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Frank Kelleter

Anecdotal Manifestations of the Evangelical Here and Now: Four Conversions in Jonathan Edwards's Northampton

Abstract: This essay discusses the close affinity between religious rhetoric and anecdotal storytelling, focusing on evangelical notions of mediated immediacy during the Great Awakening (1730s to 1740s). In particular, it deals with four conversion accounts contained in Jonathan Edwards's writings on the religious revival in Northampton, Massachusetts. The essay argues that the ideological and soteriological work of these and other evangelical anecdotes is dependent, most of all, on their communicative velocity (rather than their formal brevity).

Keywords: American Enlightenment, Early Modern Media, Evangelicalism, Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards.

The etymology of the word *anecdote* (Greek for "unpublished") obscures more than it reveals. Associations of orality, privacy, provisionality, and even secrecy are common when one speaks of anecdotes, but such terms indicate no clear distinction between what is published and what is not. Rather, they raise questions about the scale and scope of different modes of sharing a story. A rumor circulated among family members, a joke told to a select group of partygoers, a note written to myself for later use: All these communications are kept away from larger audiences, but their resulting privacy, exclusivity, or secrecy in every case expresses a special degree of publicity rather than a state of non-disclosure. Since the public is not a place – not a physical area that autonomous individuals can choose to visit or stay away from – but a temporary gathering of communicative practices, there are many ways (and many media, including the human voice) in which things can be published or put on a path for wider distribution. We do well to consider that words such as "publication," "writing," "fiction," and, yes, "anecdote" do not refer to ideal forms or organic objects in the world, but to historically configured actions, that is, matters of self-description.

Genres, too, exist and develop as consolidated practice. This is of some relevance whenever we speak of anecdotes in generic terms. I take my departure from one such definition, which describes anecdotes as short but exemplary stories about relatively insignificant events happening to relatively significant

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historical figures.[1] Understood and reproduced in this fashion, anecdotal stories are often situated in specific times and places, and they show fictionalized versions of real human beings in singular everyday incidents. These stories are concentrated and revealing at the same time. They bring together unique lives and general insights. Their evolving art consists in connecting concrete moments and localities to universal patterns of perceptions. This is why anecdotes have proven highly attractive to systems of thought that understand the empirical world as an expression of *something else*, something both immanent in and yet fundamentally separate from the quotidian experience of "here and now."

Religious rhetoric, for example, abounds with anecdotes. At the same time, religious rhetoric typically claims to have transcended this particular mode of storytelling. And true, when religious anecdotes are strung together into larger units, like beads on a chain, they can form gospels, scriptures, holy books. My essay will address this literary alchemy, focusing on the 1730s and 1740s, when evangelical movements in North America, as part of a larger spiritual shift within the Atlantic West, coalesced into what would later be called the "Great Awakening."[2] Three decades before the American Revolution, this series of evangelical revivals transformed the colonial public sphere, not only because the Great Awakening diversified North America's religious landscape, undermining the hegemony of orthodox Puritanism in New England and Anglicanism in the Southern colonies, but also because evangelical communication effectively modernized many of the available modes and media of public storytelling in British America.[3]

It is no coincidence that this turning point in the history of American publicity can also be portrayed as a key episode in the American history of anecdotal storytelling. After all, the very word "evangelical" suggests a type of revelation that represents events in this world as bringing "good news" about another world, which is infinitely more meaningful.[4] While I will not be able to do justice to all the theological intricacies of the four conversions mentioned in my essay's subtitle, I will nevertheless employ these narratives to make two larger points about anecdotes and their history. The first of these points, building on Joel Fineman's (1980; 1989) landmark discussions of the anecdotal, holds that anecdotes are usually not the opposite of so-called grand narratives. Rather, anecdotes regularly serve as functional elements within larger rhetorical and ideological frameworks. Therefore, the cultural work performed by anecdotes has less to do with the much-quoted size of these stories – that is, their brevity or compactness – than with their rapid connectivity. Put more abstractly, a history of communicative practices will be more interested in the effective temporality of these seemingly minor and often incidental narratives than in their formal definition. Accordingly, my second point holds that anecdotes are best understood and studied not as *small forms*, as if they were isolated textual structures, but as *fast forms,* because they exist as highly connective structures with a special capacity for speeding up acts of storytelling.

