Saving Time and Annihilating Space: Discourses of Speed in AT&T Advertising, 1909-1929

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Abstract
In the early years of the 20th century, advertisements for the telephone—especially those created for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T)—did far more than sell the public on telephone service. They can be seen as constituting a pedagogy of modernity that was instrumental in shaping modern conceptions of time and space in the social imagination. This essay draws on numerous examples of telephone advertising and illustrates how they deployed representations of time and space in the discursive construction of speed as a product of the telephone. The author argues that the tropes of speed engaged by these advertisements aligned the possibilities afforded by modern technology with the acceleration of capitalism itself.

Keywords
time and space, advertising, telephone, 20th century, social imagination

Perhaps more than any other modern technology, the telephone provoked the North American public to imagine new ways of thinking about and being in the world. The invention of the telephone in the late 19th century and its subsequent installation in offices and homes through the early years of the 20th century was accompanied by a proliferation of texts and images that made expansive and often contradictory claims for its role in transforming modern life. The telephone was presented not simply as a new way to communicate; it was simultaneously credited with the ability to bring together “all races in all climes” and blamed for the collapse of community and familial relations. It was identified, at one and the same time, as ameliorating and intensifying the sense of alienation associated with the new era. It was implicated, along with the telegraph, railroads, and electricity, in the rise of pathologies related to life’s increasing tempo even as it was being heralded for enabling businesses to expand with security and efficiency. These representations of the telephone reflected and were imbricated with larger debates about modern life. They were grounded in the real social conditions and concerns of the day. Historian Ida Tarbell noted that by 1878, the year that the first commercial telephone exchanges opened, “The American people were feeling the full impact of the new forces which had been remaking their economic life since the Civil War.” Technology, industrialization, mass production, urbanization, and immigration were challenging traditional social conventions and expectations. There was

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very real disagreement over the values that would guide this new, modern America, and more
often than not, technology acted as a site on which these negotiations played out. Dreams of
unbounded economic and personal power, anxieties about social instability, and utopian longings
for democratic communication were projected onto the telephone by electrical experts, the business
community, the press, and the public alike and, in this way, came to have an impact on how
the telephone was imagined and accommodated in daily life.

In the early years of the 20th century, advertising—its a product of transformations in techn-
ology, business, and social values—emerged as an authoritative source of information about
modern products and possibilities. American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) was one of the
first companies in the United States to use institutional advertising in mass-circulation maga-
zines to build its reputation and shape public opinion. These advertising campaigns were not
intended to ‘sell’ telephone service to the public but rather to promote AT&T itself through
“advertisements so attractive that the people will begin to look for the monthly story about the
telephone.” The ads contributed to the public’s familiarity with the telephone and made tele-
phony and AT&T virtually synonymous while simultaneously masking the limitations of AT&T’s
networks and the broader social relations of power that underwrote the development of a conti-
nental telephone system. More significantly, these “stories” or narratives can be seen as forming
a pedagogy of modernity that was instrumental in shaping new conceptions of time and space in
ways that aligned the possibilities afforded by modern technology with the acceleration of capi-
talism itself.

My argument that advertising mediated a transformation in cultural conceptions of time
and space is suggested by theories of representation put forward by French sociologist Henri
Lefebvre and advanced by cultural theorist Fredric Jameson and historical geographer David
Harvey. Lefebvre argued that each historical stage of capitalism has produced its own distinc-
tive space that “permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting some and prohibiting others.” For Lefebvre, social space is comprised not only of spatial practices and representations of
space but also the spatial imaginary that shapes the perceptions of a given era and poses the
conditions of possibility by which that era can be distinguished and defined. Following from
Lefebvre, Frederic Jameson contends that representation—which he defines as “all forms of
aesthetic production”—functions as an allegory, or symbolic expression, that offers a nuanced,
if somewhat imperfect, rendering of social and economic relations at a given political-economic
moment. As such, he argues, representation itself sets the terms for political and economic
analysis. He writes that representation or, the “problems of figuration” that arise with

the passage from market to monopoly capitalism . . . conveyed by way of the growing
contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological
description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the condi-
tions of that experience.

Telephone advertising sought to depict the new spatial, temporal, and ultimately social relations
precipitated by the advent of electric communication. As representations, telephone
advertisements did not invent the concepts they engaged; rather, they interwove emerging
perceptions and themes arising in popular discourse to make sense of the new possibilities
offered by the telephone. The influence of advertising on social conceptions of the world must
be seen as taking place in collaboration with the many emerging practices and institutions of the
late 19th and early 20th centuries. Yet telephony must also be appreciated as one of the modern
communications media that quite literally transformed spatial and temporal relations and
ultimately exacerbated the contradiction that Jameson describes between lived experience and
the real conditions that support it.
It is for this reason, Harvey argues, that the study of representation should not be seen as simply incidental to historical analysis but rather that “the production of images and discourses is an important facet of [social] activity that has to be analyzed as part and parcel of the reproduction and transformation of any social order.” It is in the context of these arguments that I propose that representations of time and space in telephone advertising in the early decades of the 20th century can be seen as providing a pedagogy of modernity, in which the values of time and space embodied the logic of modern capitalism. AT&T’s campaigns took up the goal of influencing human minds and actions by employing metaphors of speed, instantaneousness, and immediacy that illuminated concepts of time and space in keeping with capitalism’s “great acceleration.” As such, these advertisements should be understood as narratives that simultaneously shaped perceptions of telephony and gave figural form to the novel concepts, experiences, and expressions of modern American capitalism.

