Seija-Riitta Laakso

Across the Oceans

Development of Overseas Business Information Transmission, 1815-1875

Academic dissertation to be publicly discussed, by due permission of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Helsinki in the auditorium of Arppeanum, Snellmaninkatu 3, on the 9th of December, 2006, at 10 a.m.

Helsinki 2006

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Cover picture: The Ocean Penny Postage propaganda cover, designed by James Valentine, was sent from Airdrie, Scotland, to Belleville, Canada, in October 1853 and carried from Liverpool to New York by the Cunard Line's steamer *Asia*. The propaganda covers were published to promote the idea of expanding the domestic uniform one penny postage rate to overseas mail. The dream of the Ocean Penny Postage became true in the late 19th century. (From the writer's collection.)

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PREFACE

The origins of this work go back to *Italia '98*, an international philatelic exhibition in Milan, where a well-known French dealer happened to have a box of old letters on his desk. Two of these letters appeared to be especially interesting. They were business correspondence, sent from New York to August Martell in Cognac, France, in the late 1820s, by the ships *France* and *Charlemagne*.

At that time, all overseas mail was carried across the oceans by sailing ships. A further examination of these two letters opened up a new world to me. The *France* and the *Charlemagne* were American sailing packets on regular line service between New York and Havre. As will be noticed in this study, the idea of "sailing on schedule" instead of general merchant shipping was one of the most important conditions for the development of business information transmission, whether conducted by sail or by steam.

A few years later, when I started this study, Professor Yrjö Kaukiainen's article on the Shrinking World gave my thesis a firm direction at the point when the idea was still more or less open. Without that article, my work on this theme would probably never have been started. I would like to thank Professor Kaukiainen for his patient guidance, which has continued even after his retirement from his university post.

I would also like to thank Professors Riitta Hjerppe and Markku Kuisma for their support and many useful conversations in their research seminars, and Professor Päiviö Tommila for his earlier counsel on the history of communications. I am also indebted to Professor Laura Kolbe, who took the time to read my thesis in an early stage, thank you for your support.

My warmest thanks also go to Professor Robert Lee, School of History at the University of Liverpool, and Dr Adrian Jarvis, Centre for Port and Maritime History, for facilitating and supporting my studies in Liverpool in 2004.

The pre-examiners of my thesis, Professor Jari Ojala and Docent Mika Kallioinen gave many insightful comments on the work. Especially the detailed observations and recommendations by Jari Ojala were extremely valuable in the final phase of the study. The international group of researchers led by him and Leos Müller also shared ideas of good value during the congresses under the title "Information Flows 1600-2000" in Jyväskylä (2005) and in Helsinki (2006), and many e-mails and articles have been sent across the oceans between the participants later on. Thank you for your contribution, all of you.

Graeme J. Milne, Sari Mäenpää and Tage Lindfors, thank you very much to you, too, for reading my texts and giving your useful comments, and thanks for all our good conversations. And without Tim Voelcker's help in London, some of my East India records would never have been finalized – thanks a lot.

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Research work could hardly be successful without the help of skilled personnel in the libraries and archives. I would like to direct my grateful thanks to the

directors and personnel of the Merseyside Maritime Museum Library & Archives; the University of Liverpool's Sydney Jones Library & Archives; the Liverpool Public Record Office Library & Archives; the India Record Office and the Philatelic Collections of the British Library in London; the Library of the Royal Philatelic Society London; and the Library of the Post Museum in Helsinki.

For financial support, I wish to express my warm thanks to the Helsingin Sanomat Centennial Foundation, which enabled my studies in the Liverpool archives, and to the University of Helsinki.

Finally, of course, my greatest gratitude goes to my family and to all my friends, whether mentioned above or not. Without you my thesis would probably have been completed much earlier, but I would definitely have lost something else of personal importance in my life. Thank you all.

I dedicate this book to my parents: to my late father, who always encouraged me to study further, and to my mother, whose warm support helped me through many difficulties during the years when I was involved in this research.

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Seija-Riitta Laakso

I. INTRODUCTION

Earlier studies have shown that the speed of information transmission increased markedly in all parts of the world during the 19th century. Before that period, the development in duration and frequency of sailings had been very much slower.[1] The fast progress was primarily based on the change from sailing ships and horse-driven coaches to steamers and railways. The telegraph, introduced by the mid-19th century and taken into intercontinental use twenty years later, finally revolutionized the speed of information transmission over long distances. This development has generally been described as a chain of technical improvements. In the real world, things were of course more complicated.

The title of this study, *Across the Oceans – Development of Overseas Business Information Transmission 1815-1875*, has been chosen to indicate that shipping and overseas information transmission were unquestionably linked in the 19th century, before the time of aircraft or electric communications. Maritime history is usually seen as the history of shipping, while the development of the speed of information transmission is often included in the history of communications. In particular, Yrjö Kaukiainen, Ian K. Steele and Allan R. Pred have carried out important research by combining these aspects.

The starting point for this particular study was Yrjö Kaukiainen's article, in which he showed that the general duration of information transmission had continuously decreased several decades before the breakthrough of the electric telegraph. Kaukiainen based his arguments on maritime intelligence published by *Lloyd's List*, calculating how many days it took for the information on ship arrivals in different ports around the world to reach London and be published.

Interestingly, the shortest time lag e.g. between Barbados and London was 38 days in 1820, but only 20 days in 1860. Similarly, the time lag decreased on the route between Buenos Aires and London from 72 to 40 days; between Valparaiso and London from 109 to 49 days; and between New York and London from 23 to ten days during the same period. The most remarkable changes were seen on the East India route, where the time lag between Bombay and London decreased from 121 to 25 days; and between Calcutta and London, where it decreased from 128 to 35 days between 1820 and 1860.[2] All this happened before the long distance telegraph was brought into use. The Atlantic cable was laid successfully in 1866, and a direct connection from London to India was opened in 1870. A direct telegraph line to Buenos Aires was available in 1875.

A great part of the development can naturally be explained by the overall change from sail to steam and the opening of railways over the isthmuses of Suez and Panama. But it is also evident that such changes took time. The networks - shipping routes and regular sailings, railways, canals, and telegraph lines - had to be established, financed and built, as well as coordinated to serve the mail system. Everything could not be done immediately when a new innovation was made.

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[1] See Yrjö Kaukiainen, "Shrinking the world: Improvements in the speed of information transmission, c. 1820-1870". *European Review of Economic History, 5* (Cambridge 2001), 1-28; Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic 1675-1740. An Exploration of Communication and Community* (Oxford, 1986); and Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities, 1790-1840* (Harvard, 1973).

[2] Kaukiainen (2001), 1-28. – Westbound, the difference on the New York route would obviously have been much greater due to the prevailing winds and currents.