

POSTAL CENSORSHIP IN ENGLAND 1635-1844
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‘When a man puts a letter into the post-office’, wrote a journalist in 1844, ‘he confidently believes...the communications he makes to his family and friends will not be read, either by Postmaster-General, or penny postman, or Secretary of State, and that no human being will venture to break a seal which...has been regarded as sacred as the door of his own private residence’.¹ A Parliamentary inquiry, however, soon proved that the journalist’s assumptions were untrue. Mail was being opened in a secret room of the British post office, without statutory authority or public knowledge. Evidence of this nature in an apparently benign institution is important. The post office, however, is rarely mentioned in histories of the seventeenth century, when its services, and ways to avoid them, took shape.

This paper challenges the myth of the heroic postman braving sleet and snow to deliver uncensored mail. It argues that the post office played an important role in the history of communication that can add to our understanding of how early modern censorship worked. Since the post office was an evolving institution with informal arrangements, it provides an ideal vantage point from which to observe the development of censorship practices. Though the distribution of mail may seem distant from ideological argument, the British State did not think so in the late-seventeenth century. It tried to control the post, but failed to do so in the face of public demand and economic change. By the eighteenth century, the post office had become a right and a necessity.

This paper presents the post office as an arena for continuous struggle between a government intent on censoring news and information and a public insistent on freer communication. Although initially successful, government censorship was doomed to failure as profound changes took place in the way ordinary people communicated. Few have noticed that the early post office created a public space for the private dialogues of writers and readers of every class and every locale. It linked and literally transported all types of written and printed media, including newspapers. This arena of unrestricted discourse was as provocative to state censors as any coffeehouse. Both institutions fit Habermas’s definition of a public sphere, but current debates about its advent or containment rarely mention the post office.²

Studies of seventeenth-century censorship have focused on the early part of the century, when licensing acts and regulations pre-censored English printing through the Stationers Company, crown prerogative, and the courts.³ Thus the Oxford English Dictionary defines a censor in the 1640s as ‘an official...whose duty it is to inspect all books, journals, dramatic pieces, etc., before publication to secure that they shall contain nothing immoral, heretical, or offensive to the government’.⁴ This type of overt

¹Post Office Archive (hereafter POA), 23/7 Newspaper cuttings file, The Sun, June 15 1844.

²Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Cambridge, Mass, 1989) and Moral Consciousness and Interactive Communication (1990); Craig Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere (Cambridge, Mass, 1994); Steve Pincus, “Coffee Politicians does Create”, Journal of Modern History 67 (1995) 807-34.

³Donald Thomas, A Long Time Burning (London [hereafter L], 1969); Frederick Siebert, Freedom of the Press in England (Urbana, 1965); Harold Weber, Paper Bullets (Lexington, Ky, 1996); A.C. Duke and C.A. Tamse. eds., Too Mighty to be Free (Zutphen, Netherlands, 1987).

⁴Oxford English Dictionary Online, see ‘Censor’, 2.b.

censorship was primarily concerned with print. Under Tudor and early Stuart monarchs, licensing laws were enforced only sporadically in response to crises, and were never meant to suppress all opposition. A balance was struck combining pre-print licensing with the search and seizure of persons by warrants, followed by court action. Spies, espionage and assassination were also used to provide state security.⁵ Though Licensing Acts lapsed in the 1640s, and again in 1679 during the Exclusion Crisis, each government passed its own version throughout the century. If we look only at laws, we see a grim line of repression and miss customary practices and unintended consequences.

This papers focuses on the period after the Restoration (1660), when methods of censorship shifted, as the State faced changes in the structure of communications that enhanced free expression. One such shift may be seen the development of the post office, whose very function violated norms of secrecy and privilege.⁶ Charles II (1660-1685) saw the intelligence potential of the post office, but feared freer communication. In the wake of new turnpikes, commerce, and print culture, the unsupervised flow of mail caused anxiety. Unlike licensed printed books, manuscript letters were less monitored by statute. Once a letter was sealed, no censor knew what lay inside.

Moreover, increased levels of literacy and wealth were creating a vast nation of letter writers.⁷ They experienced new patterns of mobility and separation that led to changing views about space, time, and distance. Their new ability to communicate in the absence of others gave a sense of power. Letters, unlike news, were enclosed and paid for, and hence were private property, outside the ownership of the state. The government clearly saw the danger of unrestricted mail.

In response to these conditions, Charles II's ministers used a combination of subtle, often hidden methods of censorship that centered on the post office. Letters were opened, read, copied, and resealed in a secret room filled with newly invented machines—a technological advance.⁸ Rival mail services were ruthlessly stamped out so that censorship could be more effective. And the flow of information in and out of the post office was controlled and contained in new ways. I define these efforts to restrict the freedom of communication as censorship. In this broad view, censorship is 'the activity in which an authority (usually public) attempts to control, limit, or suppress publication, information, beliefs, and arguments...for the protection of...a public good against instability or subversion'.⁹ Since people generally knew that mail was opened, but were uncertain when, where, or how, they faced subtle controls on a daily basis. Responses to this type of censorship were historically specific and related to the values of the wider culture.

This definition of censorship fits the circumstances of seventeenth-century states experiencing continuous insecurity, subversive plots, and constant periods of war. England, in particular, had waged a civil war and killed a king, traumatizing the

⁵Alan Hynes, *Invisible Power* (Stroud 1992); Paul Hyland and Neil Sammells, eds., *Writing and Censorship in Britain* (L&NY, 1992); Cyndia Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England and Press Censorship in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, 1997 and 2001).

⁶David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture* (Princeton, 2000) 50.

⁷S. Whyman "Paper Visits" in Rebecca Earle, *Epistolary Selves* (Aldershot, 1999) 15-36.

⁸BL 8242.k.12, House of Commons, *Report from the Secret Committee On the Post office: Together with the Appendix* (L, Aug 5 1844). The secret operation was variously called 'the Private Foreign Office', 'the Foreign Secretary's Office', and 'the Secret Office'.

⁹P.Clarke and L. Linzey, eds., *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society* (L, 1996) 119.

monarchy and leaving scars on both sides. The Church's divine mission and principles of natural law supported censorship on the grounds of protecting the nation's faith and morals. Notions of secrecy, authority, and universal truth underpinned these arguments.

The public, on the other hand, had experienced thrilling and unfettered access to information and news in the 1640s. Memories of reading, writing, and discussing public affairs from different points of view were not forgotten. The crown's belief that news was its exclusive property (*arcanii imperium*) had been dealt a lethal blow by public participation in popular debate. Milton's insistence on the right to know, speak, and argue according to conscience challenged pre-print licensing.¹⁰ Thus a concept of the public's right to information was slowly developing.¹¹ Hitherto, it was not in ordinary people's power to safely express or access information and ideas. Letter writing gave new options to growing numbers, who might post a letter and have the government transport it. The post office, by its very function, lay at the heart of a struggle as to who would control communications. Background about England's early postal development will put my definition of censorship in context.

The post office was established not just to carry the king's dispatches, but as a preventive monopoly to control the gathering of information.¹² The post's more familiar roles as a public service, and even as a source of revenue, came later, mainly due to public pressure. From the government's point of view, the security of the realm depended upon detention and examination of the post. That is why postal maps before the 1720s show the pre-meditated flow of mail only through London, where postage was charged for both incoming and outgoing journeys.¹³ More important, bags could be centrally detained and opened. Mails that were slow and geographically limited provided ideal conditions for opening letters.¹⁴ The state maintained the status quo through hidden barriers to the post.