**Discourses of Speed**

The tropes of speed employed in advertisements for the telephone system were not unique. Numerous other products and services advertised at the beginning of the 20th century articulated the rhetoric of progress and efficiency that pervaded modern society at large. Along with interpretations put forward by politicians, engineers, economists, philosophers, and novelists, these advertisements influenced how ideas about progress and efficiency came to be defined. Speed expressed the modern sensibility. It appeared to “modernize” every action, to enhance every transaction. In an era that social critics and commentators christened “the age of hurry” and the “most rapid age in history,” speed came to be regarded as an indispensable, or at the very least unavoidable, element of everyday life.

It would be an error to think of speed as an arbitrary value. Speed’s attraction was neither aesthetic nor abstract, although it certainly took on aesthetic and abstract qualities as it captivated the popular imagination. The relationship between modernity’s fascination with speed and capitalism’s valorization of speed’s effect on the circulation of capital was not lost on advocates of industry or advertising. To the businessman of the late 19th century, this correlation was plainly obvious. Andrew Carnegie wrote in 1886 that the speed of capital expansion “was an attestation of [America’s] triumphant democracy.” “The old nations of the earth creep at a snail’s pace,” he declared, while “the Republic thunders past with the rush of the express.” In a speech to the New York Electric Club in 1889, Erastus Wiman, president of the Canadian telegraph system remarked: “If to accomplish things quickly, close transactions promptly, and generally to get through with things is a step toward a business man’s millennium, then we must be nearing that heavenly expectation.”

Following World War I, the tempo of capitalism and everyday life accelerated rapidly. No one understood the significance of speed in the modern economy more clearly than advertisers. The author of an article appearing in *Advertising & Selling* in 1928 commented that it was perhaps not coincidental “that a large number of the fastest moving securities have been those of companies which provided us with speedier processes, transportation or conveniences”; his examples included “Dupont with quick drying Duco paint, the airplane manufacturers, the motors, the telephone and radio stocks.” Advertisers of the era recognized the allure of speed and its association with modern technologies, notions of progress, and optimism about the future, and they used it as a selling point for a disparate array of goods.

The Warner-Patterson-Perry Company advertised their shaving brush with the declaration “tis the speedy brush,” noting “you wouldn’t travel by ox-cart when an express train was available.”
The Hawaiian Pineapple Company promoted the superiority of their product by boasting that the
canning of their pineapples proceeded with “Speed . . . speed . . . split-second speed.”

The representations of speed that informed telephone advertisements during this era were
doubly potent because they were not just linking speed with any arbitrary product. Unlike
Warner-Patterson-Perry’s “speedy brush,” the telephone really did offer its users appreciable
advantages of speed and efficiency in both business and domestic transactions. The telephone’s
ability to annihilate distance “was not a science-fiction fantasy or some theoretical leap of
physicists” writes cultural historian Stephen Kern:

> It was the actual experience of the masses who quickly became accustomed to an
instrument that enabled them to raise money, sell wheat, make speeches, signal storms,
prevent log jams, report fires, buy groceries, or just communicate across ever increasing
distances.14

Telephone advertisements gave form to the benefits and uses of speed and offered a way of
imagining speed in the context of daily life. They presented an image of modern life that
mimicked the ideals of capitalist circulation: a life where people, goods, and ideas were in
constant motion. In doing so, these advertisements also implicitly warned businesses and
businessmen against trying to resist the velocity and momentum of change for fear of being left
behind—or worse in their estimation, of slowing down the nation’s financial growth. Telephone
advertising circulated these meanings and came to reify them, so that even those who had no
vested interest in supporting these concepts were made familiar with them and came to associate
them with ideas of democracy, progress, and modernity.

Speed emerged as a trope in telephone advertising in the early years of the 20th century.
Advertisements in the late 1870s had explained the workings of the telephone and proclaimed its
clarity of transmission—a claim that was not always warranted. In the 1880s and 1890s, tele-
phone advertisements appeared in newspapers or in telephone almanacs and directories, offering
information on the cost of services and announcing new exchanges or long-distance connections,
while continuing to promote the quality of the patented Bell telephone (Figure 1). In the
early 1900s, telephone ads started to employ the idea of speed to describe particular relationships
of time, space, and profit that the telephone made possible. One of the earliest examples is
the advertisement “All Business Depends Upon Communication,” which appeared in 1903
(Figure 2). While lacking the modern layout and use of illustrations that came to characterize
later ads, its use of metaphors of speed anticipated a representation of the telephone that would
soon dominate both telephone advertising and the social imagination.

Unlike the earlier advertisements that promoted the physical attributes of the telephone, describ-
ing it as “neat and portable . . . and an ornament to any room or office,” or “superior in design and
workmanship,” the 1903 ad focused instead on the telephone’s ability to alter the user’s experience
of time and space. It did so by engaging two representational strategies that are significant for their
correspondence to the ideals of modern capitalism. The first was the articulation of the speed of
communication and profit: “The more rapid and certain the communication the better, and the more
profitable the business. The telephone . . . affords the most rapid and certain communication possible
to imagine.” By the end of the decade, telephone advertising would come to provide the
public with ways of quantifying this relationship, and perhaps more critically, begin the process of
displacing traditional conceptions about time with new modern values.

