



“Nothing can replace the Post” – electronic mail and the UPU in the 1980s

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Nothing can replace the Post: With this motto, the German postal administration demonstrated at the Universal Postal Congress in Hamburg in 1984 that the UPU was looking positively to the future, even in the 110th year of its existence. The members of the UPU did not expect electronic mail services to be a serious competitor to traditional letter mail in the foreseeable future. In 1979, the UPU's Consultative Council for Postal Studies had begun to slowly observe their development, but only reluctantly contacted the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which was responsible for the standardization of electronic communication technologies. Some postal administrations, European for the most part, even cooperated outside the UPU, within the so-called Paris Group, to jointly study electronic mail services from a postal perspective. In the second half of the 1980s, the UPU turned its attention to this topic as the digitalization of telecommunications opened up completely new possibilities for electronic mail services. It took over the work of the Paris Group, which lacked the competence to participate in ITU committees.

This presentation takes a closer look at these developments from the 1970s to the 1990s. Why, when and how did the UPU and its member administrations respond to electronic mail services? Why did it react comparatively late, even though digital forms of communication were becoming apparent quite early on? How does the UPU's reaction to electronic mail systems fit into the long lines of the global regime for cross-border postal services?

The presentation argues that a number of partially interdependent reasons made the UPU react reservedly towards electronic mail. The combination of a missing financial incentive with the historically rooted expectation that innovations within telecommunications (such as telegraph, telephone or telex) would never seriously impact postal services was crucial. The UPU and its members could hardly imagine that electronic mail services would be able to become a competitor to letter mail.

With the development of ISDN and the emergence of new electronic messaging options, the UPU had to react unexpectedly quickly to the ITU's offer of cooperation. It was forced to fall back on the Paris Group's study work, even though it had ignored the group for a long time. That SGT 503 made the Paris Group practically superfluous was ultimately only due to the fact that only the UPU had formal access to the International Telegraph and Telephone Consultative Committee (CCITT). Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the UPU could not have foreseen this change in the 1980s: neither were its actors experts in computers, telecommunications or digital networks, nor did their long-term experience with new forms of communication suggest the kind of change in communication routines that would gradually occur with the spread of e-mail and the Internet.

At the Universal Postal Congress in Seoul (1994), however, the breakthrough of e-mail could no longer be denied. For the first time, the UPU clearly stated that “electronic mail services are strategically important to the Post”. Just 10 years after the self-assured *“Nothing can replace the Post”*, even the delegation from Pakistan underlined that *“we have to meet this challenge by innovation and by technical expedients”*.