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[1] Cf. Wilpert (1979: 27) and Cuddon (1991: 42).

[2] This essay relies on my previous discussion of the Great Awakening in the context of the American Enlightenment (Kelleter 2002; esp. 242–310).

[3] For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of the Great Awakening, see Lambert (1999).

[4] On the role of Puritan typology in this regard, sidelined in the present essay but of central importance to the issues discussed here, see Brumm (1963); Bercovitch (1972); Miner (1977); Kelleter (2002: 248–252).

To approach anecdotes in this manner, as techniques of larger narratives and larger narrative acts, means to ask which communities are (intended to be) constituted – and for how long – by such speedy communications.[5] This question is important because anecdotal storytelling is often defined as we have seen by its limited address. The notion of universal reach seems to run counter to the literary self-understanding of anecdotes. However, Christianity and the Enlightenment – two frameworks of rhetoric and ideology that are indeed huge but no less real for their bewildering diversity – have turned anecdotal stories into key components of emphatically universal narratives: divine love for humanity on the one hand, enabling forms of address no longer circumscribed by hereditary concerns or local necessities, and the sensual commonality of human beings on the other hand, allowing for the revolutionary concept of an all-inclusive public sphere, which claims to be capable of absorbing, potentially, every individual interest and experience. In the evangelical movements of the early eighteenth century, these two universalisms came together.[6] New methods of linking up singularity and truth were the result. The scientific case study, for instance, even and especially in its medical versions concerned with deviation, owes much to Enlightenment concepts of common sense and empirical reason. For Christian storytellers, in turn, the sublime model of narrative transcendence is the New Testament itself, or more precisely: the Gospels and their massive canon of learned hermeneutic expansion. Thus, evangelical rhetoric of the 1730s comes equipped with a highly complex, almost absurdly elaborate, theory of anecdotal storytelling.

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[5] Cf. "Temporal Communities" (2018). Relying on Fineman (1989), a first hypothesis addressing this question might propose that in anecdotes, "literary" and "historiographic" communities meet each other and constitute themselves.

[6] See Fiering (1981).

In colonial New England, the most sophisticated scholar of religious narrative was Jonathan Edwards, the minister of Northampton, Massachusetts, who walked a fine line between theologically legitimizing the Great Awakening and pragmatically controlling what he regarded as its enthusiastic and antinomian excesses. As an almost orthodox Puritan strongly drawn to the unorthodoxies of contemporary thought and expression, Edwards was a somewhat reluctant apologist of the colonial revival. He was also its most subtle theorist, especially concerning the role played by storytelling in the event of divine grace. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that Edwards's own writings about the awakening of his hometown, Northampton, contain a number of stories that can reasonably be called anecdotal. By documenting local details, these stories are meant to exemplify the authenticity of the mass conversions happening simultaneously on a much larger scale throughout the colonies. Thus, in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton* (1737), Edwards inserts into the larger trajectory of his theological argument a number of individual conversion accounts, among them the stories of Abigail Hutchinson, a single young woman, and Phebe Bartlett, a four-year-old child. Five years later, in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival in New England and the Ways It Ought to Be Acknowledged and Promoted* (1742), Edwards gives another short account of a powerful conversion, but this time withholding information about the name, age, and gender of the person in question. A fourth, quite different type of conversion is depicted in one of Edwards's letters at the time and then again anonymously in *A Faithful Narrative:* this is the tragic story of Edwards's Uncle Hawley.

In formal terms, the conversion tales of Abigail Hutchinson and Phebe Bartlett are interesting because they constitute anecdotes in which the spiritual function of anecdotal storytelling is explicitly addressed and theorized. We can almost call them meta-anecdotes – and as such, these narratives, in turn, are embedded in a larger theory of evangelical storytelling that ultimately refers back to the Gospels. Thus, the story of Abigail Hutchinson's conversion begins with Hutchinson hearing the story of another woman, a neighbor, who is little respected in town, but then, because of her conversion, becomes a public figure of sorts. Edwards writes:

> This news wrought much upon [Hutchinson], and stirred up a spirit of envy in her towards this young woman, whom she thought very unworthy of being distinguished from others by

> such a mercy; but withal it engaged her in a firm resolution to do her utmost to obtain the same blessing. (4: 192)[7]

