REVIEW ESSAY

Going Postal

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News Over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897.

Menahem Blondheim. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994. viii, 305 pp. Index. Bibliography. ISBN 067462212x.

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

Richard R. John. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. xiii, 369 pp. Index. Bibliography. ISBN 0674833384. ∞

News in the Mail: The Press, the Post Office, and Public Information, 1700-1860s.

Richard B. Kielbowicz. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989. xii, 209 pp. ISBN 0313266387. ∞

Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays.

Leigh Eric Schmidt. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. xvi, 363 pp. Index. Bibliography. Illustrated. ISBN 0691029806. ∞

Handwriting in America: A Cultural History.

Tamara P. Thornton. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996. xiv, 284 pp. Index. Bibliography. Illustrated. ISBN 0300064772. ∞

A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public.

Ronald J. Zboray. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. xxiii, 326 pp. Index. Bibliography. Illustrated. ISBN 019507582x. ∞

"For my part," wrote Henry David Thoreau in the mid-1840s, "I could easily do without the post office." The railroad, the mill, and the pace of modern life all disturbed Thoreau, who fretted as Massachusetts rapidly transformed itself into the most urbanized and industrialized state in the Union. Writing from his bucolic vantage point in the woods outside Concord, the twenty-eight-year-old philosopher counseled fellow New Englanders to resist these modernizing trends, to "stay at home...mind our business" and, above all, "simplify, simplify." Still, as Thoreau shrewdly realized in 1845, regular mail delivery made such advice virtually impossible to follow. He despised the intrusion of postal service into his daily existence: "to speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life...that were worth the postage." Thoreau believed that "very few important communications" found their way into correspondence and that mail recipients would usually be better off emotionally and financially if they avoided paying the postage due. People visited the post office to satisfy a seemingly insatiable craving for news, but they left with mere "gossip." Newspapers, which dominated the mid-century mails, filled their columns with accounts of steamship wrecks, railroad accidents, livestock mishaps, and the local police blotter. Thoreau trivialized the newspaper as feminine and therefore insignificant, sneering that "they who edit and read it are old women over their tea." In the very act of deriding the post office's irrelevance, however, he soberly acknowledged its threatening and transformative qualities.[1]

In addition to Thoreau, many Americans—reflecting a broad diversity of sociopolitical perspectives—have complained about, critiqued, and wryly ridiculed the nation's postal policies. From the Post Office Act of 1792 through the creation of the U.S. Postal Service in 1971 and beyond, America's mail delivery system has served as the focal point for intense political wrangling, public debate, consumer controversy, and corporate rivalry. Some of the most extraordinary cultural figures in American history have tied their fame and fortune to postal affairs. Benjamin Franklin used his postmastership to great personal and political advantage in the eighteenth century. "Wild Bill" Hickok honed his gunfighting skills and participated in an early post office shootout while riding the post in Rock Creek, Kansas in 1861. Department store magnate and pious Presbyterian John Wanamaker served as postmaster general during a particularly innovative period in the department's history during the 1890s. Vice reformer Anthony Comstock used his position as a postal inspector to prevent the circulation of birth control information and to stifle radical political movements in late-nineteenth-century America. His attempt to "purify" the nation by banning "obscene" literature from the

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[1] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), 102–5.

mails became inextricably linked with "Victorian" morality in the popular mind. Charles Lindbergh flew the mail between Illinois and St. Louis before achieving celebrity status in 1927 with his New York to Paris flight, and his aerial exploits stimulated a dramatic increase in airmail volume. It thus hardly seems surprising that, when popular showman "Buffalo Bill" Cody sought to recreate his early career and magnify his own significance in his popular 1879 autobiography, he carefully invented an adventuresome series of exploits during a supposed stint as a Pony Express rider.[2]

Thoreau recognized the revolutionary potential and cultural significance of the post office. Surprisingly, many historians and most archivists have ignored it. Despite the sheer volume of correspondence in most archival collections, and the profession's fetishistic obsession with dissecting every minor episode in the new "information revolution," archival theorists have not adequately historicized or contextualized current electronic events. A tendency to equate informational advance with technological change, to assume (rather than prove) that the electronic records revolution constitutes something fundamentally new and unprecedented, and to focus on the form rather than the content of archival documentation, pervades much current professional thinking. Paying attention to the post office offers one way to put history back into current debates over information and communication issues. A growing, embryonic scholarly literature has emerged in the past few years that has altered the ways in which historians view mail, correspondence, and public postal policy. The newer works cited at the outset of this essay in particular, when considered alongside some older studies, such as the noteworthy work of Wayne Fuller, and some recent works concerning writing, literacy, and American business, alter our understanding of the history and nature of American communication. By synthesizing these studies, a narrative emerges that points to especially important and archivally interesting transformations in American communications culture between 1790 and 1930. Archivists who review and consider this new body of work will gain some important insights into their collections, their craft, and the claims of the new corps of "information specialists" and silicon snake oil salesmen who populate the American landscape in the 1990s.[3]

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[2] Franklin's years as postmaster are covered in Ruth L. Butler, *Doctor Franklin, Postmaster General* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928); "Wild Bill" Hickok's postal slaying of the McCandless gang is covered in William F. Cody, *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody Known As Buffalo Bill the Famous Hunter, Scout and Guide* (New York: Indian Head Books, 1991), 127–29; Wayne E. Fuller, *RFD: The Changing Face of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 18–25 discusses Wanamaker, as does William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 180–85. On Comstock and vice suppression, see Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print: The Vice Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) and Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 252–72. Lindbergh's contributions are documented in Carl H. Scheele, *A Short History of the Mail Service* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970), 156.

