

Behind the Box: A Sociological Analysis of Theft, Tampering and Mishandling of Postal Packets

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Abstract

There is no gainsaying the fact that besides the physical requirements of food and shelter, man has another fundamental need, the need to communicate with his fellow human beings. The urge for communication is natural, primal and, in our modern interdependent world, a necessity. Indeed, our social life revolves around communication since it is the cement that holds society together. It is for this very important reason that postal service was developed to provide the indispensable link between people living in different parts of the world. Thus, through postal service people separated by hundreds and thousands of miles can be brought together. However, over the years, there have been malpractices in and against the Ghana Post Company Limited. These have resulted in numerous complaints, which constitute an indication of the public dissatisfaction with the performance of the organization. The study revealed that indeed mail theft, pilfering, tampering and mishandling of postal items are present at the Post Offices in Ghana. Among others, we identify factors such as social solidarity among workers, social pressure and 'conducive' working environment as contributing to mail theft, pilfering and mishandling of postal packets.

Key words: *Postal service; Pilfering; Tampering; Mail theft; Deviance*

Introduction

The effective functioning of government, the proper management of the economy, the socio-cultural intercourse, the fostering of international trade, friendship and understanding, and the conduct of activities which are essential to the well-being of every society depend on communication. In communication and in terms of communicating effectively, the postal service is an essential component. In spite of the prevalence of emails in Ghana, the technology is limited to cities and big towns. About 50 percent of Ghana's population, particularly rural areas, still depends on postal services given the fact that many rural communities lack electricity supply and telecommunication networks that are critical in modern electronic communication. Even in cities and big towns where emails are easily accessible, hard copy documents, books and items ordered online are delivered through the postal system. Indeed, it is significant in every country's infrastructure; it enables everyone to readily and conveniently send and receive personal and business letters, printed papers, documents and articles of various kinds, as well as send and receive sums of money. Its indispensable role in the socio-economic, cultural and political spheres makes it a partner in development.

As noted by T.E. Leavy in 2002,¹ through the distribution of information in various forms, the postal service has become an important player in the information society and an essential instrument in communication that facilitates and contributes to cultural, economic and social development. The problem, however, is that there have been deviant persons involved in the rendering of the post services in Ghana who engage in theft, tampering and mishandling of parcels and packages. These deviant practices have gone a long way to undermine the significance of the postal service in the country in contributing to information flow and communication.

We note the deviant behavioral terms as follows: Pilfering refers to extraction of money or any valuable item from a letter or parcel. In this case, the packet is resealed for delivery. Tampering occurs when a letter or parcel has its state altered. It may occur with or without extraction from the letter or parcel. Mail theft occurs when the whole packet or envelope is taken away. Even if it does not contain money as suspected, the addressee will

¹ T.E. Leavy was the Director General of the Universal Postal Union and he noted these lines in the 'Message from the Director General of the Universal Postal Union on World Post Day on World Post Day' in 2002.

not have the letter back since such letters are destroyed. Mishandling of postal item is a generic term used to describe all sorts of illegal ways of handling any item sent through the post.

In this paper, among other objectives, we attempt to investigate the factors that are responsible for these negative practices of theft, tampering and mishandling. We will however restrict our attention to socio-cultural factors. That is to say, other factors such as economic and political are outside the scope of the study.

Historical Development of Postal Services in Ghana

According to the Ghana Post Information Bulletin (2000), postal services in the then Gold Coast started in 1854. This followed a representation made to the Secretary of State for the Colonies by the then Governor of the Gold Coast, Major Stephen Hill for the British Post Master General in London to establish separate postal services for the Gold Coast. Before this time, receiving or dispatching mails were confined to the exchanges between the British Secretary of State for the Colonies in London, the Governor based in Cape Coast and his representative in Accra. The first significant development toward enabling mass usage of the service occurred in 1860. It was an effort to introduce in the Gold Coast a truly national postal service to incorporate both internal and external service. In that year, the Legislative Council of the Gold Coast Colony enacted legislation for the payment of postage on certain classes of letter passing through the post.

The Bulletin also notes that the first post office was opened at Cape Coast with one Rowland Cole, a Sierra Leonean, as the first Post Master in 1873. However, in 1874, the General Post Office was moved to Accra with the transfer of the capital from Cape Coast in that same year.