Edwards thus admits, and even stresses, that Hutchinson's wish to be converted was mediated by previous narratives, or more precisely: by rumors. Nevertheless, *A Faithful Narrative* insists that the resulting conversion was authentic. In other words, Edwards holds that narrative arbitration and even the un-Christian disposition of "envy" can foster genuine salvation. This is an important point for Edwards, because his own telling of Hutchinson's story is supposed to do more than merely authenticate this conversion and others like it: it is supposed to mediate them, in the sense of actively preparing and provoking further "surprising works of God." And so it did, probably on a massive scale, if we regard Edwards's books, published in the authoritative voice of a theological storyteller, as crucial contributors to the Great Awakening rather than mere depictions of it.

Evangelical anecdotes have a twofold function here, a rhetorical and a soteriological one, or put differently: one having to do with strategic *mediation*, one with *immediate* salvation. Abigail Hutchinson, for example, gains a twofold distinction through storytelling. According to her minister's theory of narrative revelation, Hutchinson receives God's authentic grace despite the fact that she merely tried to imitate another person's rumored actions. Although her individual case is shown to spring from questionable ambitions, this shaky source is instantly transformed – by divine grace, which is said to be working through the "faithful" publication of a theological narrator – into "good news," that is, into an exemplary story that becomes a model, in turn, for "the conversion of many hundred souls."

A similar communicative structure is attributed to the conversion of Phebe Bartlett. At first glance, it seems as if Edwards selected this particular case for inclusion in *A Faithful Narrative* because the conversion of a four-year-old is difficult to trace back to previous theological knowledge. This was a central point of critique against the Great Awakening at the time: the idea that it was driven, not by grace, but by theological topoi. The conversion of a child would have been particularly attractive for defenders of the revival in this regard. Edwards, however, concedes that Phebe's conversion was, again, prepared by conversation: "[S]he was greatly affected by the talk of her brother, who had been hopefully converted a little before, at about eleven years of age, and then seriously talked to her about the great things of religion." Phebe also pays close attention to what her minister has to say (as does Abigail Hutchinson): “I love to hear them talk,” she tells her mother about her spiritual teachers (4: 202). In this fashion, the young listener soon turns into a lecturer; the pupil becomes an instructor herself, and a stern one:

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[7] *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1957–2008) are quoted here by volume number rather than year.

> [T]he child took her opportunities to talk to the other children about the great concern of their souls, sometimes so as much to affect them and set them into tears. [...] “I have been talking to Nabby and Eunice.” Her mother asked her what she had said to ’em. “Why,” said she, “I told ’em they must pray, and prepare to die, that they had but a little while to live in this world, and they must be always ready.” (4: 204)

This sounds terrifying. Phebe’s childish lectures read like oddly concentrated versions of Edwards’s own celebrated revival sermons with their fire and brimstone rhetoric, such as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (more about this below). But what makes Phebe’s talks with her friends even more terrifying is that Edwards seems unaware of this similarity. Or why did he include Phebe’s telling statements in his apology of the Great Awakening? After all, eighteenth-century theological discourse already understood the precarious status of child conversions. As William Rand wrote in *The Late Religious Commotions in New-England Considered* (1743):

> *Imitation* is *natural* to Children, especially in Language; and when such Imitation is *taken notice of* with *apparent* Pleasure and Applause, it is nothing *marvellous* if it encreases, and the pious Expressions they hear are caught, and repeated by them. – Whilst at the same Time they understand not what they say, and speak *only by Rote*. (10; original italics)

It can be assumed that Jonathan Edwards, one of the most discerning readers of contemporary philosophy in colonial America, was familiar with this line of argument. Why, then, did he include Phebe’s imitative speeches in his book? I suggest he did so because Phebe’s story and Phebe’s language fit a pattern of selection that determines all four anecdotes discussed here. This brings me back to the complex double function of evangelical anecdotes. As stories that fulfill both a rhetorical and a soteriological purpose, these religious narratives, situated at the threshold of the literary and the historiographic, serve to *mediate immediacy*. This is the ultimate and paradoxical goal of their “good news,” according to Edwards’s own biblical theory of storytelling: “There is no one thing that I know of, that God has made such a means of promoting his work amongst us, as the news of others’ conversion” (4: 176).

