

The postal service, the dissemination of news and the creation of geography,

1500-1700

Joad Raymond

Horses are faster than people. If anyone wants evidence for this claim, I can offer the annual 'man versus horse' race, run in Llanwrtyd Wells in Wales annually in June (<<http://www.green-events.co.uk/events.html?id=54>>).



The 35k cross country race pitches humans on foot against (mounted) horses, and has been run 36 times since 1981. Only on two of those occasions has a human won. So, horses are faster than people, and are therefore a means of speeding up communication. They can also potentially increase the *volume* of communication. However, between about 1500 and about 1700 the systematic use of horses in the form of postal services effected not only a *quantitative* change, in terms of speed and volume, but also a *qualitative* shift. Regular posts transformed the *practices* of news communication, with a lasting effect on European societies and on the shape and idea of Europe itself.



] In late medieval Europe news communication relied above all on word of mouth, though this had a symbiotic relationship with written newsletters. Letters confirmed news first heard as rumour, letters spread news further and more reliably, and they helped define what constituted news; but newsletters also could keep news secret as it moved, because a sealed letter did not require an intermediary to memorise and convey the message (though letters risked instead being opened by the messenger or someone who intercepted the messenger). One of the defining characteristics of writing on paper or on parchment is that it moves across space and time, and the word no longer depends on the voice to project it. So there's a kind of complementarity between the secrecy of the sealed post, and the silence of writing. Post or carrier as a means of conveying writing is sympathetic to the forms of writing, such as letters, which recreate a voice at a distance. I suspect there may be a deeper association or sympathy between writing as a mode of communication and the means that are used to convey it, one that obtains throughout western literature and society.

Thomas Andrew to William Paston:

'And my lord or ye send me eny letter, ye may send it me be John a More, this brynger, if he com agayne, or els be Fox wyff if her husband be nat gone to London.'

John Paston to Margaret Paston:

'I mervyll that I here no tidyngges from yow hough ye haue do at the assisses. The berer of this lettir is a comon carier, and was at Norwich on Satirday, and brought me lettirs from other men, but your seruaunts inquere nat diligently after the comyng of cariers and other men.'

Margaret Paston:

'I trowe the bearer of this shall telle more by mouthe, as he shall be enfourmed, of the revel in this cuntré'.

One example of pre-postal service correspondence from the Paston family in fifteenth-century England. The Pastons were witnesses to the Wars of the Roses and wrote and preserved a unique collection of familiar letters. In these letters the absence of a postal service is an irritation. They use 120 named carriers, not all men, plus another 29 carriers who are unnamed. Some were friends, family servants, or servants of their friends, some were carters, bearing things other than letters, some were common carriers, paid a fee for their services. So the Pastons had to *think* about the logistics: hence Thomas Andrew wrote to William Paston in the late C15th, 'And my lord or ye send me eny letter, ye may send it me be John a More, this brynger, if he com agayne, or els be Fox wyff if her husband be nat gone to London.' And John Paston reproved his wife Margaret in 1465, 'I mervyll that I here no tidyngges from yow hough ye haue do at the assisses. The berer of this lettir is a comon carier, and was at Norwich on Satirday, and brought me lettirs from other men, but *your* seruaunts inquere nat diligently after the comyng of cariers *and* other men.' However, the bearers played an important additional role, blurring the line between oral and manuscript communication. Margaret Paston writes, "I trowe the bearer of this shall telle more by mouthe, as he shall be enfourmed, of the revel in this cuntré". Spoken and written words are here complementary, and the delivery of one prompted an occasion for the other.

By shaping communications about news that took place in manuscript form, postal services also, though indirectly, affected the *content* and *practices* of oral news communication. But there would also be subsequent more direct effects, brought about by the necessary improvement in the quality of roads, and by the introduction of staging posts, and the increasing numbers of inns. Inns, necessary to the infrastructure of postal services, became places where news was exchanged orally, and where national or international news, brought by riders, could slip quickly into local conversations.



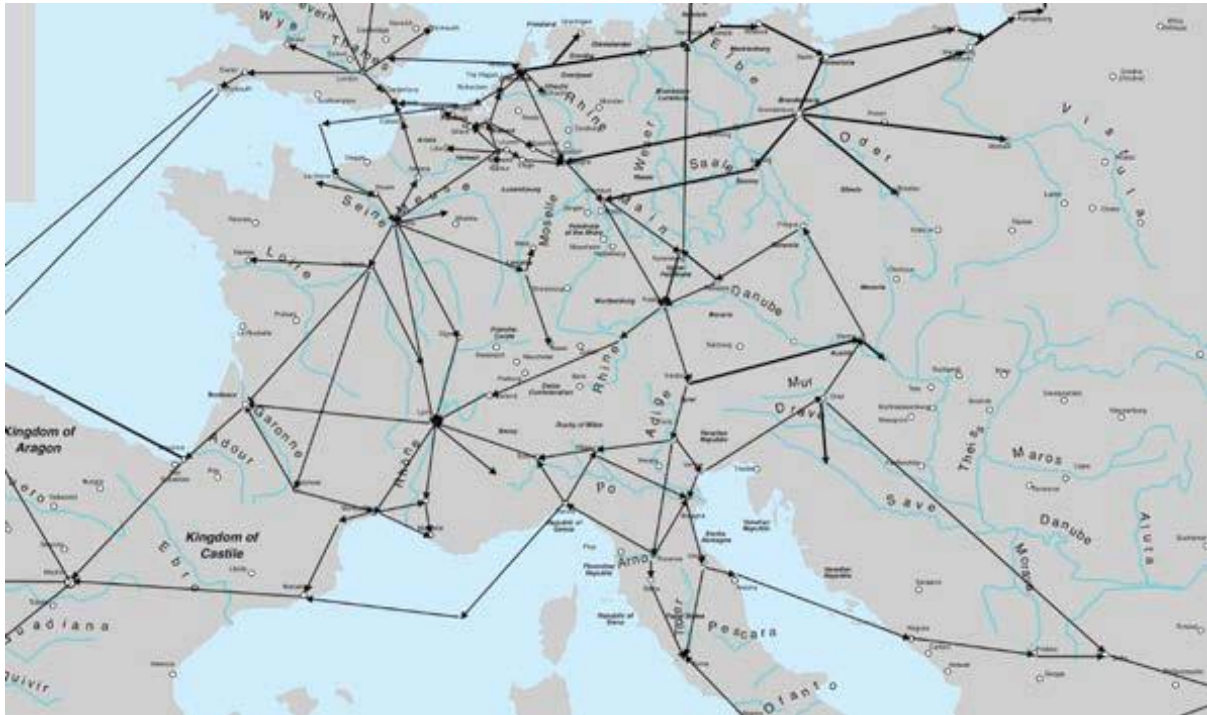
I would like here to acknowledge my indebtedness to the scholars involved in the News Networks in Early Modern Europe project in particular the co-authors of the chapter on 'European Postal Networks' upon which I draw in what follows, namely Nikolaus Schobesberger, Paul Arblaster, Mario Infelise, André Belo, Noah Moxham and Carmen Espejo (the *News Networks* volume can be downloaded here:

<<http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/9789004277199>>). And I

am aware that more detailed accounts of the Imperial postal service and the Tasso family will be given over the next two days by people who are more expert than I am in this field – so what I offer here is very much an overview of the post, with a view to saying something about *news*.

