

**THE CRIMEAN WAR AND AUSTRALIA'S COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA  
HISTORY**

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### **Abstract**

*At the beginning of the 1850s there were high hopes in the Australian colonies that the establishment of government-subsidised steamship mail services between Britain and Australia would regularise the flow of news and hence enable a more predictable and productive economic, political and social engagement between the colonies and the Mother Country. There was also a growing awareness that colonial expansion by European powers and increasing globalisation of shipping and trade meant that wars amongst European states were increasingly likely to have global ramifications. Feelings of insecurity were exacerbated by the irregularity of communication and by the unreliability of much news from overseas. As it turned out, there was little improvement in communication between Britain and Australia throughout the 1850s. Steamship services, first introduced in 1852, were plagued by technical and commercial failure. Furthermore, the Crimean War had a major impact on services as the demand for troopships it generated diverted steamship resources from the Australian route to the Mediterranean. Just when news from Europe was most eagerly wanted by colonial Australians, the system of mail steamships which promised the long sought for regularity in its flow was withdrawn, replaced for a period by unpredictable sailing packets.*

### **Introduction**

News of Britain's declaration of war on Russia on 27 March 1854 reached Sydney ninety days later on 25 June where, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "Russophobia" was already prevalent (1 April, 1854). In a longer than expected journey, it had been carried from Britain to Melbourne via the Cape by the General Screw Steam Shipping Company's mail steamer, *Queen of the South*, which had left Southampton on the 4 April and had arrived in Melbourne on 21 June. On the same day, the news was dispatched for Sydney on the coastal steamer *Waratah* where it arrived four days later. This alarming news was doubtless made more so by the publication in the *Sydney Morning Herald* a few weeks later on the 15 July of a story taken from London's *Daily News* headlined "Russian Designs on India and Australia". This story noted the recent build-up of a Russian war squadron in the North Pacific and speculated on the possibility of a buccaneering "dash at Sydney or Melbourne". The *Daily News* commented that, "these are strange times we live in when it is possible that some of the first shots fired in the new war may be in the remote Pacific". Because of colonial expansion and the globalisation of trade, wars amongst European powers now potentially had a global reach. The Australian colonies, despite their relative remoteness, were not immune, particularly given their new-found wealth through the discovery of gold. The conflict amongst Russia, Britain

and France was, as Sydney's *Empire* put it, "unquestionably a matter of world-wide concern" (30 March, 1854). Furthermore, as McKernan and Browne (1988, p. 78) have pointed out, "Middle and upper-class colonists' Anglophile sentiments and personal connections with Britain led them to regard the war as their own". Add to this the fact that in the years 1852-5, inclusive, over 313,000 passengers left the United Kingdom for Australia (Bach, 1982, p.98), and it is not surprising that "news from home" and the efficiency of the lines of communication that could deliver it were a major priority in the colonies.

Yet as it happened, the very ship that brought news to Sydney of the outbreak of war also brought bad news regarding communication. The Australian Royal Mail Steam Company, which had been awarded the first Australian steamship mail contract by the British government two years earlier, had collapsed financially and its iconically named ships, the *Australian*, *Melbourne*, *Victoria*, and *Sydney*, had been re-assigned to British government work in the Mediterranean. The service between London and Sydney via Panama, proposed by the newly formed Australian Pacific Steam Navigation Company, had also been abandoned as uneconomic due to the price of coal and the failure to secure a British Government subsidy. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* London correspondent somewhat forlornly declared that he did not "despair of seeing an efficient, regular, rapid, and constant communication kept up between Australia and England" but, at the same time, conceded that war made this less likely, at least as far as private enterprise was concerned. As it turned out, even the correspondent's very guarded optimism proved to be misplaced. The unprecedented demand for war transports generated by the outbreak of war (Bach, 1982, p. 95) led to the suspension of steamship mail services between Britain and Australia. Just when news was most eagerly wanted, the system which promised a long sought for regularity in its flow to the Australian colonies was withdrawn.