If this is so, the evangelical storyteller needs to acknowledge the agency of narratives and media in the conversion process, but at the same time he also needs to dispel any suspicion that the reception of grace is a fantasy that merely reproduces previous conversations. In order to achieve this – in order to mark divine communication as irresistible but nevertheless allow for human influence and storytelling – evangelical theology relies on the metaphysical concept of *preparation*, which defines the linguistic activities of competent speakers, such as ministers, missionaries, or theologians, as inviting the event of grace, but not causing it. That this construction shaped the selection of converts in Edwards's writings on Northampton becomes evident in the case of the unnamed person in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, because this unspecified convert – "unpublished" and yet made public – was none other than Edwards's wife Sarah Pierrepont. Notably, by withholding this information, Edwards changed the story. For when the narrator of the conversion tale subtracts himself and his own evangelical actions from the narrative, this distinguishes the experience of grace as all the more immediate in a literal sense of the term.

However, converts are converted into discourse as much as faith. In fact, claiming the priority of the latter over the former – claiming that affect precedes social interaction – is a defining discursive feature of faith itself. Already in *A Faithful Narrative*, one has to read between the lines to notice how much Phebe truly yearned to be acknowledged by the adult world and, in particular, by her spiritual mentor Jonathan Edwards, to gain rhetorical authority herself. In fact, even Abigail Hutchinson's conversion obliquely partakes of this pattern, because when *A Faithful Narrative* was published in 1737, Hutchinson was already dead. For the overall logic of evangelical story distribution, this fact is significant for two reasons. First, the model convert's physical demise takes care of one of the chief public arguments against the revival, which concerned the transient nature of many contemporary conversions. Critics repeatedly described the Great Awakening as a dramatic but short-lived religious epidemic, highly dependent on passing moments of crisis such as earthquakes or the arrival of charismatic itinerant preachers like George Whitefield.[8] In this situation, Hutchinson's conversion must have been particularly welcome to Edwards, because with the convert already dead, there could be no spiritual backsliding. This fact conveniently removed Hutchinson's life story from further social actions, turning her case into a singular one indeed.

But Hutchinson's singularity is instructive for a second reason as well, again connected to her death, or rather: her sense of mortality. If we read carefully, we notice that Hutchinson's desire for salvation was closely linked to her wish to commit suicide. At the time of her conversion, Hutchinson was suffering from a painful and visibly fatal throat disease. Edwards tells us about her "great longings to die, that she might be with Christ; which increased till she thought she did not know how to be patient to wait till God's time should come" (4: 196). Naturally, Edwards convinced her that this was a theological mistake and that she had to let God decide. This she did – and resigned herself to her fate. "After this," Edwards innocently declares, "her illness increased upon her" (4: 196). However we want to interpret the relationship between Hutchinson's orthodox resignation and the contrary reaction of her body, her re-evaluation of suicide fully accords with a typical doctrine of her spiritual teacher. For already in his early years as a minister, Edwards had preached on the topic of "Dying to Gain." In a sermon of this title, delivered in 1722, he described death as "a perfect freedom from temptation." But although the "gain of dying" is thus said to consist in the end of all "worthless, miserable, wretched, dull, earthly vanities" (10: 587), no human being has power over life and death, so that the beauty of a Christian death, according to Edwards, resides in its divine dispensation, its foreign sovereignty: "[Y]et let it come when, how, and where it will, it will be your unspeakable gain" (10: 590). The same scenario of renouncing suicide while affirming death organizes Hutchinson's narrative and, apparently, life. (Hutchinson eventually died of malnutrition; she might have refused food or was unable to swallow and starved to death.)

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[8] On Whitefield's role in the Great Awakening, see Stout (1991); Lambert (1994). For epidemiological accounts of the Great Awakening, see the writings of Charles Chauncy, such as *Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against* (1742), *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England* (1743), and *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield* (1745).

In this light, Edwards's anecdotes about the Northampton revival appear highly selective. Moreover, their selection appears to be strategic. It is firmly based in Edwards's theory of evangelical storytelling, which stresses the legitimacy of narrative influence on the event of grace, while the storyteller himself works hard to qualify (or even conceal) obvious signs of influencing. This explains why Edwards's conversion accounts deal with a dying woman, a child, and his own wife: people who have a vested interest in bringing themselves in accordance with Edwards's evangelical discourse. All three converts are dependent, in one sense or another, on Edwards's attention and approval, but in every case, their special dependence is de-emphasized, covered up, or denied in the act of storytelling. In this fashion, the evangelical doctrine of preparation serves to obscure the fact that certain effects are, if not directly caused, then strongly co-determined by the techniques and authorities of evangelical narration itself.