The British post office started later than on the continent in a spirit of resistance.¹⁵ It emerged on an ad hoc basis to meet the needs of war. By the sixteenth century, declining roads limited wheeled transport to the south.¹⁶ Only the Dover Road had settled posts providing horses for the King's messenger, often taken from plows or carts. Henry VIII's first Master of the Posts, Brian Tuke, chose postmasters, organized horses, and divided roads into stages.¹⁷ By 1584, some public service was offered, and in 1591, all rival posts were closed down for security reasons.¹⁸ From this time on, a state obsession

¹⁰John Milton, *Aeropagitica* (1644).

¹¹Joad Raymond, *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early-Modern Britain* (L, 1999)128.

¹²POA Treasury Letter Books Relating to the Post Office, microfilm edition, 1686-1760, vols.1-9; Alan Marshall, *Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II 1660-85* (Cambridge, 1994) 78-96; G.E. Aylmer, *The Crown's Servants* (Oxford, 2002) 38.

¹³POA, Map file showing Postal Routes and Post Towns; A.W. Robertson, *Great Britain: Post Roads, Post Towns and Post Rates 1635-1839* (Pinner, 1974). Though post towns grew in number, the spaces between them remain vacant on maps until 1720, when the state felt more secure.

¹⁴BL 8242.k.12, Appendix, 95.

¹⁵V. Wheeler-Hobban, *The History of the King's Messengers* (L, 1935); Philip Beale, *History of the Post in England from the Romans to the Stuarts* (Aldershot, 1998) 12. In France there were royal posts by 1464. The Von Taxis family ran continental posts.

¹⁶J. Crofts, *Packhorse, Waggon and Post* (L, 1967), 1-21; BL Add Ms 24718, f.727, Calverley Papers.

¹⁷Great Britain, Post Office, *The Post Office. An Historical Summary* (L, 1911) 5; Beale, 113, 118.

¹⁸BL 8242.k.12, 5; *The Post Office*, 4; H.Robinson, *The British Post Office:A History* (Princeton, 1948) 12.

with monopoly was continually challenged by rival services and private strategies to send mail by alternate means.¹⁹

By the first decades of the seventeenth century, merchants, officials, and the public clamored for improved postal service in the face of rising population, literacy levels, print media, and a commercial marketplace, all centered in London.²⁰ At the same time, a vibrant news culture had evolved.²¹ Finally, in 1635, Thomas Witherings offered a proposal for ‘reforming and settling...the Letter-Office’. Under his plan, the public would pay 2d for carriage of a single sheet letter up to 80 miles, with increments for additional sheets and miles.²² These charges were aimed at a commercial market, for 2d. was the sum charged by common carriers, and would suit the trading classes. Now the post could become an independent source of revenue, rather than an annual charge of L3400.²³ Civil conflict, however, put a stop to these plans.

The post office was in a sorry state, when war and the lifting of censorship controls in 1640 led to a revolutionary outburst of printed pamphlets and news-books.²⁴ In the radical climate of the 1640s, parliamentary and royalist mail services engaged in wild competition resulting in Witherings’ imprisonment, the murder of a post boy, and overcharging by Parliament of up to 6d. per letter. Opposition pamphlets linked the post office monopoly to the violation of Magna Carta and English liberty. The right to carry mail, they claimed, was a right of free-born Englishmen.²⁵ When the London City Council established its own post in 1649, cooler heads realized that the post had to be controlled.²⁶ Finally, under the Protectorate in 1653, the mails were put out to farm for L10,000.²⁷ Although it centralized operations and basic services, farming was a hated monopoly, which politicized the mails.

Under John Thurloe, the post office became ‘the pulse of all political movement, the deputy postmasters in the country serving as a hydra-headed agency for the state

¹⁹BL Harl MS 5954, Collection of Tracts relating to ye Generall and Penney Post Office, f.8, An Abstract of the Case of the First Undertakers for Reducing Letters to Half the Former Rate, Dec. 1642 and f.21, Complaint to Parliament, Aug. 1642; POA 94/12 Roger Whitley Notebooks, f. 111, April 19 1673, f.411, April 21 1674; Post Office, 6-7.

²⁰POA Ref.1.217 Kenneth Fowler, *The Demand for and Provision of Postal Services during the Seventeenth Century*, 1982, unpublished typescript, 18-23.

²¹Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2002), 86-90, 121-34; Joad Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper* (Oxford, 1996) 5-10; Zaret, 100-32.

²²POA Acts file, Proclamation, July 3 1635, The Settlement of the Farm, Grant of Patent, June 1637; POA 114, Acts & Warrants; W. Stitt Dibden, ed., *The Post Office 1635-1720, from Original Records*, 1-15.

²³BL 8242.k.12, 5; Michael Frearson, ‘The Distribution and Readership of London Corantos’, in R. Myers and M. Harris, *Serials and their Readers 1620-1914* (Winchester, 1993), 1-25. I thank A. Bellany for this reference.

²⁴The literature for this is huge. For literary critics see works of David Norbrook and Nigel Smith.

²⁵BL Harl MS 5954, ff.4, 8, The Case of the Undertakers; f.20, John Hill, A Penny Post: or a Vindication of the Liberty and Birthright of Every Englishman in Carrying Merchants & other men’s Letters (L, 1659),

²⁶Post Office, 7.

²⁷BL Add MS 62091, Thomas Gardiner, A Generall Survey of the Post Office, and Foster W. Bond, ed., A General Survey of the Post Office, 1677-82 (Post Office History Society, Special Series 5, 1958), 1-2; Stitt-Dibden, 2. ‘The term “farming” meant a purchase of the revenue from the posts over a given period, for which the bidder paid a fixed...contracted sum of money, recouping his outlay by levying charges on the carriage of mail’.

seeing, hearing, and reporting everything of importance'.²⁸ In a secret room adjoining the post office with its own private entrance, John Wallis,²⁹ Isaac Dorislaus,³⁰ and Sir Samuel Morland³¹ opened, copied, and resealed letters from eleven p.m. until three or four in the morning, when the mails left the office. They decoded letters written in the 'scientific' mode of codes and ciphers.³² Thurloe used devious methods to obtain intelligence,³³ and in 1657, a postal act incorporated Witherings's plan.³⁴

With the Restoration, the post office finally achieved new stability, functions, and importance. Rival services that provided uncensored alternative were forced under ground. Rates were 2d., 4d., and 6d. for one sheet carried up to 80, 140, or more miles. The six roads, Kent, Yarmouth, Chester, Bristol, Plymouth, and the North carried mail three weekly as far as Dublin and Edinburgh, with daily carriage to Dover and continental packet boats.³⁵ At best, mail moved only 4-5 miles per hour by horse and foot post, though coaches and carriers criss-crossed the nation.³⁶ If speed was crucial, writers turned to friends, carriers, servants, porters, spies, and hawkers.³⁷ They sent letters to merchants on the continent for forwarding back to England, and hid them in loads of cheese, books, and clothes. Letters sent to fictitious persons were later hand-delivered to intended addressees. To avoid scrutiny, trusted couriers posted letters at the first stage outside London or immediately before the closing of the general post office, leaving little time to open mail. At the same time, new routes, branches, and post towns developed in response to public petitions and demand. Service spread like topsy throughout the nation, along with guidebooks and maps. By the 1680s, most market towns were served by horse posts riding 120 miles a day.³⁸ The huge growth of mail is seen in the swift increase in postal farm rent from L10,000 to L25,000 by 1666.³⁹ An expanding nationwide system now operated under a centrally rationalized work plan with stable personnel and funding.

²⁸Wilson Hyde, The Post in Grant and Farm (L, 1894) 238; F.M.G.Higham, The Principal Secretary of State (Manchester, 1923), 108-21; BL MS 4166 Thurloe Papers, f.94; BL Add 32471, f.1. A Briefe Declaration; C.H. Firth, 'Thurloe and the Post Office', English Historical Review 13 (1898), 527-33.