One of the first effects that the newly-emergent regularised postal services had on the news was in the commercialisation of *avvisi*. These had originally been documents exclusively for ambassadors, but, partly owing to these new distribution possibilities, they were soon much reproduced and available across Europe, so that *avvisi* became the primary written news medium of the sixteenth century. Postal services enabled the gathering and spread of news, and then by providing a cheap and accessible mode of distribution made scribal newsletters and subsequently printed newspapers economically viable. The reliability and frequency of postal services reassured scribes and publishers that there would be enough supply of news for them to venture to produce a weekly newspaper.

What services were available at the beginning of the sixteenth century? The example of the Pastons has indicated that there were common carriers, plus private carriers, often family servants. Sovereigns and cities had their own carriers. Merchants employed carriers and relied on semi-formal mechanisms to transmit letters and financial instruments internationally. Within some cities, where there was a sufficient critical mass, companies collaborated to create a shared carrier service: seventeen companies did just this in Florence in 1357. Major merchant cities built extensive networks particularly in the later sixteenth century. The University of Paris had an international messenger system in the fourteenth century. Monasteries and abbeys might employ a carrier. The Papacy of course had its post, which was taken over by members of the Tasso family in 1460 (they continued to organise it until 1539). These services were mostly irregular. None of them were accessible by the general public. In future developments two changes would be particularly significant. The first would be the establishment of a regular, long-distance service made possible through staging posts where horses could be changed. The second would be the opening up of those services to private customers.



The centrepiece of this story, to which we're paying tribute today, is the award of the monopoly of the Imperial post to Francesco Tasso in 1516. This was a stage within a longer term process. A postal service within the Holy Roman Empire had been founded by Emperor Maximilian I in 1490, and its management given to the Taxis (or Tassis) family from Bergamo. Its main route ran from Brussels south east via Augsburg to its headquarters in Innsbruck, and then south to the north of Italy where it connected to regional postal services. The headquarters were moved to Brussels in 1501, and it was placed under the control of the Spanish crown. However, in 1505 Philip I of Spain signed a contract with Franz von Taxis that gave the post independent, commercial status. This was followed by the 1516 contract that gave the Taxis family a monopoly over the Italian territories; and then in 1530 the Emperor Charles V made Johann Baptist von Taxis postmaster-general with authority over all of the crown's territories.

This follows a pattern. The first half of the C16th was a period in which existing *ad hoc* arrangements, and some improvised arrangements, were formalised. Thus in Britain the position of Master of Posts was created by Henry VIII in 1517, though a 'King's Post' had first appeared in the 1480s, a chronology that mirrors the Empire's. Then during the second half of the C16th we see expansion and consolidation. The distance between staging posts was reduced; posting horses were made available for private use (though the earliest evidence for this dates from 1515); new cities, such as Cologne (1577) and

Frankfurt (1598) received postal stations. By the mid-sixteenth century, most major European cities would have an official post office to handle letters; by the end, all would. Importantly, cities not part of the Imperial post, developed their own carrier and postal services which then connected them to the Imperial post. By this means a complex and extensive *network* (a word I'll come back to) was created.

Perhaps most importantly, during the later C16th the Taxis post increasingly focussed on services for private customers, who were more prompt in payment than the Habsburgs. The Roman *cursus publicus*, perhaps the model for modern post, was 'public' in the sense that it was official, not for private use. The shift from the state and authority to the general public is the key shift, in that it both transformed the economic basis of the post, and made possible the public news culture that developed from the C16th onwards. Once again, this is a pan-European development: we see royal messengers supplementing their wages in France from 1550 (when an edict against it was published). And the same happened under Queen Elizabeth. The opening of the post to 'by-letters', as they were called in England, was controversial, but was undertaken partly because in effect the private side of the service *subsidised* the Queen's Post by increasing the scale of the enterprise and radically reducing the marginal costs of additional staging posts and additional horses. Significantly this opening of the post coincided with the growth of a secret Service under Sir Francis Walsingham: a public post was a means of public surveillance, and the opening of letters was to become a standard practice in the Empire, Britain, and Venice over the next century.

The development into a public service was by no means linear. The beginning of the Eighty Years War in 1568 disturbed communications from Spain to the Northern Netherlands: the Taxis' international post collapsed in 1577, and was replaced by local services; then the former was restored, with a new monopoly of the 'Reichspost' granted to Leonhard von Taxis in the 1590s by the Emperor Rudolf II. This outlawed – no doubt with limited success – private competitors, with a view to improving profitability, though it also facilitated state supervision and surveillance, the creation of 'black rooms', and those practices we associate with the term 'censorship'.

Some confirmation of this broad chronology, and a sense of how widely perceived and understood was the development of the post, and the image of the post, can be obtained by looking at the minor genre of guidebooks to it, and the associated iconography. First the guidebooks, beginning with:

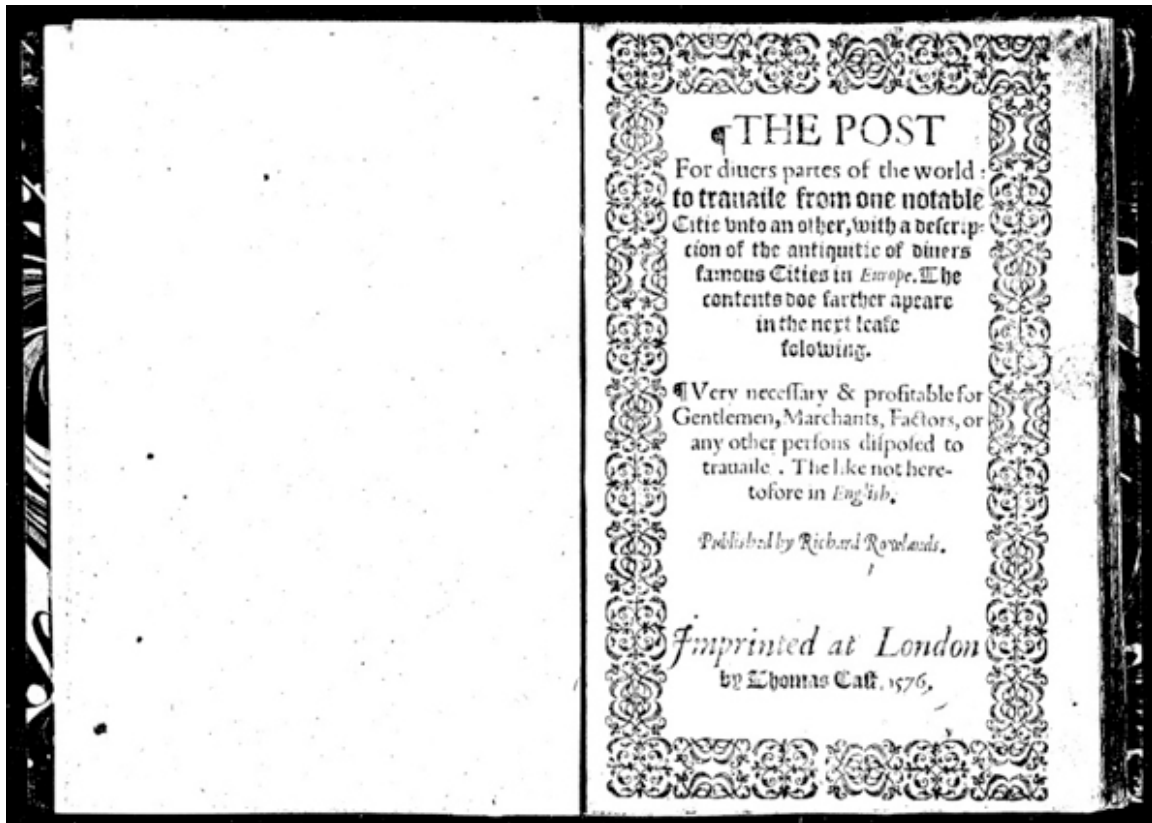
- Ioannis de Helba (Giovanni da L'Herba), *Itinerario delle poste per diverse parte del mondo* (Rome, Venice, 1562, 1563, 1564)