Evidently, gender plays a vital role in the generic allocation of these three stories; they are anecdotal because they touch on female lives. By contrast, when Edwards presents an ideal male convert, he opts for a mixture of curatorial and hagiographic modes, as in *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend*

Mr. David Brainerd (1749), his most frequently reprinted book, a five hundred-page tome much closer to the analytical ambitions of the modern-day case study than the conversion narratives of *A Faithful Narrative* and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*. In any case, Edwards's method of mediating immediacy – turning the here and now of individual moments into an evangelical truth – did not always work out as expected. The act of storytelling itself puts strong limitations on authorial control. Thus, a fourth conversion narrative in Edwards's writings on the Northampton revival takes a different turn: the story of Uncle Hawley, who suffered a death wish quite similar to Hutchinson's. In this case, however, Hawley's minister (Jonathan Edwards again) failed to theologically curb his subject's desire for suicide.

In terms of communicative structure, Hawley's story, despite its male protagonist, is virtually identical to the other three cases of evangelical exemplarity. This adds to Edwards's distress about his uncle's fate, because Hawley's story is not supposed to become another model tale – and yet it does. In the summer of 1735, Edwards reports in a letter to Benjamin Colman that Uncle Hawley, who had been converted under Edwards's guidance, cut his throat last Sunday:

> He had been for a considerable time concerned about the condition of his soul; till, by the ordering of a divine providence he was suffered to fall into deep melancholy, a distemper that the family are very prone to; he was much overpowered by it; the devil took the advantage and drove him into despairing thoughts. (4: 109)

Evidently, satanic power has to be invoked when evangelical communication develops an unpredictable momentum of its own. Without the devil, how can faith address its own involuntary effects? Sensing the power of "suggestion" but unwilling to trace it to the worldly instruments of transcendence, Edwards requires a divine antagonist, both a nonhuman person and a subject without subjectivity, to explain why Hawley's desperate act soon inspired others in *quite the same manner* that the evangelist's own storytelling prepared the event of grace for many souls now saved. In *A Faithful Narrative* Edwards writes about Hawley:

> After this, multitudes in this and other towns seemed to have it strongly suggested to 'em, and pressed upon 'em, to do as this person has done. And many that seemed to be under no melancholy, some pious persons that had no special darkness, or doubts about the goodness of their state, nor were under any special trouble or concern of mind about anything spiritual or temporal, yet had it urged upon 'em, as if somebody had spoke to 'em, "Cut your own throat, now is good opportunity: *now, NOW!*" (4: 207; original italics)

The temporality of this final suggestion with its fierce sense of urgency, its contagious conjuring of a sudden opening, an auspicious moment in time that would pass instantly, never to return perhaps, if that singular chance was missed – such imperative demands on a living body's here and now illustrate what fast narratives can do. What they are capable of. Satanic whispers are forceful not because they are short and succinct but because they act quickly. It is no coincidence that the pivotal word Hawley hears spoken to him by the devil is "opportunity." To understand the full force of this special temptation, we need to remember that the massive success of the colonial revivals in the 1730s and 1740s did not come out of the blue nor from hell but that it was the result of intense publicity measures and innovative media technologies. In this context, it bears repeating that Edwards's own revival sermons consisted of more than drastic warnings and threats. Despite what is suggested by the canonized example of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741) and its curious reception history, Edwards's sermons during the Great Awakening emphatically encouraged the positive self-reproduction of evangelical communication by insistently promoting exemplary conversion cases. In this fashion, Edwards and other eighteenth-century evangelicals developed techniques of spiritual peer pressure that in more than one way anticipated the language of modern advertising.