²⁹BL Add MS 32499, John Wallis Letter Book; D.E. Smith, 'John Wallis as Cryptographer', Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society, 2nd Ser., xxiv (Nov. 1917) 82-96; Bodl MS e. Mus 203; Bodl MS Eng Misc e 475; Bodl Ms Smith 31, ff.38-50 and Smith 54; C.Scribe, 'The Autobiography of John Wallis', Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London 25:1 (1970), 17-66; Bodl MS Eng Misc c.382.

³⁰Higham, 15; BL Add MS 72751, f.36v; BL MS Rawl A. 477, 10-14. Dorislaus was the son of the Rump Parliament's Ambassador to Holland 1653-81. For dealings with Williamson see PRO SP 29/209, f.118.

³¹H.W. Dickinson, Sir Samuel Morland: Diplomat and Inventor 1625-95 (Cambridge, 1970); Foster W. Bond, 'Samuel Morland and the Secret Opening of Letters', PHS Bulletin 79 (1955) 26-8; Bl Add MS 61689, f.51, 61690, f.104; DNB xiii (1968) 965-70.

³²BL MS Rawl A.477, ff.10-14, A Brief Discourse concerning the Business of Intelligence; E.R. Turner, 'The Secrecy of the Post', English Historical Review 33 (1918) 320-7.

³³Higham, 111-116.

³⁴PO Acts File; CSPD, 1657, clv, June 9 1677; 'An Act for the Settling of the Postage of England', Post Office Magazine, June 1975.

³⁵POA Acts File; BL Harl MS 5954, ff.27,28,35; Stitt Dibden, 29-33.

³⁶Gardiner, 31-6; Hyde, 291. Though ordered speed was 7mph April to Sept. and 5mph for other months, De Laune's The Present State of London (1681) claims no more than 5.mph. See authors file based on dates of letters and post marks.

³⁷Dartmouth Papers, HMC, 11th Report, Appendix V (L, 1978), 41,45. See also auhor's collection file.

³⁸J. Taylor, Carrier's Cosmographie (1637); POA, Road Book Collection.

³⁹Gardiner, 2; The Book of Postal Dates 1635-1985 (n.d.) 2. After 1677, post office profits passed to the Duke of York and pensioners.

Unlike customs and excise men who were loathed, postal officials worked with communities as they lobbied for expanding, valued services.

Clearly, this burgeoning network had to be controlled. In a major shift, Charles II vowed to learn from the mistakes of his father.⁴⁰ He recognized the intelligence potential of the post office and achieved desired control by combining the offices of Postmaster General and principal Secretary of State in one person, with deputies to manage the mail.⁴¹ The Secretaries and the post office now played complementary roles in the search and seizure of seditious papers and persons, the enforcement of licensing acts, and the building of an espionage network. By 1666, Secretary Henry Bennet, Lord Arlington and his deputy Sir Joseph Williamson had secured the postal monopoly and reorganized the flow of information in and out of the post office. The two men stood at the hub of Parliament and Privy Council with direct access to the King. They therefore had a central power-base from which to develop the intelligence functions of the post office. Williamson brought new procedures and success to the post office and took a fresh new approach to manipulating news.

The son of a poor Cumberland clergyman, Williamson became an MP, head of the State Paper Office, clerk to the Privy Council, and eventually Secretary of State.⁴² With the help of his agent at the Post Office, James Hickes, he headed the government's intelligence network with its own safe houses, false addresses, and informers.⁴³ Since 'Ambassadors & publick Minister [were] for the most part but great spies', he kept 'a strikt watch upon them...& their letters constantly opened'. He searched and bribed carriers and foot posts, while spies informed on those 'subtil and sly fellowes in and about the Citty, who are paid...by a common purse [and]...goe laden with intelligence'.⁴⁴ Though there was no statutory precedent, internal documents provided customary language stating that no employee was to detain or open a letter 'except by express warrant of the Secretaries [of State]'.⁴⁵ This language reveals both confirmation and abuse of the Secretaries' right to open letters. That power was reaffirmed in a letter from Secretary Coventry to Arlington in 1677: 'I...do yet conceive that a Secretary of State may demand an account of any letters that come to the post house...My Lord Secretaries of State have not used...to ask anybody's leave but the King's'.⁴⁶

Now Dorislaus and Morland expanded their nightly activities in the secret room. In a three-hour visit, Charles II was shown machines that could open letters sealed with

⁴⁰Thomas Slaughter, ed., *Ideology and Politics on the Eve of Restoration: Newcastle's Advice to Charles II* (Philadelphia, 1984); Aylmer, 38; Raymond, *Invention*, 162-3.

⁴¹Higham, 283-4. Charles I's plans to annex the post office to the Secretary's office in the late 1630s were thwarted only by Civil War.

⁴²*DNB*, xxi (1968) 473-8; B. Henning, *The House of Commons 1660-90* (L, 1983) iii, 736-40; Bodl MS Eng Lett. c.5, d.37; MS Firth b.1,2; Queens College, Oxford Benefactor's Book; *State Papers Domestic Charles II-Anne 1660-1714*, microfilm edition; State Paper Office, *Thirtieth Annual Report* (L, 1869) 244-52. His papers make up the bulk of *State Papers Domestic* for Charles II's reign and include detailed journals and notebooks. See especially PRO SP/87, Williamson's notebook Sept 8-Nov 17 1663; SP29/366, ff.1-260, notebook 1674-79; SP 29/319A, ff.2,157,183,188,190,192 for intelligence work.

⁴³Peter Fraser, *The Intelligence of the Secretaries of State & their Monopoly of Licensed News 1660-88* (Cambridge, 1956); Marshall, *Intelligence and Espionage*.

⁴⁴BL MS Rawl A.477, ff.12v,13r.

⁴⁵POA 94/15, f.587, Roger Whitley Letter Book, Sept 1673-Feb 1675; POA 71/35/15 *Report*; 9 Anne c.10; 35 George III c.612.

⁴⁶BL Add MS 251523, f.31, Henry Coventry to Lord Arlington, Sept 18 1677; Higham, 284.

wax or wafers, take impressions of seals, imitate writing perfectly, and copy a letter in one minute, likely using an 'offset process of pressing damp tissue paper against the ink'.⁴⁷ The comptroller and treasurer attended the opening and closing of each mail. They watched the 46 London employees closely and distributed bags evenly so all would finish together, 'that noe clarke may shutt the Baggs to prevent confederacy with the postmaster'. Porters attended the door 'to prevent the going out of Letter Carriers...until the Kings mail was sent',⁴⁸ giving time to open letters. Foreign office employees were sent to the continent to learn languages and cyphers and to recognize seals and hands, whilst cryptography was raised to a science.⁴⁹

In 1665, the French Ambassador commented on the English post office: 'They have tricks to open letters more skillfully than anywhere in the world, some even...fancying that...it is not possible to be a great statesman without tampering with packets'. Huge troves of surviving deciphered letters confirm his statement. Opening then closing letters was a subtle act of censorship, giving illusion of epistolary freedom, while retaining control.⁵⁰

But Williamson's most innovative achievement was his creation of a rational system for gathering raw news, editing it to create intelligence, then circulating what he wished in controlled newsletters and Gazettes.⁵¹ With the help of his man at the post office, Hickes,⁵² he developed an exclusive list of about 50 of his best domestic informants. It included Lord Lieutenants, customs and port officers, governors of garrisons, fleet commanders, privy councilors, and personal friends. In 1674 this list contained 23 postmasters.⁵³

Postmasters were ideal informers, for they were dependent, had taken oaths, and could be instructed not to give information to others. Many were tavern or innkeepers supplying drink, gossip, and horses. This made them accurately informed about local people and the movement of strangers in and out of their districts. In 1667, John Lisle petitioned for a postmaster's job promising that he 'would thus be able to give large intelligence, especially through foreigners who resort to the post'.⁵⁴ Politicization of postmasters in every small locality helped support Government censorship of mail. They could, and did, however, also inform for opponents of the state.