The Crimean War was a significant event in Australia's communications history. It demonstrated the tenuousness and vulnerability of Australia's international communication links. Colonial newspapers did their best to make sense of the world for their readers but were often exasperated by the paucity and fragmented nature of news

from overseas. The *Sydney Morning Herald* commented on one occasion: "We give, as we receive, in a mutilated form, the last news from Europe and from England" (22 June, 1855). The uncertain communication conditions affected the Australian experience of the Crimean War, particularly by heightening concerns regarding security and exacerbating fears within the colonies of the possibility of a Russian naval attack. Finally, there is some evidence that the war provided a stimulus to the development of telegraphy in Australia as a means of extending the surveillance of shipping.

### **Establishing steam communication between Britain and Australia**

In the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century efforts by the colonial press to systematise the flow of news to Australia were hampered by the lack of a dedicated mail service between Britain and her Australian colonies. Until the 1840s letters and newspapers arrived via merchant ships, whalers, or transports under 'ship's letter' arrangements made by the British Post Office. Alternatively, parcels of newspapers could be sent via 'private hands' usually through special arrangement with ships' captains. The first dedicated mail service, a monthly sailing packet under contract to the British Admiralty, commenced in 1844. Duration was highly variable ranging, for the first three journeys from Gravesend to Sydney via the Cape of Good Hope, between 113 and 134 days. Furthermore, the return journey via Cape Horn took, on average, twelve days longer than the outward journey. Scheduling was also irregular as the contractors, the firm of H and C Toulmin, needed to secure freight in order to make the venture pay. There was general dissatisfaction with the service particularly as these sailing packets took, on average, twelve days longer than the average for private ships (Robinson, 1964, p. 188). This led to a campaign, bolstered by the economic boom following the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria and the associated mass immigration, for the establishment of a government subsidised regular steamship service to Australia along the lines that already operated in many other parts of the British Empire.

A complicating factor in the Australian context was disagreement amongst the colonies over mail routes arising from rivalry over which would receive the mail first and which city would serve as the main Australian base for the service. The H and C Toulmin

sailing packets had journeyed direct to Sydney leaving the distribution of mail from there to Melbourne to a local service. When it came to a new service, some New South Wales interests favoured a trans-Pacific route from Sydney to London via Panama complemented by a branch service from Sydney to Melbourne. Furthermore, if a steamer route was to be established to Singapore to connect with the existing 'overland' Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P & O) service from Britain to the Far East via Suez, New South Wales wanted the route to be via the Torres Strait. The southern colonies preferred a route via Western Australia to Melbourne. They also looked favourably on the establishment of a steamship service to London via the Cape of Good Hope.

In 1850 the British Government issued a call for tenders for steamship mail services and the upshot was that two contracts were awarded, one to the newly formed Australian Royal Mail Steam Navigation Company (ARM) to operate a service every second month via the Cape of Good Hope from the latter half of 1852 and the other to P & O to operate a service every second month from Singapore to Sydney, via King George's Sound (Western Australia), Adelaide and Melbourne, from the beginning of 1853. The ARM service was subsidised by the British Government to the tune of 26,000 pounds per annum while P & O received around 17,000 pounds per annum for the Singapore-Sydney section of its operations (Bach, 1982, p. 109). According to the P & O contract, the total time for mails from London to Sydney was not to exceed seventy days while for ARM the longer voyage via the Cape was set at seventy nine days (Robinson, 1964, pp. 191-2; *SMH*, 2 July, 1853). As noted earlier, a plan to establish a service via Panama collapsed after failing to receive sufficient financial backing.

In May 1852 the Directors of P & O announced that they would immediately send two steamers to Australia to inaugurate an experimental service so as to learn as much as possible about the route before beginning the actual contract in 1853 (Cable, 1937, p. 122). The first mail steamship to arrive in Australia from Britain was the *Chusan* which left Southampton on 15 May 1852 and arrived in Melbourne on 29 July and Sydney on 3 August. White has noted that the *Chusan* and later the P & O's *Formosa*, which arrived

on 22 October 1852, “were received with great excitement by citizens of the Colony who fondly imagined that a new era in ocean postal communications had dawned for them” (1988, p. 282). The Melbourne *Argus* of 31 July described the arrival of the *Chusan* as “an event, the importance of which can scarcely be over-estimated”. It continued: “As the precursor of a long line of similar arrivals, she has placed the key-stone to that bridge by which we may consider that we are now united to the Mother-country”.

