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British Educational Research Association

How 'tweeting' was done in 1909

The Twitterati may believe they are pioneers in the world of social networking. But 100 years before the Jakes and Kates of today began tweeting the Ethels and Alfreds of Edwardian Britain were doing something very similar, researchers have concluded.

A century ago the tweeting was done via the humble picture postcard. It had been introduced in its present form in 1902 -- picture on one side, blank space for address and message on the other -- and became an almost instant phenomenon, like Twitter. However, it is only now that researchers at Lancaster and Manchester Metropolitan universities are discovering how similar Twitter and the picture postcard are.

Twitter allows text-based posts of up to 140 characters. The postcard provided a similar amount of space for not only "Wish you were here" messages from the seaside but general conversation in the days before mobile phones and text-messaging.

And, like Twitter, the postcard generated an astonishing amount of chat. Earlier this year the Twitter website was estimated to have 6 million unique monthly visitors, making 55 million monthly visits.

However, the picture postcard seems to have stimulated even more traffic. Using the Postmaster General's reports, Julia Gillen of Lancaster University and Nigel Hall of Manchester Metropolitan University have calculated that around 6 billion postcards (a remarkable 200 cards per person) were posted in Britain during the Edwardian era (1901-1910).

Furthermore, the postcard messages could often be transmitted far more quickly than they can be today as there were up to 10 deliveries of post a day in the major cities. "We forget what a revolution the postcard represented," the researchers will tell the British Educational Research Association conference in Manchester today (September 4) "With the postcard, people were given the opportunity to communicate in a short, convenient form that could not be governed by the relatively formal letter-writing etiquette. The low price and efficiency of the Edwardian postcard meant that, as an informal 'written communications technology', it was not equalled until the 21st century."

Gillen and Hall highlight how similar the wording of postcards could be to text and Twitter messages. Punctuation could be disregarded and short forms were common.

Mrs Rowarth of The Lamb Inn in Chinley, Derbyshire, received a postcard in 1905 that began: "A P.C from you this mg. is it tomorrow or next Sat. the opening ...". Another anonymous Edwardian dashed off a card to tell a friend or relative: "Our George will come and fitch the peelinges and bring you a bit of pork so don't get any meat."

Such abuses of English caused much alarm among purists who felt that accepted standards were threatened. "In terms of literacy, there is a parallel with media concern about children's literacy practices in particular," say the researchers, who have amassed a collection of 1,500 Edwardian postcards.

However, the initial moral panic subsided and the introduction of the picture postcard came to be regarded as a positive development. Gillen and Hall share that benign view and are now intent on extending their transcription and analysis of their growing collection of cards.

They also want to see what others make of the postcards and are therefore using Twitter to 're-send' some of the cards approximately 100 years after their original posting. Those who want a taste of Edwardian tweeting can find some of the cards that Gillen and Hall have collected by visiting the Twitter website and keying EVIIpc into the search box.

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Notes for editors:

1. The first picture postcards were introduced into the UK in 1894. Initially it was only possible to write a short message in the margin of the picture.

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