[3] This "review essay" essentially seeks to synthesize this new literature, to draw out its most significant

Building the National Information Infrastructure, 1790–1840

The most intriguing and thorough historical work on this subject concerns the early antebellum period, described by historian Richard John as possibly "the single most revolutionary era in the entire history of American communications."[4] In fact, it appears that many major elements of America's public communication policy were developed, debated, and at least partially resolved during an era that actually preceded the commercialization of the telegraph, the completion of the national railroad network, and the rise of national corporate capitalism. Subsequent technologies confirmed, rather than created, shifts in the existing informational universe. They supplemented, rather than subsumed, older forms of communication. Americans incorporated these technologies into a public informational infrastructure that, at its base, centered first and foremost on the mail. Archivists need to keep in mind that several ongoing communication systems complement and compete with each other at any particular historical moment, and that the documentary universe remains richer and more diverse than often appears the case.

Early American postal policy catered primarily to newspapers and commercial concerns. Both the Federalists who drafted the Post Office Act of 1792 and the Jeffersonians who supported it shared a general goal of increasing the flow of "public" information. The Federalists viewed a strong post office as a way to foster a national consciousness, strengthen a centralized state, and, not incidentally, expand their patronage network. Jeffersonians hoped to use the system to propagate their own ideology, provide a counterpoint to the Federalist press, and alert Americans to their opponents' shady political machinations. Both sides believed that increasing popular accessibility to news sources would strengthen their positions, and the 1792 legislation explicitly favored the press. Postal rates for newspapers remained disproportionately low, printers retained the crucial right to freely exchange their papers through the mail, and publishers could even circulate papers

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archival implications, and to incorporate these more recent arguments concerning mail, correspondence, and the post office into the still very useful older literature. The most accessible overview of postal history, written prior to the office's transformation into a governmental corporation, is Scheele's *Short History of the Mail Service*. The two works by Wayne Fuller cited in footnote 2, *The American Mail* and *RFD*, are indispensable starting points for examining United States postal history. There are also a number of interesting works on the Canadian postal system, which have not been included in this review. These include Robert M. Campbell, *The Politics of the Post: Canada's Postal System from Public Service to Privatization* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 1994), and Susan O'Reilly, *On Track: The Railway Mail Service of Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992). Another good point of entry into American postal history is to view the exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution's National Postal Museum, at 2 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. The phrase "silicon snake oil salesmen" is borrowed from Clifford Stoll, *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

[4] John, *Spreading the News*, 24. For a classic statement on the antebellum era, see Robert G. Albion, "The 'Communication Revolution,'" *American Historical Review* 37 (July 1932): 718–20.

outside of established postal routes. Letter-writers remained in a subordinate position and heavily subsidized the system. Best estimates suggest that newspapers generated only about 3 percent of postal revenue in 1792, but composed approximately 70 percent of postal weight. Comparable figures for 1814 were 8 percent and 70 percent, while in 1832 the press generated no more than 15 percent of total revenue while composing up to 95 percent of the bulk carried through the mails. Further, the free newspaper exchange privilege meant that printers always had a ready supply of news that could be reprinted to fill empty columns.[5]

Several important and seemingly contradictory informational implications resulted from these early postal policies. First, the widespread dissemination and subsidization of news through the mails appears to have buttressed the centralizing and nationalizing tendencies that some historians have associated with "modernization." By 1820 the United States boasted "more post offices and newspapers per capita than any other nation in the world," and a national news network centered largely in New York dispensed information to the hinterland. Newspapers, freely exchanging information by mail, tended to reprint the same national and foreign stories. This provided the news with a certain coherence, and created a relatively homogenized informational universe, although local variations existed and multiple political perspectives certainly were reflected. Up-to-date market information, data concerning new agricultural techniques and practices, significant (and trivial) government documents, and accounts of party debates all flowed from the major seaport cities to more isolated communities. The federal government largely underwrote the cost of this venture by indirectly subsidizing newspapers with cheap postage, subcontracting with transit companies (primarily stagecoaches, but increasingly steamboats and railroads as well) to deliver the mail, and using the postal service as a rationale for building a national overland transportation network. A cozy public/private partnership developed, as the postal system stimulated a wide range of business enterprises and internal improvements.[6]

Modernization and homogenization, however, constitute only part of the story. The national dissemination of news through the mails also created and fostered the growth of communities of interest that operated outside of tra-

[5] John, *Spreading the News*, 36–42; Kielbowicz, *News In The Mail*, 32–36, 43–50.

[6] The classic statement of modernization theory is Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600–1865* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976). See also his *"Knowledge Is Power": The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information, 1790–1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973) remains indispensable in tracing the ways in which information circulated between urban centers and their peripheries. The interpretation in this paragraph is based on Kielbowicz, *News In the Mail*, esp. 5–6, 31–50. The quote can be found on page 57. For an excellent account of the way in which the post office fostered private transportation, see Oliver W. Holmes and Peter T. Rohrbach, *Stagecoach East: Stagecoach Days in the East from the Colonial Period to the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983).

ditional geographical boundaries. Specialized periodicals, resembling newspapers in order to take advantage of lower postal rates, developed along political, occupational, fraternal, reform, and religious lines. Tensions developed between particularistic local cultures and national "imagined communities" of interest that sought to erase geographical differences and shape public opinion. If the postal system initially supported nationalist sentiments and buttressed the concept of a strong central government, it also divided Americans in new ways. Serious culture wars fragmented the nation in the 1820s and 1830s. Jacksonian politicians, exploiting popular resentment against eastern elites and such large national institutions as the Bank of the United States, rode to power on a platform that promised respect for provincial cultures, acknowledgment of regional diversity, an end to large governmental public works programs, and hostility toward the national institutions and bureaucratic concerns located in the metropolitan centers. Debates often centered on how "news" and "facts" were defined and how they differed from mere "opinion," and how authority itself might become institutionalized and recognized in a society of democratic equals.[7]