After Williamson 'skimmed the cream' from domestic letters, he turned to his weekly, foreign correspondents. Diplomats appointed for their values as informants watched shipping, trade, and military movements, and sent embassy dispatches and

⁴⁷Dickinson, 95; HMC Downshire I, 594-5, 609-10. I thank Sonia Anderson for this reference.

⁴⁸Gardiner, 19-23.

⁴⁹Higham, 115; Stitt Dibden, 'Four Hundred Years of Anglo-Dutch Mail 1574-1965', Postal History Society Souvenir, 21st Annual Conference, Sept. 1965, The Hague; BL Add MS 44158-45523, Wiles Family Papers; John Davys, An Essay on Decyphering (L, 1745).

⁵⁰Dickinson, 96; Fraser, 25; Mark Thomas, The Secretaries (Oxford, 1932), 155. See also Intercepted Correspondence at the PRO and British Library.

⁵¹Alan Marshall, 'Sir Joseph Williamson and the Conduct of Administration in Restoration England', Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research, 69 (1996) 18-41.

⁵²POA Ref. 1.73, In the Days of the Post Office Man, typescript, n.d.; BL Add 38863, Establishment of the Duke of York's Household, 1682. For Hickes's correspondence with Williamson see CSPD in the 1660s.

⁵³PRO SP29/319A, ff.189,190; W.D. Christie, ed., Letters Addressed from London to Sir Joseph Williamson, vol II, Camden Society, New Series, 114 (1874), Appendix: Report of H. Ball, 'The State...of Your Honour's Paper Office, Oct. 24, 1674', 161-5; Fraser, 30-31, Appendix II, 140.

⁵⁴CSPD, 1666-7, 570.

newsletters.⁵⁵ They addressed their letters to fictitious names, known by Hicke, who took them out of the post and gave them to Williamson.⁵⁶ Williamson was the first to receive continental newsletters in return for his own. Then he reused the foreign news, after recording how many days old it was in his journal. These journals also list inland and foreign informers, letters received, and the speed of mail from abroad. Prior to this time, England had not systematically entered the continent's well-developed news network. One might almost say that foreign newsletters were 'introduced into England to suit the needs of the secretary of State'⁵⁷

All sources of news were then edited and sent to Henry Ball and his clerks in the Post Office. Williamson's method was 'to read all my letters of all heads my selfe in my owne chambre and marke wt for ye print and what for ye mss'.⁵⁸ Those items for mss. were assembled, copied, and sent postage free as private newsletters to informers on Williamson's lists. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, Ball and four clerks wrote so many letters 'that if some of them were not prepared the preceding night, we could not compass them'. These hand-written newsletters contained the highly sought-after domestic news, which was denied to the public.⁵⁹ Because the newsletters were key to Williamson's power, entry into the system was jealously controlled. In 1667, J. Hubbock of Durham was 'anxious for written intelligence weekly and [would] pay 40s a year for it'. Hicke had offered 'a constant correspondence to Mr. Lindsay, postmaster of Dartmouth, and begged Williams for 'an order to him to have the written intelligence'. No one but Williamson could add members to this select list.⁶⁰ Profits were not the issue, for as Ball reported: 'For those that are your Honor's particular friends, or at the ports, wee doe not expect... a farthing....'⁶¹ The newsletters were sent not to make a profit, but were confidential circulars, predicated on the notion that 'the best intelligence could only be got from... correspondents, if their news was kept exclusively to themselves.'⁶²

As part of a premeditated plan to control public opinion, Williamson also personally created and supervised the London Gazette, the only official newspaper from 1666-1688. Its goal of combating 'seditious misinformation and false news' shows both the old Crown notion that the public could not be trusted with news, and the new realization that it must manipulate it. Critics have ridiculed the Gazette's bland mix of proclamations, sermons, appointments, and advertisements.⁶³ Hicke wrote of a 'general complaint of the Gazette wanting Domestic Intelligence; some in the Office who sent 14

⁵⁵PRO SP 29/319A, f.58,188-9.

⁵⁶PRO SP 29/87, f.68v.

⁵⁷PRO SP 29/87, ff. 2,3,41-48,70, 72v.74v; PRO SP 29/271, f.228; SP 29/319A, ff.22,28; Fraser, 41, 43-5.

⁵⁸PRO SP 29/87, f.10r

⁵⁹Christie, 165; Thomas O' Malley, 'Religion and the Newspaper Press 1660-85: A Study of the London Gazette', in M. Harris and A. Lee, eds., The Press in English Society from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries (Rutherford, NJ, 1986), 11. They were written under Williamson's direction at various times by Robert Francis, Henry Ball and Robert Yard. In 1667 Hicke sent out 30 to 40 newsletters per week. By 1676 he sent about 100 per week.

⁶⁰Jeremy Greenwood, Newspapers and the Post Office 1635-1834, Special Series Publication #26, Postal History Society, 1971, unpaginated; A. Marshall, Sir Joseph Williamson, 45.

⁶¹Christie, 165.

⁶²Fraser, 29.

⁶³O'Malley, 30; P.M. Handover, A History of the London Gazette (L, 1965) 14-17.

or 16 dozen, now only send half the number...they having nothing in them of the proceedings of Parliament.⁶⁴

Still, the London Gazette sold for only a penny, and was widely read for its foreign news. This success led Williamson to reward country postmasters, by exchanging postage-free Gazettes in return for intelligence. Postmasters could then use them to bring custom to their inns and shops, or loan, circulate, and sell them for profit. This practice brought revenue to postal officers, and encouraged employees to improve intelligence. By the 1670s, it had become so common that some postmasters received gazettes instead of salary.⁶⁵

The circulation of Gazettes proved so successful, that a radical extension soon took place. The 6 Clerks of the Road, who supervised the mails from London, were informally given the privilege of 'franking' Gazettes to local postmasters, This meant sending them postage free.⁶⁶ A privilege formerly restricted to ministers of state and MPs was now extended to postmasters. The public abuse of franking is well known, and there was a thriving business in selling forged franks. From 1670 to 1677, the Post Office franking allowance rose from L4000 to L7200.⁶⁷

But abuse of franking also tempted underpaid local postmasters and their superiors, the 6 Clerks of the Roads. Treasury Board minutes confess that postal employees 'lie under very great temptation of being prevailed upon to do things very prejudicial to the revenue.... Though divers of them have been turned out for the same, yet it is no terror to their successors, they not being able to live upon their employments'.⁶⁸ The franking of gazettes not only supplemented postal salaries, it solved the main problem for distributing all later newspapers—the high cost of postage.

Clearly, unless papers were franked, they could never have circulated en masse. Without franking, the consumer had to pay at least 1 to 6 pence several times a week for just the newspaper, and then 2 to 6 pence per sheet for postage, depending on the distance.⁶⁹ Though rates varied over time, the Clerks of the Road negotiated with publishers, then charged local postmasters 2d. or 3d. a paper—a huge savings. As newspaper circulation expanded, the clerks of the road made huge profits that ballooned with growing readership.⁷⁰ Local postmasters received a percentage of about 2.5-5%. In time, rising proceeds were divided among an increasing number of postal officials.⁷¹

Soon the now powerful 6 Clerks of the Road were suspected of dispersing material. They were also caught farming 'newes of their own ... spreading the same to all sorts of Chapmen'. Mr. Sawtell, for example, 'in return for Currant Intelligence post-free

⁶⁴CSPD 1667-8, Dec 16 1667, 102; Greenwood.