- Jörg Gail, *Ein neuwes nützlichs Raißbüchlin* (Augsburg, 1563)



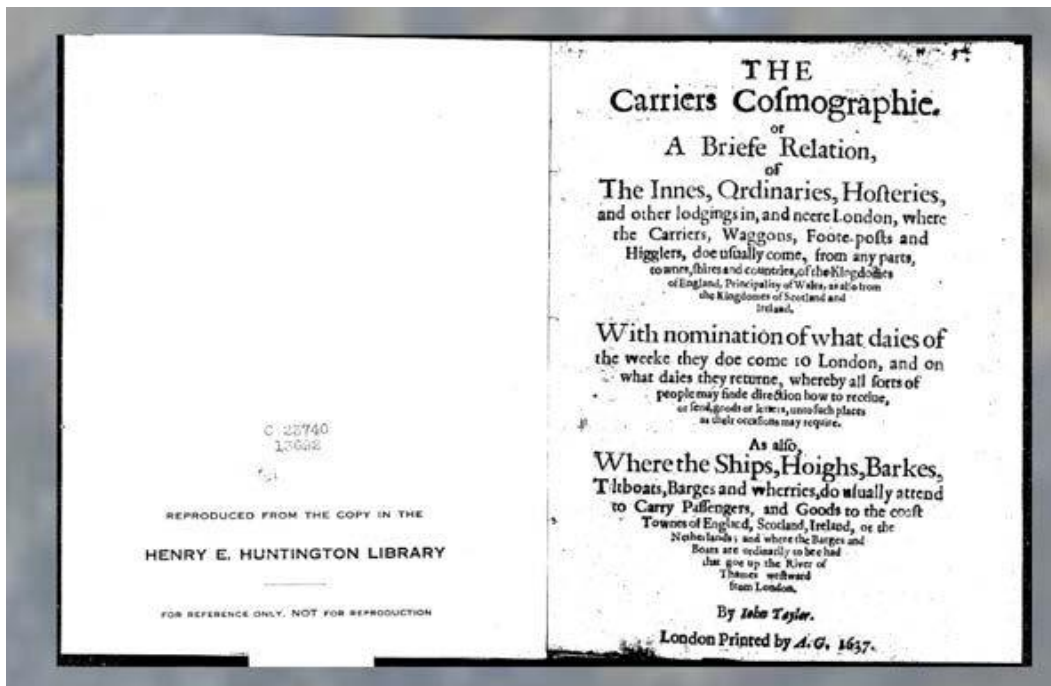
- Richard Rowlands (Verstegan), *The Post of the Word* (London, 1576)



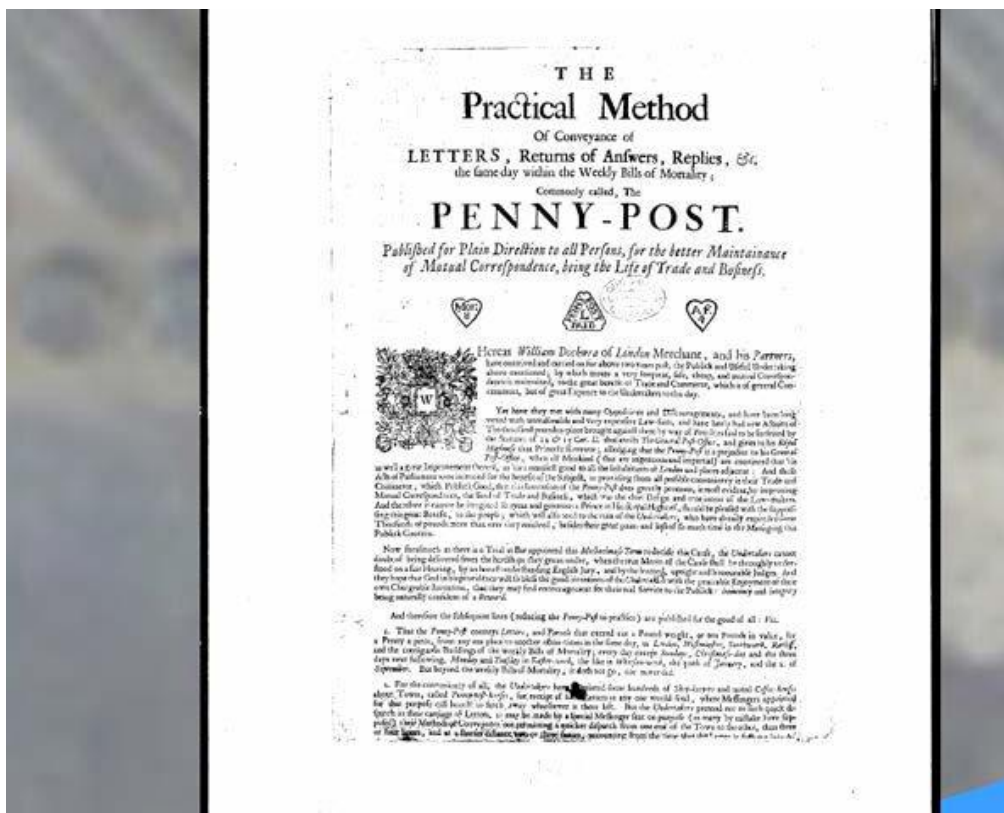
- Ottavio Codogno, *Compendio delle poste, or Nuovo itinerario delle poste* (1608 onwards)



- Carriers are importantly different to postal services, but they equally benefitted from guides, and John Taylor's 1637 *The Carriers Cosmographie* was perhaps inspired by these earlier guides.