The post office figured prominently in two political controversies that especially exposed the fault lines of American culture in the 1820s and 1830s: sabbatarianism and abolitionism. Movements to eliminate Sunday mail delivery and boycott transportation companies that moved freight on the Sabbath pitted an increasingly aggressive national coalition of evangelical activists against the interests of merchants and businessmen in such smaller commercial ports as Rochester and Canandaigua, New York. Religious observance conflicted with the growing need for timely market information by capitalist entrepreneurs in the hinterlands. Significantly, both sides used the national mail network itself to circulate and file petitions, publicize their respective causes, and recruit like-minded national constituencies to advance their interests. Although their moral visions for the nation differed, these competing interest groups participated in a national process of coalition building and information sharing that relied heavily on the modern postal system. Both evangelicals and their opponents created "virtual" national communities that sought influence and control over the new transportation and communication revolutions. They acknowledged the reality of the transformation, even if some lamented the message.[8]

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[7] John, *Spreading the News*, 169–80, explores these tensions in detail. On Jacksonianism and the state generally, see Robert Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822–1832* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955) remains a critical study for understanding Jacksonian ideology.

[8] John, *Spreading the News*, 169–205, covers sabbatarianism. For other accounts of the mail issue, see Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 105–16; James R. Rohrer, "Sunday Mails and the Church-State Theme in Jacksonian America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 7 (Spring 1987): 53–74; and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Prelude to Abolitionism: Sabbatarian Politics and the Rise of the Second Party System" *Journal of*

Abolitionism presented an even more direct threat to national unity. During the summer of 1835, New York-based abolitionists sent roughly 175,000 pieces of mail to the southern states, in an effort to convince slave-holders that they should abandon their "sinful" practices. The reformers carefully formatted their appeals to resemble magazines so that postal officials would allow them in the mail without question. Abolitionists did not prepay postage, thus offering mailmen an incentive to deliver and collect from the recipients, and they addressed their publications to specific individuals in order to answer the objection that information might fall into the hands of slaves or free blacks. The mail campaign appeared to confirm the worst fears of southerners who operated on the communications periphery: the post office made it possible for outside national interests, unresponsive to regional concerns and opinions, to flood communities with "incendiary" material that violated local norms. Control over the postal system, and the informational universe that it spawned, was critical to maintaining local folkways, customs, and institutions. Southerners won the battle in 1835: a vigilante society known as the "Lynch Men" broke into the Charleston, South Carolina post office and destroyed thousands of abolitionist periodicals. The Charleston and New York City postmasters soon reached a formal agreement that abolitionists could no longer transmit their periodicals through the mails to South Carolina, since the content violated southern law, tradition, and opinion. Amos Kendall, the nation's postmaster general, adopted an extreme states' rights position and suppressed the periodicals in the interest of buttressing local mores. In the long run, however, the post office helped to redefine the nature of community and undermined local control over information flow. As the events of the 1830s indicated, competing social groups and conflicting interests would continue to battle over postal policy and, implicitly, control over the nation's information network.[9]

Politicians and postmasters during this formative period also concerned themselves with providing equal access to information. A speculative venture by northeastern capitalists in 1825 illustrated the problem. After receiving notice of a sharp price rise in European cotton markets, these merchants paid a mail contractor to speed a purchase order for large quantities of cotton to southern farmers, and to withhold the news of the market shift until the purchase had been concluded. By controlling the news, they made a quick financial killing and impugned the integrity of the postal system. Information meant money, and postmasters in the 1820s and 1830s devised a series of

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American History 58 (Sept. 1971): 316–41. In fact, the sabbatarian issue was not resolved finally until 1912, when Congress voted to close down the few post offices that still maintained Sunday hours.

[9] John, *Spreading the News*, 257–80. Other accounts of the abolitionists' postal crusade include Leonard L. Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Abolitionists' Postal Campaign of 1835," *Journal of Negro History* 50 (Oct. 1965): 227–38.

methods to favor public interest over private business concerns. They carefully laid out postal routes, restricted private expresses, and used special pony riders to transmit timely economic information between northeastern ports and such burgeoning market towns as St. Louis, New Orleans, Mobile, and Charleston. Faith in the federal government as a protector of the public good characterized the antebellum communication pioneers. When Samuel F.B. Morse began commercializing the telegraph in 1844, he hoped that this new invention would be administered as a branch of the general post office, and many merchants agreed. A democratic society and a smoothly functioning capitalist culture required equal access to information and controls over speculative interests. Mounting evidence indicated, however, that information could not be distributed on an equitable basis. Insiders continually sought ways to subvert the postal system, relying on private couriers and bribing public officials. The specter of a society divided into knowledgeable information "haves" and less sophisticated "have nots," loomed large.[10]

Most historians and archivists associate America's communication and transportation revolution with a series of technological innovations roughly traceable to the 1830s and 1840s: railroads, the penny press, photography, and telegraphy. The above survey indicates that the major intellectual questions that confront information policymakers today predate technological change. The post office stimulated widespread debate over privileged information, the creation of "virtual" communities not based on geographical proximity, the relationship between public policy and private enterprise, and the desirability of limiting the free flow of information. Positions were staked out early, and the antebellum experience offers no comforting evidence that conflicting views could be resolved equitably. Individuals and professional associations concerned with information policy in the 1990s need to study and digest these early debates.

