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**L'ÉCLATEMENT
DES MODÈLES POSTAUX**

THE DECLINE OF MAIL: POSTAL INDUSTRY DECISION-MAKERS' INTERPRETATIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

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Cet article explore les manières dont les décideurs ont interprété l'avenir du secteur postal au début du XXIᵉ siècle. Trois cadrages différents sont découverts, qui ont influencé les prises de décisions stratégiques des opérateurs postaux qui en ont résulté.

The decade of the 2000s represented a turbulent time in postal history[1], during which European national postal operators faced a combination of market liberalization, digital substitution, and resulting declining mail volumes[2]. The decade ended with the global financial crisis, which only accelerated substitution away from physical mail towards digital communication solutions. Similar contexts are described in the strategy literature as dynamic periods of strategic renewal[3]. During such periods, competing frames emerge that serve to organize actors' discourse, aid sensemaking, and sell issues to decision-makers[4]. Frame analysis therefore represents a useful analytical tool for the researcher wanting to understand social and organizational change[5].

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[1] We wish to extend a very special thanks to the visiting research assistant Mohammed Ghali Bennani (École des Mines de Saint-Étienne / EM Lyon) for his valuable aid in compiling the data. We also thank the editors of this issue, and the co-editor of *The Future is in the Post* series, Derek Osborn.

[2] A. K. Dieke, C. Bender, J. I. Campbell Jr., R. H. Cohen, C. Müller, A. Niederprüm, A. de Streel, S. Thiele, C. Zanker, *Main Developments in the Postal Sector (2010-2013)*, Bad Honnef, WIK-Consult, 2013.

[3] K. M. Eisenhardt and L. J. Bourgeois III, "Politics of strategic decision making in high-velocity environments: Toward a midrange theory", *Academy of management journal*, vol. 31, n° 4, 1988, p. 737-770; P. S. Barr, "Adapting to unfamiliar environmental events: a look at the evolution of interpretation and its role in strategic change", *Organization Science*, vol. 9, n° 6, 1998, p. 644-669.

[4] P. Constantinides and M. Slavova, "From a monopoly to an entrepreneurial field: The constitution of possibilities in South African energy", *Journal of Business Venturing*, vol. 35, n° 6, 2020, p. 106061; J. E. Dutton and S. J. Ashford, "Selling issues to top management", *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 18, n° 3, 1993, p. 397-428; D. A. Gioia and K. Chittipeddi, "Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation", *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 12, n° 6, 1991, p. 433-448; B. Gray, J. M. Purdy, S. Ansari, "From interactions to institutions: Microprocesses of framing and mechanisms for the structuring of institutional fields", *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 40, n° 1, 2015, p. 115-143.

[5] W. E. D. Creed, J. A. Langstraat, M. A. Scully, "A picture of the frame: Frame analysis as technique and as politics", *Organizational Research Methods*, vol. 5, n° 1, 2002, p. 34-55.

The modern postal system and sector traces its history back to the 1500s and 1600s, when Kings across Europe established regular postal routes by horse and carriage to transport letters across their kingdoms and beyond. The postal service was truly democratized only once the business model changed from a receiver-pays to a sender-pays model, under the 1840 Rowland Hill reform, with uniform prices irrespective of source and destination within a country. What started as a reform in Great Britain rapidly spread as a business model across Europe and the world and the 20th century saw mail transactions grow tremendously. The European Union (EU) worked during the 1990s to create a common postal market within Europe and with the Framework Postal Directive in 1997 set about the liberalization of this market, encouraging competition between operators and countries, and gradually reducing reserved (monopoly) areas of the market[6]. The liberalization was completed by 2013[7]. The relatively short period of time that national postal operators had to adapt to market liberalization coincided with the rapid development and penetration of mobile telecommunications and the Internet. The first social media sites were also launched in the middle of this period (Myspace and LinkedIn in 2003, Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006). These new technologies resulted in a shift of communication from paper to digital, from physical to online. Consequently, national postal operators not only experienced competition, but also for the first time in its modern history a reversal of trends towards lower mail volumes[8]. With such rapid and far-reaching changes, the sector offers a rich empirical setting within which to study strategy-making, cognition, and business model adaptation during times of extreme environmental change[9]. In particular, a historical approach helps contextualize and explain how interpretations of this change have shaped strategy in more recent years[10].

Framing occurs when people develop or reorient a particular conceptualization of an issue. This frame has an impact on their opinions on the issue. The major assumption of framing theory is that any issue can end up being framed in various ways, and thus be viewed differently by different people or groups of people[11]. Frames are communicated and shared, therefore leading to collective construction within and across organizational boundaries.

During periods of strategic change, framing aids managers in sensegiving, the process of helping organizational members make sense of the change[12]. However, when such change is surrounded by high uncertainty, competing frames may emerge[13], leading to conflicts, upsetting existing organizational power structures and ultimately pointing

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[6] See e.g. K. J. Sund, "From Cooperation to Competition: Changing Dominant Logics and Legitimization in Liberalizing Industries", in J. Rendtorff (ed.), *Handbook of Business Legitimacy*, Cham, Springer, 2020.