For the *Herald*, the arrival of the *Chusan*, coupled with the finalisation of the complementary contract with ARM, represented the realisation of hopes that had been first awakened back in 1838 when business interests in Sydney and London had first attempted to establish steam navigation between London and Sydney. It recalled the New South Wales Legislative Council's unanimous resolution of September 1845 petitioning the Queen to extend to New South Wales the then established arrangements for the conveyance of mails to India and China. Success, the *Herald* thought, had been a long time coming. The benefits of a regular once a month mail service could hardly be overstated. The effect, according to the *Herald*, would be to “reduce the distance between us and old England by at least one half” (4 August, 1852). The *Herald* emphasised the importance of regularity in communication. Sailing ships could, on occasion, achieve very fast passages, but these instances had been “accidental and fitful”. According to the *Herald*, “the great desideratum is that we should be able to calculate upon our advices to the *very day*, irregularity being the exception and strict punctuality the rule” (emphasis in original). Regularity of communication between Britain and Australia would serve to “equalize our markets” and “maintain a healthful relation between supply and demand”. Importantly, it would also temporally order what had thus far been a jumbled flow of news and so properly structure colonial engagement with European and other world affairs:

This will secure to us a succession of European news in regular chronological order – a cheering contrast to our present modes of supply, the news of February preceding the news of January, the climax of some stirring event preceding all the circumstances out of which it arose. Omega preceding Alpha, effect preceding cause (4 August, 1852).

The anticipated regularity of communication arising from the establishment of steamship mail services also prompted the London-based 'steamship newspaper', *Home News*, originally established in 1847 to serve an Anglo-Indian readership, to commence a monthly Australian edition to be published on the eve of the departure from London of each Australian mail (Putnis, 2007a).

### **Developments in telegraphy**

In the early 1850s telegraphy was also beginning to have a significant impact on international news flow, including news flow to Australia (albeit that a direct telegraphic link between Australia and Europe was not established till 1872). However, while telegraphy greatly enhanced the speed of transmission of news across those distances where lines had been laid, it did little to reduce uncertainty regarding world events, particularly in remote places like Australia where the import of copies of short telegraphic messages received by ship was difficult to determine and the status of their contents impossible to verify. If anything, they created more rather than less uncertainty.

The period of the Crimean War coincided with major extensions of telegraphic links in Europe some of which were specifically directed at expediting communication between the Crimea and Britain. At the beginning of the conflict the fastest communication route between the Crimea and London took five days: 'two days from the Crimea to Varna [Bulgaria] by steamer, and three further days on horseback from there to Bucharest, the nearest point that had been connected to the European telegraph network through the Austrian lines' (Bektas, 2000, p.673). (Paris had been linked to London via the cross-channel submarine cable since 1851.) However, by 1855 transmission time between the Crimea and London was reduced to as little as five hours (Bektas, 2000, p. 675). As well as influencing the command structure of Britain's war effort, the telegraph link greatly enhanced the timeliness of news for the British public. The London *Globe* went so far as to claim that, "Henceforth, if due despatch be used, we are, as it were, present at the siege of Sebastopol". It continued: "To state the case without the least exaggeration, the daily papers ... should inform the British public of all that has occurred in the siege works before Sebastopol on the preceding day" (quoted in *Home News for Australia*, 4 May,

1855). As Winseck and Pike (2007, p. 26) have noted, the Crimean war represented a moment when pioneering use of telegraphy meant that “the link between military communications, on the one hand, and politicians, journalists, and the public, on the other, was tightened decisively”.

Australia's first telegraph line, between Melbourne and Williamstown, was opened in March 1854 and was extended to Queenscliff near the entrance to port Philip Bay by January 1855. South Australia and New South Wales soon followed and an inter-colonial telegraph linking Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide was opened in October 1858, thus enabling the telegraphic interchange of news amongst the newspapers of these cities. While these telegraph lines did not impact on the transmission of news of the Crimean War, the war itself and associated fears of a raid by the Russian navy known to be in the region, stimulated their development (Moyal, 1984, p. 20).

