On Tuesday, 17 March 1868, the youthful Robert Coupland Harding set out from his father’s printing establishment on Hastings Street, Napier, to walk overland to his uncle John’s farm in Waipukurau, some 80 miles away. Apart from visiting relatives, the primary reason was to hand-deliver the weekly country edition of the daily newspaper, the Hawkes Bay Times, which had been overlooked in the scramble to bundle up the papers for the Cobb and Co. coach earlier that morning. As Harding’s diary records, the rhythms of walking provide a singular opportunity for observing in vivid and minute detail the world around him: from various signposts in the landscape, both familiar and foreign, to chance meetings with acquaintances; from getting lost and fording streams in the Big Bush to meeting a Maori woman who gives him a watermelon; from encountering three tramps sleeping rough who share a cup of strong coffee to bushwhacking through Scotch thistles. His jottings also include this wonderfully evocative description:

I left at 12:52, and the first thing I noticed on the road were the telegraphic wires,—the first time I had seen them. I soon became conscious of a most extraordinary humming which I heard at intervals, gradually rising, and then gradually dying away. It could not be the sea, and I was puzzled. Before I passed the houses, however, I found that it proceeded from the vibrations of the telegraphic wires, causing the posts to give forth a musical sound, and the ground to quake around them,—quite in the style of the Aeolian harp. Where the wires were at all loose there was an awful rattle. It struck me as being astonishing how tight the wires were drawn between the posts, being almost horizontal. I took notes of the milestones, and the time I reached them, as follows:—1. 1.3; 2, 1.18; 3, 1.32; 4, 1.50; 5, 2.6; 6, 2.21; 7, 2.37; 8, 2.55; 9, 3.12; 10, 3.30; 11, 3.47; 12, 4.5; 13, 4.20; 14, 4.40; 15; 4.59; 16, 5.15; 17, 5.34; 18, 5.53.

Harding’s encounter with the telegraph immediately results in a desire to mimic the stenography of sound, suspending the narrative by a marking of time and place that overwrites and encodes the landscape in numerical sequences. Later that evening when he tosses and turns in bed at the halfway house of his friends, the Fosters, he writes, ‘I still seemed to be taking quick and regular strides, and the
music of the telegraph wires rose and fell on my ears just as it had done for the first fourteen miles of my journey’ (Harding 1867–68).

The conjunctions and disjunctions of this moment are several: walking to hand-deliver a hand-typeset, hand-printed newspaper in a landscape already infiltrated by that exemplar of progress and speed, the telegraph; listening to the hum of the wires that deliver, in the end, not sound, but writing; and writing that, in turn through the print medium, recrosses delivery lines that depend, variously, on coach roads, railways, steamships, electrical impulses, and the rhythms of walking. This technological moment also exemplifies how the newspaper and periodical press in the long nineteenth century functioned as part of a global communication network. Molded by the interrelationships of hand and machine, walking and telegraphic transmission, slow reading and the illusion of instantaneity (Hofmeyr 2013), this flexible and fluid web of empire (Ballantyne 2012) was reliant upon the cut-and-paste economy of trade exchanges, repurposing snippets of information for domestic consumption, and sending the results out once more into the great sea of textual circulation.

The Printers’ Web, a Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden-funded project, uses twenty-first-century tools to unpick the thread and glue binding nineteenth-century typographical journals in order to understand the structures and rhythms of global communication networks in the printological world, and how they contributed to social and cultural cohesion amongst a highly mobile workforce in an era of mass industrialization. New imperial historians use metaphors such as webs and kaleidoscopes to describe this interconnected world of global interchange and globalizing sensibilities; they talk about migration and circulation as key elements. However, they rarely acknowledge the potential of a linked open data model or deploy methods from digital history or humanities computing that provide a perfect fit for the topic under consideration. The Printers’ Web is a test bed for exploring alternative, digitally mediated modes of data collection, analysis, and visualization that turn metaphor into practice.

Digital history is an internationally recognized approach to historical studies that is defined as the application of digital technologies to investigating and representing the past. As both a field and a method (Sword in Cohen et al. 2008), it relies on an increasing breadth of Web-delivered digitized resources that enable scholars and students ‘to make, define, query, and annotate associations in the human record of the past’ (Seefeldt and Thomas 2009), often in the context of Web 2.0 social media and gaming interfaces. A focus on tool building for resource discovery, analysis, and visualization is at the heart of this enterprise. Stephen Ramsay has coined the phrase ‘algorithmic criticism’ to describe this shift in humanities research from ‘criticism to creation, from writing to coding, from book to tool’ (Ramsay 2011). In his 2011 monograph, Reading Machines, Ramsay notes,

‘Algorithmic criticism’ sounds for all the world like a set of methods for exploiting the sudden abundance of digital material related to the humanities. If not a method, then perhaps a methodology for coping with it, handling it, comprehending it. But in the end, it is simply an attitude toward the