Chapter 12

Representing ‘A Century of Inventions’:
Nineteenth-Century Technology and
Victorian Punch

Richard Noakes

On 6 February 1858 the leading Victorian comic periodical, Punch; or, The London Charivari, published a short article entitled ‘The Newest Nouveauté de Paris’. It reported seeing ‘a new Crinoline petticoat’ called ‘La Crinoline de Leviathan’, which was ‘so denominated from the extraordinary number of slips’ it boasted. ‘The most curious part of the structure’, Punch continued, ‘[is that] the more slips it numbers, the greater the difficulty the Crinoline has in making way’, and that owing to its enormous size ‘there is great doubt [...] how the Crinoline can be launched’. What started like an item of news about fashion turned out to be a spoof report in which Punch cleverly blended commentaries on two subjects that had already inspired many of its satires: the ghastly size and unwieldy nature of crinoline dresses, and the protracted launch of the gigantic steamship, the Leviathan. Despite several major ‘slips’, this mammoth engineering task had finally been completed a week before Punch’s spoof.¹

Like so many articles in Punch, ‘The Newest Nouveauté de Paris’ bears an unrevealing title and yet contains valuable insights into the significance of particular technologies and technological metaphors in Victorian culture. Despite their apparent irrelevance to technological matters, such articles furnish some of the most startling evidence for the interpenetration of technical and non-technical discourses. Accordingly, this chapter illustrates the importance of an inclusive reading of all Punch material, from overtly ‘technological’ articles, such as a full-page cartoon of the Atlantic telegraph, to far subtler representations of engineering as in the ‘Newest Nouveauté de Paris’.

Punch has been called the ‘first and incomparably the greatest of the Victorian humorous journals’, which exerted ‘much influence on middle-class opinion’, and it remains a favourite primary source for Victorianists.² It was not an immediate commercial success on its launch in 1841, but within a few years this 3d weekly had established itself as one of the most widely read and admired comic journals of the day. By the 1860s it was enjoying weekly sales of an estimated 40,000 which was considerably greater than that of its rivals in the fierce nineteenth-century market for comic periodicals.³ Historians of Punch have shown that the periodical’s success owed much to its combination of respectable humour and
social conscience, a combination that contemporary commentators believed distinguished it from its scurrilous early nineteenth-century ancestors. Mark Lemon, who edited Punch from 1841 to 1870, believed that one way of achieving this respectable brand of humour was by ‘keeping to the gentlemanly view of things’, a remark which highlights the predominantly male and middle-class readership to which Punch contributors targeted their texts and illustrations. With such admired writers as Douglas Jerrold and William Makepeace Thackeray, and such esteemed artists as John Leech and Richard Doyle, Lemon played a key role in establishing by the mid-1850s the more genteel tone of the periodical. This transformation successfully responded to shifts in national circumstances—from the ‘hungry’ and socially turbulent 1840s to the economically prosperous and socially more harmonious 1850s—and the changing expectations of middle-class reading audiences.

Historians have provided ample evidence to show that, despite its satirical perspective on the week’s news, Punch remains a uniquely wide-ranging gauge of what one avid reader of the periodical called the ‘changing costumes, customs, fads, fears, and [follies] of the period’. Richard Altick’s recent ‘Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution, 1841–51’, for example, demonstrates how many Victorian observers recognized the uncanny skill with which Punch captured the details of the contemporary landscape. There now exists a large and growing literature that uses this material to document Victorian attitudes to such key issues as religion, science, race, the Irish, and social customs. Scholars have long recognized the importance of technology, invention, and engineering in Victorian Punch. The periodical’s appreciation of the cultural significance of technology is well illustrated by its 1866 observation that the nineteenth century was ‘A Century of Inventions’. Most studies of Punch and technology, however, tend to concentrate on the more straightforward material on invention and engineering and thus overlook its deployment of technological metaphors and allusions in the putatively non-technological articles. Altick’s analysis is the exception here; he presents a sophisticated reading of Punch and technology—one that gives a properly contextualist analysis of technological material and understands the two-way traffic between technological and non-technological discourses.