The period also saw major developments on the Indian sub-continent. On 31 December, 1854 a telegraph was opened linking the Governments of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. The *Herald* noted on 12 June 1855, with considerable foresight given the Indian uprising of 1857, that in case of any “sudden revolutions” the telegraph would be strategically important for the British as with “quick communication, the force of one Presidency becomes available for the defence of all”. It also speculated, again with foresight, that the line across India might one day play a role in Australia's communication with the rest of the world.

As well as enhancing communication with Britain, the P & O service to Australia via Suez, established in 1853, linked the Australian colonies to port cities throughout Asia and to the fast emerging European telegraph network which, by 1854, included a link between London and the Mediterranean port of Trieste. P & O steamers, for example, could bring copies of the *Malta Times*, with later news from Europe, and the *Straits Times* from Singapore which contained coverage of news from Asia. The *Herald* also subscribed to Hermann Credner's Trieste-based “Overland Telegraphic Despatches”

which sought to expedite “important communications between Europe and the east” by providing the latest European telegraphic news to passing ships (*SMH*, 20 May, 1854).

### **Hopes disappointed**

The much hoped for regularity of communication anticipated by the *Herald* on the arrival of P & O's *Chusan* in August 1852 failed to eventuate. The mail services of the 1850s turned out to be little better than those of the 1840s. Steamship companies rarely met the contracted mail times, resulting in unpredictability and large communication gaps; new steamship ventures collapsed while the well-established P & O found the Singapore-Sydney route unprofitable despite the subsidy; a shortage of steamships arising from the demands of the Crimean War led to a reversion to a sailing packet service; and, at the end of the war, the complexities involved in negotiating a new agreement between the British Government and the often bickering Australian colonies delayed the resumption of a steamship mail service.

The June 1852 decision of the British Government to award the Cape route contract to the untried and ill-equipped ARM proved disastrous. The line was plagued by breakdowns, inadequate arrangements for fuel, poor management, and, on one occasion, a badly leaking vessel which resulted in major water damage to the mail. Steaming times far exceeded the contracted time making subsequent departures well behind schedule. The *Herald* reported on 1 July 1853 that, at a time when the *Australian* was already expected in Sydney, she had in fact, following mechanical problems, “just sailed from Plymouth on her return to the port of London, having given up the voyage in despair”. Meanwhile, the *Adelaide*, which was shortly expected in England, was still at anchor in Sydney Harbour. Matters worsened when ARM was unable to provide ships for the February and April 1853 mails. Not surprisingly its contract with the British Government was cancelled and the company subsequently went bankrupt (White, 1988, p. 281). Reflecting on the time since its expression of optimism at the arrival of the *Chusan*, the *Herald* lamented on 1 July 1853: “What have we gained but a succession of disappointments?” While recognising that ARM Directors were culpable, the *Herald* attributed most of the blame for the failure to the British government's poor judgement and false economy (*SMH*, 1

July, 1853). Melbourne's *Argus* later commented that, "it is impossible to describe the bitter feeling with which the conduct of the British Government" in matters of postal communication "is regarded throughout the Australian colonies" (7 July, 1854).

Following the demise of the ARM, the British government reverted to the use of sailing packets via the Cape route every second month, with P&O continuing to operate the Singapore route on alternate months. However, in 1853 another steamship concern, the General Screw Steam Shipping Company (GSSSC), which had been servicing the Cape from Britain, began making trial runs to Australia via the Cape. Thus there was a short-lived "double service" on this route which, while welcome, heightened the sense of unpredictability. Meanwhile, Melbourne merchants complained in a petition to the Victorian Lieutenant Governor that "the want of adequate Postal communication completely disarranges the trade of Australia with England and other countries, and converts the most careful and legitimate operations of commerce into hazardous speculations" (Victoria, *V & P*, 1853-4, pp. 415-18) and the Victorian Legislative Council appealed to the Queen asking for her intervention and pledging whatever expenditure may be necessary (Victoria, *V & P*, 1853-4, p. 253). The British Government responded by agreeing to replace the unreliable sailing packet service with the steam packet service (outward via the Cape, homeward via Cape Horn) which had been trialled by GSSSC and would now operate every two months alternating with the P & O service.

