

## Modernization, Communication Policy, and the Geopolitics of News, 1820-1860

RICHARD B. KIELBOWICZ

□—Several tensions were evident in the federal communication policy of the mid-1800s, and this essay argues that some are best understood in terms of the dislocations caused by modernization. Battles over newspaper postage, a cornerstone of communication policy, pitted interests trying to foster a national culture against those trying to protect

regionalism or localism. The former lobbied for a low, relatively flat postage schedule, while the latter sought to impede the long-distance flow of information. This was part of an effort to prevent supralocal communication from disrupting traditional social arrangements, which emphasize proximate relations.

AS NATIONS modernize, traditional attachments of family, birthplace, and community are increasingly supplemented by supralocal affiliations. Communication plays a central role in the process of drawing people into national communities; face-to-face communication gives way, at least in part, to impersonal, mediated relations (Rogers, 1969). Consequently, many of the signs—and strains—of modernization are visible in a nation's communication system and the policies governing it.

In the mid-nineteenth century, roughly the 1820s to 1860s, the United States was undergoing modernization. Subsistence agriculture was being commercialized; manufacturing shifted from homes and small shops to factories where specialized laborers produced standardized products; the economy was developing regional specializations that necessi-

tated increased trade; and various social institutions—religious sects, reform groups, political parties, and occupational associations—were coalescing in national communities. Modernization, however, proceeded unevenly. Some regions, notably the South, as well as districts within regions, lagged behind the rest of the country. This unevenness created a number of tensions, and federal policy had to accommodate the differences (Brown, 1976).

Communication was a major agent of modernization, and through the mid-1800s the nation's communication network was built on the operations of the post office. The mails provided the mechanism by which information circulated throughout a sprawling, developing country before the telegraph and press associations began furnishing similar services at mid-century.<sup>1</sup> Those in and out of Congress who sought to influence the nature of the growing communication network, and thereby affect

---

*Mr. Kielbowicz is Assistant Professor of Communications, University of Washington.*

the pace of modernization, concentrated their efforts on shaping postal policy. One of the most divisive complaints recurring throughout debates was that postal policy favored urban publications, especially a handful in the largest Northeastern cities, at the expense of their smaller rural counterparts. Debate occurred on several levels, but most fundamentally the struggle over newspaper postal policy was part of a larger contest to decide which conceptions of community would prevail in the nation's formative decades.

The tension was essentially between interests trying to promote a national culture, and those trying to protect regionalism or localism. For the most part, the former favored a communication system in which information flowed rapidly with few impediments, often from urban centers, while the latter strived to protect local and regional media voices. There was more at stake than simply the structure of the communication system, for policymakers perceived that lines of political, economic, and cultural influence followed lines of transportation and communication. Whether this perception was accurate (many scholars agree that it was [Deutsch, 1953; Odum & Moore, 1938, p. 119; Park, 1929; Pred, 1973]), it figured prominently in the debates over the earliest U.S. communications policy.

The mails, by carrying periodicals, forged links among scattered and diverse people, an essential step in modernization. The postal system exhibited some of the contradictory tendencies of the much broader communication revolution that Carey (1969) has so aptly characterized. On the one hand, improvements in communication had a centripetal or unifying tendency by bringing disparate groups into contact; a leading example would be the symbols of nationalism commu-

nicated to the country across social and geographic lines. On the other hand, it had a centrifugal effect, that is, the few individuals with kindred interests in each of thousands of communities developed large-scale national associations; reform movements of the mid-1800s are good examples. Although Carey rightly calls these tendencies contradictory, they share one overriding trait: they both represented supralocal communication. Both, moreover, are characteristic of modernization. The mails abetted these contradictory tendencies by conveying information that cut across narrow groups and bound the nation into a whole, while simultaneously carrying publications that endowed specialized groups with their separate identities.

In an exegesis of Innis' (1951) work, Carey (1981) explains that the U.S. "policy of improving communication over long distance" aided the "shift from local and regional units to national and international ones, though not without considerable struggle and conflict. Individuals were linked into larger units of social organization without the necessity of appealing to them through local and proximate structures" (p. 84).

Struggles over newspaper postage, therefore, can be understood as part of the debate over modernization, the transition from a traditional society, in which local affiliations predominate, to a nation-state. Those who welcomed the changes wrought by modernization tended to be relatively cosmopolitan and comfortable with information flowing from distant centers. Those who preferred a traditional society, in which local ties take precedence, resented supralocal communication because it threatened the authority of those in the immediate community. To some extent, the lines of contention were urban versus rural, North versus South. But such

dichotomies are a bit too facile since many individuals are cosmopolites or localites regardless of their place of residence (Rogers, 1969, pp. 146-168).

This essay argues that contemporaries' orientations—local or regional versus those that were primarily national—affected the way postal policy governing newspapers was structured. These geopolitics, in turn, grew out of the strains and anxieties associated with modernization. Most of the evidence presented here was derived from remarks made during debates over newspaper postage, with some supplemental analysis of data on publications sent through the mails.