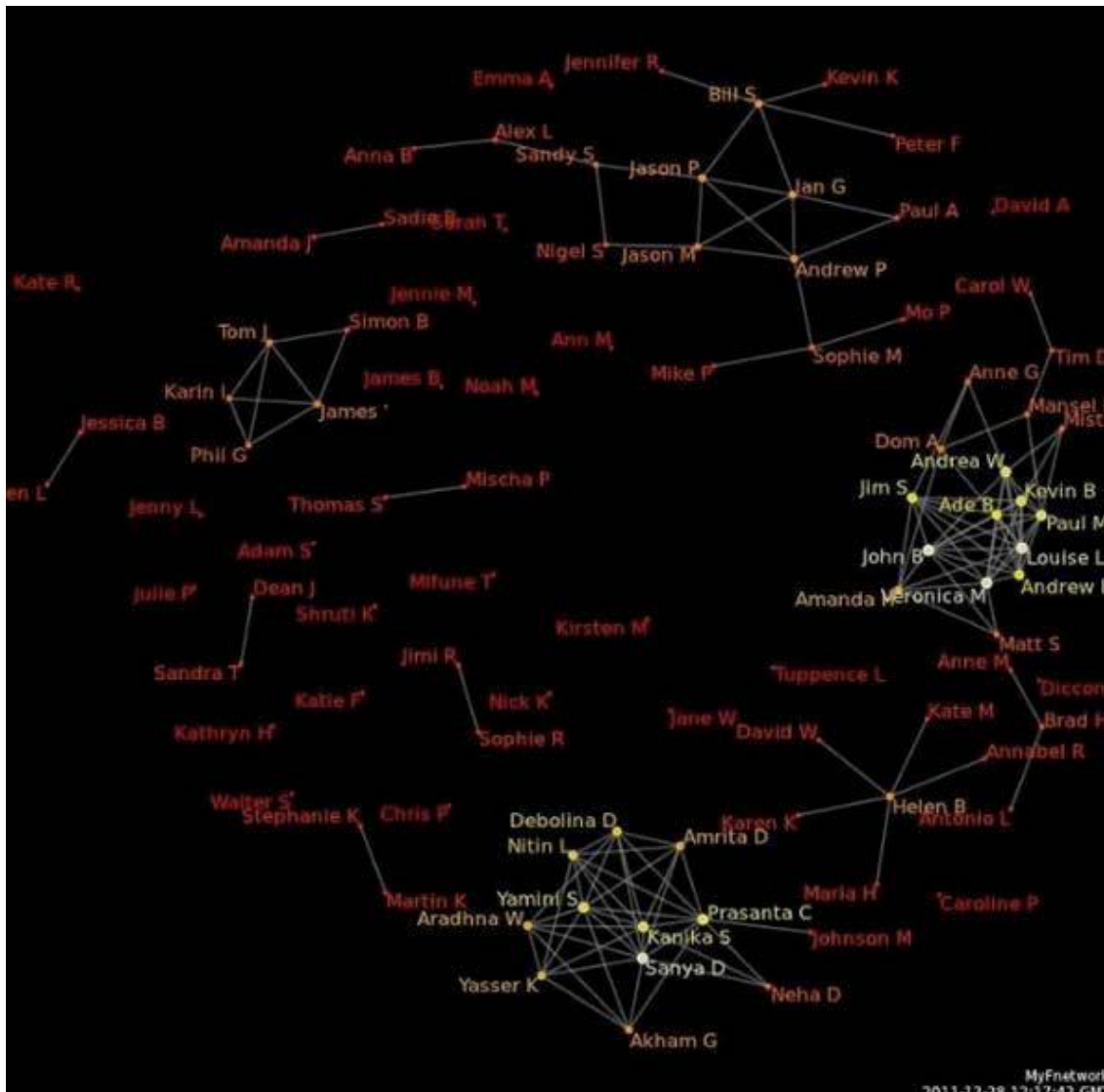
- From a much later period, here is a 1681 guide to how to use the penny post newly-established in London: William Dockwra, *The practical method of conveyance* (London, 1681). It's literally an instruction manual.



And there were others, some now lost. These are *plain*, apparently inexpensively-printed books. They represent journeys in stages, and explain who and where to go to send a letter. At the more expensive end of the market, and perhaps with a subtly different use, in 1632 Nicolas Sanson represented French postal routes in map form, *Carte géographique des postes qui trauerent la France* (Paris, 1632), which shows routes and stages.

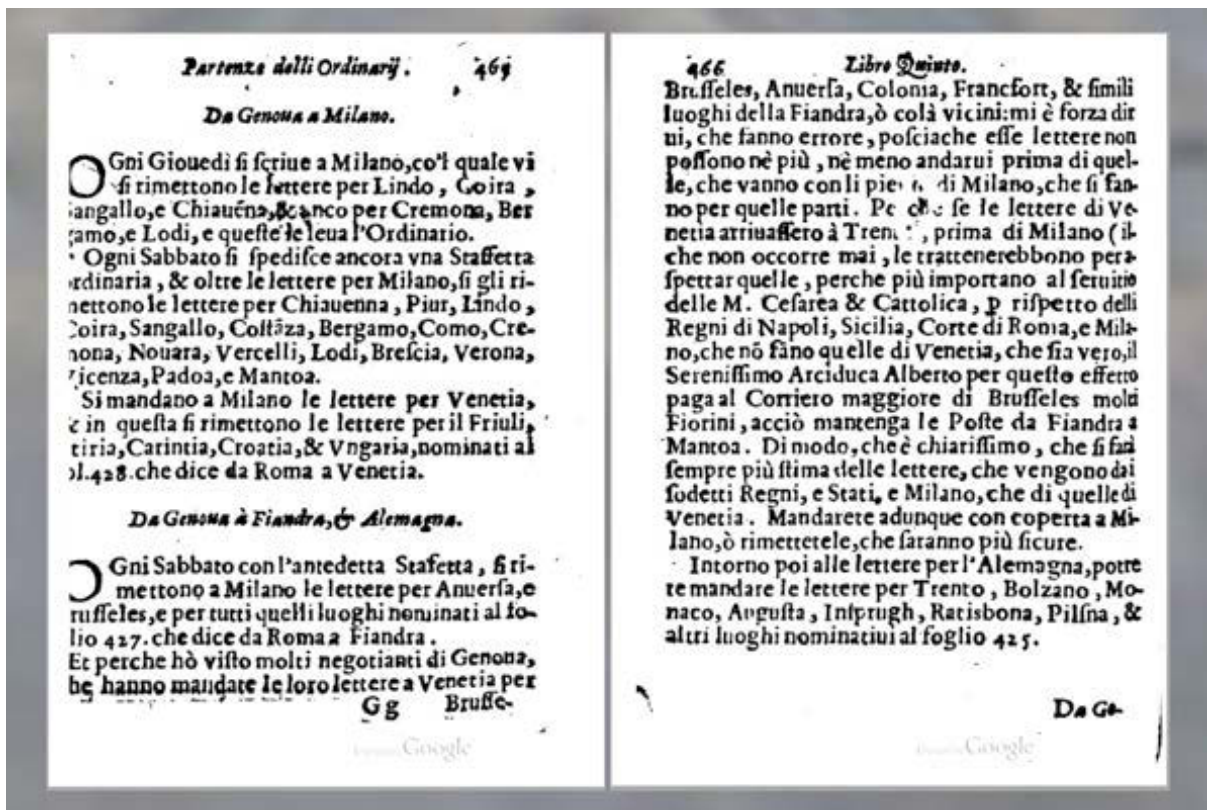


These guides do not always agree with each other on the best routes. This is for two related reasons – related because they stem from the fact that the postal services create a *network*.