The Issues at Stake

For postal services to be efficient and economical, postal items (mails, parcels, etc.) must be mass-processed as far as possible. Thus, the basic function of postal organization is to convert the individual mails and parcels as rapidly as possible into something that can be handled on a bulk basis, ensuring however, that they finally regain their individual status. In the conversion, the first step involves collection and sorting of individual mails and parcels

by the most economic method, concentrating together all items that are going to the same direction. The sorting office may employ thousands of personnel.² As part of collection and sorting, conveyance is done by the use of local transport, usually operated by the postal organizations themselves and sorting offices.

The next stage is the arrival of the mails at the sorting office of the final destination where they are systematically sorted. The items finally recover their individual identity and are grouped for delivery to individual's addresses. In most countries delivery is on a house-to-house basis, although boxes at local post offices are sometimes used.

The Ghana Post Company Limited, like all other postal organizations, goes through the above procedures or operations with the view to fulfill its established mandate of prompt, efficient, reliable and secure services to its domestic and foreign customers. However, in the performance of these services, the Company has been perceived as not living up to expectation in several circles of society. There continues to be complaints that delivery of business documents and personal letters, as well as payment of remittances through the post is unduly delayed and, indeed, there is persistent public outcry against stealing, pilfering and mistreatment of letters and parcels sent through the post. The news media on countless number of times have carried or published letters and editorials over the years on the poor performance and more importantly the anti-social behavior of persistent stealing of postal items by some unscrupulous postal offices and their collaborators. One of such letters appeared in January 12, 1999 edition of the *Daily Graphic* captioned 'Our Undelivered Mails'. In this letter, a Ghanaian residing in Japan wondered whether Ghana Post appreciates the responsibility it owes to the public. The writer was amazed that his letter, which was dispatched from Japan on December 24, 1997, was returned to him by the Mamprobi Post Office on November 13, 1998, with the label unknown.³ He could not fathom why the Mamprobi Post Office could not locate the town Mamfe-Akwapim boldly written at the back of the envelope in their service map. To him Ghana Post has no excuse for the gross dereliction of duty because at no time in the intervening eleven months did the address of the addressee changed or had the address suspended for default payment.

² Sorting office/room and mails office are used interchangeably, but they all refer to the place where mails are processed for dispatch

³ Mamprobi is the same of one of the town in Accra, the capital city of Ghana.

Between October 2001 and January 2002, numerous complaints of mail theft, mail tampering and mishandling of postal packets were lodged at the District Operations Office of Ghana Post Company Limited in a particular regional capital, which was our area of study.⁴ Most of the complaints were verbal reports, but quite a number expressed their displeasure in writing. A few of the victims of mail tampering or theft bypassed the authorities at this regional office and reported their complaints directly to the Company's headquarters in Accra. However, these complaints were referred to the District Operations Office of the said region for further investigation. Preliminary investigations led to amazing revelations that gave credence to the complaints. It therefore became necessary for the issue to be properly investigated and for the perpetrators of these deviant practices or behavior to be appropriately dealt with.

Some Objectives of the Study

The study sought to ascertain the validity or otherwise of the public perception about Ghana Post and the services it renders. To achieve this, the complaints received at unspecified district's operations office of Ghana Post provided a ground for investigating the unspecified city's mails office. Specifically the study sought to:

- i. establish whether indeed there is mail theft, pilfering, or tampering at the mails office;
- ii. identify the factors that promote such practices if they exist;
- iii. uncover the modus operandi; and
- iv. make recommendations to reverse the trend (refer to the conclusion).

Study Area and Methodology

As noted earlier, because of possible embarrassment to employees of the particular post office where this study was conducted at that period and a possible prosecution against them or unwarranted but face-saving lawsuit against us, we wish to withhold the name of this post office, the region, and the city within which it is located. We will only concentrate on

⁴ Because of possible embarrassment to employees of this particular office at that period and a possible prosecution against them or unwarranted but face-saving lawsuit against us, we wish to withhold the name of this post office, the region, and the city within which it is located and only concentrate on the issue. We will use the term 'unspecified' to indicate any location relating to this post office.

the issue. Accordingly, we will use the term ‘unspecified’ to indicate any location relating to this post office.