This chapter builds on Altick’s approach. It analyses the periodical’s representations of and attitudes towards technology, broadly defined, between 1841 and 1861. This timescale allows new insights into how the periodical changed between two monumental events in the history of nineteenth-century British technology—the railway boom of the early 1840s and the laying of the first Atlantic telegraph cables in the late 1850s. Moreover, unlike previous accounts of Punch, this chapter attempts to classify the various types of technological humour in the periodical and to suggest ways of developing a more sophisticated analysis of how technological subjects were deployed by Punch for comic and critical commentary on both technological and non-technological topics. Scholars agree that the popularity of Punch owed much to the ability of its writers and artists to refer to contemporary issues which readers would have been able to comprehend. Technological references were no exception, and by tracing Punch’s use of technological allusions and metaphors in a wide range of topics and genres, this chapter illustrates that an inclusive reading of a periodical reveals the embeddedness of particular types of technology in everyday life and shows the fears, anxieties, and enthusiasms about technology that Punch writers were so effective at sharing with readers.

Railways and Telegraphs: Optimism and Pessimism

Technology became the target of commentary in Punch for many reasons. Driven by the comic journalistic goals of producing texts and illustrations that were topical, amusing, and critical, contributors were particularly attracted to those technological events and issues with which readers would have been familiar and interested, and which were therefore ripe for satirical reflection and sober appraisal. Accordingly, inventions and engineering accomplishments that became the subject of discussion and sensational display in daily newspapers, exhibition halls, pleasure gardens, learned societies, Parliamentary proceedings, and society gossip were seized on by Punch as rich sources of material for its highly idiosyncratic editorializing on the week’s events. While the journalistic preoccupations of Punch contributors explains the extensive coverage of such newsworthy technological issues as railway safety and telegraphic communication, their liberal Bohemian outlook elucidates why they chose to re-present technological events that revealed fundamental human virtues and vices, from ingenuity and heroism to obscurantism and fraudulence.

The defensiveness with which Punch contributors tracked the week’s news meant that the periodical bore witness to the rapid technological changes in the mid-Victorian period. Accordingly, there were far more articles on or alluding to steam-locomotives, railway accidents, and railroad speculation in the 1840s than in later decades when railways had become integral parts of the lives of Punch readers and were thus no longer the technological novelties that made exciting copy. Likewise, a concentration of telegraphy articles in the 1850s reflected the spate of new electric telegraphs laid in that decade. By the 1860s, however, notwithstanding the brief flurries of interest in the 1865 and 1866 Atlantic telegraph cables, the declining amount of material on electric telegraphs suggests that they too were no longer seen as such newsworthy and effective sources of comedy and criticism. Similarly, while the new techniques of photography were frequent topics of satire in the 1840s, they occupied far less periodical space by the late 1850s when articles on the typical post-Crimean technological subjects of heavy artillery and other new military weapons attracted most attention. While the technological focus of the periodical changed with contemporary events, the wit, ingenuity, and overall tone had softened by the mid-1850s under Lemon’s influence. A good illustration of this is provided by contrasting John Leech’s hilarious and extravagant 1843 visual satire on William Henson’s aerial steam carriage with the same artist’s more sober 1858 depiction of ‘John Bull’ and ‘Brother Jonathan’ being joined by the first Atlantic telegraph cable (Figs 12.1 and 12.2).

The massive expansion in Britain’s railway and telegraphic networks was reflected in the prominence of these topics in Punch. During its first twenty years,
Punch balanced its concern about the perils of travelling on and investing in railways with an underlying enthusiasm for the possibilities of this novel form of transport. The railway boom of the 1840s provided ample opportunity for the periodical to warn against uncontrolled financial speculation in new railway schemes and to attack those avaricious entrepreneurs who seemed to be profiting from a form of transportation that was neither comfortable nor safe. Punch exploited a variety of literary and visual genres both to portray and to question the dangerous speeds, fragile machinery, and financial pitfalls associated with the railways. For example, an 1847 parody of a scene from Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream explained that the 'course of Railways did never run smooth' because they were 'difficult in curves' and 'stood upon Directors' whins' Elsewhere, Punch responded to the many new and apparently chimerical railway schemes with spoof news reports and descriptions of its own deliberately unprofitable alternatives. Throughout the 1840s readers were kept abreast of the progress of Punch's spoof 'Kensington Railway' which was described as 'a road leading from a place nobody ever was, to a place nobody was ever going', and whose financial state was so dismally that by 1848 its owners were renting out its telegraph line for drying clothes. However, this pessimism was balanced by Punch's identification of railways with progress, its celebration of the accomplishments of Robert Stephenson and other railway pioneers in the face of adversity, and its boundless enthusiasm for new railway inventions. In cartoons and poems readers saw steam locomotives represented as literal and figurative engines of British technological, social, and intellectual advancement, often in opposition to 'barbarian' foreigners, dogmatic clergymen, and others who impeded such developments, while in spoof prospectuses, cartoons, and droll commentaries on novel locomotive designs, readers were presented with such extravagant proposals as a new railroad from Britain to China via the Earth's core and using giant musical instruments to create locomotive warning signals.