[7] C. Jaag, "Postal-sector policy: From monopoly to regulated competition and beyond", *Utilities Policy*, n° 31, 2014, p. 266-277.

[8] K. J. Sund, *Innovation in the Postal Sector: Strategies, Barriers and Enablers*, Lausanne, EPFL/SAP, 2008; K. J. Sund and D. Osborn, *The Future Is in the Post: Perspectives on Strategy in the Postal Industry*, Faringdon, Libri Publishing, 2010.

[9] M. Bogers, K. J. Sund, J. A. Villarroel, "The Organizational Dimension of Business Model Exploration: Evidence from the European Postal Industry", in N. J. Foss (ed.), *Business Model Innovation: The Organizational Dimension*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

[10] N. S. Argyres, A. De Massis, N. J. Foss, F. Frattini, G. Jones, B. S. Silverman, "History informed strategy research: The promise of history and historical research methods in advancing strategy scholarship", *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 41, n° 3, 2020, p. 343-368.

[11] D. Chong and J. N. Druckman, "Framing theory", *Annual Review of Political Science*, n° 10, 2007, p. 103-126.

[12] M. Logemann, R. Piekkari, J. Cornelissen, "The sense of it all: Framing and narratives in sensegiving about a strategic change", *Long Range Planning*, vol. 52, n° 5, 2019, p. 101852.

[13] S. Kaplan, "Framing contests: Strategy making under uncertainty", *Organization Science*, vol. 19, n° 5, 2008, p. 729-752.

different organizations in the same industry environment in different strategic directions.

Using framing theory, we explore in this paper how postal decision-makers during the first decade of the new millennium interpreted and framed the major changes taking place in the environment, and what futures and strategic options were pointed towards for national postal operators. We do this by conducting a content analysis of the book series *The Future is in the Post*, a unique collection of essays written during the period 2010-2012 by over 70 postal thought leaders and decision-makers. We uncover competing frames pointing to alternative change interpretations, and strategic options for operators. We finish by commenting on how the framing of trends at the time may have impacted the subsequent strategic decisions and development of postal operators.

THE POSTAL SECTOR IN THE EARLY 2000s

While global letter-post volumes were still growing until 2006, the threat of the booming Internet and electronic substitution of mail was being felt across postal companies all over the world.

Figure 1 illustrates this global development of mail volumes. In the developing world, mobile communication was expected to rapidly put an end to postal physical communication services. The World Bank even stated that mail could disappear by as early as 2015[14]. For some, the postal industry was a declining one with poor prospects. In this context, European Union policymakers were trying to increase competition for the provision

of letter-post services, by finalizing a liberalization agenda that had been set at a time of steady letter-post growth in the late 20th century.

Year after year, however, letter-post volumes growth rates declined. For many years, mail volumes were strongly correlated with general economic growth, but a progressive decoupling process started in the early 2000s, with lower growth rates and then mail volumes decline leading up to the global economic and financial crisis[15]. In hindsight, it could appear astonishing how policymaking fostering greater competition in letter-post markets could have been expected to successfully cope with such fundamental trends and produce the positive impacts that were looked for at the launch of the first European postal directive[16]. While introducing more competition in growing markets such as the telecommunication market is one thing, liberalizing a declining market is a totally different one. In the EU, historical postal operators were perhaps misled by such policies and focused all their efforts in achieving greater efficiency gains to cope with a potentially more competitive framework. By doing so, a more ambitious look at the future was foregone (or overlooked) while big technology companies like Amazon or Google were already sowing the seeds of e-commerce and delivery for the 21st century.

A vicious postal policy debate circle unfolded with policy makers hoping to achieve liberalization and privatization outcomes by reforming the main business segment of postal companies at the time, namely the letter-post in most advanced economies, while the latter was increasingly gearing towards a declining growth path. Except for a few sector leaders, such as Deutsche Post DHL or Poste Italiane[17],

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[14] "Pulling the envelope", *The Economist*, January 20th, 2005: https://www.economist.com/special-report/2005/01/20/pulling-the-envelope.

[15] Universal Postal Union, "Development strategies for the postal sector: an economic perspective", 2012.

[16] C. Jaag, "Postal-sector policy: From monopoly to regulated competition and beyond", *Utilities Policy*, vol. 31, 2014, p. 266-277.

[17] K. J. Sund, "Transformation and diversification in the context of regulated industries: The case of Poste Italiane and Poste Mobile", *International Journal of Management Education*, vol. 9, n° 4, 2011, p. 77-85.