Hence, besides Satan, it was the Great Awakening's own itinerant preachers and keen local ministers who constantly stressed the unique "opportunity" that prospective converts needed to exploit while the divine offer still stood. Or in Edwards's own words (from "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"): "*now* you have an extraordinary *opportunity*," "*many* are *daily* coming from the east, west, north and south; *many* that were very *lately* in the same miserable condition that you are in, are in *now* an happy state," "*[h]ow awful is it to be left behind at such a day!*" (22: 416–417; my italics).[9] In this state of self-reproducing emergency, the rhetorical and ideological work of evangelical anecdotes resided less in their formal structure – their smallness, which has tempted post-1960s scholars to contrast anecdotes favorably with grand narratives – than in what is afforded, indeed mobilized, by such small forms: large and growing numbers of stories traveling at high speed from place to place.

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[9] Like a good marketing strategist, Edwards focuses especially on adolescents, the consumer group most susceptible to peer pressure: "And you that are *young men*, and *young women*, will you neglect this precious season that you now enjoy, when so many others of your age are renouncing all youthful vanities, and flocking to Christ? You especially have now an extraordinary opportunity; but if you neglect it, it will soon be with you as it is with those persons that spent away all the precious days of youth in sin." While adolescents are offered a chance to feel trendy and popular, children are addressed in a more authoritarian tone: "And you *children* that are unconverted, don't you know that you are going down to hell, to bear the dreadful wrath of that God that is now angry with you every day, and every night?" (22: 417; original italics). Given such statements, it is not surprising that *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival* declares: "The work has been chiefly amongst those that are young" (4: 504).

In the 1730s, Edwards was well aware of the spiritual capacities of space-transcending communication technologies (from itinerancy to transatlantic print circuits) and he methodically translated this awareness into a revivalist media strategy. To name just one example, early on in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" we find a sentence directly addressed to Edwards's audience in the town of Enfield, Connecticut. "Are not your souls as precious as the souls of the people at Suffield" (22: 418), Edwards asks the good people of Enfield, encouraging them to follow the example of their neighbors. In Edwards's original manuscript, there is a revealing note written in the text's margins at this point. Referring to the word "Suffield," Edwards jots down, "[t]he next neighboring town." If we assume that Edwards knew where Suffield was (and did not need to remind himself in a note), it appears that this sermon was written for repeated usage, in different localities, all with their own "next neighboring towns," the names of which could be inserted upon delivery in place of "Suffield" to evoke evangelical competition in the service of trans-local salvation. Something similar can be said about the anecdotes in Edwards's writings on the Great Awakening. The tales of individual salvation that we find in *A Faithful Narrative* and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival* are no longer classical Puritan conversion narratives. Rather, these are functional elements within a new and wide-ranging genre of religious storytelling that Michael Crawford (1991) has termed "revival narratives." Crucially, this storytelling genre is a *publication genre:* a genre, that is, which has fully grasped and embraced the soteriological affordances of print culture.

In sum, Edwards's short conversion stories function as print-cultural preparations of ongoing mass events, speedy technologies of salvation. Much like the public sphere of the European Enlightenment, from which Edwards takes his cue for his Protestant media theory, the evangelical public sphere of the early eighteenth century is driven by exemplary narratives so quick that they constantly regenerate their own communicative conditions. Or as Edwards put it in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival:*

> A history should be published once a month, or once a fortnight, of the progress of [this work of God], by one of the ministers of Boston, who are near the press and are most conveniently situated to receive accounts from all parts. It has been found by experience that the tidings of remarkable effects of the power and grace of God in any place, tend greatly to awaken and engage the minds of persons in other places. 'Tis great pity therefore, but that some means should be used for the most speedy, most extensive and certain giving

> information of such things, and that the country ben't left only to slow, partial and doubtful information and false representations of common report. (4: 529)

We are at the beginning of a modern media history here. Anecdotes – in a wider, praxeological sense of the term – are crucial players in this process. Therefore, whenever we study narratives that link the concision of individual moments to overarching truths and their demands, we are well advised to dispense with analytical models that treat these stories as if they were isolated formal structures. Instead, it pays to look at their specific temporalities and their technological connectivities, that is, their speeds and reaches. In fact, this perspective may be appropriate for all kinds of literary brevities, from pre-evangelical note-taking, as Meredith Neuman (2013) has shown in her study of early New England print culture, to Twitter, which is not understood adequately by studies focusing on individual tweets and their formal constraints of one hundred and forty or two hundred and eighty characters. For cultural historians it seems more fruitful to attend to the increasingly large and fast systems of interaction that generate, and are generated by, such seemingly small communications.

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