Thus, after a disastrous beginning for the steamship mail service, things seemed to be looking up. In June 1854, when Australia received news of Britain's declaration of war on Russia there was, with the contracting of GSSSC, some prospect of adequate steam communication with Britain on the alternating month system, though sensible co-ordination of the two services was almost impossible given their varying steaming times. However, by early 1855 the picture had altered dramatically. Both P&O and GSSSC had cancelled their still unprofitable steamship services to Australia on the grounds that their ships were required by the British Government for military transport. P & O announced that the "emergency in the East" required this diversion "even at the risk of interrupting the mail service" (*SMH*, 14 February, 1855). Robinson has noted that "the Australians

were bitter over the treatment they received, for the P & O did not find it necessary to discontinue the Hong Kong service. What nettled the Australians more than ever was the stopping of the Singapore-Sydney service without giving notice" (1964, pp. 194-5). Following the cancellation of the steam ship services, a twice-monthly sailing packet, operated by the Black Ball and White Star lines out of Liverpool, began delivering the mails via the Cape route. The sailing packets did not approach the speed and reliability achievable by steamships with an average sailing time to Australia of 84 days and an average return time of 93 days (Robinson, 1964, p. 195). Furthermore, while the ships were required to depart from Liverpool regularly on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of every month, they were able to set their own schedules on the return journey from Sydney (White, 1988, pp. 284-5).

### **The Press in Australia**

What did this irregularity of mail services mean for the colonial newspapers and how did they react to it? More generally, what were the effects on the experience of news in the Australian colonies, especially news about the progress of the Crimean War? The loss of steamship services significantly reduced the timeliness of news from the Crimea in the Australian press. Steaming times had been improving with P & O achieving 60 days from London to Sydney for its July 1854 mail (*SMH*, 9 September). Furthermore, the loss of P & O service via Suez meant that nearly all news about the Crimean War now arrived via London. Previously, later news was picked up in Mediterranean ports. For example, news of the disastrous charge of the Light Brigade on 25 October 1854, initial reports of which appeared in the London *Times* of 2 November, formed part of the batch of news dispatched to Australia by the scheduled P & O mail which departed London on 9 November. However, this was supplemented by further details of the event and of subsequent fighting picked up at Malta on 14 November and Alexandria on 19 November. This kind of up-dating was not, of course, available through the substituted sailing packet service via the Cape.

There was intense rivalry amongst newspapers in Sydney and Melbourne to be first to secure overseas news. In Sydney both major newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and

the *Empire*, kept boat crews on standby near Sydney Heads to meet incoming ships at sea. The *Herald* journalist, F C Brewer, recalled that when vessels were expected during the night, "the reporter and his boat crew often camped at Watson's Bay on the look-out for 'lights to the south'ard', and some dangerous work was done in boarding vessels in the dark". He commented that, "the public excitement of the latest news kept newspaper people in a whirl to supply the demands" (Fairfax and Sons, 1931, pp. 173-4).

While weeks could go by without fresh news there were occasions when new material arrived hard on the heels of previous reports, much to the surprise of editors. During the brief period in early 1853 when two shipping lines were operating on the Cape route there was an occasion when two ships arrived on successive days leading to some consternation at the "excess" of news that resulted. After the usual time lapse of just over a month, a new instalment of news (in this case news from London up to 27 January) arrived in Melbourne via the sailing packet *Kent* on the 20 April. Much to everyone's surprise, the very next day saw the arrival of the GSSSC's *Harbinger*. This efficient steamship brought London news, via the Cape, to 14 February. The editor of the Melbourne *Argus* was overwhelmed: "We have thus eighteen days later English news than we had even yesterday" (*Argus*, 22 April 1853). For the editor of the *Argus*, this occurrence evoked a feeling, marvellous yet unsettling, that his age was one of miraculous invention in which time had a new volatility. Accelerated transmission of news was a feature of this new world. He expounded:

Time works wonders ... There are special eras in which time puts forth its wonder-working faculty with such multiplied force, that miracles cease to be the exception and become the rule...The recent news from Europe has crowded upon us so rapidly that only after a little reflection are we able to realise its momentous interest ... The long and tantalising interval which preceded the arrival of the news by the *Kent*, has been more than compensated by the swiftness with which the *Harbinger* has followed in her wake.