Figure 1. Evolution of worldwide letter-post volumes

Global letter-post volumes index (base 100 = 1990)
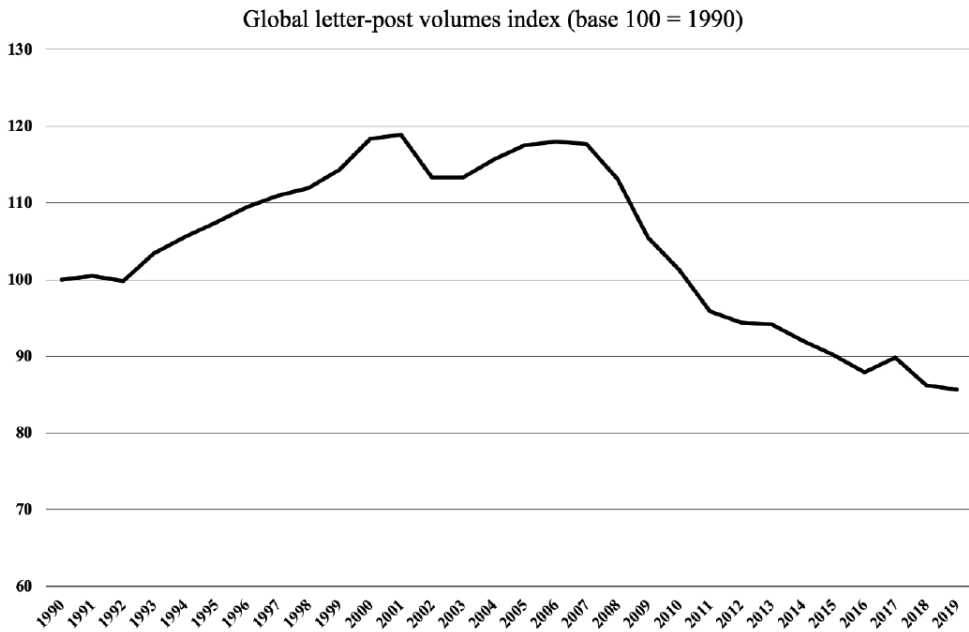
Source: UPU Postal Statistics

little or almost no attention was paid to other strategic business segments such as global trade facilitation and logistics, or the review and modernization of postal financial services, and their financial inclusion role in the nascent digital era.

In the European Union, a comprehensive ecosystem of institutions and numerous stakeholders focused on a sequence of European Union postal directives tackling the progressive removal of the letter-post reserved area. However, in terms of postal activities, the debate about the long-term future of postal business models was relatively narrow in scope and alternative postal business models were almost systematically ignored. Regulators thus failed to scope well the future functions and endeavours of the postal sector. For example, business to consumer parcel volume developments linked to e-commerce were not fully taken into consideration. Figure 2 illustrates how e-commerce has led to growth in parcel

volumes during this period. The postal sector discussions of the early 2000s could thus be said to lack a long-term vision.

The global economic and financial crisis made the situation described above even more acute. Letter-post volume decline accelerated; and uncertainties about the future of the postal business were not helping to frame a clear and ambitious postal policy agenda. The uncertain environment also resulted in relatively low investments in postal infrastructures in many countries, despite the initial phase of the exponential growth of e-commerce and parcel volumes. Instead, investment was still mainly focused on further industrializing the treatment of letter-post communication. The stage for very challenging postal times was set in spite of a two-decade long EU postal agenda and discussion.

More particularly, the financial crisis led to a large decline of domestic transactional mail