⁶⁵POA 94/17, Whitley Letter Book, f. 43, March 7 1675, f.69, March 30 1675; Greenwood; BL Add MS 62019, f. 6. Salaries ranged from L110 to 2 Gazettes weekly. See also Malden, Margate, and Dorchester.

⁶⁶POA Franking file; POA Paper no. 16--Franks; POA Treasury Letter Book, Vol.2, ff. 192, 207; vol. 3, f.64; Francis Freeling letter, June 1820; Post Office Correspondence: Letter to Mr Haldane, Nov 23 1966; Letter to Dr. C.B. Henry, July 4 1973.

⁶⁷For example POA Treasury Letter Book, vol.3, March 16 1704; vol. 9, f. 168. George Brumell, A Short Account of the Franking System in the Post Office 1652-1840 (Bournemouth, 1936) 13; Greenwood [12].

⁶⁸Treasury minutes April 5 1688, cited in James Sutherland, The Restoration Newspaper and Its Development (Cambridge, 1986) 116.

⁶⁹Greenwood, Table of newspaper prices by year. This of course depended on date, price, pages, etc.

⁷⁰POA Ref 1.73 In the Days of the Post Man, n.p; POA 24, Catalogue, 1. By the 1780s, 75% of all salaries in the Postal Inland Office were paid from profits of the clerks' news business.

⁷¹Greenwood [32]; POA Franking File, letters.

twice a week' had postmasters reporting to him 'anything worthy of note that happened in their neighbourhood'.⁷² The very people who were supposed to control news were spreading it to the public.

Most important, Williamson's innocent 'perk' would have a profound impact on the rise and censorship of the newspaper. Local postmasters now orders for subscriptions, and placed papers in coffeehouses, taverns, and alehouses, ensuring readership lower down the scale. This situation encouraged local public opinion, a shared sense of national identity, and coffeehouses themselves. Although there was no legal basis for receiving postage-free newspapers, it became a hallowed right. Because it developed at a time when readership and prices were rising, its profit potential soared. Postal reformers who wanted to end this perk failed because of fear that 'sneaking booksellers' would send the news by carriers and coaches.⁷³ This abuse would lead to mass circulation of eighteenth-century newspapers.

Williamson's attempts to monopolize information and mail were doomed to failure. He only released news after it was read and interpreted, starving the public of domestic items, and saving the best for himself. During the Exclusion Crisis of 1679-1681, when Whigs attempted to exclude James, Duke of York, from the succession, an underground news culture quickly reemerged. Williamson was ousted for mishandling the Popish Plot,⁷⁴ and the Licensing Act that had suppressed all but official news, was again allowed to lapse in 1679. As in 1640, an outburst of newspaper and pamphlet publishing followed. What is not so well known is how these events were linked to the post office. By 1680, the monopoly of mail so carefully nurtured by Williamson had crumbled. A Whig-backed unlicensed penny post was successfully established.

Many historians see this period as a turning point. The formation of parties offered new types of political participation and newspaper journalism matured. Successful challenges were made by Parliament and London juries to Government censorship.⁷⁵ On June 10 1679, a Whig Controlled Parliament failed to extend the Licensing Act. Now the crown was forced to control printing through the royal prerogative.⁷⁶ On May 12 1680, a decree forbade the publication of 'any news—whether true or false'.⁷⁷ None of these methods worked and Whig-packed juries blocked Government prosecutions. Without licensing, anyone could publish news. After years of dearth, between 1679-1682, there emerged 40 domestic newspapers. The Exclusion Crisis and rise of party challenged the legal basis for press control.⁷⁸

All of these events were strengthened and supported by the London Penny Post. On March 22 1680, William Dockwra announced 'the New and Useful Invention,

⁷²Gardiner, 27; CSPD, Oct 1683-April 1684, 54, cited in Sutherland 117.

⁷³POA Treasury Letter Book, vol. 4, f.224, Dec 3 1711; Post 94/17; Robinson, 1948, 68; Greenwood.

⁷⁴CSPD 1679-80, xv; Dr. Williams Library MS, Roger Morrice Entry Book, vol 1, ff. 96-7, 135; Marshall, Intelligence, 72.

⁷⁵Mark Knights, Politics and Opinion in Crisis 1678-81 (Cambridge, 1994); Raymond, News, 113.

⁷⁶Lois Schwoerer, 'Liberty of the Press and Public Opinion 1660-95' in J.R. Jones ed., Liberty Secured: Britain before and after 1688 (Stanford, 1992) 213-4; Timothy Crist, 'Government Control of the Press after the Expiration of the Printing Act in 1679', Printing History 5 (1979) 48-77.

⁷⁷Donald Thomas, A Long Time Burning, 32'; London Gazette, May 5 and 17, 1660; Crist, 61.

⁷⁸For example, Harris's Domestic Intelligence, Langley's True Protestant Mercury, Smith's Protestant Intelligence, Care's Weekly Paquet of Advice from Rome. Knights, 157-72.

commonly term'd the PENNY POST' which carried letters for a penny.⁷⁹ He brought the post office to the people by creating seven central offices and 500 receiving-houses in each main street. Bonded messengers called each hour bringing letters to clerks, who stamped them with hour, day, and office and delivered them in an hour. A letter brought in at eight, would be stamped by nine, and delivered at or near ten o'clock. Mails were carried 6-10 times a day.⁸⁰ Expensive advertisements, handbills, and pamphlets targeted a broad public, including shopkeepers, tradesmen, and their workmen, showing the breadth and depth of letter writing.⁸¹ The public saw how an efficient postal system brought economic, social, and political benefits. Dockwra succeeded because he met public needs. He also used his Whig-backed service to thwart Government censorship.

The opposition Whig leader, the Earl of Shaftesbury, was linked to the Penny Post. Dockwra was a London customs searcher, often in litigation, who grew wealthy from trading as an interloper.⁸² His partner Robert Murray was involved in shadowy commercial 'projects'. Letters claim that Dockwra stole Murray's invention. But since Murray was arrested in May 1680 for distributing Charles Blount's Appeal from the Country, Dockwra had to start up on his own.⁸³ A year later, Murray was caught hiring and paying Shaftesbury's witnesses to swear as directed.⁸⁴ In June 1682, Secretary Leoline Jenkins was warned against 'a little one Murray, an Agent of my Lord Shaftesbury's' in Paris', who 'comes with instructions ... and talks...against the...Administration'.⁸⁵ Another undertaker Dr Hugh Chamberlen, a Whig midwife,

⁷⁹True News or Mercurius Anglicus, Mar 14-17, 1680; Mercurius Civicus, Mar 22, 24 1680; BL MS Harl 5954, f. 45, The Case of William Dockwra, Merchant, concerning the Penny Post; Frank Staff, The Penny Post 1680-1918 (L, 1964) 37-8.

⁸⁰F. Bagust, Some Notes on the Small Post Offices of London in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (L, 1937); Bodl Douce DD 119, T. Delaune, The Present State of London (L, 1681) 353; BL Harl Ms 5954, ff.48-50, The Practical Method of the Penny Post: Being a Sheet very Necessary for all Persons to Have by Them (L, 1681) and f.67, A Penny Well Bestowed, April, 1680.

⁸¹T. Todd, William Dockwra and the Rest of the Undertakers (Edinburgh, 1952), 31, 99-100; A Practical Method, 226.