The second strategy can be seen in the advertisement’s representation of the telephone as
mediating a new relationship between the telephone user and (geographic) space, one in
which spatial (and temporal) barriers to communication have been dissolved: “With an extension
station on your desk you have half the country at your elbow.” The metaphor echoes the shrinking of (national) space to a human scale, under human command, an achievement that was effectively realized with the emergence of national markets. The advertisement’s allusions to the telephone as transportation are also noteworthy in this respect. “Nothing,” claimed the ad “moves so swiftly as the telephone. . . . The quickest way of getting over the ground is to sit still and use the telephone. A journey by telephone will give you a taste of ideal rapid transit.” The depiction of the telephone as a mode of transportation both linked it to and distinguished it from the railways. It gave the impression that the telephone system, like the railway, was national in its scope.
Figure 2. Bell Telephone Company of Canada advertisement, 1903. “All Business Depends Upon Communication.” (BCHC File: Bell Ads 1900-1919. Reproduced with permission of the Bell Canada Historical Collection)
despite the fact that this would not be the case for over a decade. Conversely, it also acted as a reminder that the separation of transportation and communication was a relatively recent phenomenon; and that unlike railway travel, telephone communication transcended material limitations and truly “annihilated” space.17

While it might be argued that the discourses of speed employed by the advertisement were simply creative devices, it is difficult to overlook their resonance during this period of rapid and unpredictable capital expansion. This is underlined by the fact that in 1903, advertisements (like the telephones themselves) were not yet standardized. Individual licensees or telephone companies typically produced their own advertising—or rather purchased space in publications and arranged to have their advertisements produced by the printers.18 The earliest examples of references to speed in advertising were not the result of a coordinated marketing plan but rather appeared because they ‘made sense’ in the context of the era’s sensibility and logic. It can be argued that they also made sense in another way: they created ways of imagining the new temporal and spatial coordinates of life in the modern world.

**Time and Money**

By 1909, AT&T’s advertising employed complex articulations of speed to describe the telephone’s impact on the new relations of time and space. In the advertisement, “The Implement of the Nation,” the benefits of speed were subsumed by the notion of “efficiency” and the Bell System presented as the medium through which efficiency, at the level of the individual and the corporation, was translated into national productivity and wealth (Figure 3).

The increased efficiency of the individual, . . . the increased efficiency of the nation as a whole, because of the development of the Bell system, can hardly be estimated. . . . The modern corporation itself could not exist without telephone service of national scope. . . . The wheels of commerce have been kept at the necessary speed to provide this swift development by the universal telephone.

Although the telephone network was largely regional at this time, the advertisement relied on allusion to the railway’s “wheels of commerce” to create images of speed, time, and space that compensated for the telephone’s limitations of scale. One of the most intriguing elements of this advertisement is the temporal accounting that it performed. By allowing the businessman to address urgent business matters without resorting to the expense of “either a messenger or a personal visit,” the ad argued that the telephone not only saved time, it created wealth.

The mere item of time actually saved by those who use the telephone means an immense increase in the production of the nation’s wealth every working day in the year. Without counting the convenience, without counting the wonderful increased efficiency, but just counting the time alone, over $3,000,000 a day is saved by the users of the telephone! Which means adding $3,000,000 a day to the nation’s wealth!

While the equation of time and money was not a new idea—the concept was operative since mid-18th century when Benjamin Franklin famously declared that “time is money”—here the telephone was being shown as mediating an even more abstract calculation.19 Rather than labor time being seen as money (and time not spent working perceived as a loss), the telephone was represented as transforming time spent not working into a source of value. The calculation of a $3,000,000 profit on the basis of labor not performed is perplexing until one considers this new speculative value of time in relation to the growth of fictitious capital that accompanied the
emergence of national markets, the expansion of trade, the birth of the modern corporation, and the transformation from market to monopoly capitalism.

Such a representation of time can only be deployed if time (and space) is emptied of its social value or meaning—that is to say, its perceived value is independent of its use—leaving it available to take on a new and purely economic significance. This requires that time and space be conceived in purely abstract terms, the value of each minute and every mile standardized and
also conceived as a unit of measurement of that value. It is not coincidental that AT&T and its operating companies accomplished just this in the process of calculating the rates for long-distance communication.

This new manifestation of temporal and spatial logic had two consequences that had a profound impact on how modern time and space were conceived (and ultimately lived). The first consequence of the abstraction and standardization of time’s value can be likened to the effect of the division of labor as a means of generating absolute surplus value. With each minute having the same relative monetary value as the next, minutes became interchangeable and the entire 24-hour day—not just the traditional workday—could be imagined as a zone for commercial activity. While electricity, especially electric lighting, had already extended the workday into the night, its diffusion had not imposed an absolute value on increments of time in the way that the commercialization of telephone service—and especially long-distance service—would. Prior to the coming of the telephone, the partition of the day into work and family time was somewhat safeguarded by the physical separation of the business and the domestic spheres. Even the telegraph, because its use in the United States was largely restricted to the workplace, did little to challenge the partition between public and private domains. The telephone, as it became increasingly common in both offices and homes, disturbed these boundaries, so that time previously reserved for rest, relaxation, and social activities came to be opened up for all manner of commercial uses. Hence, the 1910 advertisement, aptly titled “The Always-on-Duty Telephone,” declared that the “Bell System is on duty 1440 minutes a day,” and noted ominously that “if any of these minutes are not used, their earning power is irrevocably lost” (Figure 4). As the 1,440-minute-day expanded the potential for profit, it also increased competition and established new expectations. An advertisement with the headline “Telephoning Against Time” described the modern American as active, forceful, and demanding: “When seconds count, Americans look to the telephone for immediate service. . . . They have no time to think of the tremendous load that is put upon the telephone system. They are not interested in the means. They demand results” (Figure 5). The advertisement explained that the Bell System Companies would realize immense savings if calls placed during the busiest calling times could be delayed and placed during periods of lower demand. But the expense of an “always on duty” telephone system was justified, the copy continues, because without it “the nation’s talk would lose in its race against time, and the whole telephone service of the country would be demoralized.”