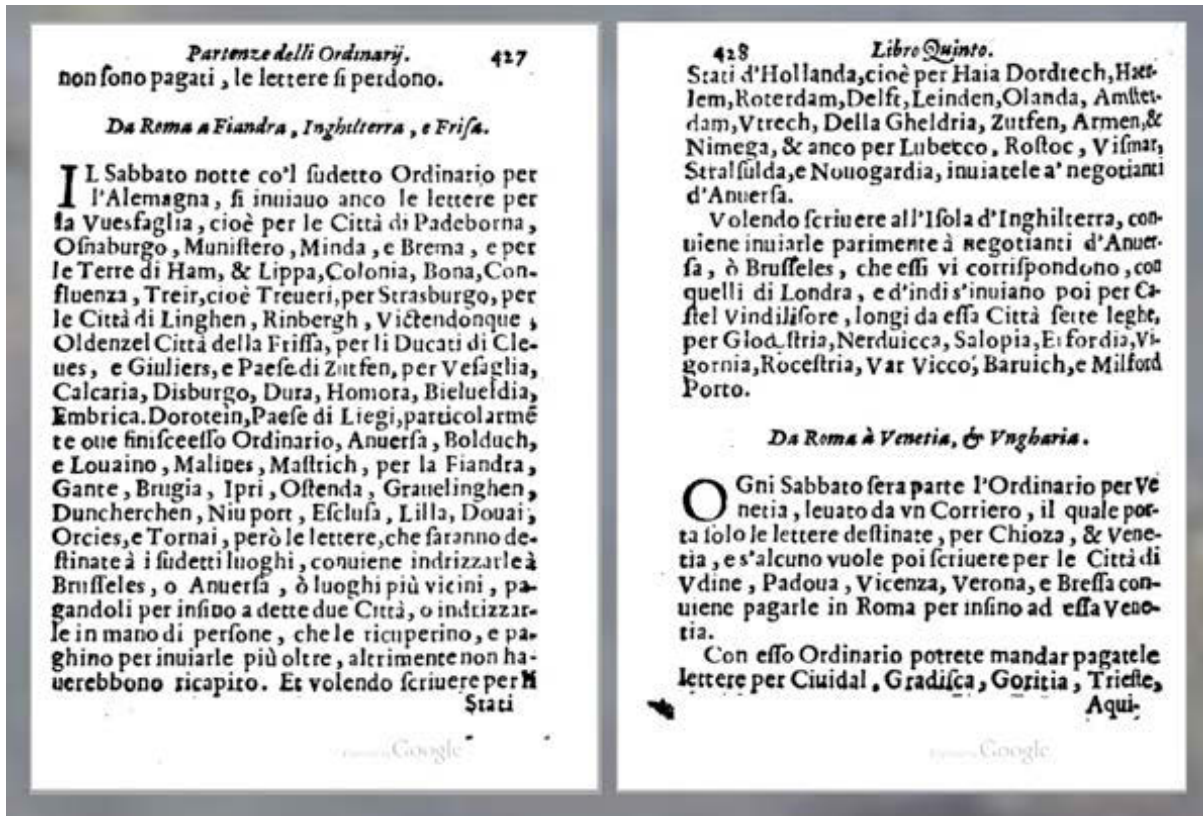
By network I mean something particular. A complex, dynamic system that lies beyond the full comprehension of any one of its participants, and that is, crucially, self-organising and self-repairing. What that network looks like from the inside depends upon where you stand within it, even though the network is an organic whole, even though it is in a sense the same network whether you're in Uppsala or Lisbon. And here is the first reason why the guides offer different versions of postal transport. They tend to lean towards particular nodes within the network, particular postal routes with which the authors (and their cultures) are most familiar. And the second, related reason, is because there is always more than one path for the communication to follow, and this is inherent to the nature of a network. Here is Codogno trying to persuade

Genoese merchants not to send their letters to Brussels via Venice, but instead to use the post via Milan (which is presumably what they were used to doing).

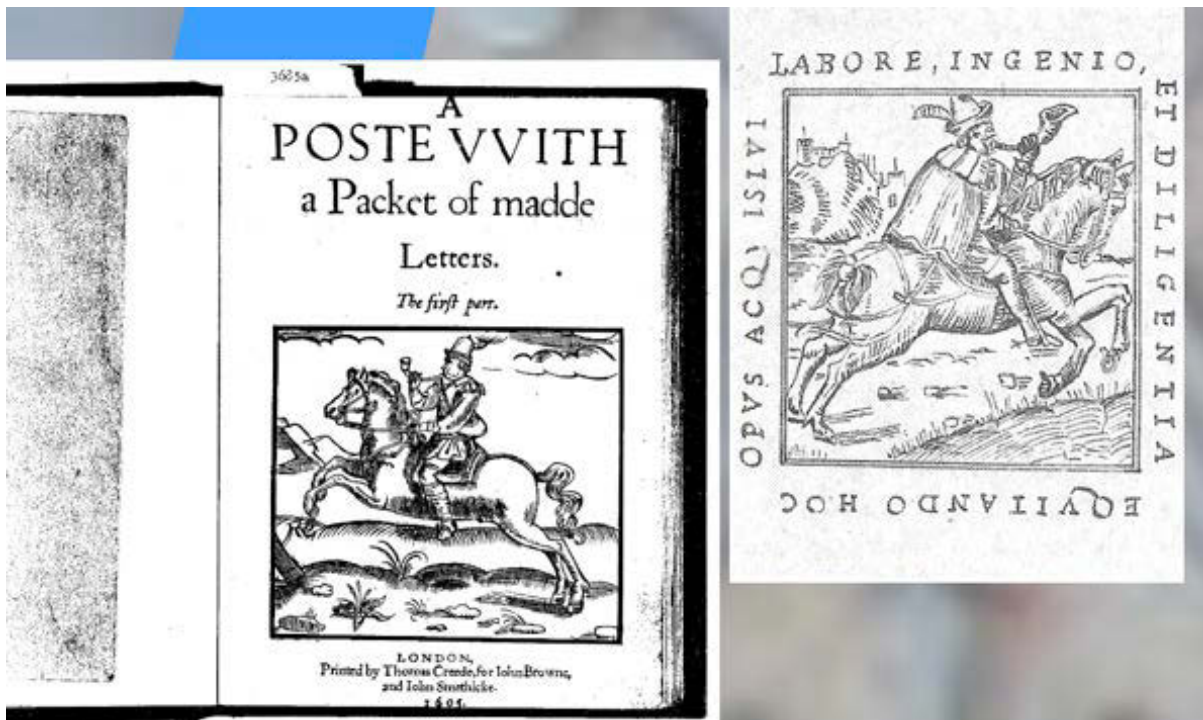


Networks perforce contain *multiplicity* and *redundancy*. But far from being inefficient, this is essential to the preservation of a system that is subject to interruptions, such as wars: the Eighty Years War, the Thirty Years War; and legal interventions, such as when Rudolf II banned courier services from transporting post. A system need redundancy to be able to adapt to such changing circumstances, and self-organising networks generate and maintain redundancy apparently precisely for this reason. (In the later period, commercial competition also contributes to the variety of services.)

Fundamental to the complexity and the comprehensiveness of this network is the fact that the various postal services could be *joined up*. Individuals within the network knew how to manipulate it so that some part of the journey a letter needed to make could be undertaken by the Imperial Post, and then when the limits of this were reached the letter could be moved onto another service. This is Codogno, again, giving advice on how to do this: if you want to write to the northern Netherlands, you do so via the merchants at Antwerp; if you want to write to the 'Island' of England, do so via Antwerp or Brussels.



We can also see *images* of the post in woodcuts, hence: Nicholas Breton's *A Post with a Packet of Madde Letters*, first published in 1602, and followed by many subsequent editions, which from 1605 included a woodcut of a post rider sounding his horn (here juxtaposed with an early edition of Codogno).



