

missing. Should policy focus on picking the few winners and increase the funding or should it rather try to improve the positions of those industries which are not on a world-class level. Here again, the book in total is rather descriptive and lacks a 'strategy' or a 'vision' statement on how to proceed with science and technology, especially from a policy perspective in Germany.

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Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse

Richard R. John

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In the seven decades after its establishment in 1775 the American postal system stimulated a communications revolution, comparable to the subsequent revolutions connected with the telegraph, telephone and computer. This book traces the central role of the postal system in that communications revolution and its contribution to American public life. The author shows how the postal system influenced the establishment of a national society out of a loose union of confederated states. Richard John throws the light onto a chapter in American history that is often neglected but sets up the origins of some of the most distinctive features of American life today. John characterises his book as an 'interpretative biography' of an important American institution. This biography is not written in a chronological order but rather arranged by different topics.

Chapter 1 characterises the role of the postal system as an agent of change that helped to spur the communications revolution. An important aspect is the organisation of the postal system as a branch of the central government. At that time, no other branch of the central government penetrated so deeply the whole territory of the US and played a comparable role in shaping the pattern of everyday life. The postal system bound the confederation of states together to 'one great neighbourhood' similar to today's information technologies creating a global village.

In *Chapter 2* John describes the development of the postal system from an appendix of the neocolonial bureaucracy to a central administration of an independent state. Starting point of that development was the Post Office Act of 1792 with the following major provisions:

- Including the transmission of newspapers through the mail for subsidised tariffs indicated a change from the fiscal rationale to the educational rationale for the postal system. This paved the way for the establishment of a national market for information.
- Congress got the power to designate new postal routes. Abandoning the fiscal rationale that each route should be self-supporting facilitated the rapid expansion of the postal system to a nationwide network.

The completion of the network is analysed in more detail in *Chapter 3*. Under the auspices of postmaster general McLean, the three elements of the postal system were further developed:

- Key structure of the communications circuit was since 1800 a hub and spokes system with distribution centres and branch depots. The communications circuit regulated the

transmission of the letters, newspapers, and other items, which at that time were included in the so called 'portmanteau' of the postriders and stagecoaches. This transmission of information from sender to recipient was separated from the mere physical conveyance.

- The physical conveyance in the transportation circuit was contracted out mainly to stagecoaches, which transported the 'portmanteau' from office to office. Those mail contracts were important subsidies for the stagecoach industry and helped as well to establish a network of stagecoach based public transportation throughout the country. In the later periods this subsidisation was restricted to mail routes in the hinterland.
- The financial circuit was the most time-consuming part for the general post office, due to complicated accounting schemes, which involved an enormous amount of paper work. This was only facilitated later by mandatory prepayment of postage in 1855 and the remuneration of postmasters by salary instead of payment by piece in 1864.

Bringing together the stagecoach industry and the postal system can be seen as one of the major contributions to establish a nationwide network with a regular schedule, not only for the transmission of information, but also for a passenger service.

Postal policy also played a leading role in the creation of an imagined community, in which a scattered citizenry was able to participate in the political process. *Chapter 4* describes the role of postmasters as leading figures in public life. As the postal patrons had to pick up the mail at the post office, this was a meeting point for merchants, tradesman and other men of affairs—the citizenry. John points out that women and blacks are excluded from that community, although they used the postal system to a non-negligible degree. In the first decades of the postal system the main part of the mail were newspapers. For a lot of Americans, reading a newspaper became a great collective ritual including discussion on fundamental beliefs. This enabled a politic of vigilance towards the central government, supplanting a politic of trust. Participation in the political process became a valued ideal. The predomination of newspapers in the mail was mainly due to the fact, that low newspaper rates were regarded to have a greater benefit on the public than a reduction in the letter rate. Only the Post Office Act in 1845 brought a substantial reduction in the letter rate and a simplification of the postage system, which led to an explosion in letter writing.

The postal system was also involved in the struggle over the proper role of the central government in American life. In *Chapter 5*, John takes the example of the sabbatarian controversy to demonstrate its role in shaping the boundaries of American public life. The sabbatarians protested against the transmission of mail and the opening of the post office on Sundays. They focused their protest on the postal system, because it was the only activity that was exempted from state and local laws that restricted work on Sundays. The underlying question was mainly, if the central government should have the capacity to shape the pattern of everyday life by such decisions. In the long run, the sabbatarians were successful and demonstrated, how easily a small group of activists could take advantage of the communications revolution. In this chapter John also shows, that the expansion of the communications infrastructure has enabled the sudden injection of topics, like the sabbatarian controversy, into national politics. It has often been overlooked that this was the basis for the transformation of the gentry-based political order to the mass-based political order still valid today.

The last aspect is elaborated in more detail in *Chapter 6*. The postal system was a well-spring of the mass party, by using extensively the patronage policy. The key role of the postal system again stems from the importance of the postal system as a nationwide institution of the central government and a source of federal employment at that time.

In his presidential campaign Andrew Jackson promised jobs in public offices for political support. This led after his election to a policy of partisan dismissal and postal patronage, which strengthened the political base of the Jacksonians. In the first years of the Jacksonian era, the postal system went into debt and the level of service decreased. This led to discussions of privatisation of the post office. Although this was never achieved and postal monopoly was even strengthened in the Post Office Act of 1845, private entrepreneurs competed with the governmental postal system on the lucrative routes. By 1845 private mail delivery firms transmitted two-thirds of all the mail in the US. But these efforts finally failed, last but not least due to the strong relationship between the postal system and the mass party. The Jacksonians strove to restore the balance of power between the central government and the individual states.

In *Chapter 7* John analyses another controversy on the role of the central government where the postal system is involved—the controversy on slavery. The abolitionists used mass mailings to get their message into the slaveholding states. The major question for the postal office was, whether there should be an obligation from the central government to deliver all mail (freedom of press) or the state laws prohibiting the circulation of antislavery publications should be applied. The second option falls under the doctrine of federal reinforcement of state law. Although congress decided in the Post Office Act of 1836 on the principle of inviolability of mail, this was never successfully invoked to expand the permissible boundaries of dissent. As long as the slaveholding states dominated the central government, there was no change. Only in 1860 the victory of the Republicans, an exclusively northern party, brought back the abolishment of slavery into the national discussion and reinforcement of the inviolability principle. But this resulted in the end to the rejection of the Union by the secessionists and culminated in the American Civil War of 1861. John describes this aptly as an epilogue to the communications revolution. The same facilities that had strengthened the Union in the first years later worked in the opposite direction and drove the Union apart.

The book is a comprehensive study on an important American institution during a critical epoch in its history. It has to be mentioned, that this book originated as a doctoral dissertation in history. The book should be valued as an excellent historical overview not so much on the development of the postal system itself, but rather on the contribution of postal policy to the political process and American society prior to the Civil War. Therefore the book is recommended to readers interested in American history and specially in the role of American institutions like the post office in the shaping of public life. John chooses on the one hand a style of enriching historical analysis with anecdotal evidence, which makes reading more interesting. On the other hand, the non-chronological order and jumping back and forth in time within the chapters complicates reading specially for those, not so familiar with American history.

In several respects, the book may also be of interest for those, working or studying postal issues today. It becomes apparent, though not being the aim of the book and treated in detail, that certain problems of the past find a counterpart in today's postal world. The controversy on the fiscal and educational rationale for example, is mirrored partly in the current discussion on universal service. The development of the electric telegraph was a similar spectre for the postal service like the electronic communication media today. Another conclusion is that the postal system is still underlying similar influences from politics like in the past.

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