Our unspecified post office, apart from being the only post office in regional capital it is located, also serves as the regional headquarters of the Ghana Post Company Limited. From the front view of the building, the mails office is a long stretch of block at the right side of the office and it is partitioned with cement blocks. The tail end of the block housed the parcel section, that is, an office where postmen keep dutiable postal packets for examination by customs officials. In effect, officials of both Customs Excise and Preventive Service (CEPS) and Postmen or workers of Ghana Post Company Limited share the parcel section. The other side of the block is where other postal items, including ordinary mails, registered packets, and express mails are sorted for dispatch to their final destinations, or for delivery into private letterboxes, or house-to-house delivery.

During the period under consideration, seven (7) employees including a supervisor were working in this office. Apart from the supervisor who was an assistant manager, five (5) of them were senior postal officers. The remaining one was a dispatch rider attached to the office and who was responsible for house to house delivery.

The approach to the study is qualitative and in terms of description and explanation; details of the nature of operations in the mails office are described and the modus operandi of personnel, vis-à-vis, ~~the~~and the rationale behind personnel behavior are explained.

Population and Sampling Procedure: The target population of this study was the staff at the mails office of the unspecified post office. In view of the small size of the population (specifically, 7 personnel) the entire personnel constituted the sample. The group was studied for a period of thirty-six (36) months – i.e., from January, 2002 to December, 2004. Complaints received from customers served as a guide in the collection of data.

Method of Data Collection: Data were collected using a combination of methods. Observation, interview and free listening (eavesdropping) were all used at a point in time when anyone suited the study. The observation was non-participant, covert and unstructured. This method was useful because any clue to the personnel that they were being studied would have put them on their toes. Besides, this method was convenient because, the principal

researcher had access to the office anytime and could spend any length of time at the office. This method gave the opportunity to eavesdrop and observe the group closely.

The interviews were both formal and informal and, as noted earlier, unstructured. Formal interview was mostly used in situations where a staff at the mails office was caught to have been engaged in mail theft, pilfering, tampering or any deviant act. In such cases, the norm was to make the culprit write a statement which served as a basis for further investigations. Such interviews took the formal nature. During the period under review five members of staff at the mails office were interviewed with this method. Besides, any time there was a reported case of malpractice, the supervisor was also formally interviewed. Informally, all the seven staff in the mails office was interviewed at different times during the study. Through these methods, a lot of information regarding the interactions among the staff and their nefarious activities in the mails office were gathered.

Observation took the form of unannounced and random sampling of mails already sorted into private letter boxes. The rationale behind these checks was to verify whether letters sorted into the private letterboxes indeed bore those particular boxes numbers. It must, however, be mentioned here that this practice formed part of the normal supervisory functions of the researcher. In most cases, some letters were found to have been placed in wrong letterboxes. When queried, staff always defended it as genuine oversight.

Deviance in Perspective

A number of writers (e.g. Andersen and Taylor, 2009)) have placed deviant behavior in context. This study was guided by a number of social forces that have the propensity to promote deviant act. Such forces include the event itself, the place or environment, time and the victim(s) involved.

Deviant Events: Deviant events take many forms, but all such events violate some norms. Potentially, therefore, people could commit as many deviant events as they can find norms to violate. Some of these acts involve physical behavior, as in crime, while others may involve verbal behavior, such as children inappropriately scolding their parents (Clinard and Meier 1998).

Event refers to some behavior, but also to the context in which the behavior occurs. The context may involve a deviant, a victim, the circumstances that brought them together and, depending on the act, a history between the deviant and the victim. Understanding deviant events begins with antecedents and encompasses the immediate situation in which events take place and its aftermath (Sacco and Kennedy 1996). Event analysis requires attention to these and all contributing factors to the deviant act. Focusing attention on the deviant act itself necessarily neglects the context in which it takes place. An act may be physically isolated in time and space, but the social context defines and shapes the deviant act.

Contributing to the debate, Bryant (1990) argued that most deviant acts do not just happen. Such acts culminate in a process or series of stages that develop over a period of time. To him, therefore, most deviant acts occur in particular social contexts. On the contrary, Lofland (1969) argued that some deviant acts, such as instances of domestic violence, often begin without specific intentions to commit the acts; the acts follow development of interactions with others. As he puts it, each action of each party is in some measure dependent upon the previous action of the other party. The outcome of such an interaction process is a joint product (Lofland 1969).