The second consequence of the telephone’s abstraction of time and space was the conflation of the political and economic well-being of the nation. Both “The Implement of the Nation” and “Telephoning Against Time” render nation and market synonymous. National space is represented as an undifferentiated space through which “talk,” goods, and capital circulate. The first advertisement’s estimation that time saved by using the telephone adds $3,000,000 a day to the nation’s wealth obscured the fact that, just as America’s transportation and communications systems were privately owned, so too was the wealth that they generated. In this same vein is the second advertisement’s association of accelerated flows of information with national progress. In this case, the advertisement does not identify profit as the reason for racing against time but there is little doubt that this is what it means.

For business, speed’s ultimate ideal is the “annihilation of space by time” or “instantaneousness” because—as Erastus Wiman commented in 1889—“[t]here is no competition against instantaneousness.” Telephone companies—both AT&T and the independent telephone companies—were acutely aware of the telephone’s competitive advantage and they used the idea of speed to promote the telephone at every opportunity. AT&T’s advertisements advised the public on the telephone’s ability to provide “The Instantaneousness Answer” and described how it “Saves Time and Steps” and “vitalizes affairs by instilling into them the spirit of NOW” (Figures 6 and 7). Stromberg-Carlson publicized the benefits of its switchboard with the headline “Service
in the Modern Tempo” and Strowager Automatic’s advertisement, titled simply “Speed,” cautioned readers that because business proceeded “at a pace undreamed of by the business man of thirty or forty years ago, seconds or minutes lost in the transmission of intelligence now often mark the difference between success or failure” (Figures 8 and 9). In an AT&T advertisement titled “The Efficient Minute,” an oversized desk set stands paramount over a lineup of modern means of transportation—a steamship, a train, a tramcar, and an automobile, with an airplane.
circling above, while the copy affirms that “the Bell Telephone is quickest of all. It is instantaneous. . . . [It] has placed a new and higher value upon the minute” (Figure 10).

The concept of speed as a calculation of abstract time is evident in many advertisements created in the early decades of the 20th century, but Bell System advertisements continued to make use of temporal calculations well past mid-century as a means to illustrate the telephone’s convenience for subscribers, to introduce improvements to service, and to proclaim the importance
Sending a message is only half of the transaction. The other, and equally important, half consists in getting back the answer.

Sometimes this is a reply to a question, or the acceptance or rejection of a proposal. Sometimes it is simply an acknowledgment that the message has been received.

The value of the message depends upon getting an answer.

When a general manager sends word to a representative in a distant city, he wants to know that his man is there, that he receives the message, and that he will act.

If the answer is not final, but raises another question, there is no delay. The other question can be settled at once. It is possible, in one telephone interview, to come to a decision which could not have been reached without the instantaneous answer.

Each answer is made instantaneous by the Bell telephone service.

The Bell system, with its ten million miles of wire, provides the instantaneous answer for anybody, anywhere, at any time.

*Increased use of the Long Distance Telephone means greater results in every line of human endeavor. Telephone efficiency means One Policy, One System, Universal Service. Every Bell Telephone is the Center of the System.*

**Figure 6.** AT&T advertising proof, 1910. "The Instantaneouness Answer." (File 1, box 1, series 1, N.W. Ayer Advertising Agency Record. Reproduced with permission of the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution)
of innovation and research. An advertisement produced in 1910 employed this form of speculative accounting to declare that in the previous year “the Bell Telephone System handled Six Billion calls—or one hundred and ninety for every second. If each message meant a saving of only ten minutes time—a most conservative estimate—it means that in 1909 the Bell System saved to the American people, time equivalent to 114,155 years. In other words the Bell System rendered a service which would take an individual messenger 114,155 years to accomplish. A saving of ten minutes per call does not begin to represent the saving of time and steps even in the message across the street—much less the saving in the long distance message across the country. Nor does the mere saving in time begin to represent the comfort, the convenience, the dispatch afforded by these six billion messages sent from the five million Bell stations all over the country. The Bell System gets things done. It vitalizes affairs by instilling into them the spirit of NOW. Makes the business of tomorrow the transaction of the minute. Makes thoughts facts. Economizes a Nation’s time. Conserves a Nation’s energy. The Bell Long Distance Service has broadened the scope of a Nation’s interests. Has given the minute a value of many. Has given the people a hold on time. Has brought Opportunity within grasping distance. Has accelerated the growth of the NATION.