The horn would subsequently represent the post by metonymy and appear on stamps,



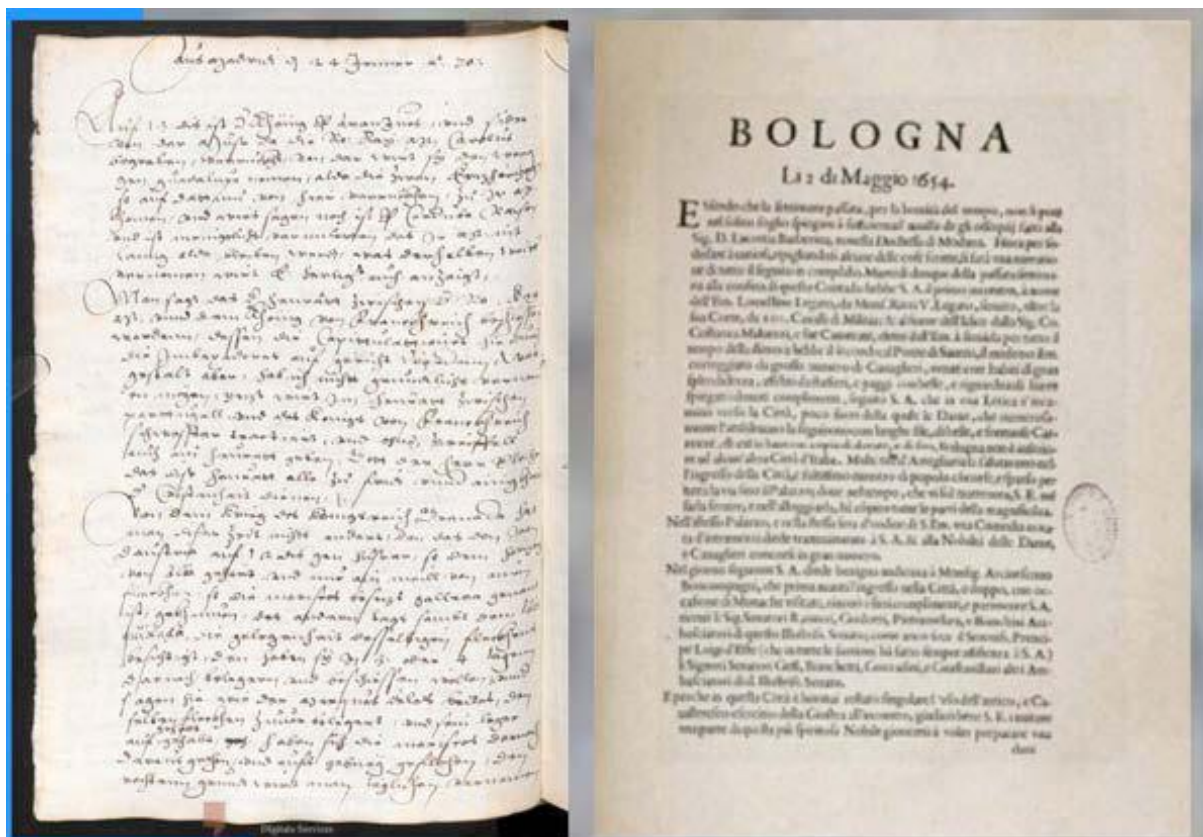
and drain covers,



for example, long after the object fell into disuse. In practice the horn was sounded to indicate to a staging post that it was time to prepare a fresh horse, but also to enter a city's gates at night and more generally to indicate the authority of the rider (hence the use was forbidden to anyone other than an official). It's a potent symbol.

These publications and these images suggest that between *about* 1580 and 1640 a broader public, beyond officials and state employees, became familiar with and perhaps used the post. This coincides with the period of improvement in the Imperial postal system beginning under Rudolf II, but also improvements in regional services in England, France and Spain. It *also* coincides with the growth of printed *news cultures* across Europe: at the start of this period in occasional, pamphlet form, at the end of this period in weekly newsbook or newspaper form.

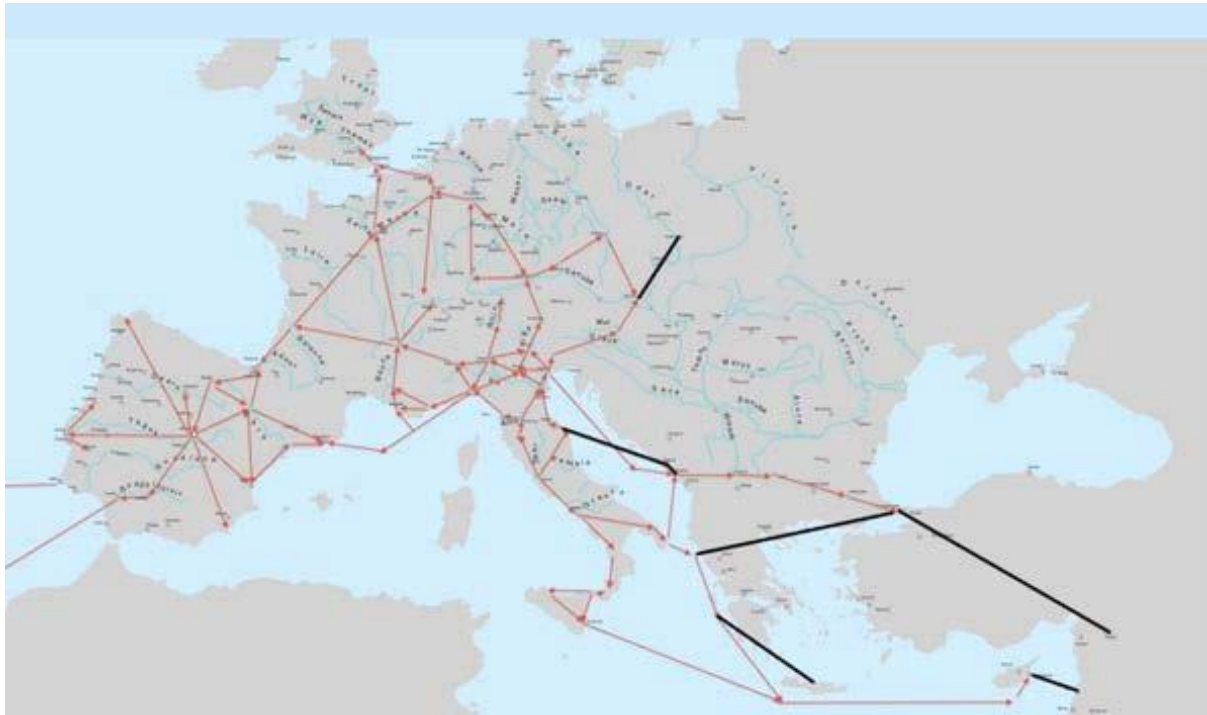
Postal services, it has long been recognised, played a foundational role in the development of news culture, but not only printed news. And one of the advantages of looking at news from the perspective of post is that it requires us to acknowledge the important continuities. While in historiography the tendency has been to look discretely at particular forms of news – *avvisi*, occasional pamphlets, news periodicals – and trace their genesis, in practice these forms did not exist in isolation, nor were they designed to work in isolation. They were produced out of the same set of arrangements for distributing news, they covered much of the same news, and they were consumed by readers who seldom relied on a single source.



