Literacy Practices and Skills in Early Twentieth Century UK: The Picture Postcard as Social Media

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Julia Gillen, PhD, Professor of Literacy Studies, Literacy Research Centre, Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster University, UK.

Abstract

The picture postcard was a revolutionary means of communication in early twentieth century UK. For the first time, it was possible to combine a short message with an attractive image and send it fast, at little expense. Such an opportunity was not to reoccur until the digital revolution. Three thousand postcards, sent between 1902-1910 have been collected, transcribed and openly digitized. Effectively the social media of its age, picture postcards enable the study of multimodal writing practices and skills. Findings demonstrate how postcard use ballooned, that they were used more by women, yet by people from almost all social classes. Literacy skills were high. Postcard writers drew on letter-writing conventions and interspersed postcards with letters, keeping constantly in communication.

Purposes

My main purpose is to present the findings from a ten-year investigation into literacy skills and practices around the picture postcard of the early twentieth century (Gillen, 2013, 2023). The Edwardian postcard (so referred after the monarch of the era) was the first available cheap, attractive, and rapid means of combining a short message with an image. With several deliveries a day in towns, potentially from early in the morning until late at night postcards often arrived within hours (See Figure 1). The Picture Postcard Craze, as it was known was extremely popular, with approximately 6 billion cards sent in the UK in the period 1902-1910.

Figure 1: A simple postcard (this is the only message)

This was the social media of its day with no comparable means of written, multimodal communication until the digital revolution of the late twentieth century. A secondary purpose, to be accompanied by interactive work with the audience sharing historical postcards (in physical and digital form), is to explore how historical data of this kind can be used to motivate student engagement and analysis and I welcome comments to this effect (during or after the meeting).

Theoretical framework

I draw on Literacy Studies (Heath, 1983; Rowsell & Pahl, 2015; Street, 1983) to centre authentic engagements with reading and writing in everyday life. Literacy Studies is chiefly known for qualitative, indeed ethnographic methods and there have been relatively few historical studies although the epistolary collection edited by Barton & Hall, (1999) involved studying practices as well as texts. The sociolinguistics of writing (Lillis, 2013) provides relevant frames for examining the materiality of writing, drawing attention, for example, to choices among implements and orientation of text. Approaches to multimodality that focus on the development of innovatory practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) are highly salient; drawing attention to individual creativity and indeed playfulness among new social movements. Finally I recognize key recent studies on historic postcard writing, such as Cure, (2018) and Wilson, (2021) both interested in how the picture postcard might be understood within the media landscape of its age.

Data sources

With the assistance of Nigel Hall, formerly of Manchester Metropolitan University,

colleagues and public donations over many years I assembled a collection of three thousand postcards which travelled through the post in the UK between 1902 and 1910. This was the "Golden Age" of the postcard, which had been invented in 1869 in Austria and introduced into Britain in 1870 but initially as a plain card without images. From 1894 part-pictorial cards were introduced and the more flexible divided back format in 1902. This collection has been digitised and made available open access as the Edwardian Postcards Collection (Lancaster Digital Collections, 2021). All cards have been transcribed.

Methods

  As well as transcribing the cards, all have been categorized to identify:
A. year of sending
B. materiality and literacy skills
C. sociodemographic characteristics
D. image genre (simplified)

Addressees have been searched for in the censuses of 1901 and 1910 in order to explore sociodemographic characteristics and occupations. On occasion, due especially to familial relationships alluded to in the cards such information has been discovered about the senders. Corpus linguistics was used to investigate key words, phrases, and popular topics. Finally, I investigated media discourses of the time around picture postcards.

Findings and discussion

First, I describe the findings of the categorization exercise, followed by major findings from the use of corpus linguistics and finally discuss one sample postcard and salient media discourse.

A: year of sending
The collection aligns with secondary data on the strong growth in the early part of the decade followed by continuing popularity. See Table 1.