The editor felt that in this communication environment there was "no predicting what a *day* may bring forth" (*Argus*, 23 April 1853, my emphasis).

The inability to verify stories, coupled with keenness to be first with the news, made newspapers particularly vulnerable to hoaxes and erroneous reports. On 1 April 1854 the *Herald* published the news that “the English and French fleets had ... captured the entire Russian fleet off Sebastopol”. It later transpired that this piece of “news” was in fact a hoax perpetrated on the *Herald* as an April Fools Day joke by the captain of a newly arrived vessel. More famously, there was the misreporting of the fall of Sebastopol in December 1854. This misinformation was received in London by telegraph and reported in the *Times* of 2 October 1854. However, official reports contradicting the news were published in a *London Gazette Extraordinary* on 5 October. Thus the “period of misinformation” in London was three days. As it happened, the Australian mail left London on the 4 October carrying the unconfirmed telegraph report (but not, of course, the correction) to Sydney where it arrived on the morning of 9 December 1854. The *Empire* immediately issued a second edition which it claimed sold “upwards of 10,000 copies.” It commented that:

for two hours afterwards the large front room of the *Empire* office was crowded to suffocation, and, though supplied by a steam engine, the demand could not be met; in many instances, the papers were literally torn to pieces in the struggles to obtain a copy...we believe a greater number of copies was distributed among the public than was ever printed of any previous publication in the colony (11 December, 1854).

While both the *Empire* and the *Herald* were careful to point out that official confirmation of the fall of Sebastopol had not been received, for the following weeks they repeatedly published news articles and editorials from outdated British newspapers detailing the story, together with their own laudatory editorials and commentaries which were written in a post-war tone of victory. The news that Sebastopol had not in fact fallen to the Allies did not reach Sydney until 30 December, meaning that the “period of misinformation” (and misguided celebration) had lasted 21 days compared with the 3 days during which the British public was deceived. Following this incident the Australian press was particularly wary about trusting information which had only been received by telegraph. This caution later heightened doubts regarding the veracity of initial reports of the real fall of Sebastopol when they serendipitously arrived in Melbourne in December 1855 in the form of telegraphic news published in the *Calcutta Englishman*.

Newspaper editorials repeatedly expressed frustration with the British Government's handling of mail services. They complained loudly of the effects of the loss of the steamship service on the flow of news. News now arrived in "tantalising dribbles" (*SMH*, 10 May, 1855) or in a "mutilated form" (*SMH*, 22 June, 1855). On one occasion, when the last news from the seat of war was already one hundred and ten days old, a new batch arrived whose intelligence, much to the disappointment of the *Herald*, was only three days later than that previously received. This represented, the *Herald* declared, 'the mischief and mortification inflicted by the stoppage of steam communication' (30 April, 1855). The Melbourne *Argus* complained that batches of later news arrived prior to scheduled earlier ones thus generating confusing news hiatuses (18 October, 1853). The mail services also played havoc with the production and delivery schedules of the Australian edition of *Home News* which was planned as a monthly but, from June 1855, changed to a twice monthly so as to align itself, as best it could, to the new sailing packet arrangements. It found it impossible, however, to deliver an orderly diet of news, remarking to its readers in its edition of 4 February 1856 that they would probably receive this edition prior to the previous one because of earlier shipping delays.

