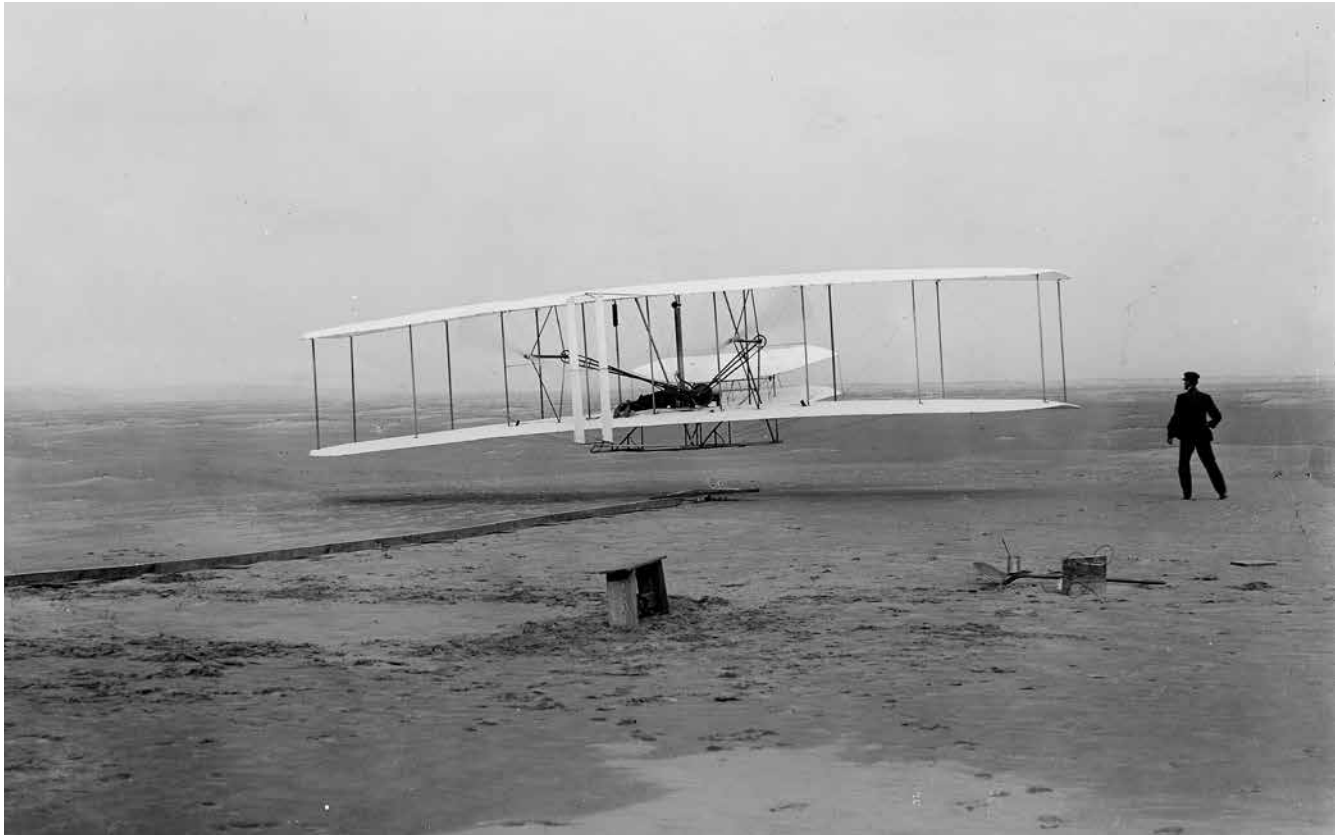


CRITICAL MOMENT

SNAPSHOT OF A COMMUNICATIONS TURNING POINT



DECEMBER 17 1903

ON A BRISK, WINDY MORNING, with his brother Wilbur running alongside, Orville Wright took off in a homemade aircraft and flew for 12 seconds. Later that day, Wilbur himself remained airborne for nearly a minute. Men had flown before, but never in a plane that powered itself and could be controlled mid-air.

For such a transformational moment, it was all remarkably casual. The Wrights had decided who would fly first with the flip of a coin. Only five men were there to see it. One of them, who had never even seen a camera before, took the photo.

Orville sent a telegram to their father, announcing their success and adding, almost as an afterthought, “inform Press.” The editor of the *Dayton Daily Journal*, with whom the news was first shared, responded: “Fifty-seven seconds, hey?”

If it had been 57 minutes, then it might have been a news item.” The Wrights discovered what many have since learned: delivering a great scoop doesn’t always lead to a great story – or any story, for that matter.

Other papers showed similar indifference, or in some cases, outright skepticism. *Scientific American* would publish an article titled “The Wright Aeroplane and Its Fabled Performances.”

For more than four years after their first flight, the Wrights remained largely unknown. This was partly by choice. Both Orville and Wilbur enjoyed working on the aircraft more than promoting it. It was not until 1908, after agreeing to a series of public demonstrations, that their achievements were finally acknowledged and celebrated worldwide.

That the Wrights could go unrecognized for so many years forces

Wilbur Wright watches as his brother Orville becomes the first person to fly a self-powered aircraft in this photograph, taken on the beach at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina

us to consider what matters more: an achievement, or whether it is noticed?

The temptation is to conclude that the newspapers simply missed a gift-wrapped story. More than a century later, the press’s negligence remains cringeworthy. But the Wrights certainly could have helped themselves by making a little more effort to engage with journalists.

There is no doubting the Wrights’ genius – Orville once built a printing press using a tombstone and buggy parts. But they failed to understand that even the most blatantly important stories are incapable of telling themselves.

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