Deviant Places: Deviant place describes a physical location typically connected to deviant act, thus a neighborhood where people encounter strong temptations and opportunity to deviate. According to Karmen (1983), a deviant act may begin with interpretation of a situation as an opportunity to commit the act. For instance, if a teenager sees a set of keys left in a car, he may interpret the situation as an opportunity to steal or move the car.

Deviant Time: Time is another important dimension to the understanding of deviant act. An analyst cannot effectively study deviant acts in isolation from their social contexts, including temporal relations between separate acts. Deviants may learn to commit these acts over long periods of time through a process of realizing pleasure and adventure from committing successive acts. The adult robbers, for example, may have begun their career in adolescence with minor youth gang delinquencies and other risk-taking activities (Blumstein, et al. 1986). The history of deviant acts suggests the possibility of transitory events, that is, some deviant

acts occur at some times more than others. Some deviant acts, for example are tied to particular situations (Forsyth, 1992).

Deviant Acts and Victims: The nature of a deviant act depends not only on the past experiences of the actor but also on the response of others in the immediate situation. The individual considers these responses in formulating a definition of the situation. The reaction of the social audience helps to organize and shape the deviant act.

From the above literature it is clear that deviant events gain their significance by drawing our attention to conditions that define deviance rather than the deviants who commit the act. Deviants are only one part of the social equation. Sociologists and other social scientists must broaden their perspective to examine the nature of the social events associated with deviance. The social context includes social forces that bring deviants together with potential victims, as well as the time and places of those interactions.

Findings and Insight

The study revealed that indeed mail theft, tampering and mishandling of postal packets were present at the unspecified sorting office of the Ghana Post Company Limited and these were facilitated by the following factors:

Social Solidarity among the Staff in the Mails Office: It was found that all the workers in the mails office had worked in that office for a period ranging between three and ten years. This long period of staying together had knit them together and enabled a form of social solidarity. This bond was strengthened by the small size of the group. Besides, the group, to a large extent, was homogeneous in respect of socio-cultural characteristics. For instance, six (6) out of the seven (7) persons working in that office hailed from the same region and had also worked together for between three (3) to ten (10) years, and therefore had many things in common. It came to light during the study that the ‘bad nuts’ among them were known to all the workers in that office, but the close relationships that had existed among them made it difficult for any of them to betray a colleague.

It is also important to note that, the unwillingness on the part of the workers to report a co-worker caught stealing or tampering with any postal item could be explained by the fact

that all of them were fully aware of the punishment for engaging in stealing, tampering etc. This was outright dismissal. So, fully aware of this negative consequence, and the fact that all the members of the group were breadwinners of their families, it appears that it was their collective responsibility to protect one another's job. It was even found that there were instances that the supervisor prevented some members in the office from reporting a colleague who was caught for stealing some letters. Apparently, when any of these issues happens, it is normally settled by the supervisor without it getting to the notice of higher authorities. Thus, the social relationships developed among them served to insulate the deviants from action.

Social Pressure: Akin to the above factor was another cultural practice that, to some extent, tends to promote the deviant behaviors – i.e. Fear of Being Called a Bad Person. As already indicated, all but one of the seven personnel hailed from the same region, with three hailing from the same district. Telling a superior anything that would lead to the dismissal or any form of punishment of a co-worker was interpreted as a “wicked act”. Hence, one or two of the staff who felt strongly about these deviant acts of their colleagues could also not report to the higher authorities, even if their conscience had urged them to. How could they, if they imagined how the families of a dismissed colleague would relate or interact with them when they meet at the market or during funeral celebrations? After all, who wants to be labeled as having committed a “wicked act” and, therefore, being described as a “bad man” among his kinsmen (tribe)? Thus, the quest to gain acceptance in one's society compelled those who could otherwise have been heroes to overlook any deviant act or look on helplessly. This finding supports the assertion of Clinard and Meier (1998); they contend that the nature of deviant act depends not only on the past experience of the actor but also on the response of others in the immediate situation.