### NEWSPAPER POSTAGE IN THE AGE OF JACKSON

The first administrations and Congresses believed that building a postal network and underwriting the circulation of information through the press would keep the western territories faithful to the federal government (Bretz, 1909; Kielbowicz 1982, 1983). Chambers (1963, p. 42) notes that partisan papers, which relayed intelligence by post, "constituted a major force for fractional or party cohesion, communicating partisan information and views from the centers of power to the outlying communities."

Few attempts were made to restructure newspaper postal policy during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. But in 1832 Congress seriously considered the ultimate postal privilege for newspapers—the abolition of postage. The ensuing debates, which occupied a great deal of the Senate's time, provide the best insights into the geopolitics of news during the Jacksonian period.

The proposal to abolish newspaper postage was offered by George Bibb of

Kentucky, a one-time Jacksonian who had turned against the President in 1828 (*Register of Debates*, 1832, p. 875). Most of the backers were Whigs and other anti-Jackson Senators who contended that the abolition of newspaper postage was necessary to put all papers on the same footing as those enjoying the patronage of the Executive departments (*Register of Debates*, 1832, p. 882). Many arguments dealt with the economics of abolishing newspaper postage and its impact on partisan newspapers, but much of the debate centered on its consequences for the urban and rural press.

Most Jacksonian Senators opposed the move to abolish newspaper postage, in part because they believed that it would "annihilate at least one-half of our village newspapers" (*Register of Debates*, 1832, p. 912). The post office committee, headed by Felix Grundy, a staunch Jackson supporter, asserted that, if postage was eliminated, "a prevailing curiosity in the interior to see and read the papers which are published in the large cities" would displace the local press (U.S. Senate, 1832, p. 5). They forecast dreadful results:

The city editors, by fixing agents in the different towns and villages to receive and circulate their papers, will depress, and eventually supplant, the smaller establishments.

A monopoly of influence in the large cities, whose political atmosphere is not always most congenial to a spirit of independence, will be the consequence. That freedom, that manliness of spirit, which has always characterized the great body of the common people of our country, and which constitutes the safeguard of our liberties, will gradually decline. (U.S. Senate, 1832, p. 5)

Rural legislators preferred to have country editors mediate the flow of news; "all the useful intelligence" in the city papers could be selected from the

exchanges, reprinted, and circulated "with but a few hours delay, through the medium of the local press" (U.S. Senate, 1832).

John Holmes, a Whig from Maine, refuted this claim, countering with a more cosmopolitan conception of American journalism: "The idea that news should not come to the people from abroad [out-of-town] or if it does, that it should be first fashioned, fitted, and pruned by a village editor, before it would be safe to see it, is a caprice so bordering on the ridiculous, that I can hardly treat it seriously" (*Register of Debates*, 1832, p. 887). Large city papers and small country ones not only competed, Holmes recognized, but the coverage of one also complemented the other. "Both have different offices to perform," he remarked.

At the close of a seven-day debate, the motion to abolish newspaper postage failed by a 23 to 22 vote. An analysis of the voting reveals that it divided along party lines; the administration's supporters favored retaining newspaper postage, those generally opposed to Jackson voted for the postage-free conveyance of newspapers. "Not a single Jackson man . . . voted for the abolition," the *Boston Evening Transcript* (1832) snapped. "And pray what has Jacksonism to fear from the universal diffusion of intelligence?"

The defeat of the amendment to abolish newspaper postage did not discourage its most tenacious proponents. The amendment lost on May 10, the post office bill passed on May 14, and the next day Holmes introduced a bill specifically designed to repeal newspaper postage, which was referred to the post office committee headed by Grundy (Parks, 1940; *Register of Debates*, 1832, p. 930). The committee reported against the bill (*Register of Debates*, 1832, pp. 933-934). Other measures introduced in the House and Senate in 1832 were also

defeated because policymakers believed they would give city publications too large a share of the market (*Register of Debates*, 1832-1833, pp. 927-930, 943).

The 1832 debates held the close attention of Congress because the outcome affected the fortunes of partisan papers, the major form of journalism at the time. Not surprisingly, partisan concerns pervaded the deliberations. Subsequent debates, however, increasingly focused on how postal policies affected the newer brand of journalism, mass circulated city dailies.

