

Postcards' importance fades with technology

By Monica Cure

In this age of Instagram and Twitter, it is easy to forget how recently postcards were a principal way of sending images and short messages. Nothing about postal communication seems appropriate for that today: Someone once confessed to me that he hand-delivers postcards after he returns from a trip because they arrive more quickly that way.

Yet when postcards were invented, they were revolutionary technology – and caused their own uproar.

It was 1865 when German postal official Heinrich von Stephan was the first to propose the adoption of what he described as an “open post-sheet” made of stiff paper. One side would be reserved for the recipient’s address, and the other side would have just enough space for a brief message. It would circulate at the cheapest rate possible.

Von Stephan’s proposal was rejected as too radical.

It seemed economically unworkable to the other delegates of the Austro-German Postal Conference. Who would forgo their privacy, even for the sake of convenience and frugality?

Four years later, when a similar proposal was accepted by the Austrian post office, the public answered that question. Three million postcards passed through the Austrian post within the first three months. Nations around the world quickly issued their own official postcards. Seventy-five million were sent in Britain in 1870, the year it adopted the new medium.

The postcard’s popularity baffled and even appalled the cultural elite. On one hand, it seemed ridiculous and highly

inappropriate to write anything remotely personal on a postcard, where postal workers, neighbors or servants could read the message. On the other hand, if one lacked anything substantial to write, why write at all? The smaller format inhibited sustained thought. Some even blamed the postcard for a decline in literacy and argued that its shorter format led to poor grammar.

"I have no words in which to speak of this abomination," complained one writer in Scribner's Magazine in 1908. "It symbolizes the triumph of the commonplace, of the cheap-and-easy, the utter capitulation of individuality.... On their edges will be scrawled flying words, and some initials ... to me who so dearly love a quiet letter from a friend, [even] written infrequently."

Postcard enthusiasts became just as extreme in their pronouncements. They saw it as a symbol of democracy itself and a revolution in interpersonal communication. Affordable to all, the postcard was hailed as the most important postal advancement since the penny post. It created more points of contact between family members and friends, regardless of class. It was even credited with facilitating global understanding through the establishment of international postcard exchange clubs.

For true postcard aficionados, communicating via postcard was not just easier but also better. They waxed poetic about the sentimental merits of this new abbreviated medium. Less room to write meant instant synecdoche. "Wish you were here" on a hand-colored postcard of the "moonlit" Eiffel Tower – necessarily just a taste of what the sender was thinking as he put pen to card – could evoke a world of desire. The recipient would imagine the rest.

Yet, ultimately, this way of saying everything could also be interpreted as saying nothing. As telephone service spread exponentially in the early 1900s, it now seemed to exemplify

all the benefits once attributed to sending a postcard. Placing a call was faster and eventually would become cheaper so that one could both “say” more and say it more easily.

The postcard’s history reminds us that there are always hopes and fears projected onto the latest communication technology. Ease and speed promise greater intimacy, but eventually the very attributes that attracted us to the new form seem to strip messages of their depth.

We’ve all experienced the thrill of reconnecting with elementary school friends on Facebook before slowly realizing we have nothing in common with them. Instagram continually reminds us that seeing what people ate for dinner feels like the furthest thing from actually having dinner with them.

Each new form gestures toward the fantasy of perfect communication. And each, in turn, becomes dispensable once it disappoints us.

A friend recently found out that her 25-year-old brother-in-law had never received a postcard in his life. She told me this with an air of such sadness and regret, as if that fact conveyed so much of what was wrong with the world. It seemed to imply that no one cared enough to take the trouble to buy a simple postcard and stamp, write a few lines and mail it to him. She decided to be the first.

Perhaps we have it backward. We seek communication that is easy and effortless, and think that will foster genuine connection. But what truly matters is the trouble we take.

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