Punch's representations of the electric telegraph also reveal tensions between technological pessimism and optimism. On the one hand, Punch was fascinated by the 'lightning' speed of 'electro-galvanic communication' and in the first article referring to the electric telegraph it considered the transmission speed to be so great that news could be 'received before it is written'. On the other hand, it was acutely aware of the problems that many of its readers would have faced with the telegraph, ranging from the lies apparently conveyed via what Punch christened the 'tell-a-cram' to the infuriatingly complex procedures of sending messages. However, Punch was satisfied that the problems of the telegraph had more to do with human incompetence than with any fundamental flaws in its principles of operation. In 1853, for example, it contrasted the expediency of telegraphic communication with the slow and circuitous routes by which post was delivered, observing: the 'law of the Electric Telegraph is a law of Nature which is unchangeable', while the 'law of the Post' is dependent on the whim of the Post Office. Indeed, Punch's droll proposals and enthusiastic commentaries on the possible applications of telegraphy—including remote medical consultation and crime detection—underlined its confidence that, despite its troublesome
manifestations, the telegraph would eventually improve the physical and moral condition of humankind.

The troubled attempts to span the Atlantic with a telegraph cable prompted a similar mixture of pessimism and optimism. The severance of the first Atlantic cable in August 1857 resulted in a series of humorous news commentaries, jokes, mock poetic laments, and a timely poem in which allegorical figures of steam and electricity exchanged the boast: 'we help morality; | That means we make to overtake | Rebellion and rascality', but then worried: 'with all our might, we haven't quite | Regenerated the nations'. The successful laying of the second Atlantic cable in August 1858, however, dissipated Punch's doubts about the utopian promise of global telegraphy. Four days after the Old and New Worlds had been connected by telegraph, Punch decided to make technology the subject of the week's celebrated 'large cut' (Fig. 12.2). It shows the allegorical figures of Britain and the United States—'JOHN BULL' and Brother 'JONATHAN'—pulling opposite ends of an Atlantic telegraph cable which is sinking the vessel of the ancient oceanic despot, Neptune. The cartoon expressed Punch's growing confidence that this electrical amalgamation of Britain and the United States could foster the international kinship required for vanishing tyranny.

As far as Punch was concerned, the miracle of telegraphy was more than a match for supernatural beings of both the past and present. Roman Catholic miracles, not to mention Roman Catholicism per se, were the frequent targets of Punch's ridicule, so few readers would have been surprised in 1859 by the periodical's sceptical response to reports of the simultaneous liquefaction of Saint Januarius's blood in several Italian towns. What was new about this anti-Catholic piece was the technological focus. Punch explained how the feat could have been accomplished by the electric telegraph and contrasted the reliable 'miracles' of engineering with the 'miracles' claimed by religious sects. Some Italian towns, it urged, '[are] places where the steam-engine has never been inspected, and where the electric telegraphs are utterly undreamt of' and where their agencies might readily affect a so-thought "miracle", and deceive the eyesights blinded by the darkened superstitions which are the stock-in-trade and groundwork of the Romish Church. Roman Catholics were not the only ones to be the targets of Punch's technological humour, and in its first two decades it produced a string of droll poems, spoof letters, and visual caricatures of ignorant rustics, women, and members of foreign races conveying their confusion and unfounded hostility towards new technology.

A Typology of Technological Humour

In the years prior to the opening of that symbol of mid-Victorian prosperity and technological progress, the Great Exhibition of 1851, Punch portrayed many other inventions that likewise indicate a tension between technological pessimism and optimism. While it could lament in 1849 that 'most new inventions, to go a very great way' seemed 'completely to have been dropt' because nobody would 'carry' them, the enthusiasm with which it greeted, explained, burlesqued, ridiculed, and
speculated on technology testifies to its underlying admiration for, and confidence in, the products of inventors' and engineers' workshops. To make sense of this rich material, it is important not only to survey what sorts of 'new inventions' captured the attention of _Punch_ contributors, but also to attempt to classify the different types of article in which technology features. Since there are satisfactory surveys in Graves's and Altick's accounts of _Punch_, my emphasis is on the latter.