### CITY V. COUNTRY IN POSTAL POLICY

One of the most stalwart Jacksonians, Amos Kendall, served as postmaster general from 1835 to 1840. He consistently opposed any measure that would increase the long-distance circulation of city papers. Believing that "there is justice and good policy in graduating the postage on newspapers according to the size and weight of the matter to be conveyed," Kendall proposed a slightly higher rate for large papers. His plan, offered in 1836, would have increased from 1½ to 2 cents the charge for large papers (Postmaster General, 1836, p. 542). In 1838, Kendall pressed his case more vigorously in a letter to the House post office committee. He pointed out that the *New York Courier and Enquirer*, weighing 1.75 ounces, could be mailed anywhere in the country for 1½ cents. But a letter of the same weight would be charged \$1.75—116 times as much as the paper. The postmaster general also discounted the value of the large city papers that traveled great distances, "three-fourths of which are filled with matter of no utility to the distant reader" (U.S. House of Representatives, 1838, pp. 3-4). Not until the 1840s, however, did Congress seriously consider graduat-

ing newspaper rates according to size and distance.

In 1836, Kendall lobbied successfully for the establishment of postal expresses because he believed that they would free readers from dependence on the large dailies published in a few Eastern cities. With the advent of the expresses, "the editors [in the South and West] will have the advantage of being the original dispensers of the news to their subscribers; and the people will obtain it through their own papers, without postage five or six days sooner than it can reach them in the New York papers, with postage" (Postmaster General, 1836, p. 544). Editors along the express routes obtained most of their news from slips—digests or proofs of important stories. Previously, editors had culled their news from the major dailies with which they exchanged postage-free (Kielbowicz, 1982). The exchanges had come in the same coaches that brought city papers to subscribers, and since postage never exceeded 1½ cents, there was little to deter readers from taking distant publications, depriving local editors of sales and the opportunity to mediate the flow of news. Editors in the West and South, of course, resented having to compete with the leading metropolitan dailies, and the expresses promised to give them an edge in getting nonlocal news to readers in their communities.

One of the Jacksonians' most persistent objections to the modest postage charged newspapers was that it encouraged city papers to circulate widely through the mails. Only scanty data bearing on this issue remain, but they all support the contention that cities were responsible for a disproportionate share of newspapers entered in the mails. In 1832, a group of Boston publishers estimated that 1,275,000 newspapers were mailed yearly from their city. Of these, 525,000 circulated within 100 miles at 1

cent postage and 750,000 traveled beyond, paying 1½ cents (U.S. House of Representatives, 1832).

Six years later, the postmaster general asked his deputies in five large cities to keep a count of matter mailed from their offices during one week. The post offices at New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and Richmond accepted for mailing a total of 44,468 lbs. of newspapers, 8,857 lbs. of other periodicals, and 1,916 lbs. of letters. As a rough estimate, these five cities probably accounted for half of the papers mailed in 1838.<sup>3</sup> Many of these papers circulated substantial distances. The postmaster general estimated in 1838 that New York City sent southward about one and a half tons of printed matter each day (U.S. House of Representatives, 1838, p. 12).

Taking advantage of the low newspaper postage, publishers in the cities actively courted subscribers in the country. Dailies discovered that readers in their hinterlands prized news from the cities, and they began offering special editions for circulation in the country, issued once, twice, or three times a week, and compiled from the columns of the daily. By 1820, at least 20 country editions emanated from New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, while more came from Boston, Albany, Alexandria, Lynchburg, Norfolk, Richmond, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, St. Louis, and New Orleans (Lee, 1937, pp. 381–384, 714; Pred, 1973, pp. 61–62). The mails that brought country editors their city exchanges carried competing sheets directly to subscribers. A Goshen, New York editor analyzed the plight of country journalism in 1827:

It is well known that post roads and post offices have increased rapidly within a few years; and that almost every person can have convenient access to papers by mail; and printers know, that the New York papers, designed for circulation in the country, are

made up twice a week from the daily papers, and published at less expense than we can publish our country papers—hence they can afford them at a lower price, in proportion to the news they contain, than we can publish our papers in the country; and thus in consequence of the facility of the mails, and the cheapness of the city papers, the circulation of our country papers is rapidly diminishing, and ere long many of them must be consigned to oblivion. . . . And if this system is to continue, and increase as it has done of late years, we shall by and by have very few country papers published, and the poorer class of our population will be doomed to remain ignorant, like the same class in the monarchies of the old world. (cited in Hamilton, 1936, pp. 236–237)

The most notable such paper, Horace Greeley's *Weekly Tribune*, begun in 1841, eventually attained a huge national following, perhaps a million readers. (Hale, 1950, p. 227). Subscriptions to the country editions cost little—one dollar a year for the weekly edition of the *New York Courier and Enquirer*—plus modest postage (Crouthamel, 1969, p. 87).

The country press mounted a counter-attack. In the mid-1820s, as the encroachment of country editions grew more threatening, editors in rural areas began reporting local news missing from city publications. Earlier, most newspapers had featured international, national, and state capital news; thus country papers had little local coverage. To stem the incursion of urban publications, country papers increased coverage of news in their communities, distinguishing their coverage from that of the city press (Birdsall, 1959, pp. 206–209; Russo, 1980, pp. 6–8).