Figure 2. Evolution of worldwide parcel-post volumes

Global parcel-post volumes index (base 100 = 1990)
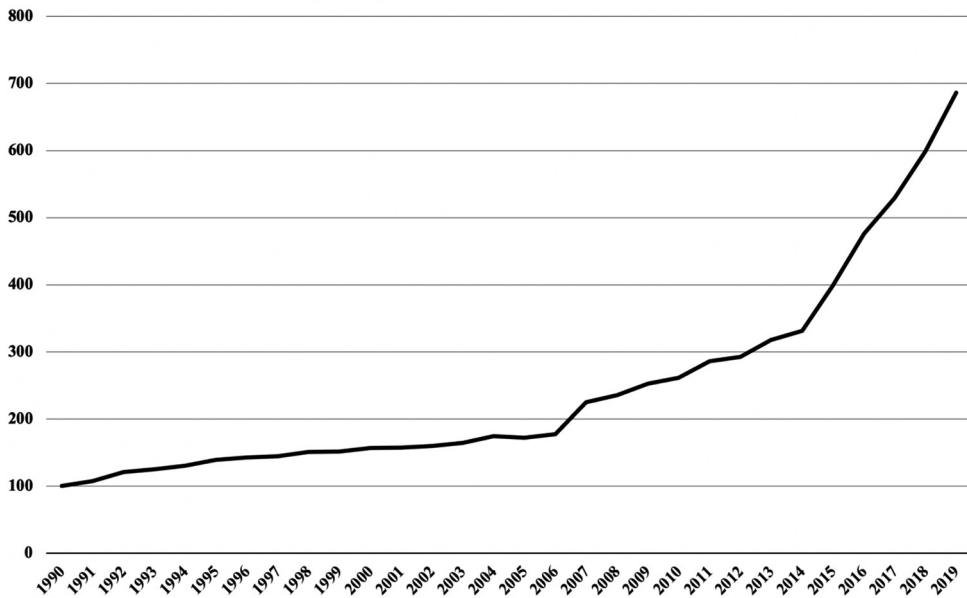
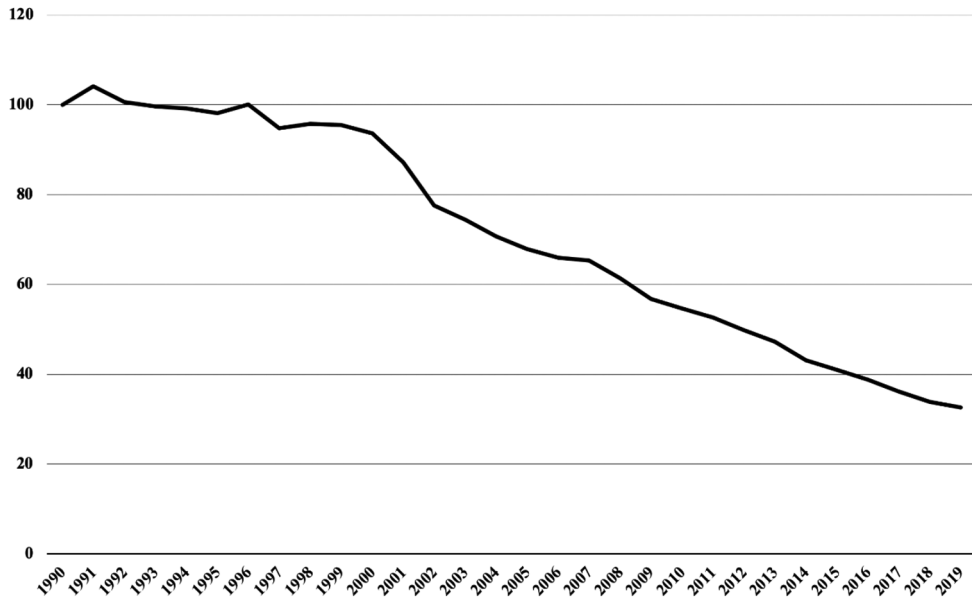
Source: UPU Postal Statistics

and priority mail[18]. Only direct mail showed some resilience, but its share in global advertisement spending was going to decrease as well. Mail communication was accelerating both its absolute and relative decline. With the development of e-commerce, domestic parcel volumes followed the opposite path, but postal delivery systems were not optimized for dealing with increasing parcel volumes flows yet. Little importance was given to the last mile despite critical cost and environmental issues resulting from the global rise of e-commerce. Ultimately, dissatisfied with the quality of service they received, big e-commerce players like Amazon started building their own delivery systems, entering directly in competition with postal and logistics companies for the first time.

On the international front, the global financial crisis accelerated the already on-going collapse of international letter-post volumes which were suffering the most from electronic substitution and the development of the Internet on a global level. This can be seen in Figure 3 below. Unlike cross-border letter communication, small packets items – recorded under the same international letter-post definition of the Universal Postal Union (UPU) – were starting their exponential growth right after the financial crisis. This movement was mainly driven by consumers looking for attractive online offers and prices abroad, thanks to newly established global e-commerce platforms like Alibaba[19]. These fundamental shifts in international postal exchanges (that were going to frame the later UPU policy debate until the terminal dues

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[18] Universal Postal Union, "The global economic and financial crisis and the postal sector", Bern, UPU, 2009.

[19] J. Anson, M. Boffa, M. Helble, "Consumer arbitrage in cross-border e-commerce", *Review of International Economics*, vol. 27, n° 4, 2015. p. 1234-1251.

Figure 3. Evolution of international letter-post volumes

Global international letter-post volumes index (base 100 = 1990)

Source: UPU Postal Statistics

crisis of 2018-2019 between the United States and the rest of the world) had been widely overlooked by the different European postal directives. They were treated as peripheral issues at best.

FRAMING DURING INDUSTRY CHANGE

Any issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, or what has been referred to as frames. These frames are guides for sensemaking and interpretation, constructed through social interaction[20]. Sociologists have therefore not surprisingly studied framing for many years, especially in the context of social movements. Topics studied by sociologists include public discourse, frame alignment, and collective identity[21]. More recently, framing has gained popularity in the management literature as a mechanism to explain the dynamics of competing logics within and between organizations[22].

According to framing theory, some actors actively engage in framing activities, trying to share their frame of an issue, and influence the opinions of other actors. There is thus some degree of similarity of outcome between

[20] S. Kaplan, "Framing contests: Strategy making under uncertainty", *Organization Science*, vol. 19, n° 5, 2008, p. 729-752.

[21] R. D. Benford, "Frame disputes within the nuclear disarmament movement", *Social Forces*, vol. 71, n° 3, 1993, p. 677-701.

