

Birth of the FAX

Lead: In one of its earliest forms, the facsimile, known today as the FAX, was an experimental newspaper, delivered by high frequency radio broadcasts.

Intro. : A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: By the 1920s, radio transmission of newspaper photos was a regular part of print journalism, but the process was of restricted value because it made use of expensive photographic paper that had to be chemically developed. One inventor, a transplanted Brit, William George Harold Finch, wanted to take the idea a step further. He developed a process that used radio waves to transmit written words and pictures to a home receiver similar to an AM radio. The printer was very slow and produced results that were rather crude by current standards, but the idea was so intriguing that several big-city newspaper papers, such as the St. Louis Times-Dispatch, began experimenting with Finch's equipment and that of his rival John Hogan. Perhaps this was a defensive tactic. Newspapers were a print medium and their publishers had

convinced themselves that radio and its infant cousin, television, were too transitory to be satisfactory. They believed that people wanted their news in tangible form.

Hence, after the wartime emergency, by the late 1940s many newspapers brought out fax editions. These went exactly nowhere. Given the opportunity to buy an expensive fax receiver printer, the vast majority of potential customers went out and bought one of those new televisions.

The idea of electronically delivered information did not die. Since 1990 the New York Times has had a fax edition sent to resorts and cruise ships around the world. Few businesses or up-scale homes could exist today without the ever-present FAX machine, but, according to essayist George Mannes, if present trends continue, the facsimile will finally find its real success not in the tangible form envisioned in pre-war years, but rather in tiny packets of information delivered over the Internet.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Mannes, George. “Delivering the FAX,” American Heritage of Invention and Technology 14 (4, Spring 1999): 40-49.

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