Presenting One's Self Through the Mails, 1840-1870

Beginning in the 1840s, a series of postal reforms altered the structure and very nature of the American mail system. Legislation between 1845 and 1855 slashed and simplified rates for individual letters. Weight, rather than number of sheets, became the criteria for determining rates, and three cents per half ounce emerged as the standard price for mailing a letter. With some variation, this basic cost endured for nearly a century. Individuals no longer subsidized cheap newspaper postage by paying high rates, and Congress accepted the notion that the post office might run a deficit in the interest of increasing communication and information exchange between American citizens. Other reforms also encouraged individuals to make greater private use

[10] John, *Spreading the News*, 83–89; Fuller, *The American Mail*, 171–78.

of the post office. Distance zones were largely eliminated, and standard rates applied for letters sent up to three thousand miles. Prepayment of domestic postage became compulsory, the stamp was introduced as a standard item, and the post office even began issuing embossed stamped envelopes in 1853. Other new features guaranteed greater security and convenience. The post office introduced a domestic registry service (1855), second and third class mail categories (1863), free city delivery by carriers in major metropolitan centers (1863), money orders to eliminate transmission of cash and currency (1864), and penny postal cards for convenience (1873).[11]

Cheap postage, convenient delivery, and the new safety features stimulated and coincided with what may be termed the golden age of American letter-writing. Prior to 1845, Richard John has noted, "Few Americans ever sent or received a letter through the mail." Between 1840 and 1860, however, the number of letters handled by the post office increased fourfold, to over 161 million items. Merchants still wrote the vast majority of letters, and the commercial northeast still mailed a disproportionate amount of correspondence. Other social groups, however, were beginning to put pen to paper as well. Technological change made writing tools much more widely available. Machine-made paper came into common use, with chemically treated wood pulp emerging as an inexpensive alternative to rags as raw material for paper manufacturing. Mass-produced steel pens also decreased in price, as Richard Estabrook opened the first pen company in the United States in Camden, New Jersey, on the eve of the Civil War. A more literate public eagerly consumed these writing products. The nation's expanding common school system, which developed and matured alongside a broad range of private educational institutions from Sunday schools to academies, helped produce nearly universal white literacy by the end of the antebellum period. White women especially read and wrote in unprecedented numbers.[12]

The postal revolution coincided with, and supported, a transportation revolution and geographical movement that reshaped the North American continent. Depleted soil and declining agricultural opportunities precipitated a mass movement from farm to city in the northeast. Canals, steamboats, and the completion of the transcontinental rail network destroyed traditional notions of time and distance, and stimulated the invention of new forms of business enterprise. Americans on the move appeared to be creating new kinds of communities, composed of strangers, young men on the make, and

[11] Summaries of the legislation can be found in Scheele, *Short History of the Mail Service*, 73–76, Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail*, 82–89, and John, *Spreading the News*, 156–61.

[12] John, *Spreading the News*, 156. A good brief overview of writing technology can be found in Edmund Berkeley, Jr., "Writing Instruments and Materials," in Edmund Berkeley, Jr., ed., *Autographs and Manuscripts: A Collector's Manual* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 28–39. On literacy, see the instructive essay by Carl F. Kaestle, "The History of Literacy and the History of Readers," *Review of Research in Education* 12 (1985): 11–53.

random acquaintances. Correspondence remained the only way to stay in touch with kin and friends left behind. Convenient mail service perpetuated old social ties and in many instances created new forms of virtual community among an increasingly rootless population whose constant mobility threatened traditional links to locality and place. The rising tide of German and post-famine Irish immigration in the 1840s also produced a new transatlantic traffic in letters, and the United States accordingly concluded a number of international postal treaties and arrangements. Women began corresponding with women in growing numbers, prompting one historian to discover a "female world of love and ritual" that relied on letters to establish and deepen affective ties.[13]

The sheer volume of this letter-writing frenzy is staggering. The amount of per capita correspondence traveling through the mails increased from 1.61 pieces per year in 1840 to 5.15 in 1860. Figures for urban centers were much higher: New York and Boston both sent out over thirty letters per person in 1856, reflecting at least in part their emergence as important national and regional business centers. Evidence indicates that mid-nineteenth-century correspondence took on new physical characteristics as well. Historian Tamara Thornton has chronicled the way in which Victorians viewed handwriting as a presentation of the self and a key element in the formation of character. White women took up their pens and carefully learned elaborate ornamental hands, using the lush roundness and ornate letters of Spencerian script. While writing became the way in which many Victorians invented and physically presented their unique characters in an increasingly anonymous and impersonal society, it also became the way in which they demonstrated their self-control and conformity to external models of achievement. Accurately reproducing a perfect script, rather than expressing one's own individuality through handwriting, became the desired goal for many.

The substance of correspondence, as well as its form, developed in new ways. Few historians have analyzed the actual content of nineteenth-century personal letters, but Ronald Zboray's comments are suggestive. He argues that correspondents strove "to perfect their orthography and grammar because they knew they would be on public display," and that "a stiff formality commonly plays tug-of-war with the conversational tone" in Victorian letters. Observing that personal communication often took on the tenor of popular fiction, he concludes that "the changeover from face-to-face oral communication to the written medium of the letter transformed the very nature of the self, from one defined by total immersion in the community to one self-constructed in the act of writing letters." New lines of commercial products

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[13] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Society and Culture* 1 (Autumn 1975): 1–30.

communicated the same message. "Letterwriter" books proliferated and went through multiple editions, instructing correspondents on the proper form, technique, and style for communicating messages.[14]

Perhaps the valentine craze, one of the remarkable cultural creations of the 1840s and 1850s, best exemplifies the new mode of public and private correspondence. Valentine's Day, virtually unknown as a holiday in the United States in the 1830s, was transformed into a major commercial event by the following decade. Both homespun and commercially produced cards, often circulated through the mail, became the hallmark of the February festivities. Ready-made sentiments and verses, composed by professional "valentine writers," were reproduced both in handmade cards and the mass-printed varieties. Self-expression and originality coexisted and blended with formulaic and often hackneyed sentiment in communicating the most private and personal of thoughts. Comic valentines, which lampooned the recipient and frequently contained at least mildly obscene overtones as well, could also be sent under cover of the mails. As the first American holiday structured around the "greeting card," Valentine's Day reflected the ambivalence of a culture on the cusp of a communications revolution, where new forms of structured rituals and heavily stylized correspondence threatened to overwhelm older forms of celebration and talk.[15]

