

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# The Postman Always Pings Twice

By MICHAEL RAVNITZKY

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**THE** Postal Service recently announced it had lost \$8.5 billion in the last year, despite cutting more than 100,000 jobs. Without new revenue and other changes to get it back on a firm financial footing, it said, it could face insolvency by the end of 2011.

**Fortunately,** the service has a unique asset that could allow it to make money by collecting valuable data that would contribute to the country's safety and economic health: its far-reaching network of trucks.

The service's thousands of delivery vehicles have only one purpose now: to transport mail. But what if they were fitted with sensors to collect and transmit information about weather or air pollutants? The trucks would go from being bulky tools of industrial-age communication to being on the cutting edge of 21st-century information-gathering and forecasting.

**After** all, the delivery fleet already goes to almost every home and business in America nearly every day, and it travels fixed routes along a majority of the country's roads to get there. Data collection wouldn't require much additional staff or resources; all it would take would be a small, cheap and unobtrusive sensor package mounted on each truck. (This idea is mine alone, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Postal Regulatory Commission.)

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**Commented [A2]:** Paragraphs 2 and 3 present a solution to the problem

**Commented [A3]:** This paragraph provides an explanation for why the solution is a good idea

The key elements for the project already exist, including tiny, inexpensive G.P.S. receivers and radio uplinks, features found in today's smart phones. The sensors would operate without distracting the drivers from their primary responsibilities. The service could also minimize startup costs by teaming up with a company to develop, install and operate the equipment. One company under contract with the National Weather Service is already installing environmental sensors on long-haul commercial buses to enhance weather forecasting.

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The data gathered by these truck-mounted sensors would establish a baseline map of ordinary conditions, making it significantly easier to spot a problem or anomaly. Such a system could aid in homeland security by rapidly detecting chemical agents, radiological materials and, eventually, biological attacks; it could also collect detailed data to improve weather forecasts. And it could assess road quality, catalog potholes and provide early warning of unsafe road conditions like black ice.

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A system like this could also detect gaps in cell-tower coverage, weak radio and television signals and sources of radio frequency interference. This data could help provide uninterrupted communication services and promote more efficient use of the broadcast spectrum.

One logical way to start would be for the service to work with other federal agencies, or to lease space on certain trucks to permit testing of smart sensors by businesses, nonprofits or university researchers.

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True, other types of vehicles, like taxis or buses, could also carry sensors. But such vehicles typically don't follow as many regular routes. Nor are they managed by a single organization that could readily coordinate nationwide or regional data collection.

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There are a few obvious objections. For starters, there are privacy concerns regarding certain types of data. But a review panel could be set up to monitor the use of the network and ensure safeguards for handling the data.

There's also the question about marketplace competition from a federal agency monopoly, an issue that has led Congress to limit the types of non-postal services the agency is allowed to provide. But in this case, the service wouldn't be competing; rather, it would be providing a platform that a business could never afford. If anything, by offering access to a wide range of data and thereby being a catalyst for business innovation, the service would be promoting competition, not hindering it.

Over the next few years the Postal Service must figure out what role it will play in a world where new modes of communication and information-gathering seem to emerge every few years. Postal delivery trucks that go everywhere nearly every day are positioned to fill that role — without sacrificing the vital task of delivering the nation's mail.

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