressively covered the

feud between the two men, and in doing so it not only responded to public interest in the fight but also played a role in arranging the match and promoting it through its extensive backgrounds of the boxers and the history of the sport in America. By contrast, the *New York Tribune* took a dimmer view of the contest and focused its more moderate coverage on the legal and moral implications of the fight and the parties involved.

The depth of coverage given the fight by the *Herald* illustrates why Gorn called Bennett's newspaper "one of the most reliable sources of boxing news before the Civil War" (1986, p. 62). But on this occasion, it was not just the scope of the *Herald's* coverage that was significant, it was its use of the new electric telegraph to provide more complete and immediate news. The telegraphic dispatches were not the focus of the *Herald's* coverage, rather they were, by their placement and length, supplemental to the main story. However, they did allow the newspaper to provide more timely breaking news for its readers.

There are interesting parallels between the *Herald's* use of the telegraph in the eighteenth century and modern newspapers' efforts to adapt to the Internet starting at the end of the twentieth century.⁴ Online expert Shel Holtz's (2001) first rule in writing for online publications is, "Think immediacy." Holtz explains: "You must expect to update breaking stories quickly and to add depth whenever it is available" (2001, p. 283). This essentially is what the *Herald* reporter was doing as Hyer, Sullivan and their parties raced to evade the authorities and stage their prizefight on a small patch of land in Maryland. As he learned new developments, the *Herald* reporter sent back dispatches to the newspaper, which then put them in print. The reporter's terse telegraphic reports, one after another, provided a sense of immediacy that could not be provided by mail reports or carrier pigeons, thus increasing interest in the event being covered. As Blondheim (1994, p. 38) has written, "This building up of expectations — what the media sociologist Helen MacGill Hughes called the 'quicken[ing] urgency' of news — attracted readers and encouraged the sale of

newspapers.” This sense of urgency in reporting the news introduced a new style of journalism that would be especially useful to the developing field of sports writing. It was what Carey (1999, p. 70) described as a “lean ‘telegraphic’ style” that relied on terse writing and leading with the news. As Carey explained:

“ ... the telegraph eliminated the correspondent who provided letters that announced an event, described it in detail, and analyzed its substance, and replaced him with the stringer who supplied the bare facts. As words were expensive on the telegraph, it separated the observer from the writing.” (p. 211)

The impact of Morse’s new technology on the news industry cannot be separated from its impact on spectator sports in America. Carey has written that “the telegraph produced a new series of social interactions, a new conceptual system, new forms of language, and a new structure of social relations” (1999, p. 70). Applying his observation to American spectator sports, the telegraph marked the birth of a national sports society, one in which the technology also served a social purpose. Kenneth Silverman (2003) wrote in his biography of Morse that the rapid expansion of the United States before the introduction of the telegraph “had raised doubts about whether the Republic could be governed” (p. 241). Morse’s invention put those fears to rest, assuring that “American institutions could be extended indefinitely, the nation becoming a lightning-bound network of communities within minutes of each other, a single neuro-electropolis” (pp. 241-242). Likewise, the sporting world also became a “neuro-electropolis” of sorts, with athletes and teams in the East and Midwest also captivating fans throughout the sprawling country. By using the telegraph to cover sports event, the newspapers were thus stimulating the growth of sports and in turn sports reporting.

While it is true that “only a small proportion of the news came by telegraph” (Crouthamel, 1989, p. 47), readers could then turn to the more traditional and lengthier mail reports or regular staff

articles for the complete story and commentary and a more lively writing style.

By covering the Sullivan-Hyer fight as it did, the *Herald* provided a framework for newspapers to report on not only on prize-fights but also the other sporting events that were to follow as first baseball, then football and other sports gained in popularity, fueled in great part by the ever increasing newspaper coverage. The stage had been set for the national sports reporting and specialized sports reporters who were to appear in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As the *Herald* demonstrated through its coverage of Sullivan and Hyer, sports were to be an integral part of Samuel Morse's "one neighborhood of the whole country."

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Notes

1. Some boxing historians designate Tom Hyer's father, Jacob, as the first American champion for his victory over Tom Beasley in 1816. See John V. Grombach, *The Saga of Sock: A Complete Story of Boxing* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1949), p. 166. Others, such as Nat Fleischer, credit Tom Hyer as winning the first championship when he beat George McCluskey in 1841. See Fleischer, *The Heavyweight Championship: An Informal History of Heavyweight Boxing from 1719 to the Present Day* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1949), p. 50. Others, however, reserve that distinction for Tom Hyer until he defeated Sullivan. Adding credence to this claim is that the articles of agreement for the match named it as such, and both men were undefeated. See John Durant, *The Heavyweight Champions* (New York: Hastings House, 1964), p. 14.

2. Nugent (p. 335) wrote that in covering the Sullivan-Hyer fight, Elliott "dispatched from Baltimore to New York the first prize-fight message" ever transmitted by telegraph. Betts ("The Technological Revolution," p. 238) calls this "one of the first reports by wire." The author

has found no other references to a prior sports report transmitted by telegraph.

3. According to Nugent (p. 335), Elliott doubled “as a reporter of prizefights and horse-races. Seated at the ringside, he dictated a story to a stenographer, who later transcribed the notes for a copyreader to cut down and polish.”

4. The eighteenth century press dubbed the telegraph “the great highway of thought,” (Blondheim, 34) an analogy similar to “the information superhighway” tag given the Internet.

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