During the Jacksonian period, abolitionist publications suffered abuse at the hands of postmasters. The controversy provoked by the abolitionists' use of the mails raised questions of communication

and regional culture (Eaton, 1964, pp. 196–215; Nye, 1945, 1972, pp. 41–85; Savage, 1938). The censorship of anti-slavery publications by postal authorities and mobs was a reaction to a massive public information campaign launched in 1835. About one million pamphlets were distributed in that year alone. This, of course, triggered the well-known backlash, in part because Southerners feared the incendiary literature would spark a slave revolt. More significantly, the resentment derived partly from the source of the information—Northern cities. Southerners invariably observed that the perpetrators directed their propaganda war from remote cities with an alien culture. The underlying concern, according to Richards (1970, p. 61), “was the fear that social control was shifting from local elites to organizations and metropolitan centers.”

The South's antipathy for abolitionist publications had many of the same roots as the Jacksonians' repugnance for city papers. This marked the first time that a social movement coupled cheap printing technology with the delivery system afforded by the post office to launch a nationwide public information campaign. Previously, political factions and religious groups had used the mails extensively to disseminate their organizations' information among the faithful. But beginning in the 1830s, reform groups, notably abolitionists, went a step further and combined cheap printing and minimal postage to proselytize among people who abhorred their views. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his observations of American society in the 1830s, noted the symbiosis between reform movements and the periodical press—that communication was essential in uniting widely dispersed individuals who shared some concern (Tocqueville, 1835/1966, pp. 489–491). The aboli-

tionists, though the most aggressive and abrasive reform movement using the mails, were hardly alone. Evangelical maternal associations were among the other antebellum movements that exploited the potential of cheap printing and cheap postage (Meckel, 1982).

### NATIONALISM V. LOCALISM IN ANTEBELLUM NEWSPAPER POSTAL POLICY

In the first major revision of newspaper postage in half a century, the Post Office Act of March 3, 1845, Congress adopted two provisions affecting the press. First, newspapers could pass in the mails free within 30 miles of the office of publication. Second, postage remained unchanged for all newspapers under 1900 square inches, but those exceeding 1900 square inches were assessed at higher magazine rates.

Some characterized free circulation within 30 miles as a boon for the urban and New England press. "This bill comes before us merely to cheapen postage to the inhabitants of the great cities," said Representative William L. Yancey (*Congressional Globe* appendix, 1845, pp. 307-308). This was also a New England bill, Representative William Payne claimed; Yancey and Payne, both Democrats, represented Alabama. Nearly all the inhabitants of New England could receive a newspaper postage-free from within 30 miles of their residence. "Not so in the South or West," Payne complained. Fewer than one-fourth of the people in these regions lived within the 30-mile free-postage radius (*Congressional Globe* appendix, 1845, p. 339). A minority of the House post-office committee, one Democrat and two Whigs all from the Northeast, had

framed that provision (U.S. House of Representatives, 1844).

But free local circulation was not solely the product of regional chauvinism. As with most legislation, it reflected compromises. Reacting to agitation for cheap postage, Congress eliminated postage on newspapers distributed in the vicinity of the office of publication. Regardless of which regions benefited, free circulation within 30 miles enhanced the competitive position of local publications while making it relatively more costly to take distant ones. An across-the-board reduction in newspaper postage, as advocated by some, would have brought city papers into direct competition with the country press. The interests of the people were best served by preserving local outlets for news and opinion, some policymakers argued (*Congressional Globe*, 1844, p. 423).

The provision for free local circulation was withdrawn two years later (Post Office Act of March 3, 1847), primarily because of lost revenues, but it kept reappearing in proposals as Congress worked on further revisions of postal policy (*Congressional Globe*, 1847, p. 57). In 1848, the Senate debated the merits of restoring the 30-mile free-postage zone. Again, it revived the argument of whether such a policy benefited country papers more than those issued from cities. In the less developed parts of the country, it was noted, few subscribers lived within a 30-mile radius of a newspaper. Thus, the Senate considered extending the area of free circulation to 50 miles, or even the entire state in which a paper was published. The latter proposal was found defective by some because it would have made it easier for the weekly editions of city dailies to circulate in the rural areas of their own state. Despite such objections, the Senate accepted an amendment to permit

weekly papers to circulate free in their own states. The Thirtieth Congress failed to agree on other parts of the post office bill, however, and adjourned its first session without any changes in newspaper policy (*Congressional Globe*, 1848, pp. 1059, 1065-1066).

By the early 1850s, policymakers were considering the implications of the telegraph for the flow of news through the mails. As a House report observed:

It was formerly thought that the support of the country press demanded a tariff upon the city papers, but the establishment of telegraph lines has superseded this necessity; for whilst their circulation has been circumscribed, new dailies are constantly springing up in every portion of the country, so that when the papers from the city arrive, their chief news has been several days anticipated upon the wings of the lightning. (U.S. House of Representatives, 1850, p. 6)

In other words, the telegraph enhanced the competitive edge of country papers in relation to those from cities, and the committee therefore concluded that a buffer zone of free local postage was no longer needed.