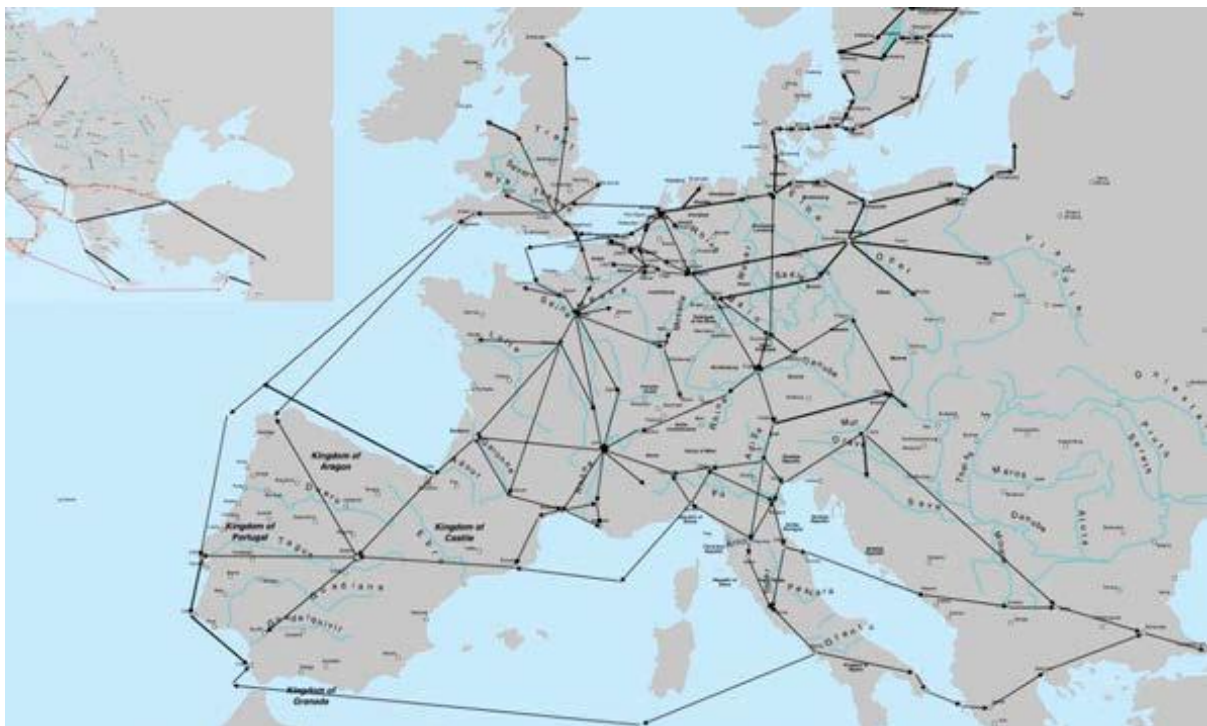
The first news periodicals, produced in the early C17th, were almost identical in appearance to *avvisi* produced in the C16th, which, as Mario Infelise has shown, consisted of a series of paragraphs, each headed with an indication of the source of the news (not necessarily its origin, but the point at which it was relayed).

Such *metadata* (as it has been identified by Will Slaughter) will in due course enable us to measure the geography of news communication in early modern Europe, in terms of direction, expanse, the quantity and speed of flows. However, it's possible for the time being to assert that there is a fairly close correlation between the postal services and

the content of *avvisi* and subsequent printed news forms. Here is a map of Codogno's *Compendio delle poste*, drawn by Paul Arblaster and Noah Moxham.



Here is another map that augments Codogno's account with other postal services.



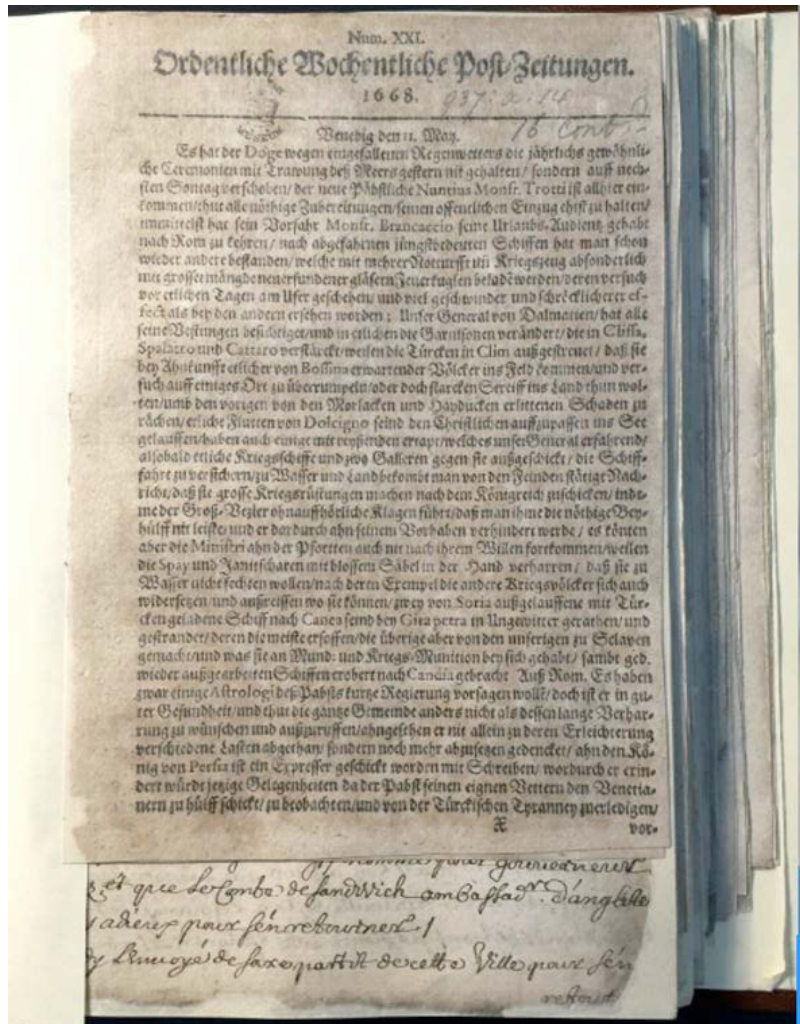
You'll see that both indicate the crucial routes by which post and therefore news from Constantinople entered Western Europe. This is a textbook example of the 'strength of weak links' (a phenomenon identified by networks scientists), where the news from the east depends on a limited number of connections to enter the west, making those

connections, above all Venice, highly important as nodes joining what are in effect semi-detached systems. This map corresponds to what we find in the news publications of early modern Europe. News from within this network is relatively plentiful and relatively quick to arrive. News from outside this network is relatively infrequent and tardy – though Kate Lowe has shown how news from North Africa enters via Italy; Renate Pieper has shown how news from the Americas passed into Europe via Seville and Madrid; and Ginny Dillon has traced the slow passage of news from Transylvania into the Empire.