American Telephone and Telegraph Company and Associated Companies

For Rates and Other Information Regarding Service, Call the District Manager

The Central District and Printing Telegraph Company

BELL SYSTEM

Figure 7. AT&T advertising proof, 1910. “Saves Time and Steps.” (File 1, box 1, series 1, N.W.Ayer Advertising Agency Record. Reproduced with permission of the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution)
Figure 8. Stromberg-Carlson advertisement, 1929. “Service in the Modern Tempo,” Telephony (6 July): 4-5

Figure 9. Strowager Automatic advertisement, 1928. “Speed,” Telephony (2 June): 26-27
We have speeded up our ships and railways; we have made rapid transit more and more rapid; we have developed a mile a minute in the air and much faster in an automobile.

But the Bell Telephone is quickest of all. It is instantaneous. No weeks or days or minutes wasted in waiting for somebody to go and come; no waiting for an answer.

It is the most effective agency for making minutes more useful, more efficient.

In almost every field of work men are accomplishing more in less time with the Bell Telephone than they could without it. They can talk with more people, near and far; they can keep the run of more details; they can buy or sell more goods, and to better advantage; they can be active in more affairs.

The Bell Telephone has placed a new and higher value upon the minute—for everybody. It has done this by means of One Policy, One System, and Universal Service.

Bell Long Distance Telephone service not only gives an added value to a man’s minutes—it accomplishes business results which would be absolutely impossible without it. Every Bell Telephone is the Center of the System.

American Telephone and Telegraph Company
And Associated Companies

Figure 10. AT&T advertising proof, 1910. “The Efficient Minute.” (File 1, box 21, series 1, N.W. Ayer Advertising Agency Record. Reproduced with permission of the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution)

noting, “Telephone Research ‘Saves’ 77 Years” (Figure 12). Even though the factors involved in these calculations varied, the representation of time that underwrote them—fragmented, interchangeable, and uniform—remained constant. It resonated with the expansion and acceleration of capitalism itself: the speeding up of communication commensurate to the increased velocity of the circulation of capital that it encouraged and made possible.
Whether framed as “saved time,” efficiency, instantaneousness, or convenience, speed was the product sold by these ads and, like all commodities, it was mute about the conditions of its production. It is true that increases to the speed of telephone communications were produced through technological improvements to the telephone and the telephone system, which enhanced the reliability of connections and allowed operators to handle a greater number of calls more quickly. But this acceleration was more often the result of human engineering than electrical
engineering: telephone speed came at a human cost. The remarkable time savings and profits for users publicized in AT&T advertising were largely made possible by applying the principles of scientific management to the working conditions of operators, and included the use of supervisors and service inspectors to monitor speed-of-answer and speed-of-call-handling, and penalties for operators who did not achieve the expected rates of calls per hour.23

In addition to the discursive production of speed as time savings, early 20th-century telephone advertising also expressed speed as a relationship, or ratio, of time and space. Here, speed was the product of the telephone’s ability to “annihilate” space by time—the obstacle of distance to
the rapid circulation of capital overcome by telephone’s “instantaneity” and the telephone as a means of mastering space.

The Mastery of Space: The Landscapes of Capital

Roland Marchand tells us that one of the most stereotyped scenes to appear in the advertising of the 1920s was the image of the modern man at work. “Again and again he reappeared in a setting so predictable that it became one of advertising’s contributions to the nation’s store of visual clichés. . . . His minimal but sufficient props,” Marchand notes, “included a telephone, the inevitable window, and a pristinely uncluttered desk.” Advertisers for a wide range of businesses—among them, Goodrich Tires and Gulf Refineries—employed this visual blueprint to connote power, distinction, and control over the future. Marchand observed that the combined symbolism of the telephone and the “window-with-a-view” “inspired the welling up of a feeling best epitomized by the phrase, ‘master of all he surveys.’”

Corporate advertising of the 1920s was able to use the telephone as a symbol of power and prestige because that meaning had already been put into circulation by early telephone advertisements. In fact, the “master of all he surveys” tableau Marchand describes emerged well before the 1920s. The image of a businessman speaking on a telephone while surveying a panoramic view made its first appearance in AT&T advertisements over a decade earlier. But unlike Marchand’s newly minted 1920s white-collar professionals, the businessmen of the AT&T ads were railway presidents and business magnates, whose dominion of space was tangible and had truly been abetted by the telephone.

The 1909 advertisement “In Touch With His World” tells the story of the modern railway president who uses the telephone to stay in command of his system even as he “spends the greater portion of the summer at his country home renewing his energy” (Figure 13). The image depicts an elegantly attired man, candlestick phone in hand, surveying the view from a large window. The window is, in fact, so large that its frame is visible only at a point directly behind his back, so that the partition between the railroad president and the landscape is insubstantial and yielding. The view from the window is of open fields and gently rolling hills. In the far distance, in the upper right hand corner of the image, is a city with billowing smokestacks and chimneys. The advertising copy notes: “He may be one hundred miles or more away from headquarters, yet his office and the principal business centers of the country are within talking distance.” The image and copy capture the sensibility of the advertisement’s headline: one’s world no longer need be defined in terms of one’s location but could now be organized in ways that defied the real coordinates of physical space. In other words, the value of the telephone lay less in that it made it possible to speak to anyone-anywhere, and more in that it permitted its users to connect with only those people and places they deemed important, and to forgo the time-consuming niceties that traditional forms of social interaction required.