⁸²BL Cup. 645 b.11 8, Broadside, 1704, Royal Africa Company, The case of the Appellants. Appellant vs William Dockwra and other Respondents notes Dockwra was part owner of the Anne, trading as an interloper. He received L2,630 in 1696; BL MS Stowe 747, f.93; Add MS 61689, ff.57, 58; Todd, 9-11; DNB, v (1968), 1044-45; POA Treasury Letter Book, vol. I, ff. 82-3. I thank Steve Pincus for information about Dockwras later wealth, trade, and relations with government ministers.

⁸³BL Harl MS 5954, f. 52, 93-5; William Lewins, Her Majesty's Mails, 2nd ed., (L, 1865), 54; SP 29/413, f.121 cites the Affidavit of Stephen Whiteway, 'hawker...acquainted with George Cawdron and Robert Murray, both in the Penny Letter Office...vended seditious books supplied by Murray and Cawdron, CPSD, 1680, 488, May 22 1680; SP 29/413, ff.124-5 records a warrant from Council to Francis Strutt, messenger to apprehend George Cowdron and Robert Murray, CPSD 1680, 488; Angliae Metropolis: or the Present State of London (L, 1690), f.343; Todd, 3, 22; J.G. Muddiman, The King's Journalist (L, 1923) 220-21.

⁸⁴SP 29/416, f.132, Robert Bolton's deposition. 'Murray...took his informations and carried them to the Earl of Shaftesbury', He received 20s from Aaron Smith before College's trial and 40s and 20s of Mr Dalby, Oates man. He was told 'what they did was by the Earl of Shaftesbury's direction...Murray told him the said Earl did not like the first information'. CPSD, 1681, 431-2, Sept 1 1681.

⁸⁵Todd, 22-26; Murray might have been the register of hackney coaches in 1687 against whom 400 coachmen petitioned.

designed commercial projects,⁸⁶ whilst Henry Neville alias Payne, a ‘conspirator and author’, was arrested in the Popish Plot.⁸⁷

The Penny Post spread unlicensed news and turned coffeehouses into chains of mail collection points that eluded censorship. For example, in 1681, 12 copies of libels were sent through the Penny Post to a news writer in a Whig coffeehouse. He quickly sent them on to a similar Amsterdam establishment. On March 1 1681, Heraclitis Ridens, a Government paper, linked the free press to the penny post: ‘There was never anything so favourable to the carrying on and managing Intrigue ... That and the Press being unpadlockt, are two incomparable twins of the Liberty of the Subject! One may Write, Print, publish and disperse ingenious Libels...and no body the...wiser for it’.⁸⁸ The public now saw that censorship and high postage were unnecessary. ‘We see nothing of this at Paris, at Amsterdam, at Hamburgh or any other City’, wrote Defoe.⁸⁹

By 1682 with the fall of the Whigs, Dockwra was ousted and his Penny Post was absorbed into the Post Office.⁹⁰ In 1697, a State Poem that sung Dockwra’s praises revealed an ongoing postal myth. It claimed that ‘all natives and free Citizens of London’ had a ‘birthright to use whomever they pleased to deliver letters’.⁹¹ Londoners saw that efficient postal service not only spread news, but could help defy censorship. The penny post was part of the battle over whether communications should be free or controlled. It became a model for later postal service, when the government felt more secure. Technologically, the structure of mail delivery had changed.

The Glorious Revolution, that ejected James II, led to freer communications and a tremendous surge in postal revenues from L65,000 in 1682, to 90,000 in 1688, 100,000 in 1694, L150,000 in 1700 when the Penny post carried over a million items.⁹² William III officially declined the offer of Morland’s machines, but actively participated in a network of ‘black chambers’ that linked the secret office to those abroad.⁹³ William III’s Postmaster General John Wildman⁹⁴ and his comptroller of the foreign office, William Brocket, regularly opened mail and were charged with informing for Jacobites.⁹⁵ ‘In most of ye offices [of]...ye penny post,’ noted an absverer in 1697, ‘there is a subtill trade in writing news ltres & votes of Parliament for...customers...in citty and country’, while

⁸⁶BL Add MS 61869, f.98; Add MS 61690, f.47; J.J. Aveling, The Chamberlens and the Midwifery Forceps (NY, 1977); Todd 22,24-27,93; The Practical Method of the Penny Post, April 1681, 13,23.

⁸⁷Roger Morrice Entry Book, vol. 1, f.557, vol. 2, f.84; Todd, 13-25; DNB, 553-4.

⁸⁸CSPD, 1683-4, 52; Knights, 173, Richard Ashcraft, Revolutionary Politics & Locke’s Two Treatises of Government (Princeton, 1986) 172-3.

⁸⁹Staff, 56; Robinson, 1948, 84.

⁹⁰POA, Treasury Letter Book, vol 1, f.83; Todd, 45; BL Ms Harl 5954, f.45; London Gazette, Nov 23-27, 1682.

⁹¹Todd, vii.

⁹²Robinson, 1948, 36, 43.

⁹³BL Add 61690, f.51, 104; HMC Finch II (L, 1933) 264-66; HMC Finch III (L, 1957) 455-6; HMC Buccleuch II (L, 1903) 48-51; Karl De Leuw, ‘The Black Chamber in the Dutch Republic’, Historical Journal, 42 (1999) 133-56; Stitt Dibden, Four Hundred Years, 7. I thank Sonia Anderson and David Onnekink for citations and information on this point.

⁹⁴BL Add MS 61689-61690, Papers relating to the Post Office and John Wildman 1688-91; BL Egerton MS 2543, f. 64-5, Treasury Minutes, Post Office petitions and Legal Papers; Maurice Ashley, John Wildman: Plotter and Postmaster (L, 1947).

⁹⁵BL Add 72751, f.36-41, 45; POA 95/1, f.63-4, Sir Thomas Frankland Papers 1694-97; BL Add MS 61690, f.16-7; Kenneth Ellis, The Post Office in the Eighteenth Century (L, 1958), 65-7; CSPD, 1660-1, 409 and 1661-2, 556,560.

officials were charged with selling news direct to newspapers.⁹⁶ The office set up to control news was itself out of control and undermining state censorship.

Old notions of censorship collapsed when the Licensing Act was allowed to lapse in 1695, this time for good. Locke's friend John Freke thought younger MPs wished to enjoy the independent newspapers they had known during the Exclusion Crisis.⁹⁷ Not only was licensing opposed by major sections of the public, the government had faith in other methods of control like the law of seditious libel, taxation, and subsidization of news.⁹⁸ By 1700, newspapers were so culturally embedded that even the 1712 Stamp Act⁹⁹ failed to eject the growing opposition press.¹⁰⁰ Yet censorship did not fade away. The law of seditious libel became a powerful instrument, and by preventing the appearance of material that could be viewed as extremist, it fixed the boundaries of political debate.¹⁰¹

The later effects of opening mail and circulating newspapers may be clearly seen in the eighteenth century. A new postal act of 1711¹⁰² raised prices, but repeated language permitting opening of letters 'by an express warrant...of one of the principal Secretaries of State'.¹⁰³ This privilege led to the arrests of Atterbury and the Jacobites in the 1720s.¹⁰⁴ In 1742, a Commons secret committee found that a secret foreign office had existed since 1718. Though it cost L3500 per year to pay its five clerks and four foreign-trained decipherers, no action or disclosure ensued.¹⁰⁵ In the wake of the 1745 Jacobite rising, general warrants were used to stop 'all...letters, packets, or papers...as shall come to the...post office, suspected to contain matters of a dangerous tendency'. This was an abuse of a practice that was usually confined to named individuals. It had long been done, charged the Craftsman, by leaving 'a Blank dormant Warrant at the Office, to be fill'ed up at the Discretion of the Postmaster General'.¹⁰⁶

There were few warrants kept for the rest of the century, though an intercepted letter led to the radical, Horne Tooke's trial in 1795.¹⁰⁷ By the 1820s, postal officials stamped detained letters with 'missent' to explain delay.¹⁰⁸ Not until 1844 did a Commons Secret Committee report make the opening of mail public. Even then, action was taken only when a Parliament member's letters were searched.¹⁰⁹ 'No reasonable

⁹⁶BL Add MS 61689, f. 90, Sept 24 1689.