### **Communication conditions and Australian responses to the Crimean War**

The discontinuance of steam communication as a result of the Crimean War was variously treated in the colonial press as a sign of the British Government's abandonment of the Australian colonies, an indication of the need for Australian commercial and to a lesser extent political independence, and a uniquely Australian contribution and sacrifice towards Britain's war effort. Additionally, the loss of steam communication between Britain and Australia exacerbated existing concerns within the Australian community regarding the possibility of a Russian attack on the Australian colonies, and, in general, fanned colonial insecurity. As Hyslop (1976, p.23) has pointed out, the "war scares", which periodically befell the Australian colonies throughout the nineteenth century, were fed by rumour and conjecture, intensified by the limitations of communication. Such fears could seem irrational, particularly to people back in Britain. Indeed, the Governor of New South Wales at the time of the Crimean War, Sir William Denison, conceded as

much, writing to Sir Roderick Murchison in England, "You laugh, and with reason, at the panic which led people in these colonies to insist upon fortifying themselves against the Russians." Denison says that he "never partook of the panic" (Denison, 1870, p. 309). However, it is clear that war scares often loomed large for the colonists and, judging by steps taken from the 1850s to improve colonial defences, were taken very seriously. (Hyslop, 1976; see also MacCallum, 1956, Lack, 1968.)

On 3 July 1854, the *Empire* conjectured that a decline in the quality of communication with Britain would be the greatest impact on Australia of the Crimean War: "It is probable that the material effects of a European war upon the interests of these remote territories, will be the obstruction which it will cause to the progress of improved means of intercourse between them and the mother country". The *Herald* argued that Australia should arrange and fund its own steamship mail service to Singapore. After the cancellation of the steamship services, the *Herald* commented that "it is important that our interests should not be set aside by every occurrence of war, and every change in the temper of our London merchants, or the views of the noble Postmaster-General" (24 January, 1855). The Melbourne *Argus* decried the discontinuance of P & O's service as an "infamous injustice" (17 February, 1855). The issue of steam communication appears to have stretched to the limit the obligations of patriotic loyalty to Britain in its conflict with Russia felt by colonial Australians. A letter from the Australian Postal Association to the Postmaster-General, published in the *Herald* on 22 January 1855, captures the problematic position of the Australian colonies:

The arduous contest with Russia in which this country is engaged has for the last few months induced the Committee of this Association to abstain from pressing the improvement of Australian postal communication on her Majesty's Government... Deeply sympathising with the mother country in her efforts to repel the barbarism of the north, Australia is too patriotic not freely to bring her quota of sacrifice to the national cause, and she waives for the present what is most important and most dear to her – her right to frequent communication with the parent state.

This letter represents a range of responses to the issue – patriotic loyalty to Britain, anger and frustration at the loss of steam communication, and also a sense that the cancellation of the steamship services could be considered as an Australian sacrifice for the war effort.

However, beyond the ire of merchants and newspaper editors, there are additional indications that communication conditions, particularly after the cancellation of the steamship services, affected the experience of the Crimean War in Australia. Newspaper editorials suggest that the cancellation of steam communication created a heightened sense of news anxiety. The *Herald* commented on 1 March 1855 that “in the present state of Europe an uninterrupted communication is of the highest importance. It is now eighty days since our last intelligence left London. We can scarcely think without intense anxiety of the possible events which those days seemed likely to usher in”. On 30 April 1855 it further commented:

We had long been looking at the signal post with anxious expectation. One hundred and ten days had elapsed since we received intelligence from the seat of war. At length our curiosity was gratified by three days later intelligence! We realize by these long delays the mischief and mortification inflicted by the stoppage of steam communication...We shall find that ignorance of events will some day involve us in a cost so enormous as to exact the fullest penalties for our past negligence and delay.

The *Herald* here suggests that the delay and unreliability of Australia's communication with Britain will not only have commercial consequences, but also that colonial Australia's extended ignorance of events of colonial and global significance could have implications for its security. Rumours of Russian threats to Australia's security had proliferated throughout the Crimean War, prompting improvements in the defence fortifications of Australia's harbours (for example the construction of Fort Denison in Sydney) and the formation of volunteer military units (McKernan and Browne, 1988, pp. 79-80). After the declaration of war, the *Herald* discussed recent visits by Russian frigates to Australia and to British colonies in the Pacific, speculated on the Russian capture and destruction of British merchant vessels, and reviewed the departure of vessels and the duration of their voyages to calculate whether news of the declaration of war would reach British ships and colonies before it reached the Russian Pacific squadron.

