



The UPU and the standardization of the envelope in the 1960s: towards a universal language of mail

Sébastien Richez (Committee for the History of the Post, La Poste Group, France)

Long after the era of scrolls and parchments, until the early 19th century most written messages circulated in the form of folded documents, sometimes tied up and sealed with wax. This practice often reflected the preciousness of their content, linked to the high social status of their creators – wealth and literacy being two basic requirements for correspondence.

The first half of the 19th century saw a technical revolution, first in England with the appearance of the envelope, a new “packaging of the written word”, and then across Western societies, where use of the Post was democratized in stages up until 1914–1918. Banal though the envelope may now seem, in the inter-war period it was the subject of numerous innovations, patented in Germany, France and the United Kingdom, for example, making the object ever more practical for everyday use, though the Universal Postal Union took no interest in it.

Following these intranational developments with the envelope, the post-1945 revival of postal universalism ushered in a period of international standardization. The aim was to prepare packaging for the growing globalization of trade, which, in the case of mail-intensive exchanges, would rely on the mechanization and automation of flow processing already underway in the richest countries.

These were the driving force behind the move to standardize letters, and more specifically, to establish a range of envelope formats acceptable to Posts.

Between the 1957 Ottawa Congress, where the Consultative Committee for Postal Studies launched the process, and the 1969 Tokyo Congress, which formalized the trend towards new standards by officially amending the Universal Postal Convention and its Detailed Regulations, the UPU innovated in terms of partnership, establishing a working relationship with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

This extra-postal expertise, combined with the know-how of influential administrations, formed a UPU–ISO partnership which saw both advances and tensions over the decade, and eventually managed to define a scale of commonly-agreed size standards in a complex context. The result was a cross-disciplinary, ecumenical vision of the envelope, based on science and technology, filtered through diplomacy and economics, and confronted with industrial and financial issues. In this new form, it was to enable the next stages of the massive mail standardization programme to be launched in the 1970s, also covering the weight of papers, their nature and properties, and the layout of addressing information.

As the object of a “paper diplomacy” that replaced that of the parcel or stamp, the envelope embodies the hopes placed by developed countries in a paper-based “world communication” (Mattelard, 1999), in parallel with that which telecommunications and their standards established as a priority. Moreover, their long-term technological and practical predominance has ultimately led to the current decline of the letter... and therefore of the envelope!