⁹⁷Timothy Crist, 'The Renewal of the Licensing Act in 1693 and its Lapse in 1695', Library, 33 (1978) 320.

⁹⁸Stanford Law Review, 37 (1985), 661-762.

⁹⁹Henry Snyder, 'The Circulation of Newspapers in the Reign of Queen Anne', Library 23 (1968) 226-9; James Sutherland, 'The Circulation of Newspapers and Literary Periodicals 1700-30', Library, 4th series, xv (1935) 110-24.

¹⁰⁰R.B. Walker, 'The Newspaper Press in the Reign of Willlliam III', Historical Journal, xvii, 4 (1974) 691-709.

¹⁰¹Stanford Law Review; Leona Rostenberg, Literary, Political...& Legal Publishing, Printing and Bookselling in England, 2 vols (NY, 1965).

¹⁰²9 Anne c. 10, 1711, sec 40; BL 8242.k.12, Appendix, 106.

¹⁰³BL 8242.k.12, 7; 35 Geo III c. 612; 1 Vic c.33; POA 71/35/51 House of Commons Report.

¹⁰⁴BL 8242.k.12, 8 appendix, 110-1; Ellis, 71; David Kahn, The Codebreakers (L, 1967) 169; Lewins, 219.

¹⁰⁵Further Report from the Committee on Secrecy, Appointed to Enquire into the Conduct of...the Earl of Orford...May 13 1742 (L, 1742); BL 8242.k.12, 8; Ellis, 127-31; BL Add MS 45518-45523, Wiles Family Papers, especially 24321.

¹⁰⁶BL 8242.k.12, 12; Michael Harris, London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole (L& Toronto, 1987) 151; Craftsman, No. 28, Feb 10 1727.

¹⁰⁷BL 8242.k.12, 9; Turner, 331.

¹⁰⁸Ellis, 189.

¹⁰⁹POA 71/35/15.

doubt', noted the report, 'can be entertained that the Governments...between 1660 and 1711 had frequent recourse to the practice of opening letters'. Yet the Committee found only one warrant from the period—that of Coleman's treason in the Popish Plot.¹¹⁰ From 1712-1798 'it was not the practice to record such Warrants regularly in any official book'. Only 101 were found for 87 years; only 22 in 20 years that included the French Revolution.¹¹¹ Repeated statutory statements had confirmed the presupposed power of the Secretary of State to open mail. Now, noted the report, 'the Postmaster General having had his attention called to the fact that there was no sufficient authority for this practice, has since last June discontinued it altogether'. For a short time Britain lay bereft of opening mail—'the most effective weapon for spying on external enemies'.¹¹² The press published engravings of the Secret Office and observed how wafers were steamed away and seals reproduced with bread impressions. The London Journal thought that 'there is every reason to suppose there is a Secret Chamber in every General Post Office'.¹¹³ The myth of the heroic delivery of uncensored mail had come to an inglorious halt.

Circulation of newspapers by post, however, took unintended directions during the eighteenth century. By 1742, Robert Walpole the Whig party leader was spending £5000 a year bribing and distributing free 'pension papers', underwritten by the government. Local postmasters had a share in the profits.¹¹⁴ Secret instructions ordered them to 'make these papers as public as [you] can, and to send up...names of persons...who keep coffeehouses, that they might be furnished with them gratis,' as well as 'private families of any note'.¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, rival papers failed to be delivered though they were handed in to the post. It was 'difficult to send the Craftsman even ten miles', noted an observer, 'without interception'.¹¹⁶

By the 1760s, the 6 postal clerks of the road had built a substantial newspaper business. They franked about 58% of the papers sent through London, grossing at least £3-4000 per year—one source suggests £6-8000.¹¹⁷ In 1764, an unintended loophole in a law passed to reduce franking allowed MPS not only to frank newspapers, but to authorize others to sign their franks. Soon the Post Office was flooded with orders on behalf of printers, booksellers, and newsagents, who illegally used the loophole in a wholesale fashion, at a price that undercut the postal clerks.¹¹⁸ Now the free circulation of newspapers was virtually thrown open to the public. As a postal memo put it, 'this...was

¹¹⁰BL 8242.k.12, 7; Derbyshire Record Office MS D239M O1049-1399, Treby Papers.

¹¹¹BL 8242.k.12, 9-14; Lewins, 219. See appendices for categories of offenses

¹¹²POA 71/35/15, 3; William Holdsworth, History of English Law, vol. x (L, 1964) 491; David Vincent, The Culture of Secrecy (Oxford, 1998) 1-2.

¹¹³The Illustrated London News, June 29, 1844; M.V.D Champness, 'The End of the Secret Office', The Philatelist, Aug, 1981, 141-3; The London Journal and Weekly Record of Literature, Science, and Art, vol. 1:3, March 15 1845, 33-4.

¹¹⁴Ellis, 46; Greenwood; G.C. Gibbs, 'Press and Public Opinion' in J.R. Jones, ed., Liberty Secured: Britain Before and After 1688 (Stanford, 1992) 255-62.

¹¹⁵Laurence Hanson, Government and the Press 1695-1763 (L, 1936) 110.

¹¹⁶M. Harris, 151-3.

¹¹⁷Harris, 46-7; Ellis, 53.

¹¹⁸POA 114, Collection of Statutes relating to the Post Office (L, 1793) 85-97, especially 93-4, 4 Geo III c.24 and 9 Geo III c.35; POA 24 Newspapers, Catalogue, 1; POA, Treasury Letter Book vol.4, f.224, Dec 3 1711; Tenth Report of the Commissioners on Fees (L, 1788); POA Newspapers file.

the origin of the News Vendors trade'.¹¹⁹ By the 1790s, the post office guaranteed the right for all stamped papers to pass free without restriction, proudly noting: 'Not only clerks in the post office, but also every other person is at liberty to circulate in every part of the Kingdom...any quantity of newspapers free of postage'.¹²⁰ An Act of 1825 legalized this free transmission.¹²¹ It arose, ironically, from a statute to restrict franking.

The story of the post office complicates notions of how censorship worked and how the state adjusted to the spread of news and information.. It also questions two myths linked to postal censorship. The first praises the technological advances of the post office, and its heroic civil servants delivering uncensored mail. The second records the teleological triumph of the free press. It sees an enlightened journalism eroding censorship and foreshadowing the rise of liberal democracy. Neither of these legends quite mesh with our story of the post office, whose methods of censorship evolved more chaotically—often in unintended ways.

Our story also places the history of communication on center stage. Though this is a hot twenty-first century topic, it is rarely integrated into the early-modern political world. Yet the way people communicated with each other underwent profound change during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Until the civil war ended, there was no way to establish stable communications. When calm returned, both the supply of letter writers and the demand for postal service were in place, but transport was sorely needed. The study of censorship has rightly been linked to ideology and the ideas of writers and philosophers. But the distributive process is important too. What if Locke and his correspondents in the republic of letters had no way to circulate ideas?