[22] F. Pazzaglia, M. Farrell, K. Sonpar, P. Martin de Holan, "Keeping up with the Joneses: Industry rivalry, commitment to frames and sensemaking failures", *Human Relations*, vol. 71, n° 3, 2018, p. 427-455.

framing and priming[23]. In both cases, some interpretations are brought to the forefront, whilst others are repressed. Frames amplify in scope by being actively shared and spread, through being regularly invoked, or by being coupled with emotions[24]. This can lead to the institutionalization of a frame at an organizational, industrial, or societal level. Political activity aimed at promoting a particular frame increases during times of uncertainty. Uncertain environments are characterized by increased complexity and dynamism, and in general a difficulty in establishing the risks of events taking place[25]. Under uncertainty, achieving a collective consensus on both problems and potential solutions therefore becomes more challenging in organizations. Faced with the difficulty of making rational data-driven decisions, the organization moves towards decision-making based on establishing a strong enough coalition around a preferred course of action. Uncertainty furthermore opens up the possibility for new actors to gain power. Coalition building and power consolidation are achieved through political activities in the organization, including establishing a dominant frame. Uncertainty therefore leads to competing frames[26].

In contexts of industry and organizational change, and regardless of the level of uncertainty, frames are often employed by managers as tools of sensemaking and sensegiving. Management develops deliberate frames and narratives that can guide employees as these make sense of changes happening within and outside the organization[27]. Frames are thus useful tools of management, but also necessary in order to achieve expected outcomes of a change process. On the other hand, employees and middle managers can also actively use framing to sell issues to management[28]. When change is brought on by a situation of crisis, failure to drop old routine frames may increase the crisis, while adapting frames to new circumstances helps the organization become resilient[29]. For example, Andreas König, Lorenz Graf-Vlachy and Markus Schöberl (2021) demonstrate that framing a situation as representing a potential loss for the organization may lead to resource and routine rigidity, while framing potential gains can relax such rigidities[30].

Eliciting and studying cognitions and frames can help us examine and compare the perceptions of different managers in a context of severe environmental change[31]. Beyond simply describing the historical actions of organizations in response to change, studying frames allows the organizational historian to shed light on the logics that guided these actions, as well as competing logics that were ultimately abandoned. In the context of the postal sector, operator strategies of the last decade find their roots in the competing frames developed in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Studying these frames can thus provide

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[23] D. Chong and J. N. Druckman, "Framing theory", *art. cit.*

[24] J. M. Purdy, S. Ansari, B. Gray, "Are logics enough? Framing as an alternative tool for understanding institutional meaning making", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, vol. 28, n° 4, 2019, p. 409-419.

[25] K. J. Sund, "Revisiting organizational interpretation and three types of uncertainty", *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, vol. 23, n° 4, 2015, p. 588–605.

[26] S. Kaplan, "Framing contests", *art. cit.*

[27] M. Logemann, R. Piekkari, J. Cornelissen, "The sense of it all", *art. cit.*

[28] J. E. Dutton and S. J. Ashford, "Selling issues to top management", *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 18, n° 3, 1993, p. 397-428.

[29] S. Kim, "Frame Restructuration: The Making of an Alternative Business Incubator amid Detroit's Crisis", *Administrative Science Quarterly,* vol. 66, n° 3, 2021, p. 753-805.

[30] A. König, L. Graf-Vlachy, M. Schöberl, "Opportunity/threat perception and inertia in response to discontinuous change: Replicating and extending Gilbert (2005)", *Journal of Management*, vol. 47, n° 3, 2021, p. 771-816.

[31] K. Friis-Holm Egfjord and K. J. Sund, "Do you see what I see? How differing perceptions of the environment can hinder radical business model innovation", *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, vol. 150, 2020, article 119787.

historically interesting insights into why some strategies were adopted, and others abandoned.

METHODOLOGY

Frames and narratives can be elicited in multiple ways, including through the study of documents, through interviews, or through observation techniques. For a historical analysis of frames, a weakness of interviews is recall bias, whereby respondents no longer accurately report their logic at the time. Discursive analysis of policy-related documents represents a much better opportunity to analyse frames in the deliberate way and context in which these were written down. For example, numerous scholars have studied the framing of strategy, innovation, environment, corporate responsibility, and related issues in annual reports and letters to shareholders[32].

We base our analysis on a unique collection of 51 opinion papers, published between 2010 and 2012 in a three-volume book series under the title "The Future is in the Post". These opinion papers were written by 71 postal CEOs, top managers, experts, and consultants mainly from across Europe, the US, and parts of the Middle East and Asia. All opinion papers are available online with open access[33]. The editors of the project invited these "thought leaders" to reflect on "issues relating to strategic developments and options for the postal industry" and commented that the resulting "contrast in approach and conclusions is both interesting to explore and meriting of serious attention"[34]. Eliciting the frames evidenced in these opinion papers will obviously not provide a complete set of all frames in existence at the time among leaders in this industry (something that would

anyway be impossible to do). Instead, it should be viewed as a relatively broad and diverse sample allowing us to describe at least some of the frames of people with a high degree of influence. The opinion papers represent an alternative to other published documents such as newspaper interviews, political white papers, or annual reports that have typically been through a process of multiple corrections by press relations officers, journalists, or investor relations officers before release. In the case of our collection of opinion papers, these are more likely to directly reflect the unfiltered opinions and frames of their authors.