Most correspondence during this period remained business-oriented, however, and the transformation of corporate culture also contained important implications for the post office and for America's information infrastructure. Clearly, the telegraph significantly altered the nature of nineteenth-century communications. It permitted the instantaneous transmission of news and information and, in language very familiar to late-twentieth-century Americans who have been schooled in the exaggerated claims of the Internet, was immediately hailed as the "great highway of thought." Still, telegraphic transmission did not replace postal communication in any quick or linear fashion. In the newspaper industry, for example, both the telegraph and the postal exchanges coexisted side-by-side, each serving a very different purpose. The telegraph provided quick, concise, simplified, homogenized information in a reasonably efficient manner. It also cost money, proved difficult for individual newspapers to commandeer for any length of time, and was subject to sabotage by speculators seeking to limit the flow of inside commercial information.

Partly in response to these issues, six New York City newspapers combined in 1846 to establish the "Associated Press" (AP), a wire service de-

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[14] Zboray, *A Fictive People,* 71, 110–21; Harry B. Weiss, *American Letterwriters, 1698–1943* (New York: New York Public Library, 1945); Scheele, *Short History of the Mail Service,* 99–103; Thornton, *Handwriting in America,* 43–66.

[15] Schmidt, *Consumer Rites,* 39–104, is an excellent discussion of Valentine's Day that traces the material culture of the holiday.

signed to supply consolidated news stories to participating news organs. The AP pioneered a new journalistic style, based on precise, matter-of-fact statements that seemingly contained no personal references or opinions. The medium shaped the message in this instance, as the cost of transmission demanded brevity and concise description. A veneer of objectivity masked the real biases and partisanship inherent in the news selection process, and furthered the development of an impersonal, nonlocal and seemingly even-handed mode of discourse. Newspaper exchanges through the post office, by contrast, allowed the circulation of multiple perspectives at a somewhat slower pace. Stories that proved more complex, overtly opinionated, feature-oriented, or of somewhat narrower interest could only be shared through the traditional exchanges. Thus the exchanges and the telegraph coexisted for thirty years, until Congress eliminated the privilege of postage-free newspaper exchange in 1873.[16]

One additional communication-related business concern that thrived during this period deserves some attention as well: the private express. William F. Harnden, a former railroad conductor, established the first private express route between New York and Boston in 1839, and a number of other prominent competitors soon followed suit: the Adams Express Company, the American Express, and Wells Fargo. The western "Pony Express," which actually enjoyed a very short existence between 1860 and 1861, especially captured the popular imagination and received a disproportionate share of subsequent historical notoriety. Most firms made their money carrying parcels, since the post office limited the maximum weight of any item that could be carried through the public mails, and by serving densely populated areas of the country at a lower cost than the government. Private companies carried money, perishable goods, and other valuable commodities from place to place at a speed that could not be approached by the post office. By ignoring unprofitable routes, taking advantage of transportation routes and companies subsidized by the postal service, and marketing their services aggressively to soldiers in the Mexican War and Civil War, the expresses proved highly profitable. The post office responded with cheaper rates, door-to-door service, and tighter enforcement of its monopoly over letters. Not until a subsequent generation invented the parcel post, however, would express companies abandon their communications interest and move into other even more profitable areas. By that time, however, the relationship between postal service and American business enterprise had been reconfigured in new and unprecedented ways.[17]

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[16] Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail,* 151–55; Richard B. Kielbowicz, "News Gathering by Mail in the Age of the Telegraph: Adapting to a New Technology," *Technology and Culture* 28 (January 1987): 26–41; Blondheim, *News Over the Wires.*

[17] Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail,* 170–75; Fuller, *The American Mail,* 162–64; Scheele, *Short History of the Mail Service,* 71–73. A good corporate history of one of the premiere companies in this area is

The Business of America, 1870-1930

In 1890, shortly after Benjamin Harrison appointed John Wanamaker as postmaster general, only nineteen million out of the seventy-six million people in the United States enjoyed mail delivery at their front doors. For virtually all small town and country people, postal service proceeded in the time-honored fashion described by historian Wayne Fuller: "The trip to the post office, a mile or so down the old dirt road to the first crossroad, a turn to the right and straight into the village...the methodic process of tying the horses to the rail in front...the call at the window, the slow, unconcerned movements of the postmaster as he shoved a letter or two and the county weekly through the iron grating." The post office, usually located in a country store, served as a place of conversation, informal communication, waiting for the star route rider, and male social club. It also operated, in Fuller's words, in "painfully unbusiness-like" fashion and seemed particularly ill-suited to an age of corporate consolidation, speed, the completion of the national transportation network, and the urbanization of America.[18]

Beginning in the 1890s, Congress, the post office, and rural Americans themselves engaged in a massive campaign to lay out postal routes across the nation: in 1902, there were fewer than eight thousand routes in the nation; by 1905, there were thirty-two thousand. The goal of "everyman's mail to everyman's door" was articulated and largely accomplished by the 1920s. Politicians scrambled to obtain service for their districts, farmers began one of the largest petition-writing campaigns in history, and the rural mail carrier emerged as an important social type in the countryside. Rural Free Delivery (RFD) service often pitted the interests of farmers against small town merchants, who feared a loss of business and customer traffic in their post office/ stores, and competition with mail-order houses in the cities. It also divided county road occupants who competed and lobbied for routes that would pass their own houses. And it stimulated support among rural Americans for the "good roads movement" in the early twentieth century, as federal money reshaped the country landscape through the creation of state post roads.[19]

RFD did not realize its full potential until the establishment of parcel post service in 1913. Prior to that date, postal patrons could not send domestic packages weighing more than four pounds through the mails. Express companies handled freight, and six notoriously arrogant businesses exerted almost complete control over this unregulated monopoly at the turn of the century. Excepting a few urban centers, express service ended at the railroad

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Peter Z. Grossman, *American Express: The Unofficial History of the People Who Built the Great Financial Empire* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1987).