Such anxieties were heightened by the loss of steam communication, which the press suggested left the Australian colonies more vulnerable than ever to a surprise attack from

Russia. This point was exemplified by the reporting of an Allied engagement with the Russian fleet at Petropavlovsk in the north Pacific. The Melbourne *Argus* stated:

We are no alarmists, but it would awaken in us no surprise to learn that a Russian fleet had issued from the Amoor; and we ought certainly to prepare ourselves as far as we can to receive the first intelligence of their proceedings from themselves [i.e. via their actual arrival] (3 October, 1855).

Clearly, colonial newspapers editors and commentators viewed Australia's spatial and temporal distance from Britain, and the exacerbated delay in communication of news of the war, as threatening colonial security.

### **Aftermath**

Shortly after the end of the Crimean War the British Government proposed to the Australian colonies the re-establishment of a subsidised steamship mail service under a scheme whereby costs would be shared equally by the British and Colonial Governments. The British Admiralty would call for tenders for a service which would call at King George's Sound, Melbourne and Sydney. Branch services from Melbourne would operate to South Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. It was noted that, while the colonies had previously expressed a willingness to contribute to costs, the various schemes put forward by each colony had been "contradictory and inconsistent". Therefore, the home government had taken the initiative in proposing a comprehensive scheme which it hoped would be accepted by all the colonies (British Treasury Minute of 27 November, 1855 in New South Wales, 1856-7). In the upshot, all colonies except South Australia agreed and, in mid 1856, a contract at a cost of 185,000 pounds per year was awarded to the European and Australian Steam Navigation Company to provide a monthly service via Suez. The service commenced from the beginning of 1857 but high hopes were again followed by major disappointment as the Company failed disastrously to meet schedules. In the view of the Postmaster-General of New South Wales this service was even less satisfactory than the sailing clippers that had operated during the war (Robinson, 1964, p. 196). The company went bankrupt. From November 1859 the Australian mail service was taken over by P & O which subsequently became the long term preferred supplier of overseas mail services to Australia. While this brought a degree of stability, overseas mail routes and services remained a contentious issue. The growth of Queensland, separated from

New South Wales in 1859, generated renewed pressure for a mail route to Singapore via the Torres Strait, while the opening of the transcontinental railway across North America a decade later brought the Pacific route back into serious contention. Writing in 1875, William Purdy described the system as “still subject to experiment” and, at that time, “undergoing another series of transitions for which it has been remarkable during the last 22 years”. He remarked on the continuing “want of cohesion among the Australian [colonial] governments”, each of whom professed a “Saxon-like independence” when it came to overseas mail matters (Purdy, 1875, pp. 6-17).

### **Conclusion**

The Crimean War was a significant event in Australian communications and media history. It directly impacted on the speed and reliability of communication between Britain and Australia, as the steamships which were used for the delivery of the mails were recalled by the British Government for use in the war. The conditions of communication between Australia and Britain and their changes throughout the duration of the war also affected the local press, causing a great deal of frustration with respect to the availability of overseas news. The Crimean War highlighted the tenuousness and vulnerability of Australia's international communication links at a time when people felt they were most needed, thus exacerbating feeling of insecurity. The state of ‘uncertain knowledge’ with respect to important world events, and associated anxieties, arising from prevailing conditions of communication and Australia's position in international communication networks, is a recurring motif in 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian history (see, for example, Putnis 2004; 2007). This paper provides a further illustration of the implications of changing patterns of overseas news availability in Australia for local knowledge of and engagement with the rest of the world, an engagement which in later periods sometimes took the form of Australian involvement in overseas wars. Australia's position in the British Empire, coupled with increasing globalisation, meant that Australian history was as much shaped by events abroad as by domestic circumstances. The study of the way news of these events was communicated to Australia provides new insights into the development of Australian society and culture.

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