Our research approach is inductive following the interpretivist tradition. Our analysis starts with the broad question of what frames thought leaders at the time used when discussing issues related to the future of postal operators. The raw data consists of 122 390 words, split into 51 opinion papers. The objective of the analysis is to approach the text by identifying its diverse idea elements and asking what holds these together[35]. Our analysis was conducted in five steps. Based on our initial reading of the data, it became evident that there was a diversity of frames, and that those centred on common themes. These frames were held by multiple thought leaders and were thus shared frames. This was to be expected since thought leaders within a given industry are likely to be subjected to and share sources of information and interpretations. It should be noted that we cannot assume that stakeholders expressed all the frames they may have held in their opinion papers. In a second step, we conducted a thematic content analysis on the text to identify main themes discussed (first order codes), along which framing might differ. These first order codes were then compared and merged where themes appeared very close. In a third

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[32] See e.g. S. Tengblad and C. Ohlsson, "The framing of corporate social responsibility and the globalization of national business systems: A longitudinal case study", *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 93, n° 4, 2010, p. 653-669.

[33] These can be found via https://www.ruc.dk/~sund.

[34] K. J. Sund and D. Osborn, *The Future Is in the Post, op. cit.,* p. 3.

[35] W. E. D. Creed, J. A. Langstraat, M. A. Scully, "A picture of the frame: Frame analysis as technique and as politics", *art. cit.*

step the text was re-coded along each theme and the essence of the resulting framing was noted down. For example, the theme of inter-organizational collaboration emerged as a first order theme. Within this theme, three variants emerged as some thought leaders discussed the need to collaborate with other postal operators, some the need to collaborate with value chain partners or channels, and some collaboration with third parties like universities, new ventures, technology partners or international organizations. The fourth step was to situate each thought leader according to a general higher-order evaluative frame, of whether the thought leader was positive, neutral, or negative about the future of the postal sector. This step is consistent with the very commonly identified and used threat/opportunity interpretation, and with general practice in previous framing studies[36]. The fifth and final step was to group and compare the resulting frames contained in the 51 opinion papers. This final step resulted in three frames that are discussed in the findings and are listed in Table 1.

FINDINGS

Our analysis led us to identify three clearly delimited over-arching frames in the data. We found only two examples of individuals who seemed to attempt bridging two separate frames. We have labelled the first frame "Paper has a Future". This frame is one that is predominantly positive with regards to a possible future for paper communication. The second frame is labelled "Diversify the Trusted Postal Brand", given that one of the main arguments in this framing is that while paper (and the associated service of delivering paper from A to B) may no longer have as much value as before, the brand of the national postal

operator still has a strong value. The third and final frame has been labelled "Digitalize and Differentiate with Open Innovation", as a main argument in this framing is that posts are not able to generate value alone but need to move into new digital services in collaboration with outside actors. We discovered that within each of these frames, some thought leaders appeared more positive in their evaluation than others. Therefore, we couldn't with our data uncover a systematic threat/opportunity framing within each frame, which is why the result of our fourth analysis step is not contained in Table 1 and in the discussion below.

Paper has a future

The "Paper has a future*"* frame argues that the traditional letter mail business model still has a future. Paper is thought to have a strong value for customers. Digital communication trends are recognized but will not lead to a replacement of letter mail, and rather to the potential for new value propositions based around the complementary relationship between paper and digital. For example, hybrid forms of mail, in this framing, will grow in the future. Hybrid mail is mail that starts in digital document format, is then printed, sent in physical format and potentially re-digitized (scanned) by either the postal operator or the end receiver. Hybrid solutions are thus seen in this frame as a logical bridge between the traditional physical business model of the incumbent postal operator and the newly emerged electronic exchange of mail. It is noteworthy that this frame fails to comment on the fact that a majority of former physical mail that has been digitalized in fact no longer involves an actual message sent from a sender to a recipient. For example, communication via social media does not involve any opportunities for physical message exchange. Online

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[36] See e.g. P. C. Fiss and P. M. Hirsch, "The discourse of globalization: Framing and sensemaking of an emerging concept", *American Sociological Review*, vol. 70, n° 1, 2021, p. 29-52; A. König, L. Graf-Vlachy, M. Schöberl, "Opportunity/threat perception and inertia in response to discontinuous change", *art. cit.*; K. J. Sund, "Scanning, perceived uncertainty, and the interpretation of trends: A study of hotel directors' interpretation of demographic change", *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, vol. 33, 2013, p. 294-303.