I have argued that in a major shift, Charles II embraced the fact that the Government no longer could assume sole possession of news, information, and ideas. His ministers now looked for ways to control, or as I define it, cancel expanding modes of communication. They accepted the existence of the post office and tried to tap its intelligence potential. But instead of relying on unworkable licensing laws, they opted for informal controls—the opening of mail, the control of incoming intelligence, and the outgoing flow of newsletters and newspapers. They also erected hidden barriers to postal expansion, in contrast to more overt forms of censorship. Thus, only mails that could be opened in London were tolerated until the 1720s, when the state felt secure. Then Ralph Allen's bye, cross, and later penny posts, became safe and profitable. Thus staff refused to use mail coaches until 1787, when an exasperated Pitt adopted John Palmer's vehicles, replete with armed guards.¹²² In each case, covert constraints retarded reform, until a dynamic individual wore down institutional bureaucracy.

¹¹⁹ POA 24/4 D.Stow, Papers about Circulation and Franking Privileges of the Clerks of the Roads, 1833; POA Newspaper Cuttings, May 1811-July 1833; Letter to Mr. A. Dowell, March 1 1768; 24/6 Statements by the Clerks of the Road; Letter from D. Stow to F. Freeling, Mar 10 1832.

¹²⁰ POA 24/6 Statement relative to the Circulation of Newspapers in England and Ireland; 24/2 Correspondence between the Postmaster General and the Clerks of the Road, Apr 3 1795-Mar 26 1811.

¹²¹ POA Post 24 Newspapers, Catalogue, 1.

¹²² For Allen see POA 68/1, Ralph Allen's Instruction Book 1729-40; POA, Treasury Letter Book vol. 6, f.158, Agreement with Ralph Allen, Apr 6 1720; vol. 9, ff. 17,20, 122; POA 14/1 Ralph Allen, Copybook relating to Management of the Bye and Cross Road, 1757; Adrian Hopkins, ed., Ralph Allen's Own Narrative 1720-61, Postal History Society Special Series 8, 1960.. For Palmer see POA 40, Postmaster General's Reports; POA 103, Receiver General's Accounts, Mail Coach Building Contracts, 1788; POA 42/1 Postmaster General's Minutes to the Secretary, Series A. Vol. 1, ff. 98, 129; Ellis 99-110; C.R. Clear, John Palmer of Bath (L, 1755).

Yet despite demand, there was little reforming postal legislation after 1711, and no failed postal bills between 1696 and 1790.¹²³ We miss seeing practice, however, if we look only at laws and regulations. Post Office Acts from 1635-1711, and two centuries of Licensing Acts contain similar language. They indicate little change, at a time when licensing was actually being displaced. More important, there was no legal basis for the customary practices of opening mail and circulating postage-free news. As we probe for practices on the ground, we see that evolving institutions with informal arrangements often assumed lives of their own, due to greed, ingenuity, or chance.

In the case of the post office, some of the very strategies that were meant to increase control had opposite effects. Thus censorship activities in the secret room appeared to be successful, leading to arrests and derailment of plots. As mail ballooned in volume, however, suspicious letters grew harder to detect. Even worse, postal officials responsible for keeping mail secure, used its news and secrets for their own profit, or to help the opposition. We only know that Sawtell, Brocket, and Wildman were informers, but the whole system was ripe for abuse.

Unintended consequences were most serious in regard to circulation of newspapers. When franking expanded to include them, the post office became a commercial newsagent. Now the situation became qualitatively as well as quantitatively more dangerous. Rising literacy and income levels put newspapers onto the doorsteps of ordinary people, including women and the lower classes. With the end of licensing and the growth of journalism, the post office was in a position to profoundly affect the distribution of news. Sending it postage free at Government expense solved the problem of how to deliver it cheaply. Local postmasters, with low salaries and high temptations, thought it only natural to use perquisites to supplement pay. It was not the lack of censorship, but the 'perks' of postal clerks, that spread newspapers to the people.

All of the censorship mechanisms described above were intended to restrict free communications. As such, they send anxious signals about the ethical basis of power and the violation of liberal principles of 'privacy, confidentiality, honour, integrity, openness, and freedom of expression'.¹²⁴ Yet governments must provide security for the common good, and the need and balance for this varies with historical time and place. Our story has placed postal censorship of information in the context of a particular stage of institutional development and the values, opinions, and conventions of the wider culture. It shows us that once people enjoyed self expression through letter writing, postal services could not be contained.

Responses to censorship were also historically specific and widespread, even when methods were hidden. The intercepting, opening, and then closing of letters was a very subtle act. It encouraged free speech through letter writing, then took it away through surveillance. People were aware that mail was opened, but they were never sure when, where, or how, especially in times of crisis.¹²⁵ Most large letter collections contain scores of letters advising caution when writing. Thus self-censorship was a significant effect of state interception of mail.

¹²³J.Hoppit and J. Innes, Failed Legislation. (L, 1997). Only 9 bills are indexed: 3:0777, 3:090; 4:045; 8:036; 19:029; 20:025; 31:067; 133:057; 137:062. I thank Julian Hoppit for help on this point.

¹²⁴Vincent, vii-ix.

¹²⁵For example, Bodl MS Don b.18, f.11, Richard Tucker to John Tucker, Nov 21 1724: 'Pray did you write any letters to me or my father Thursday last? I ask because...this came to my hand broke open'.

For Richard Ashcraft and Annabel Patterson, censorship caused deep linguistic and generic changes in communication in the 1670s and 1680s. Patterson credits censorship with the creation of the confidential letter of friendship. During this time, she argues, ‘this genre...became recognized and its examples ubiquitous.’¹²⁶ Her linkage of censorship and letter writing is insightful, but this tie existed in earlier periods, and in every reign censorship was probably less effective than Patterson implies.¹²⁷

Before the Restoration, the most common response to censorship was to use the ‘science’ of codes and ciphers. The royalists, however, suffered from this strategy, when their codes were broken. Rival mail services kept emerging to provide uncensored alternatives, but after 1660 they went underground. By the time of the Exclusion Crisis, postal demand was intense, but censorship and high postage created barriers.¹²⁸ The Penny Post solved both problems temporarily. After its absorption, people resorted to friends, carriers, and travelers. None of these, however, had the continuity and reach of the national post office. After 1711, when postage was raised, the public turned to the wholesale use of franks.

Government attempts to block communication were doomed to failure. By the eighteenth century, the public regarded postal service as a right and a necessity. Unlike customs and excise men, postmasters offered a valuable service. Communities increasingly petitioned for and received expanded routes, bye and cross posts, and cheap efficient home delivery. They wrote passionate letters to the Postmaster General in London demanding postal reform. As they did so, they were participating in an expanding institution that strengthened national identity and public opinion.¹²⁹

These activities took place in a public space created by the post office. Not only was it an arena for epistolary discourse, it connected and carried other media. Coffeehouses and the press have been given credit for gradually eroding censorship. Few have noticed the countrywide structure of the post office and its partnership with the newspaper, in England and other countries. As we integrate the history of communication into the story of censorship, we must see letter writing as a national act that transformed the structure and ownership of communications.

¹²⁶R. Ashcraft, ‘The Language of Political Conflict in Restoration Literature’ in Ashcraft and Roper, Politics as Reflected in Literature (Los Angeles, 1989) 3-28; Annabel Patterson, Censorship and Interpretation (Madison, 1984) 231.

¹²⁷A.B. Worden, ‘Literature and Political Censorship in Early Modern England’ in Duke and Tamse, Too Mighty to be Free, 45-63; Sheila Lambert, ‘State Control of the Press in Theory and Practice’ in R. Meyers and M. Harris, eds. Censorship and the Control of Print in England and France 1600-1910 (Winchester, 1992) 1-32.

¹²⁸Lois Potter, Secret Rites and Secret Writing (Cambridge, 1989), 59.

¹²⁹POA, Local History Collection and Roger Whitley Notebooks generally. D. Cornelius, Devon and Cornwall: A Postal Survey 1500-1791 (Reigate, 1973); A.G.W. Hall, The Post Office at Nottingham (Nottingham, 1947).