One of the most common types of _Punch_ article featuring technology is the droll commentary on new inventions or schemes advertised in newspapers, not least those technological developments that promised to improve domestic and working conditions. Articles on a 'pocket stove', 'self-acting furniture', and 'fog glasses' explored the amusing effects of new inventions on social manners and customs, sometimes offering humorous interpretations of advertisers' typographical blunders or dubious assertions. One of _Punch_'s most revealing approaches to the relentless number of new contraptions was the seemingly serious article announcing a bogus invention. Thus, an 1843 spoof on William Henson's aerial steam carriage offered a luxury aerial courier suspended by the 'peculiarly light' issues of _Punch_ and steered by 'gigantic peacock's feathers' (Fig. 12.1), and another article introduced an 'Agricultural Pocket Thermometer' for measuring the 'loyalty of the agricultural protectionist'. Just as _Punch_ mocked the reductionist tendency of scientific 'progress' by devising its own sciences of subjects that were beyond such analysis, so these articles poked fun at the bewildering pace of technological 'progress' by puffing its own inventions for performing tasks that were clearly beyond technological solution. As so often in satire, comic results were achieved by vastly exaggerating sizes or expectations. In spoof prospectuses for such schemes as the 'Vesuvius and Etna Extinction Company' for pumping water into volcanoes using a 'MONSTER STEAM-ENGINE', _Punch_ parodied the mendacious style of advertisements to emphasize the often vast gulf between the actual and alleged capabilities of an invention.

An important indicator of the cultural significance of particular types of technology is the extent to which they inform metaphors or other aspects of non-technological discourses. _Punch_ occasionally blended its commentaries on non-technological issues with metaphors of and narratives about new bridges, cannons, automata, steam-powered looms, and other technologies. Inventions such as the 'Agricultural Pocket Thermometer' illustrate how mid-Victorian technology enriched _Punch_ 's representation of broad political and social issues. Technology helped poke fun at a more specific political issue in March 1860, when _Punch_ used a technological and political double entendre in the title of the main woodcut and accompanying poem, 'The New Russell Six-Pounder' (Fig. 12.3). This exploited readers' familiarity with the recently patented 'six-pounder' gun of William George Armstrong to represent the Foreign Secretary John Russell's new Parliamentary Reform Bill, an unsuccessful piece of legislation that proposed to reduce the franchise qualification for inhabitants of towns to £6. _Punch_ cast Russell as a political gainer, aiming his 'long-range electoral' gun into a bay where the range was to be measured by floating markers labelled with a range of values from '6 Pound Suffrage' to 'Universal Suffrage.'
More subtle and scathing, however, was *Punch*‘s use of technological metaphors to expose the defects of government machinery. Two days after the Crimean War officially ended, *Punch* presented a song charting the life of “a calico-weaver and spinner” called “JOHN BULL”, who took “infinite pains” to maintain powerful “spinning-machinery”, which duly won praise from “all Europe, including the Turk”. However, this representative figure of the English, proud of the international praise, suffered the humiliation of seeing his “perfect machinery” break down in front of his foreign visitors. He eventually traced the catastrophe to a stoker who had fallen asleep on duty, and hired another stoker who helped restore the machine to its “famous pace”. The allegorical nature of the song is, however, soon apparent from its moral: those who read the official report on the Crimean War would, *Punch* asserted, “find why our war-machinery dear, | In the act of working got so out of gear [...] | And in at the Horse-Guards’ Engine-room peep, | Where sits LORD HARDINGE, fast asleep”. *Punch* thus joined in the widespread condemnation of Viscount Henry Hardinge, the recently demoted Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, for mismanaging, from his Whitehall “Engine-room”, the British army “machine” that faced the Russians in the Crimea, and “broke down” before its Turkish and European allies.  

**Patents and Inventors**

*Punch* could be as subtle in representing its views on the politics of invention as on the politics of war. During the late 1840s and early 1850s it participated in nationwide campaigns to reform the patent laws that it clearly believed to be injurious to the English inventor. Its contributions ranged from such droll one-liners as “SOMETHING VERY PATENT—That some reform is strongly needed in the absurd laws that apply to patents”, to a natural historical description of the bureaucratic “Red-Tape Worm” of Whitehall which was “determined in its attacks on all new inventions”. It also published a Byronic parody charting the struggles of “CHILDE JOHNSON […] a venturous wight”, who fought such bureaucratic monsters as the “rapacious birds” of “Ravens’ Patent Nest”, and finally won “A magic scroll—a talisman—a thing yeclent a Patent” with which he safeguarded “a certain treasure” given to him by “The Fairy, bright Invention”.