Congress in December 1850 resumed debating the postal status of newspapers, this time in earnest. Three months later Congress adopted the most revolutionary change in newspaper postage—and the most complex rate schedule—since the founding of the United States. The Post Office Act of March 3, 1851, restored the privilege of postage-free circulation in the vicinity of the office of publication. The 1845 law had a 30-mile postage-free zone, but the new bill permitted free circulation in the county where the paper was published. This section of the new post office law arose in the House where the free in-country privilege received the fullest explication. Most of those who spoke on behalf of the provision

remarked that it was necessary to insulate the country press from the aggressive city sheets using the mails to circulate throughout the nation. Representative Abraham W. Venable, a Democrat from North Carolina, offered the most extreme opinion on the subject:

The poisoned sentiments of the cities, concentrated in their papers, with all the aggravations of such a moral and political cesspool, will invade the simple, pure, conservative atmosphere of the country, and, meeting with no antidote in a rural press, will contaminate and ultimately destroy that purity of sentiment and of purpose, which is the only true conservatism. Fourierism, agrarianism, socialism, and every other ism, political, moral, and religious, grow in that rank and festering soil; and if such influence and such channels of communication are to be the only ones felt and employed, the press would be the greatest calamity instead of the greatest blessing. We desire our country papers for our country opinions, our provincial politics, the organs of our conservative doctrines, and to assert the truth, uninfluenced by the morbid influences of city associations. (*Congressional Globe*, 1850, p. 74)

After those intemperate remarks, others who supported the idea of free local circulation took pains to emphasize that they respected the city press, but felt that it was unfair to put rural papers in competition with those from the cities. The city papers were produced at lower unit costs because of their massive circulations, and, through the agency of the post office, they circulated widely for minimal postage.

Orsamus B. Matteson, a Whig from New York, provided an illustration of this unjust arrangement. When at home in Utica, Matteson said, he was kept apprised of developments in Washington by the local dailies. But dailies twice the size could be obtained from New York City, 250 miles away, at the same post-

age that it cost to take a paper carried only 4 or 40 miles from Utica. "Is not this gross injustice?" he asked. "Ought these country or inland papers thus be compelled to submit not only to fair competition, but to struggle on with the aid of the Government extended virtually to the city journals against them in this manner?" (*Congressional Globe*, 1851, p. 220). As a privilege extended to the country press, free local circulation simply counterbalanced the privileges accorded city publications, proponents argued (p. 220).

Even among those who shared these views there was disagreement over the dimensions of the free-postage buffer zone. Congressmen debated the various merits of free conveyance within 30 miles of the office of publication, within 40 and 50 miles, anywhere in the county where published, in the Congressional district, or in the state. Each variation had certain drawbacks. There were two problems with in-county free circulation, the option finally adopted. Counties varied greatly in size; those in the West and Southwest tended to be much larger than those in New England, which meant that those regions benefited more from this provision. In addition, a newspaper published near the county border would have circulation restricted in that direction (*Congressional Globe*, 1851-1852, pp. 76, 84-93, 140, 166-167, 218, 220, 236, 240, 243, 245).

Only a few Congressmen spoke out against free local circulation. Joseph M. Root, a Whig from Ohio, noted that the telegraph gave local papers an effective edge in competition with city papers carried into their communities by post. By the time the city papers reached the country, he explained, local publications already had received and printed the important national and international news (*Congressional Globe*, 1851, p. 170).

The House not only dwelled on the free in-county provision, but it also formulated an entirely new rate schedule for all publications. The final House version fixed a 1-cent rate for newspapers of 2 ounces or less for carriage anywhere in the country, plus 1-cent for each additional ounce. Papers circulating outside the county but still within the state of publication could pass at half the regular rates. The low, uniform rate sparked little discussion in the House. Paradoxically, the House bill lowered the barrier protecting local papers by encouraging subscribers to take publications from distant cities; if a paper came from outside the state, its postage would be the same regardless of distance (*Congressional Globe*, 1851, pp. 252-253, 261, 264).

In contrast, the newspaper postal policy devised by the Senate and ultimately signed into law only faintly resembled the version passed by the House. Free in-county delivery was the one House provision that also prevailed in the Senate, though it occasioned much less discussion. The Senate post office committee, chaired by Thomas J. Rusk, a Texas Democrat, reported a bill that had been drafted in consultation with the postmaster general and his assistants. Most of the bill that passed, insofar as it affected newspapers, originated in the Post Office Department (*Congressional Globe*, 1851, p. 370).