[18] Fuller, *RFD*, 14–15.

[19] Fuller, *RFD*, 58, 177–98.

terminal and door-to-door service was virtually unknown. Country people occasionally paid postmen a fee "under the table" for delivering packages and supplies, but the post office's inability to compete in this area represented lost revenues and inconvenient service. The parcel post debate proceeded along similar lines to the controversy over RFD. Small-town merchants, according to Fuller, operated in "the world of the general store and the cracker barrel: still the world of the smooth-talking, flashily dressed drummers who traveled from town to town and store to store, carrying bags packed with samples of their line." Express companies, country storekeepers, small businessmen, and wholesale merchants lobbied heavily against parcel post. Ultimately a coalition of farmers, urban consumers who believed that the service would provide cheap farm products direct to their door, and mail-order companies prevailed. American business, and the nation's communication infrastructure, would never be quite the same.[20]

First and most immediately, parcel post accelerated the death and rebirth of the express companies. Few mourned their demise, as they had gained an extraordinary reputation, even by Gilded Age standards, for indifference to consumers, inconsistent and shady rate practices, and unscrupulous political chicanery. Some, like United States Express, simply closed up shop. Others attempted to compete with the government for a few years but transformed their companies by World War I into very different corporate configurations. American Express, for example, chose to become a worldwide banking organization, concentrating on a full range of shipping, foreign trade, and tourist services. Wells Fargo abandoned its express business and similarly concentrated on its banking functions. The government had the lucrative express business largely to itself, and its representatives often became the chief points of contact between federal bureaucrats and ordinary Americans.[21]

Parcel post proved an enormous boon to another business. Postal historians have noted that RFD service did not really increase outgoing mail from farmers to the extent that proponents had anticipated. Per capita letters from rural route patrons did increase somewhat, from fifteen in 1903, to nearly twenty in 1911, and to twenty-one in 1929, but this growth certainly did not coincide with the thousands of postal routes opened during the period. Further, much of the increase can be attributed to the use of penny postcards, which achieved great popularity with farmers and small-town letter-writers. Incoming mail, however, proved a different story. Each farmer received approximately thirty-four pieces of mail in 1911, and a staggering

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[20] Fuller, *RFD*, 199–227; Scheele, *A Short History of the Mail Service*, 143–46; Richard B. Kielbowicz, "Government Goes Into Business: Parcel Post in the Nation's Political Economy, 1880–1915," *Studies in American Political Development* 8 (Spring 1994): 150–72.

[21] Grossman, *American Express*, 125–87, charts both the abuses and the entrepreneurial rebirth of this organization.

sixty-one pieces in 1929; and much of this increase can be attributed to vast changes in American marketing, advertising, and business practice.[22]

Mail-order stores developed shortly after the Civil War, and in 1872 Aaron Montgomery Ward opened the first large retail concern that sold a full range of goods through the post. Ward's business boomed, and other urban retailers discovered a large market of potential consumers in country towns and rural hamlets. Robert W. Sears, capitalizing on his homespun smarts and his ability to communicate with ordinary people, soon entered the field and transformed the industry. Often denigrated as "hayseeds" and far removed from metropolitan centers of influence, farmers and small-town dwellers found that the fashionable catalogues developed by the mail-order giants linked them with a glitzy and seductive world of culture, style, and status. They liked what they saw and voted with their pocketbooks to participate in this consumer culture in ever-increasing numbers. By the 1890s nearly twelve hundred mail-order companies competed for their patronage and Sears' catalogues became staple items in rural households. Attractively designed, skillfully lithographed, and overflowing with exaggerated yet witty advertising copy, these catalogues distributed dreams and desires throughout the countryside. Urban department stores, including Macy's, Wanamaker's, and Spiegel's, found that they no longer needed to tie sales to showrooms, and that marketing by mail paid. Consumer goods became separated from places, and every living room became a shopper's paradise.

For the consolidated corporate entities that dominated the Gilded Age economy, the national mail system became an enormous commercial bonanza. The break-up of the express monopoly and the introduction of parcel post offered mail-order houses an important government subsidy, and their profits soared during the 1910s. Direct-mail marketing itself emerged as an important segment of the advertising industry. When the American Heart Association used a series of fund raising appeals penned by Jacob Riis to solicit contributions through the mail, nonprofits discovered a lucrative new way to market themselves as well. With the formation of the Direct Mail Marketing Association in 1917, postal solicitation entered a new era of visibility and professionalization. Newspapers, fearful of losing their advertisers, would soon coin the term "junk mail" to derisively describe the enormous flow of sales literature entering American mailboxes and living rooms. Mass mailings became so common that the post office established special mailer permits, metered mailer machines, and automatic cancelers. The merger and subsequent success of Arthur Pitney's American Postage Meter Company and Walter Bowes' Universal Stamping Machine Company in 1920 testified to the new era of mechanical mail.[23]

[22] Fuller, *RFD*, 312–13.