The periodical did not simply act as a passive observer, criticizing the paltry rewards and struggles of inventors, but called on its readers to amend what it felt to be injustices meted out to the nation’s pioneers. The demise of Frederick Scott Archer, the “inventor of Collodion”, who had left his invention “unpatented, to enrich thousands” and his family penniless, inspired *Punch* to back a campaign led by Queen Victoria for a subscription fund. Exploiting the ambiguity of photographic terms, it called on the many “sensitive” photographers to leave a “deposit of silver” so that “certain faces, now in the dark chamber, [would] light up wonderfully, with an effect never before equalled in photography”; it haughtily insisted: “answers must not be Negatives.”

*Punch* was not always so appreciative of inventors and engineers, and its representations of these figures are as ambivalent as its portrayals of technology. While the periodical could memorialize such engineers as Robert Stephenson as “hair-brained and enthusiastic” individuals who proved the worth of their inventions in the face of derision, it could also turn these virtues into faults, caricaturing the inventor as either the “mechanical genius” whose eccentric contraptions disrupted the domestic setting of his pursuits, or the witness who gave incomprehensibly technical evidence before official enquiries. *Punch* itself was responsible for some of the derision that inventors suffered for pursuing “hair-brained” schemes, since it often portrayed itself as protecting the public from scams. Some inventors infuriated *Punch* so much that their names appeared in issues of the periodical as frequently as such esteemed figures as Robert Stephenson: for example, the physician-inventor, David Boswell Reid, whose ventilating apparatus for the new Palace of Westminster met with criticism from parliamentarians and the press alike. Between 1845 and 1854 *Punch* fuelled readers’ scepticism towards Reid’s unpredictable and unsatisfactory invention in witty commentaries on news stories, spoof proposals for inventions, jokes, poems, cartoons, and a short play. The invention lacked an “air of practicality” and was a “regular ill that blows nobody good”. Following news that Reid had been sacked by the politicians who had grown tired of the machine’s scrunching and icy blasts, *Punch* lampooned him as the “The Ventilating Guy Faux”, whose attempts to deliver a “fatal blow” to Parliament had been stopped in the nick of time.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated the benefits that an inclusive reading of a Victorian comic periodical can confer on cultural histories of technology. The identification of technology and technological metaphors in *Punch* not only shows the slippage between specialist and non-specialist forms of discourse, but provides new insights into the diverse cultural meanings of technology. It demonstrates the subtlety with which representations of familiar inventions and their producers were used to comment on broad political, social, and cultural issues, and also illuminates the presence of other, less familiar machines and mechanisms, whose comic portrayal also served non-technological goals. No representation is unbiased, however, and it is imperative that historians map the diverse interests informing *Punch*’s views. Comparing *Punch* with other illustrated and comic periodicals taken by bourgeois families, not to mention exploring the backgrounds of *Punch* contributors, will make these interests much more apparent.

An inclusive reading of *Punch* is nevertheless limited in a way that is of some consequence for the historian of technology. The copies of *Punch* and most other nineteenth-century periodicals to which most scholars have access are bound volumes rather than individual issues. We are thus deprived of the wrappers surrounding each issue which contained the advertisements on which the commercial fortunes of the periodical depended. *Punch* may have lamented the amount of puffery for inventions, but an inspection of rare copies of its wrappers reveals how much it relied on advertisements for books, patent medicines, inventions, and other commodities. Conversely, the fate of many inventors and
inventions undoubtedly depended on the publicity afforded by widely circulated periodicals like *Punch*. *Punch* rarely engaged in direct correspondence with engineers and even when it did it is difficult to establish how far this type of intervention, not to mention its technological representations in general, affected the long-term future of inventions. Systematic studies of wrapper advertisements—the frequently overlooked aspect of the dialogue between a periodical and the world of invention—can, however, illuminate this question. Together with the contextualist analysis of technology in the totality of *Punch*, as exemplified in this chapter, such research promises to transform our knowledge of how the periodical changed the cultural meanings of technology and also helped shape the future of technological developments.

Notes

1 I thank Graeme Gooday, Louise Henson, and Jon Topham for help in preparing this paper.
6 Briggs, *Cap and Bell*, xi and xiv.
9 ‘A Century of Inventions’, *Punch* 50 (1866), 192.
12 ‘Railways’, *Punch* 13 (1847), 147.
13 ‘Our Own Little Railway Once More!’, *Punch* 15 (1848), 135.