It is important to recognize the degree to which the telephone’s development—and the resulting transformations of perceptions and experiences of time and spaces—was influenced by class interest and organized by the principles of capitalist circulation. Telephone advertising of this period was eloquent in addressing these interests. “In Touch With His World” does not recommend the time-saving virtues of the telephone to all citizens but rather to those men—the “railway president, merchant, manufacturer, or professional man”—who commanded space in economic terms, who sought to speed up circulation and overcome the profit-draining effects of distance. Their class position reflected the status (and the aspirations) of those people who were the early subscribers of the telephone, and they were also the group that would be most likely to assess the value of the telephone in the terms imagined in this advertisement and to use the telephone in ways that would be most profitable for AT&T.
An advertisement from the following year, aptly titled “Annihilator of Space,” represents a markedly different set of spatial relationships (Figure 14). The businessman is no longer held at a remove from the landscape by a window frame but rather reaches over it. Here, the landscape in question is a map of the United States. The businessman is seated at the map as if at a desk, candlestick telephone resting in the vicinity of New York and Boston, his arm extended to point to Chicago. Whereas the copy of the earlier ad referred to telephone connections linking “principal
business centers,” the 1910 ad asserts that “[t]here can be no boundaries to the telephone system as it is now understood and demanded.” Here telephone space is represented as “contiguous territory” not as a network of differentiated places.

The representational expansion of the telephone’s domain is noteworthy. Whereas the 1909 ad depicted the telephone’s reach as extending to neighboring cities “one hundred miles or more...
away,” the advertisement of 1910 represents the telephone’s territory as equivalent to the geographic space of the nation. Perhaps surprisingly, this new figuration of the telephone system did not reflect either new technological developments or an expansion of the telephone network. What had occurred in 1910 was the finalization of a purchase organized by AT&T president Theodore Vail in which AT&T acquired control of 30% of Western Union Company stock—an acquisition that blocked Western Union from establishing a competing telephone network and effectively gave AT&T what could be called a “spatial monopoly” as the dominant provider of national telephone service.26 In that its key function was to insulate the company from the deleterious effects of competition, Bell’s spatial monopoly was similar to its earlier patent monopoly, but with the crucial difference being that AT&T’s strategic control of space gave it enormous authority over how the American telephone system would develop, as well as how and by whom it would be used. Although AT&T was forced to liquidate its holdings in Western Union on March 19, 1914, in compliance with the terms of the Kingsbury Commitment—an agreement between AT&T and the Attorney General of the United States which terminated an antitrust suit brought against AT&T by the Justice Department—by that time it had succeeded in gaining mastery of national space in very real terms.

With the 1912 advertisement “Your Telephone Horizon,” AT&T’s colonization of the spaces of representation broke through national borders (Figure 15). The ad depicts a businessman surveying a global landscape, its horizon line following the earth’s curvature. As was the case in 1910, the advertisement’s transcontinental allusions were not matched by real capability—the first transcontinental telephone line would not open for service until January 25, 1915—but its allusions to expanded boundaries for the telephone user are suggestive of AT&T’s aggressive program of corporate expansionism and Vail’s “One Policy, One System, Universal Service.” It would be an error to dismiss the representations of space in these advertisements as idiosyncratic or irrelevant. Taken as a series, these three ads act as figural equivalents of the spatial transformations that accompanied—and indeed were fundamental to—the expansion of capitalism at this moment in time. As the spatial domain of the businessman increased through the elimination of barriers to circulation, so did his distance to his markets. The relationship between the businessman and the landscape in these representations is resonant of the increasing dematerialization and abstraction of the marketplace and the difficulty of reconciling an individual’s experience of everyday life with the social conditions of its production.

The telephone’s conquest of space ultimately reproduced and inscribed relations of class in social space. As businesses expanded and head offices began to locate at a distance from factories and plants, there emerged new geographically inscribed relations between owners and workers, between white-collar and blue-collar activities. The telephone helped create new economic landscapes in very tangible ways. Wealth and power increasingly came to be concentrated within key urban centers drawing on resources (including labor) situated in (or relegated to) outlying areas.

The 1909 advertisement advised the businessman that the time saved by conducting business at a distance could be put to use by “renewing his energy—sailing, driving, or playing golf, making himself more fit for the busier season and able at all times to handle a larger system and a larger volume of business than the railroad president of two decades ago” (Figure 13). Likewise, the 1910 advertisement promoted the telephone as “indispensable to all those whose social or business relations are more than just purely local” (Figure 14). It is noteworthy that in these early ads time saved by “annihilating space” translated into time for leisure. As business use of the telephone became more common and was no longer restricted to the entrepreneurial class, time savings no longer accrued to the telephone user but rather came to be represented as time available to increase output. In an advertisement from 1933 titled “For the Salesman . . . Extra Arms and Longer Legs,” the reader is advised that “speed . . . means repeat business” and allowed for increased productivity: “[w]here formerly each salesman averaged six personal visits a day, he
now makes six personal visits plus twenty telephone calls” (Figure 16). The illustration that accompanied these observations shows a map of the United States in which geographic space is sectioned off and given a dollar value.²⁷ Beside each city’s name is a price—the cost of long-distance communication calculated on the basis of its distance from New York (and Wall Street). This image is noteworthy because it represented precisely what AT&T had accomplished with the creation of its Long Lines division and the establishment of transcontinental service: it
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inscribed national space with a cash/value ratio. Here not only time equals money but so does space, with the value of both determined by the telephone and AT&T.28