The heart of the bill as reported by the Senate committee called for graduating newspaper postage according to the distance conveyed, in sharp contrast to the House's nearly uniform postage. It created six zones in addition to the one within the county of publication. A weekly paper paid quarterly postage of 5 cents for transport outside the county but less than 50 miles; 10 cents for 51 to 300 miles; 15 cents for 301 to 1,000 miles; 20

cents for 1,001 to 2,000 miles; 25 cents for 2,001 to 4,000 miles; and 30 cents for distances over 4,000 miles. Dailies paid five times the preceding rates, and postage for all newspapers was half if pre-paid at the office of mailing or delivery. As enacted, the bill deviated from the version sanctioned by the postmaster general in only a few respects (*Congressional Globe* appendix, 1851, pp. 257, 263-265; *New York Herald*, 1851).

In both its major features—free in-county delivery and a postage scale graduated to distance conveyed—the Senate bill erected hurdles to the long-distance circulation of public information through the press and post office. It was by far the most complicated newspaper schedule ever enacted to that time. Since 1792, there had been only two zones, plus, between 1845 and 1847, free delivery within a 30-mile radius of the office of publication. Senator William H. Seward, a New York Whig who preferred the flat rate adopted in the House, observed that graduated rates would have a tendency “to denationalize this Union.”

This bill very ingeniously adopts a tariff which will limit the circulation of the papers in the eastern States to the Atlantic coast, and the circulation of the papers published on the Pacific coast to the borders of the Pacific ocean, and which will confine the papers of Alabama and South Carolina to their borders, or nearly so, and the papers of New Hampshire and Maine to their borders. What is the object? These newspapers are the political lungs of the Republic. They ought to have free play. They ought to play vigorously, and therefore they ought to be kept in health. But, sir, the effect of this whole system, in my opinion, will be to make such discriminations between them that we shall be divided and classified into states and communities destitute of the means of maintaining communication and sympathy with

each other. (*Congressional Globe*, appendix, 1851, p. 266).

The newspaper policy was an anomalous part of the 1851 law. For letters, the law reduced a variety of zones to one flat rate; for newspapers, on the other hand, a long-standing nearly uniform rate was expanded to six zones (Post Office Act of March 3, 1851).

For a bill that had its origins in the cheap postage movement, with simplicity and uniformity of rates as its principal tenets, the newspaper provisions were an unlikely outcome. And they did not last long. Within a year, Congress overhauled the newspaper rate schedule.

The policy reflected in the Post Office Act of August 30, 1852, was diametrically opposed to that represented by the 1851 law. The new legislation provided that a newspaper of three ounces or less could circulate anywhere in the United States for 1 cent postage. For every additional ounce another cent was charged. The law retained free in-county delivery and permitted papers of 1½ ounces or less to circulate within the state of publication for half the regular rates.

Debate over the free in-county provision was relatively muted this time. Indeed, only the standard weight limit occasioned much discussion. Two and a half ounces would have permitted all but a few of the largest New York City dailies to pass through the mails at the lowest rates, according to Edson B. Olds, an Ohio Democrat and chairman of the House post office committee. James Brooks, a Whig representing New York City, objected strongly. The Senate amended the House version to fix the standard limit at three ounces so such papers as the *New York Journal of Commerce* and *Courier and Enquirer* could be mailed anywhere in the nation for 1 cent. (Like the 1851 law, this rate was

halved if prepaid at the office of mailing or delivery.) This reform proceeded smoothly because, before debates commenced, the House and Senate post office committees had conferred with the postmaster general to outline a newspaper policy that was acceptable to all (*Congressional Globe*, 1852, pp. 1663, 1711-1713, 1725-1727, 1743, 1764-1766, 2268, 2271, 2389).

In short, the new law greatly simplified newspaper rates and made them more nearly uniform. The free in-county provision of the 1851 law had been retained, but under new provisions any paper could now traverse the continent for a fairly modest rate. Two New York papers, the *Herald* (1852) and the *Times* (1852), welcomed the new law. The former noted that it could now be mailed to the Pacific Coast for 1 cent instead of 6 cents, and the latter observed that yearly postage for its daily edition would be reduced to \$1.56. Thus, one part of the law, the virtually flat rate for newspapers, abetted the nationalizing influence of the press while another provision, free circulation in the county of publication, protected local, provincial interests.

### FLOW OF NEWS ON EVE OF CIVIL WAR

The mails were the mechanism by which diverse publications flowed into thousands of towns and cities. The quantity and variety of public information transmitted by post is evident from the lists of periodicals mailed to Crown Point, New York, in 1846-1847 and 1857-1860 (Barker, 1950), and Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in 1852 (Jones, 1854). Both towns, in the hinterland of New York City, took more periodicals from that publishing center than any other place. Even more revealing, vir-

tually no publications came from south of Washington, DC, or west of the Alleghenies, underscoring the concentration of the publishing business in the Northeast.