Table 1. Three frames of the future of the Post

	"Paper has a Future" Frame	"Diversify the Trusted Postal Brand" Frame	"Digitalize and Differentiate with Open Innovation" Frame
Diagnosis of situation	Challenging period. Customers have moved into digital forms of communication, but still want physical mail and advertisement. Some Posts have been slow to modernize operations and are consequently suffering.	Customers are communicating digitally, and the decline of physical mail will not stop. Competition comes not just from postal sector, but also from digital space.	Communication has digitalized and gone mobile. Big increases in e-commerce. Current processes are outdated.
Role of the Post	The Posts are a vital national infrastructure tying the country together. They have a long and proud heritage and are among the oldest institutions in their country. Postal network is unique.	The Post should become a business organization delivering relevant services. Operators lack adaptability, but some are leading the way towards digital innovation.	Posts suffer from the weight of history, making it difficult to change. Universal service is a constraint.
Trust/Brand	National Posts are recognized and trusted by all citizens. The Post has an intimate relationship to customers that no other company has.	Posts remain a trusted brand, with a large customer base that could be exploited.	Postal brand is no longer an advantage.
Future of paper	Paper has a superior value to digital communication. Paper has been under attack before but always survived. Electronic services and e-commerce are complements to paper, rather than substitutes.	Paper communication is largely a thing of the past. The present business model around letter delivery is largely obsolete.	There is no viable future for paper.
Strategic orientation	Posts need to modernize operations and focus on what they are good at. Posts should be skeptic towards the digital space that does not offer profitable business models. Instead, they should focus on complementary areas such as hybrid mail.	Letter delivery is becoming less compelling. There is instead a big opportunity in e-commerce and parcel delivery. There is a need to innovate and diversify into electronic services. Posts should develop their capacity for innovation.	Posts must diversify but are slow to innovate internally. They need to adopt open innovation practices, for example to partner with start-ups, suppliers, universities. The aim should be to offer differentiated digital services. Posts should create the future.
Collaboration	Cross-border collaboration between postal operators and governments is important to improve quality of service.	Collaboration with channels and customers should be the focus in order to develop future electronic services.	Collaboration with, for example, digital start-ups, suppliers, universities. Explore license agreements, strategic digital acquisitions.
Regulatory concerns	Liberalization is a challenge. There is a need to redefine Universal Service Obligation for the last mile.	Liberalization and regulation is a fact of life.	Universal service definition and postal regulation is increasingly irrelevant, and a barrier for development.

banking also substitutes the traditional mailed account statement with a platform on which the user can simply consult their account and transactions in real-time. The frame fails to take into account this irreversible substitution effect.

For thought leaders employing this frame, the strategic question is how to ensure that paper mail remains the chosen form of communication in the future. One thought leader writes that the "ambition is for mail to become the chosen medium of communication for our customers and partners". Another asks: "How can mail be positioned in the mid to long term as a valuable alternative to email?". A third concludes that "hybrid mail may very well be the best service to increase the usage of mail". Thus, although digitalization trends are broadly recognized, the ultimate decline of mail is not. Actually, there is even a belief that downward mail trends could be reversed. The logic behind this stance is not limited to the perceived value of paper. The postal brand is also seen as a uniquely trusted one. The Post is perceived as a critical national infrastructure that "helps social cohesion by linking rural communities". One US thought leader goes as far as arguing against too rapid change, writing that "the US Postal Service should not change at too rapid a rate for it serves a guardian role in American society". The traditional (and monopolistic) unifying role of the Post is thus seen as something that deserves to be protected, regardless of whether or not there is a decline in demand for its services.

The logic of paper value, brand value, and trust in the Post also offers the solution for the future strategic orientation. In this frame, it is argued that Posts must continue to focus on their traditional markets, respecting their heritage and their unifying role in society. Temporarily declining mail volumes and the emergence of new technologies make it important to modernize operations and keep focusing on service quality. New services can be developed within hybrid mail in order to generate new growth in mail. Wider

diversification into digital spaces is seen with some scepticism. As one author notes: "We have to admit that there are only a few (if any) profitable electronic models compared to the physical models that we know". Another one asks: "If electronic means of communication are such good substitutes for physical mail, why are there still such high mail volumes?"

Finally, thought leaders adopting this frame argue that liberalization is a challenge and that postal operators should work closely with authorities and with their peers (national operators from other countries) to redefine a Universal Service Obligation for the future. The regulatory framework should allow flexibility for operators, and to some extent protect them from new entrants and cherry-picking by private competitors.

Diversify the trusted postal brand

The "Diversify the trusted postal brand" frame argues that postal operators must adapt their organizations and diversify their businesses to survive. Central to this framing is that paper is considered to have little future, that digital communication trends and e-commerce developments are assumed to continue. Liberalization is a fact of life that there is no point in discussing it anymore. However, postal operators are considered to have a trusted brand that can form the basis for future diversification strategies.

One thought leader comments that: "The present business model is obsolete". Another writes that "physical mail communication is a thing of the past". In this frame, digital substitution, accelerated by the financial crisis, is considered to have accelerated a move away from transactional mail in the case of business customers. For example, banks are moving away from sending physical statements towards digital ones, to save costs. Private customers have likewise moved onto digital platforms for most of their communication needs. These moves are considered

KRISTIAN J. SUND AND JOSÉ ANSON

irreversible. The trusted postal brand will therefore have to be leveraged with diversification into digital services. Some emphasize mobile services, some emphasize financial services, and some value-added services related to e-commerce.