Telephone advertising also provided a way in which the public could imagine the expanded boundaries of “the modern world” and come to terms with the new international scope of the economic and political power relations that defined monopoly capitalism. AT&T produced hundreds of advertisements that document the telephone’s increasingly dramatic “annihilation of space by time,” its colonization of global space, and its homogenization of (cultural) difference. A particularly compelling example is the 1935 advertisement with the headline “Around the

Figure 16. AT&T advertising proof, 1933. “For the Salesman… Extra Arms and Longer Legs.” (File 4, box 20, series 1, N.W. Ayer Advertising Agency Record. Reproduced with permission of the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution)
World in 1/4 Second!” (Figure 17). Above the headline floats a two-dimensional image of a globe, the five continents shown from a vantage point high above the North Pole. Beside and slightly behind the globe sits a telephone. A loose ribbon in the background, suggestive of telephone wires encircling the world, appears as though it is about to be used to wrap up the globe like a parcel or gift. New York—located close to the center of the image thanks to a skillful compression of the Arctic—is linked with San Francisco, Randeng in Java, Amsterdam, and London by a ring of tiny lightening bolts that completes its circuit back at New York. The lightening bolts symbolize the speed of electrified speech, and its alacrity is reproduced in the staccato of the ad copy:

It is 9:30 A.M. in New York City. The President of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company is sitting at a desk. Fifty feet away, in another office, a Vice-President of the Company is at his desk. The President picks up his telephone and speaks. Faster than you could ever imagine, his voice speeds across the continent to California—where it is only 6:30 in the morning.

The voice leaves the telephone wires, and, magnified many millions of times by short wave radio, hurdles the rolling Pacific. 9000 miles from San Francisco, at romantic Java in the Dutch East Indies, the voice gathers new energy and rushes 7000 miles toward England—traveling the last lap by submarine cable under the North Sea.

The hands on Big Ben, in London, show 2:30 in the afternoon as the voice leaves England and leaps the Atlantic to Netcong, New Jersey, U.S.A. A few miles more, by telephone cable, and the head of the Bell System is heard by his associate—whose reply is traveling over the same route but in the opposite direction! For the first time in history, men’s voices have girdled the globe in a two-way conversation . . . and in only one-quarter of a second.

It is noteworthy that this advertisement was designed to appear in popular children’s magazines—one of a series that undertook to explain the telephone to a youthful readership. These ads were fashioned as primers on topics that might be of interest to the school-aged child, such as the manufacture of the telephone or the scientific principles behind its invention. But they were also eloquent, in words and images, about the ways in which the telephone had altered the temporal and spatial coordinates of the modern world, and transformed social relations. This advertisement’s reference to Jules Verne’s 1916 novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* was no doubt meant to appeal to the youthful readers of the magazine, but the allusion also acts to summon up images of travel that, by comparison, seem both slow and quaint. In Verne’s novel, set in 1872, the characters use all kinds of conveyances including trains, air balloons, ships, and steamers to travel from place to place in their race to circumnavigate the globe in 80 days. In contrast, the telephone that appears in the advertisement—quite appropriately a stylish handset telephone with all its connotations of modernity—is no less than a time-and-space machine that allows one to “travel” around the world instantaneously.

Telephone advertising can be seen as a second moment in the production of the telephone, a moment when the telephone comes to be constructed in its image form. The discourses of speed that informed telephone advertising at the early years of the 20th century gave the public ways of imagining the new spatial and temporal coordinates of the modern world and familiarizing themselves with the accelerating tempo of modern life. More than simply promote telephone service, they described new protocols and practices for capitalist competition and illuminated the attendant transformation of social relations. Because it captured—and defined—modernity’s sensibility and aesthetic, advertising played a significant role in shaping the public’s understanding and, ultimately, experience of speed and the transformation of modern life.

Writing in 1915, Earnest Elmo Calkins, sometimes called the “father of advertising,” observed that advertising “ modifici es the course of people’s daily thoughts, gives them new words, new
It is 9:30 A.M. in New York City. The President of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company is sitting at a desk. Fifty feet away, in another office, a Vice-President of the Company is at his desk. The President picks up his telephone and speaks. Faster than you could ever imagine, his voice speeds across the continent to California — where it is only 6:30 in the morning.

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It is unlikely that you will ever ask such service from your telephone. But it is thrilling to think of the possibilities in that black instrument standing so calmly on the table in your living-room. At any moment of the day or night, because of the facilities offered by the Bell System, you can speak by telephone to almost any one, anywhere in the world!

phrases, new ideas, new fashions, new prejudices and new customs.” It is important, though, to recognize that the relationship between advertising and the creation of cultural knowledge is not a straightforward one. The dramatic changes that accompanied the introduction of new systems of industrial production, increasingly rapid transportation, and long-distance communication had no context within conventional perceptions and traditional practices of the late 19th century. Advertisements served both as sources of information and sites for negotiation about the meaning of these changes. By mediating the reality of telephone communication and how that experience could be imagined and understood, telephone advertising can be seen as constituting a cultural pedagogy of modern time and space.

While the diffusion and use of new technologies must be seen as having the greatest effect on users’ perceptions, the impact of advertising on the public imagination should not be underestimated. Through its images and texts, advertising circulated ideas about modern values and acted to interpret the meaning and experience of electric communication. When considered in the context of cultural and social events, the representation of the telephone as “a speed instrument” in advertisements and popular media offered important insights into the values and debates of the modern era. While these advertisements do not directly reflect how people used the telephone, they do show us how the public was encouraged to imagine its potential and allow us to speculate on how they might have made sense of it in relationship to the spaces and places of everyday life.