Data from Crown Point and Stockbridge, though not representative of the country, point to the dominance of New York City as a source of communication messages. Two analyses of more representative data suggest that Northeastern cities generally and New York in particular were the sources of much of the printed matter circulated by mail through the country. In a content analysis of American newspapers published between 1820 and 1860, Shaw (1981) traced the origins of news and the paths of circulation. In terms of the first place of publication, New York tended to dominate. For example, in the period 1847-1860, 7 percent of the stories published in a national sample first appeared in New York papers—the same share claimed by all the papers of the South. Shedding even more light on the flow of news were Shaw's findings about the second place of publication. Of all the stories picked up for republication in the decade before the Civil War, one-fourth had their second incarnation in the New York City press. New York's share had declined from 37 percent since 1820, but the country had also grown enormously in the meantime.

Tackling the same problem from a different angle, Pred (1971, 1973, 1980) reached similar conclusions. For the period between the invention of the telegraph and the Civil War, Pred's (1980) work "has left little doubt that major [urban] centers either strengthened their previously existing advantages and spatial biases with respect to the procurement and exchange of specialized economic information, or that they acquired

new advantages and biases" (p. 156). As in the pre-telegraphic period, papers in Southern cities generally obtained more economic information from New York than from other cities in their own region. Pred also found that, at least in terms of economic information, a city's press mentioned other urban centers more frequently than towns in its own hinterland, though the latter type of information was still fairly prominent (1980, pp. 159-165). Shaw's and Pred's studies thus seem to add weight to the perception of many Congressmen that the mails brought a disproportionate amount of information from a few Eastern cities.

## CONCLUSION

Policymakers of the early and mid-nineteenth century appreciated communication's role as an agent of modernization, which to some meant its capacity to undermine the foundations of traditional society. Even before 1800, federal officials believed that the diffusion of information from the federal capital to state capitals and ultimately to county seats tended to nationalize a loosely-knit society. Low newspaper postage rested in part on this assumption.

After the 1820s, when the urban media took advantage of the government's transmission system, it fostered resentment of a seeming cultural imperialism. Social change occurred most rapidly in large cities, the headwaters in the flow of information, and urban news and symbols permeated the entire society. Sub-

cultures less receptive to modernization objected, and their representatives tried to structure postal policy to insulate them from messages of change that they found threatening.

The Jacksonians and their successors, the Democrats, "championed a quiet, stable, localized, face-to-face society, simple in form and manageable," a leading historian of political culture has written (Kelley, 1979, p. 160). In contrast, their opponents, the Whigs, felt more comfortable in the increasingly commercial and cosmopolitan environment of the modernizing United States (Kelley, 1979, p. 162; Ladd, 1970, pp. 68-72). With a few exceptions, these divisions were mirrored in the debates over newspaper postage.

On a more general level, a few scholars have hypothesized that a growing communication system tends to break down localism while heightening regionalism and nationalism (Odum & Moore, 1938, p. 131; Russel, 1928; Turner, 1922/1961, p. 152). These tentative conclusions remain to be proven in the context of the nineteenth century United States, but some contemporaries seemed to intuitively arrive at the same understanding, and proceeded to shape postal policy accordingly. This produced, at times, a bifurcated postal policy linked to contradictory social goals. Some features fostered a cosmopolitan or nationalistic outlook by facilitating the widespread circulation of public information through low rates and a few zones. But other policies protected provincial interests through such provisions as free local circulation. □

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Private express companies did not appear until the 1830s, and their services were too limited and too expensive for most users; messages could be entrusted to travelers, but such delivery was haphazard; and

newspapers gathered information (usually through the mails), but could not circulate widely without the services of the post office (Mott, 1962, pp. 153-156, 194-198, 244-248).

<sup>2</sup>Pro-Jackson Democrats (20) were uniformly against the amendment to abolish newspaper postage; two Senators identified as Whigs were also opposed, as was one Senator whose affiliation cannot be determined. In favor of the amendment were six non-Jackson Democrats, seven Whigs, four National Republicans, three with other party allegiances, and two whose political preferences are unknown (*Biographical Directory of the American Congress*, 1961; *Register of Debates*, 1832, p. 919).

<sup>3</sup>This estimate was made as follows: Assuming that newspapers weighed about two ounces each, and that the sample week was average for that year, about 18 million papers were mailed from the five cities. This was about half of the estimated 38 million papers mailed in the country (Dill, 1928; Postmaster General, 1840, p. 490).