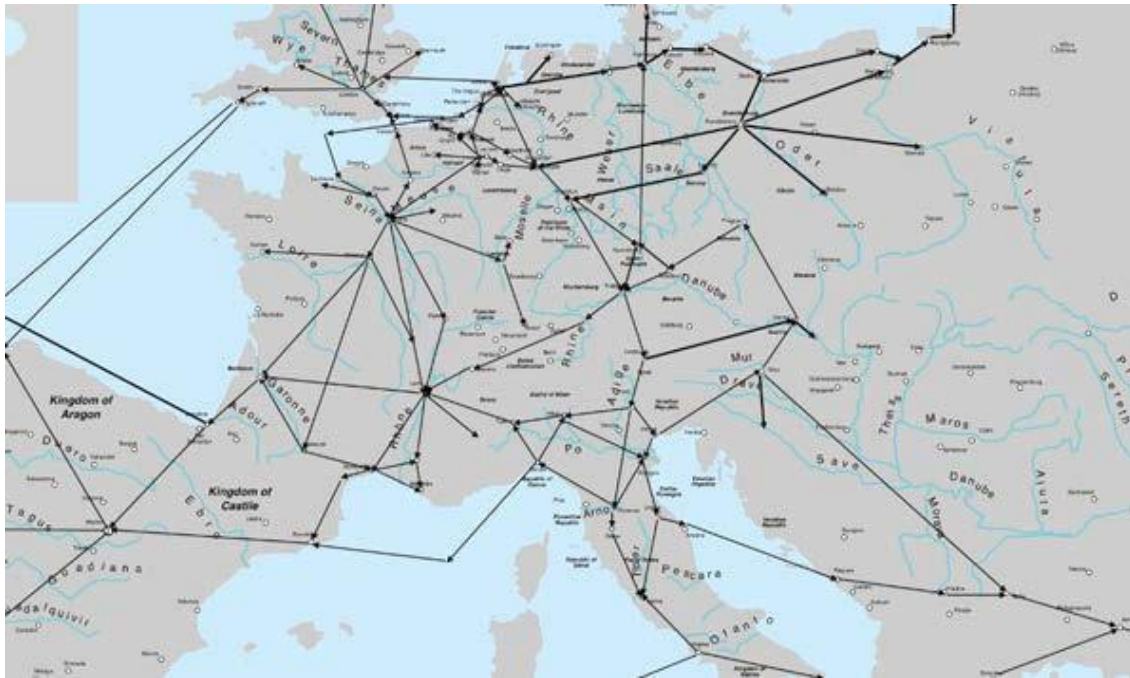
So the geography of the news in this period closely resembles the geography of the communications infrastructure, in which postal networks, and especially the imperial post, are the main arteries. The cities we find on this map are the cities that appear most frequently heading paragraphs of news. I will return to the implications of this geography shortly, but first I want to emphasise that this isn't the only way in which the post influenced the form of news. One of the things that characterised early-modern European news forms is that they were designed to be *bundled*. News was not only miscellaneous in content, but it also relied on *formal* miscellaneity and multiplicity. Paragraphs were bundled together into *avvisi*. Different forms or genres of news – merchants' news such as custom-house bills, price currents, exchange currents, together with *avvisi*, manuscript and printed separates, gazettes, personal letters – were bundled together by suppliers of news.



An individual medium was never intended to be comprehensive – it was always meant *to go with something else*. The ‘all the news that’s fit to print’ principle was not one endorsed or pursued in early news media. News forms evolved in order to bundle and be bundled. This process is part of the way they need to work, and it shapes them physically and linguistically. They need to be able to be packaged with other items, they need to be an information service that can at once supply the deficiency of others, be complemented by an additional service, and yet stand alone.



This is – obviously – part of a larger argument about how early-modern news works, which I don’t have time fully to develop here. However, it is clear that bundling is encouraged (and perhaps caused) by postal practices: news was habitually sent in *packets* of multiple and diverse items (and once sealed these packets were never re-opened to include additional materials, but augmented by additional separate letters or packets).



News reflected and supported the geography of postal networks. The maps we draw (which are *not* themselves maps of networks) indicate not only the distribution of sources, but the *communities* to which readers of news belonged. Regular postal services asserted a form of control over the environment, regulated time through their own periodicity, and generated a kind of predictable geography. There is an important ambivalence *within them*. Letters move between cities. They thus, in a way, overlook nations and states and the political boundaries that define their borders. They ignore the complex and competing authorities that shaped, despite the Emperor's authority over the post itself, the Empire. Posts cross borders, either because postal systems contain transnational elements, or because senders of letters know how to move between discrete but complementary systems. So national post systems importantly contribute to a transnational sense of community.

Nehemiah Wallington, London 1654

Now to make some use of these three ferefull Judgments of God Warr. Famin and pestilence
First to my selfe even now while I am writting **the Serious thought of their troubles & miserys
being compared with my owne (discovers to me my corruptions &) Shews to me my great Sinnes
as my unthankfulnes my murmurings.** my impatienc that if I have not my hearts desier but suffer
a littel that distasts mee I am ready waspishly to break out as though God had dealt very hardly
with mee ...

2 Secondly this **discovers Gods Mercys to mee in giveing me an heart to Simpothize & morne as
though I were in the same body which gives to me some evidence that I am a lively member of
Christs body because I am a feeling member for whre there is sence there is Life**

3 Use Is the gracious Loving kindnesse of God towards our nation is duely to be obsarved and
with praise for ever to be acknowledged because he hath given us peace and plenty & Liberty
and hath taken all from them whose sinns were not gratter then ours, nor their provocations more
grevious then ours

4ly I may see the Lot of Gods dearest Sarvants who are not previledged from bloody and firey
trialls and this may warne us to prepaire and lay up store of graces against the day of our
visitation and not to be dejected when his hand lies upon us as though Correction were signe of
disertion

Fiftly Wee may examin our selves **whither wee have not been wanting to them in their wants
and warres. Whether wee have prayed for them in their troubles and sorrows**

Sixtly Wee may examine whether their miserys were not warnnings and forerunners of our
miserys O how hath Ierland drunk of this bitter Cuppe of the Lord and the church of Scotland
tastted of it also All giveing warning to Sinfull England (which hath had yet but a smack of it) to
take heed of their Sinns Lest we (drinke the dreges and) be destroyed with their plagues ...

One example: Nehemiah Wallington writing in his notebook in London in 1654, looked back on the foreign-news corantos he had read in the 1630s and reflected on the way that the conflicts and famine of the Thirty Years War had affected him: 'the Serious thought of their troubles & miserys being compared with my owne (discovers to me my corruptions &) Shews to me my great Sinnes as my unthankfulnes my murmurings'. The terrible news he reads 'discovers Gods Mercys to mee in giveing me an heart to Simpothize & morne as though I were in the same body which gives to me some evidence that I am a lively member of Christs body because I am a feeling member for whre there is sence there is Life'. It also made him ask whether the English 'have not been wanting to them [those in Germany and the Palatinate] in their wants and warres. Whether wee have prayed for them in their troubles and sorrows'. And so on. There are solid theological grounds for this, as Wallington is experiencing Protestant fellow-feeling, but his sentiments also indicate a sense of community that extends beyond England's shores. This community is created by reading the news. There is a changed understanding of this geography, and one cause of this is the growth of international news, which made far-away places seem closer because one heard more about them and more frequently. Communication created community; good posts made good neighbours.

Importantly, Wallington was not socially privileged: he was a wood turner, an artisan, a self-educated man who had not been to school. He is writing at the end of the period when the first impact of the post disseminated broadly into society, and was acculturated into images and cheap print – though I do not mean to imply that social transformation had *ended* then. He was able to receive this news, and read in cheaply-printed form what had a century and a half earlier only been available to wealthy merchants and ambassadors, *because* of the *economics* of news, and I'd like to conclude by reflecting briefly on this. The creation of public postal services, and then the growth in scale of these services made the transportation of information cheaper as well as quicker – it reduced the marginal costs of moving letters.



Printed news became possible because of the commercial as well as the informational infrastructure of *avvisi* (and could not have survived if that infrastructure had suddenly disappeared). At the same time the *extension* of this service to financial communications – the sending of bills of exchange and credit in an increasingly depersonalised context,

rather than the personal exchanges between merchants using known intermediaries – facilitated the generation of increasingly complex and remote forms of economic credit. Modern financial instruments, illiquid, dependent on third-party credit ratings, at several removes from the goods and services that they represent, have their roots in this same expansion of communication that also generated that other form of credit, the credibility of news, the trustworthiness of a source, the dependence on reputation and the external indicators of the truthfulness of new news.

So there is a sense in which these two forms of trust, fundamental to modern society, were profoundly shaped by the postal communications of the early modern period. This isn't something I want to blame on horses, just because they were faster than people, but it seems to me to be useful to remember when analysing the *longue durée* history of communication, that these three things – post, news, and financial instruments – were in their genesis interdependent.