[23] Gordon L. Weil, *Sears, Roebuck, U.S.A.: The Great American Catalog Store and How It Got That Way*

Other businesses also grew up during this period to exploit the popular fascination with the mails. Private mailing cards (popularly, if somewhat inaccurately, referred to as postcards) grew into an enormous business and provided future generations with nostalgic collectibles and priceless views of vanished landscapes. Middle-class Americans now vacationed in unprecedented numbers, and they documented their tasteful travels to family and friends with missives from the seashore, the mountain retreat, and the fashionable urban center. Greeting cards best illustrated the link between business and Victorian sentiment. By the 1880s and 1890s, manufacturers produced cards for a full pantheon of modern American holidays: Valentine's Day, Easter, New Year's, and the most commercially successful of all, Christmas. Birthdays also became occasions for exchanging postal wishes. Massproduced, corporately sponsored sentiments became inscribed with private thoughts and personal signatures. In 1910 Joyce Hall, son of an itinerant Methodist minister, observing that "it's the sentiment that counts" and urging Americans to "care enough to send the very best" founded a mail order postcard business that would eventually evolve into the wildly successful Hallmark Cards. Merely greeting one's friends and relatives became a series of annual consumer rituals best conducted through the mail, with the benefit of corporate sponsorship and the imprimatur of American business.[24]

Some American politicians and reformers detected a less benign and somewhat seamier undertone to the private messages and personal thoughts that flowed freely across the continent. Antebellum mail disputes usually centered around political and ideological issues, such as the abolitionist effort to flood the mails. Obscenity appeared as the primary legislative issue troubling Victorian congressmen. Government regulators began scrutinizing the mails with a more discerning eye in the late 1860s. Mail fraud became a problem, as a series of well-publicized confidence games, pyramid schemes, and disreputable lotteries operated in the post-Civil War era. The most time-consuming debate and effort, however, was directed toward defining and restricting "obscene" material. In 1865 Congress embarked on a long legislative journey designed to outlaw the postal circulation of "lascivious" paperback books, photographs, poems, songs, contraceptive products, and morally suspect advertisements. Anthony Comstock began his notorious campaign to purify America in the 1870s, and the passage of the Comstock Laws in 1873 heralded

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(New York: Stein and Day, 1977) contains an interesting account of the catalog and the early mail-order years on pp. 21–40 and 61–77. On the transformation of American culture during this period, see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), esp. 42–45, 182–85. See also Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), Richard B. Kielbowicz, "Origins of the Junk-Mail Controversy: A Media Battle Over Advertising and Postal Policy," *Journal of Policy History* 5 (1993): 248–72, and Scheele, *Short History of the Post Office*, 160–66, on Pitney and Bowes.

[24] Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 94–102.

a much more restrictive era. In 1888 Congress allowed postal inspectors to open sealed mail in an effort to track down "obscene" material, and a series of well-publicized prosecutions under the obscenity statutes occurred through the 1920s. As businesses received increasing latitude and indirect governmental support to use the mails in new ways, Congress took much greater care to restrict the kinds of information being communicated by individuals and to police the content of personal parcels. Defining the limits of free information flow and determining community standards opened a new range of nationally explosive issues.[25]

Compared to its antebellum predecessor, the post office itself became a very different kind of physical space in Gilded Age America. Local post offices during the early nineteenth century had served as gathering places for merchants, tradesmen, and prominent local worthies. Richard John has described the post office as "a bastion of white male solidarity and an adjunct to the racially and sexually stratified world of politics and commerce." Drinking, gambling, and gossiping took place within its walls. Women found it an especially unfriendly place, and postal officials ultimately established both special "ladies' windows" where mail could be picked up and urban "mail boxes" where patrons could deposit letters without being harassed. Offices themselves proved transient, and no distinction existed between public and private facilities. New York City's main post office in the antebellum period, for example, was located successively in the postmaster's home, the basement of the mercantile exchange, a former museum, and a renovated Dutch Reformed church. In less urban settings, the post office rarely occupied a separate facility and usually consisted of a small window in some commercial building.[26]

By the late-nineteenth century, however, a golden age of postal architecture had dawned. New York City's relatively modest structure on Nassau Street was replaced by an enormous building located in City Hall Park and designed in the Second Empire style by Alfred Mullet. Brooklyn soon boasted a new Romanesque facility of its own. The monumental style reached its New York peak in 1913, when McKim, Mead and White designed a granite, classical revival General Post Office on Thirty-Fourth Street to complement nearby Pennsylvania Station. Massive interiors, iron gates, concrete pillars, and an image of solid, conservative tradition and reliability characterized the new buildings. As the postal system speeded the transformation of the nation into

[25] Fuller, *The American Mail*, 251–60, 267–73. See also Jon Bekken, "'Those Great and Dangerous Powers': Postal Censorship of the Press," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 15 (1991): 55–71; Jay A. Gertzman, "Postal Service Guardians of Public Morals and Erotica Mail Order Dealers of the Thirties: A Study in Administrative Authority in the United States," *Publishing History* 37 (1995): 83–110; and Bruce A. Lehman and Timothy A. Boggs, "How Uncle Sam Covers the Mails," *Civil Liberties Review* 4 (May/June 1977): 20–28.

[26] John, *Spreading the News*, 112–15, 161–67.

a country of anonymous producers and consumers, the arena for its own commercial transactions became ever more grandiose and spectacular. Shorn of its makeshift and slightly disreputable veneer, the Victorian post office became a properly genteel facility, accessible to the most prudent and prurient middle-class patron. Congress cleansed both the content of the mails and the look of the service in its effort to create a businesslike, morally upright atmosphere. The idiosyncratic quality of earlier service, the cracker-barrel informality of the older facilities, and the modestly anarchic exchange of multiple messages gave way to efficiency, speed, regularity, and cleanliness. Congress and federal bureaucrats had tamed the post office, transforming it into a model progressive era concern.