'Conducive' Environment (Privacy): Another factor that was found to have contributed to this deviant behavior was the ‘conducive’ working environment at the unspecified post office. The mail office, according to the policy of the company, is a restricted area. Ideally, even personnel of the organization who are not members of that department are not permitted to enter the place except in cases of special mission. Even though this policy was not strictly

adhered to, it nonetheless gave some sort of protection to those who engaged in the malpractices to operate. It is worth mentioning that the unspecified mail office is neither equipped with close circuit television (CCTV) nor security personnel. There was therefore no means of monitoring the activities of members. The postmaster, who is directly responsible for the entire post office, has his office detached from the mails office. Apart from the normal morning round, which takes him to the mails office and occasional visits, the office is virtually at the mercy of the workers and their supervisor. Considering the bond/solidarity that existed among members in that office, even the supervisor did not behave as one. The environment therefore became more conducive for all sorts of illegal activities including mail theft and tampering with the alleged involvement of the supervisor himself. Thus, as Karmen (1983) notes as evidence, the situation could be interpreted as an opportunity for personnel to engage in stealing, tampering, or mishandling of postal packets.

Methods of Operations (Modus Operandi): The long period of service of some of the staff in the mail office and, perhaps, the whole post office also facilitated the deviant behavior. The unspecified regional capital, though an urban area, is relatively small compared to other cities; one post office had private letterboxes of less than 2,500 during the time of research. From the years of working, the staff at the mail office could determine individual box renters who frequently received foreign mail, which were likely to contain money or other valuable items. In most cases, their guesses were right. In fact, it was claimed that some of them could detect a packet or an envelope, which contained money by hand feeling. Such packets are smuggled out easily during working hours or at the close of work. This was possible because there was no security check on the staff of the department as they went in and out of the office.

In most cases, victims who reported of missing or undelivered mail were almost always particular box renters, many of whom were women who have their husbands or other relatives living abroad, and this piece of information was known to some of the staff of the department. In one test case, the researcher made a false foreign mail and addressed it to one of the suspected letterboxes. This particular letter was smuggled into the office and was added to the bulk of mail. This was done to ascertain whether this particular mail would be placed in that particular letterbox. This mail, which should have been dropped in the private

letterbox within 24 hours, never ended up in the box. As usual, they knew the letterbox renter, and were aware that her husband who was living abroad remitted her frequently through the post. This time round the person did not succeed. Since stolen mail are opened and searched for valuable items or money, they could not be returned to the office and so this false mail like all the other stolen mail were destroyed by the thieves, never to be returned.

Another subtle way of carrying out these activities was the use of an accomplice who normally was outside the organization. With this method, the accomplice is an existing box renter in the same post office. The officer who wanted to steal some of the mail/packets he or she suspected containing some money or other valuable items selected them as part of the normal sorting process. However, instead of sorting them into the right letterboxes, he or she would deliberately sort them into the letterbox of the accomplice. This method was often used to conceal their nefarious activities from superior officers who per chance visited the office. This is because, standing from afar and watching the operations even with CCTV, one only sees a hardworking officer who is busily sorting out the mail into the private letterboxes. At the close of the day, the accomplice opens his box from behind, removes his supposed mail and meets the staff at an agreed location where the mail are thoroughly searched for valuable items and money, whilst the rest are destroyed.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the development and growth of postal service from the ancient times to the dawn of modern civilization. We have observed that the importance of the postal service has never been in doubt; as society expands and becomes more complex and sophisticated, the need for efficient, reliable and safe postal service becomes crucial. Even though e-mail and other electronic massaging are replacing the physical mails, access to internet is still unequally distributed in Ghana. The growing “digital divide” between the rural and the urban centers means that the physical mail network remains indispensable to many rural dwellers who have access to postal service, but to whom electronic communication is still very limited or not available at all. Without postal services, a broad spectrum of communication in the form of books, newspapers, magazines, information and ideas, educational materials, literature and art would be restricted with detrimental effects on the cultural and social development of rural people.

This study in the unspecified mail office undoubtedly affirms the perception of the public that some undelivered mails are stolen at the post offices. At other times, some valuables are extracted from the postal packets. Factors that account for these anti-social behaviors, we have noted, include social solidarity among the workers, the fear of being called a wicked person when one reports a colleague who engages in stealing or tampering, and, the 'conducive' environment in the unspecified mails office.

Our recommendation is that management should take a serious look at the issues raised and, particularly, the factors pointed out and addressed them holistically. For instance, staff should not be made to work in one particular office for an unnecessarily long time; transfers may help to dismantle any social network that has negative effects on the operations of the organization. Management should also consider the issue of security by installing CCTV or any other means of monitoring the operations of the workers. Management should also make conscious effort to ensure that workers in a particular office are heterogeneous in terms of tribe or ethnicity. Such a move will help to break down the social cohesion among kinsmen or tribesmen.

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