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Notes
1. Tarbell (1936, p. 1).
3. AT&T President Theodore N. Vail hired N. W. Ayer and Son to produce a series of institutional advertisements for AT&T in 1908, beginning a relationship that would continue for most of the 20th century. See Griese (1977, p. 20).
9. Wiman (1889, p. 3).
11. Advertisers were also aware of the problems associated with the increasingly frenzied pace of the economy. In 1927, a self-promotional advertisement for the Calkins and Holden Agency alerted potential clients to the perils of the quickening economic pace:

Your world is being recreated by three important influences; first, the closeness of science and discovery to commercial manufacturing; second, the shortness of the link between the manufacturer and the consumer; and third, the amazing speed with which the American public makes up its mind to change its mind.
Writing that same year, adman Robert Updegraff observed that as “life has become swifter,” people became “less patient, more restless.” The public was “quicker to take up new ideas, to sample new products, to test new services—but quicker also to toss them aside.” Business failures were common as new social practices and habits replaced traditional ways, and competition between businesses for new products and for new markets increased. Updegraff noted that

if the American public has grown so busy, and so accustomed to telephones for communication that it is losing the art of social correspondence and consequently the demand for fine social stationary is falling off somewhat disconcertingly, no mere matter of advertising ingenuity is going to make people return to old habits of correspondence.

Updegraff counseled businessmen and promoters that success depended on their ability to keep pace with the market, urging them to develop “a new sales or distribution policy or method more in line with the new American tempo and temper”—in other words to fight speed with speed. See Caulkins and Holden Inc. (1927) and Uppengraff (1927).

15. Before telephone companies began to print directories, new subscribers’ names and telephone numbers would appear in advertisements in local newspapers. See Figure 1.
16. First reference from Bell Telephone Company of Canada, “The Telephone. Time and Distance Overcome!” (Bell Canada Historical Collection, 1877). Second from “The Bell Telephone Co’y of Canada” (Figure 1). Third from “All Business Depends Upon Communication” (Figure 2). “Bell Canada Historical Collection, file” Subscriber Advertising.
17. As James Carey (1989) points out that until the invention of the telegraph in 1837, the term “‘communication’ was used to describe transportation as well as message transmittal for the simple reason that the movement of messages was dependant on their being carried on foot or horseback or by rail” (pp. 203-203).
18. Interestingly though, AT&T had established what amounted to a nationwide clipping service by the end of the 1900s. AT&T licensees clipped any stories about the telephone industry that appeared in newspapers published in their territory and sent them to company headquarters. This archive proved to be very useful once AT&T began advertising systematically as it allowed them to track and compare public response to each ad campaign. See Marchand (1998).
19. Benjamin Franklin not only equated time spent working with money but also proposed a conception of unproductive time as a negative cost, a tangible loss against potential profit.

He that can earn ten shillings in a day by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversions or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides. (From Benjamin Franklin, Advice to a Young Tradesman [1748] as cited in Adam [1995], p. 87).

22. Contemporary representations of the telephone continue to employ the idea that savings of transaction time can be accumulated and converted into working capital. In a 1990 article on mobile offices in the financial magazine Money, a Los Angeles attorney is quoted as saying that his cell phone and mobile fax machine have “added two hours to my day and 25% to my annual gross.” James Katz cites a 1993 survey of cell phone users by Motorola that reports its findings in similar terms. Those canvassed
claimed that a cellular phone “added 0.92 hours to their productive working day [and] increased their own or their company’s revenues by 19 percent” (Katz, 1999, p. 20).

23. Numerous social historians of the telephone have documented the highly gendered regimes of worker control employed by the telephone industry in order to create system efficiencies. See especially, Green (2001) and Martin (1991). On the symbiotic relationship between human and technological engineering, see Noble (1977).


25. Marchand’s phrase “master of all he surveys” is the referent for my description of these images as examples of a new mastery of space (Marchand, 1985, p. 239).

26. The transaction occurred on December 20 although the negotiations began much earlier. Vail had been named president of Western Union on November 23, 1910, and held that position simultaneously with his presidency of AT&T until April 15, 1914, when he stepped down as head of Western Union. His resignation followed the sale of AT&T’s holdings in Western Union on March 19, 1914 (AT&T Archives, 1992, pp. 31-33).

27. It is noteworthy that two Canadian cities, Montreal and Toronto, were included in this map. While this did reflect the fact that many US businesses had dealings with Canadian companies in these two cities, a more significant reason for their inclusion was likely because Bell Canada—a de facto subsidiary of AT&T—was the dominant telephone service provider in Montreal and Toronto.

28. This ad is interesting for the way in which it designates the center and the peripheries of the business world. I did not find a corresponding map showing prices for calls originating in the west although it may well have been produced. Nonetheless, locating New York–Boston–Philadelphia at the center of the economic universe did have a certain resonance in respect to the transportation and communications networks of the day, and it was true most of all for AT&T. The inscription of long-distance prices on a national map can also be seen as the “privatization” of national space by AT&T—in that public space is used for private profit. On this point, the following assessment by Marx and Engels (1970) is notable: “Division of labour and private property are . . . identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity” (p. 53).


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Caulkins and Holden Inc. (1927, June 29). Your world has changed. Advertising and Selling, p. 15.


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