## REFERENCES

- Barker, E. E. (1950). What Crown Pointers were reading one hundred years ago. *New York History*, 31, 31-40.
- Biographical directory of the American Congress, 1774-1961*. (1961). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Birdsall, R. D. (1959). *Berkshire county: A cultural history*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Boston Evening Transcript*. (1932, May 16).
- Bretz, J. P. (1909). Some aspects of postal extension into the West. In *American Historical Association Report*, 141-150.
- Brown, R. D. (1976). *Modernization: The transformation of American life, 1600-1865*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Carey, J. W. (1969). The communications revolution and the professional communicator. *Sociological Review Monograph*, 13, 23-38.
- Carey, J. W. (1981). Culture, geography, and communications: The work of Harold Innis in an American context. In W. H. Melody, L. Salter, & P. Heyer (Eds.), *Culture, communication, and dependency: The tradition of H.A. Innis* (pp. 73-91). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Chambers, W. N. (1963). *Political parties in a new nation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Congressional globe*. (1843-1873). (Vols. 1-109). Washington, DC: Blair and Rives.
- Crouthamel, J. L. (1969). *James Watson Webb*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Deutsch, K. W. (1953). *Nationalism and social communication*. New York: Wiley.
- Dill, W. A. (1928). *Growth of newspapers in the United States*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Bulletin.
- Eaton, C. (1964). *The freedom-of-thought struggle in the old South*. (rev. ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Hale, W. H. (1950). *Horace Greeley: Voice of the people*. New York: Harper & Bros.
- Hamilton, M. W. (1936). *The country printer: New York state, 1785-1830*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Innis, H. A. (1951). Technology and public opinion in the United States. In H. A. Innis (Ed.), *The bias of communication* (pp. 156-189). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Jones, E. F. (1854). *Stockbridge, past and present*. Springfield, MA: Samuel Bowles & Co.
- Kelley, R. (1979). *The cultural pattern in American politics: The first century*. New York: Knopf.
- Kielbowicz, R. B. (1982). Newsgathering by printers' exchanges before the telegraph. *Journalism History*, 9, 42-48.

- Kielbowicz, R. B. (1983). The press, post office, and flow of news in the early republic. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 3, 255-280.
- Ladd, E. C., Jr. (1970). *American political parties: Social change and political response*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Lee, A. M. (1937). *The daily newspaper in America: The evolution of a social instrument*. New York: Macmillan.
- Meckel, R. A. (1982). Educating a ministry of mothers: Evangelical maternal associations, 1815-1860. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 2, 403-423.
- Mott, F. L. (1962). *American Journalism* (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan.
- New York Herald*. (1851, March 2, 3, 4).
- New York Herald*. (1852, September 2).
- New York Times*. (1852, September 2).
- Nye, R. B. (1945). Freedom of the press and the antislavery controversy. *Journalism Quarterly*, 22, 1-11.
- Nye, R. B. (1972). *Fettered freedom: Civil liberties and the slavery controversy, 1830-1860*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Odum, H. W., & Moore, H. E. (1938). *American regionalism: A cultural-historical approach to national integration*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Park, R. E. (1929). Urbanization as measured by newspaper circulation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 35, 60-79.
- Parks, J. H. (1940). *Felix Grundy: Champion of democracy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Postmaster General. (1823-1860). *Annual Report*. Washington, DC: Various publishers.
- Post Office Act of March 3, 1845. *U.S. Statutes at Large*. 5, 733.
- Post Office Act of March 3, 1847. *U.S. Statutes at Large*. 9, 202.
- Post Office Act of March 3, 1851. *U.S. Statutes at Large*. 9, 588.
- Post Office Act of August 30, 1852. *U.S. Statutes at Large*. 10, 38-39.
- Pred, A. R. (1971). Urban systems development and the long-distance flow of information through preelectronic U.S. newspapers. *Economic Geography*, 47, 498-524.
- Pred, A. R. (1973). *Urban growth and the circulation of information*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pred, A. R. (1980). *Urban growth and city-systems in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Register of debates in Congress*. (1825-1837). (Vols. 1-29). Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton.
- Richards, L. L. (1970). "Gentlemen of property and standing": Anti-abolition mobs in Jacksonian America. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rogers, E. M. (1969). *Modernization among peasants: The impact of communication*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Russel, R. R. (1928). A revaluation of the period before the Civil War: Railroads. *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 15, 341-353.
- Russo, D. (1980). The origins of local news in the U.S. country press, 1840s-1870s. *Journalism Monographs*, 65, 1-30.
- Savage, W. S. (1938). *The controversy over the distribution of abolition literature, 1830-1860*. Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

- Shaw, D. L. (1981). At the crossroads: Change and continuity in American press-news, 1820-1860. *Journalism History*, 8, 38-50.
- Tocqueville, A. de. (1966). *Democracy in America*. (J. P. Mayer & M. Lerner, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1835)
- Turner, F. J. (1961). Sections and nation. In F. Turner (Ed.), *Frontier and Section* (pp. 136-153). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. (Original work published 1922)
- U.S. House of Representatives. (1832, February). *Petition of some citizens of Boston*. Document 116, 22, 1.
- U.S. House of Representatives. (1838, May). *Letter postage*. Report 909, 25, 2.
- U.S. House of Representatives. (1844, May). *Franking privilege and rates of postage*. Report 483, 28, 1.
- U.S. House of Representatives. (1850, July). *Reduction of rates of postage*. Report 411, 31, 1.
- U.S. Senate. (1832, May). *Postage on newspapers*. Report 147, 22, 1.