Conclusion

Several archival conclusions ensue from this brief tour through postal history. First, the much-lamented era of personal correspondence lasted for a remarkably brief historical period. Ordinary Americans wrote very few letters prior to the postal reforms of the 1840s, and by the 1870s they functioned largely as postal consumers rather than producers. From the outset, the mails functioned primarily as outlets for business enterprises: mainly for newspapers in the antebellum period, and for mail-order houses, stores, and express companies by the turn of the century. Even when large numbers of Americans first put pen to paper in the mid-nineteenth century, they constructed largely formulaic, stylized, and conventional documents that historians have only begun to analyze in any meaningful way. Personal letter-writing has not "declined" in any significant manner as a response to the telephone or any other technological cause; rather, the volume of private correspondence itself is a very recent historical phenomenon owing more to the unique demographic, business, and social milieu of nineteenth-century culture than to any romantic notions of a kinder, simpler, and more leisurely past.

Second, technological change never purely displaces one form of communication with another. The commercialization of the telegraph coincided with the greatest age of letter writing in American history. Businesses adapted the telephone to their purposes, but they also invented and expanded their direct mail marketing operations, created new forms of corporate organization to take full advantage of changing postal regulations, and invested large amounts of money in print advertising during the same period. Communication vehicles exist primarily to transact business, and corporate America makes full use of all possibilities, adapting print, visual, and electronic forms to its purposes. The Internet, once hailed as a source of "information" and alternative cultures, has begun its seemingly inevitable transformation into primarily an advertising and shopping medium, where the most visually ap-

pealing web sites created by the "hippest" corporate and entertainment conglomerates, receive the most "hits." Its history nicely parallels the transformation of the post office, which was originally conceived as a vehicle for transmitting news and was ultimately transformed into a virtual marketplace without walls.

Third, the most visible public issues in the information marketplace today reflect and rehash timeworn cultural conflicts that have divided Americans since the introduction and expansion of mail service. Contemporary concerns over "equal access to information" parallel late-nineteenth-century debates over RFD, private express companies, and parcel post service. Unfortunately, many present-day reformers appear more interested in ensuring that Americans have equal access to advertising, rather than to the educational and social advantages that allow one to navigate the nation's separate and unequal informational universe. Similarly, the notion of "community standards" often dominates current discussion. As national corporate, governmental, and nonprofit bureaucracies grew to dominate American life in the late-nineteenth century, resentments often surfaced. Many Americans believed, like antebellum South Carolinians, that keeping outsiders' messages from entering their turf might best preserve their way of life. Current debates over obscenity and personal expression have lengthy and well documented historical precedents. The ways in which previous "solutions" failed to achieve their goals should give pause to current policymakers and political panderers. In fact, the concept of community became divorced from locality at some point during the mid-nineteenth century. Americans belong to a broad range of familial, professional, corporate, religious and fraternal communities that bear little relationship to place. Recognizing this essential fact, and accepting the notion that our current communication systems simply reflect the fragmented nature of modern life, places contemporary anxieties in a larger context.

Finally, the history of American correspondence through the postal system suggests that the current archival angst over controlling and keeping electronic information represents much ado about some relatively minor alterations in the nation's informational infrastructure. The critical "speed-up" in America's information flow, after all, occurred early in the nineteenth century. By the late 1840s instantaneous transmission of information became a reality. Henry David Thoreau witnessed the defining historical moment, as he sadly realized. Victorian Americans with superior expertise, personal contacts, and leisure manipulated various data resources in order to obtain the insider information that enabled them to better conduct their businesses and gain advantages over their competitors. Their contemporary counterparts continue to do so. Most Americans still consume and discuss "news" gained from multiple sources, including print and electronic media, mail, urban

legends, and gossip in order to construct their views of reality. "Virtual communities," really a creation of the mid-nineteenth century and its transformation of the physical and mental landscape, remain the primary locus of much social and business activity. Basic informational debates remain unresolved: equal access to data in a democratic society; the nature of social authority; the boundaries between individual expression and community restraint; and the dominance of large, highly capitalized, thoroughly bureaucratized entities over most aspects of modern life.

This does not mean, of course, that the current "information revolution" poses no archival challenges and has not affected the way in which most people go about their daily life. New record forms both shape and reflect subtle and significant sociocultural shifts that ultimately create the documentary universe. Putting pen to paper in the mid-nineteenth century, as we have seen, often constituted a very personal and almost ceremonial act. Victorian letter-writers carefully communicated with distant friends and relatives using heavily stylized hands and often formulaic phrases in order to document their own characters and invent their own personalities. Writing a letter meant creating a permanent record of the self. Today's listserv lurkers and chatroom addicts also carefully construct virtual personalities for themselves, albeit with some significant differences. Often cloaked in anonymity, and frequently writing to loosely defined groups that share their personal and professional interests, they create ephemeral and malleable identities that can quickly evaporate. Impermanence itself can become a virtue, and individuals may move easily between a series of tangentially related communities and identities, adapting their styles and discourse accordingly. The virtue of brevity, critical to the circulation of information in the telegraphic age, becomes less relevant. Individuals and groups find it relatively easy to flood the informational marketplace with large quantities of undigested, unfiltered, and unedited discourse. Very different notions of authority, self, and communication hold sway, and capturing the complexity of the new environment—which coexists alongside more traditional informational avenues—means nothing less than redefining the very nature and reexamining the very purpose of a personal manuscript. Documentary form and informational content share a complex, ever-changing, and unexplored relationship. Unless we begin to acquire some historical perspective on current communication developments, however, we will continue to conclude that what is largely trivial is truly revolutionary. Further, there exists a real danger that our fascination with form will continue to overwhelm more meaningful concern over content. Perhaps, in other words, the moment has arrived to stop asking "what is a record?" and start examining what's in a record.