Table 1 Year of postcard use

Year by postmark	percentage (rounded)
1902	1
1903	4
1904	11
1905	16
1906	15
1907	16
1908	16
1909	13
1910	10

B: materiality and literacy skills
Writers made use of the available space by varying the orientation of their writing. A few wrote upside down, used mirror writing or wrote in code, presumably to obstruct easy decoding by intermediaries. Eighty-six per cent used ink pens; almost all the remainder pencils. Over ninety per cent of the postcards are generally neat and readable with few illegible words, reflecting the impact of near universal literacy in the era following education reforms. The mean number of words was 50.7.

C: sociodemographic characteristics
Gender of writers and senders can often be impossible to detect: findings are presented in Table 2. Females are more prevalent than men. Internal and external evidence makes it clear that to an extent this may be accounted for by the feminine pursuit of collecting postcards in albums, leading to their preservation. Picture postcards were used by almost all sections of society from royalty to the lowest paid occupations.

Table 2 Gender of writers and addressees (female, male, unknown)

gender of sender to addressee	percentage (rounded)
F to F	35
F to M	5
F to U	0
M to F	11
M to M	4
M to U	0
U to F	37
U to M	7
U to U	1

D: image genres
Topographical images account for the great majority of buildings. However, memes such as rough seas, cute cats, celebrity actresses and original artwork were also present. See Table 3.

Table 3 Image genres (simplified)

Image – main topic	percentage (rounded)
views	48
building/s	26
celebrity	3
ordinary person or people	2
comic	2
child	2

| art | 15 |
| words | 2 |

Content of messages

Corpus analysis reveals this to be a highly dialogic genre. However, although in some ways informal postcard writers often borrowed from letter writing conventions in their greetings and salutations. Postcards often referred to letter writing and were used frequently as short gifts interspersed in more lengthy correspondence. In an era of greater mobility (UK railways were at their zenith, and bicycle riding permeated through society) writers used postcards to keep in touch as they moved, frequently receiving as well as sending cards when away from home. Postcards could be used to share news and to make plans, occasionally for events on the very same day.

Figure 2: a complex card
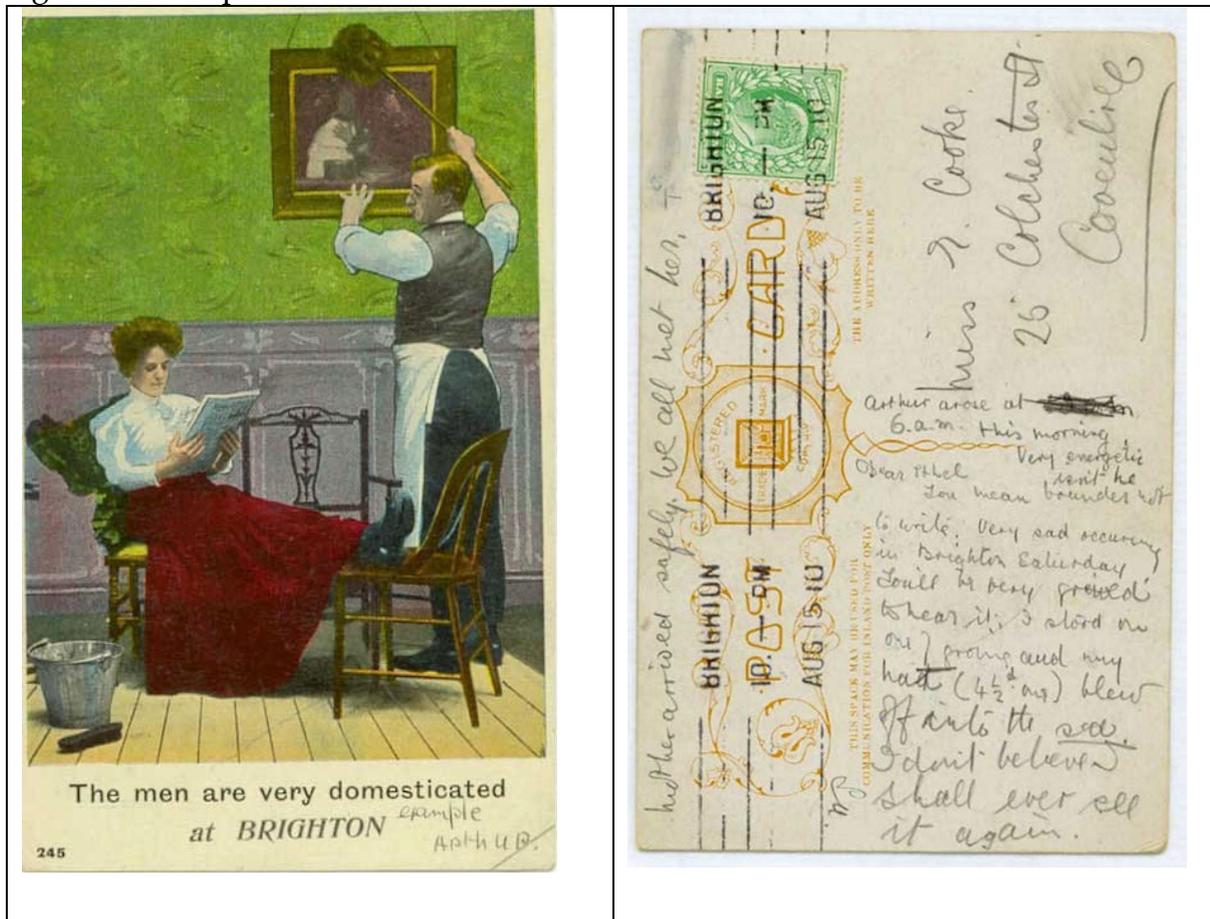
Transcription:

Miss E Cooke
25 Colchester St
Coventry

Dear Ethel
you mean bounder not
to write. Very sad occurrence
in Brighton Saturday.
You'll be grieved
to hear it. I stood on one (1) groine and my hat (4 ½ d (?)) blew off into the sea.
I don't believe I
shall ever see it again. (Written above this text) Arthur arose at
6.a.m. this morning Very energetic
isn't he
(written across the top of the card)
mother arrived safely. We all met her.

Figure 2 depicts a postcard (0027) sent in 1910. This sample illustrates how in a competitive market the postcard publisher, in an era before colour photography, has designed and printed an attractive, humorous image overstamped for each location in which it is sold. The writer has made creative use of the space made available through the regulatory constraints for a lively message including a small story (Georgakopoulou, 2007) and an explicit connection to the image, which itself has been annotated. Census investigations reveal that this postcard was sent to a 16-year-old young woman who less than a year later was working in the then very modern occupation of a shorthand typist.

Media discourses of the Edwardian era underpin this sense of the picture postcard as a defining feature of a hurried, modern age. Sometimes this was accompanied by a sense of degeneration of societal norms: "The circulation of scurrilous and anonymous postcards has become a positive nuisance in Great Harwood. …." (F. Crossley, 1906, cited by R. Crossley, (2011: 131). However, even before the beginning of the postcard's soc-called Golden Age, even such authorities as *The Times* (November 1st, 1899) were acknowledging the usefulness of the postcard: "The fact that post-cards have become a most useful adjunct of social and commercial intercourse must far outweigh any disadvantage which the old-world letter-writer ascribes to its use."

It is illuminating to consider parallels in attitudes towards the new platform can be with responses to today's social media. In terms of materiality, and practices, it is useful to question how aspects of these communications can or cannot be replicated on any social media platform, and what in turn today's social media can be used to accomplish that was earlier impossible. Turning away from sometimes simplistic conceptualizations of the digital revolution when investigating multimodal writing practices can be extremely fruitful.

Significance

Edwardian picture postcards reveal much about the writing skills and practices of people using a media which in many ways has parallels with contemporary social

media. The project has intrinsic historical interest in exploring the writing practices of non-elite writers, including many women, in the early twentieth century. Further, from experiences of engaging with diverse audiences including school and university students, as well as in public events, I hope to further explore the potential of working with historical picture postcards either as physical artefacts or digitally online, with the audience and any other readers of this paper.

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Contact: Julia Gillen, j.gillen@lancaster.ac.uk