In this frame, it is believed that postal operators should (and are able to) develop their internal innovation capabilities. In fact, this framing emphasizes that there are already good examples of operators successfully innovating. One thought leader writes: "The good news is that today the postal market can boast of several ground-breaking innovations". Innovation should be focussed on customers and their needs. Channels and customers, such as large mailers, are considered to be the perfect partners for collaboration around new service developments. Such new services are perceived to be best created inside the Post, but in collaboration with large mailers, including within e-commerce. Implicitly, it is assumed that control over innovative processes and services is preferable to a more open model.

Digitalize and differentiate with open innovation

The "Digitalize and differentiate with open innovation" frame argues that the traditional letter mail business model is in decline and digital communication trends will continue in the future. However, it also emphasizes that Posts "suffer from the weight of history", and that "there have been a relatively small number of innovations". Postal operators are late in their transformation and modernization initiatives. They are too slow to change. Digital substitution effects are considered irreversible and even the postal brand has limited potential going forward, particularly in the eyes of younger generations. The key to the future is to diversify into the digital space, developing for instance e-commerce solutions, customized marketing solutions, warehousing, logistics solutions, and so forth, all based on a differentiation strategy. This

frame thus recognizes that there is competition not only in the traditional business areas of mail and parcel delivery, but also in the new markets that operators could enter. Postal operators need to create their own niche in these markets. The emphasis is on postal operators becoming more active in creating their own future. Innovation is seen as difficult to achieve alone. Instead, operators must forge partnerships with external actors. As one thought leader writes: "There is significant opportunity for everyone involved in parcel networks to collaborate in open innovation".

In terms of the regulatory framework, one author writes that "mail service functions primarily under a series of aged and increasingly irrelevant government regulations that are responsible for how they look and operate today". This view seems to be shared within the frame, that considers regulatory frameworks as restrictive and a constraint on operators and their ability to innovate and diversify.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The historical analysis of frames in the aftermath of the financial crisis reveals three competing frames, indicating three different visions for the industry. One of the most interesting themes that has emerged from this exercise is the one on collaboration. Postal entities have historically integrated the full provision of their services within their organisations. Postal managers have thus mostly designed solutions and services from an inside-out perspective, based on fully controlled internal capabilities.

The two first frames seemingly point toward the possibility to interact more closely with other postal stakeholders and operators in the design of services and the conduct of sector policies. This is somewhat in contrast with the pro-competitive agenda set by the

76   *ENTREPRISES ET HISTOIRE*

different European postal directives. These aim at fostering competition rather than coop-eration. In this context, "co-opetition"[37] was going to gain in importance and value for postal and logistics companies, particularly from an international perspective, in develop-ments rooted in the UPU's international postal interoperability and connectivity missions. Therefore, the proponents of the "Paper has a future" frame would try to leverage cross-bor-der collaboration to improve quality of service for international letter-post services, despite the continued decline in the actual volume of such mail volumes.

Collaboration in the sector is often easier to claim than to realize and implement in practice. For example, Kristian J. Sund doc-uments how collaboration and trust slowly broke down among Nordic Posts in the period leading up to and following the merger of the Danish and Swedish Posts[38]. Over the course of the second decade of the new Millennium, the postal sector and its decision-makers have been confronted with a steep learning curve in terms of leveraging all potential benefits of collaboration. For postal sector players evolving in the frame of "Diversify the trusted postal brand", difficulties to fully understand the economic model of emerging platforms – such as the big tech ones or the logic of the sharing economy – were going to complicate the way they could reach their collaborative targets. The platform economics of the digital economy of the early 21st century was creating new ways of achieving market dominance that were not easily perceivable with the old lenses of classical competition policies. For postal operators, opening greater collaboration with these new players whose activities were blurring the boundaries of several industries, including the postal and logistics ones, has been most challenging despite the ambitions described in the frame.

For postal leaders expressing views that could be categorized in the "Digitalize and differentiate with open innovation" frame, the collaboration has often failed to happen in one of the most critical parts of the deliv-ery process, namely the last mile. So far, the willingness to control the last step towards the parcel recipient has outweighed the expected positive outcomes of an intense collaboration between all postal and logistics companies, as well as between these companies and the wider start-up ecosystem. The approach has been seen among a few postal operators, who have invested in start-ups and in developing external relationships[39]. These collaborations have focussed on developing new services within finance, identification, or logistics. However, today's last mile delivery opera-tions, where most costs and inefficiencies are still concentrated, remain under increasing stress and capacity failure threatens with the acceleration of e-commerce growth after the Covid-19 pandemic. One might speculate that European environmental regulations could contribute to encourage greater collaboration in the last mile in the coming years though. Paradoxically, regulation could deliver over this decade what the supporters of the third frame were waiting for without it.

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[37] See A. M. Brandenburger and B. J. Nalebuff, *Co-Opetition. A Revolution Mindset that Combines Competition and Cooperation*, New York, Crown Business, 1996.

[38] K. J. Sund, "From Cooperation to Competition", *art. cit.*

[39] M. Bogers, K. J. Sund, J. A. Villarroel, "The Organizational Dimension of Business Model Exploration", *art. cit.*