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The Postal Service, Circulating Portfolios and the Cultural Production of Modern Networked Identities

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Sara Dominici 

1 – Percy Lund, 'Postal Photographic Clubs, and How to Work Them', *Practical Photographer* (February 1899), 45.

2 – In this article I use 'Royal Mail' to refer to the delivery service and 'Post Office' to the government department. For a discussion of the origins and use of the two terms, see Duncan Campbell-Smith, *Masters of the Post: The Authorised History of the Royal Mail*, London: Penguin 2011, xxiii.

3 – This was triggered by the mass production of the dry collodion process. Dry plates had greatly simplified the taking of photographs, especially outdoors, because it was no longer necessary to attend to the glass plates immediately before and after exposure, as was necessary when using the wet collodion process. For an analysis of the parallel growth of amateur photographers and British photographic industry in this period, see Michael Pritchard, 'The Development and Growth of British Manufacturing and Retailing 1839–1914', unpublished PhD dissertation, De Montfort University 2010; and Michael Pritchard, 'Who Were the Amateur Photographers?', in *Either/And*, ed. Annabella Pollen and Juliet Baillie, London: National Media Museum 2012, available at <http://eitherand.org/reconsidering-amateur-photography/who-were-amateur-photographers/> (accessed 23 August 2019).

4 – For a discussion of culture as a key site for the articulation of class in Victorian society, see Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian Britain*, London: Routledge 1978; and Simon Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority and the English Industrial City 1840–1914*, New York: Manchester University Press 2000. The 'efflorescence of provincial club-life' across the country in this period is a manifestation of this. Simon Gunn, 'Clubland: The Private in the Public', in Gunn, *Public Culture*, 89. See also Barbara Black, *A Room of His Own: A Literary-Cultural Study of Victorian Clubland*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press 2012; and Amy Milne-Smith, *London Clubland: A Cultural History of Gender and Class in late Victorian Britain*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011.

The launch of the Royal Mail's parcel post service in 1883 was concurrent with the increase of amateur photographers in Britain, supporting new ways for this group of practitioners to come together through postal photographic clubs. This article explores the influence that members' participation, in assembling and distributing the portfolios shared by each club, had on photographers' understanding of their own role in the production of photographic meanings and values. It does so by discussing the postal service as a technology of communication and transport; the virtual space created through circulating portfolios as a modern network; and the conjoint acts of writing, reading and looking at photographs that constituted each portfolio as reframing photographers' idea of self. The article covers the period from the early 1880s to the early 1910s, by which time postal photographic clubs had become almost ubiquitous in Britain. The article demonstrates that this process implicitly challenged the institutionalisation of this period's dominant photographic discourse.

Keywords: *amateur photography, circulating portfolios, modern infrastructures, modernity, parcel post, photographic network, postal photographic clubs, postal service, Royal Mail*

'The photographic world in general', wrote Percy Lund, the editor of *Practical Photographer*, in 1899:

has but little idea how many postal photographic clubs there are, actively and incessantly at work, for their doings are of necessity unheard of by the majority outside the small circles consisting of the members themselves. Unlike ordinary societies, there are no meetings and reporters to spread the news; no important gentlemen in the chair, and no 'highly appreciative' audiences.¹

By the time this text was written, postal photographic clubs had been a reality in Britain for over fifteen years, having prospered, as we will see, following the launch of the Royal Mail's parcel post service in 1883.² Their appeal was remarkable, affording to many photographers, including those who could not join ordinary photographic clubs and societies – because, for instance, of geographical distances or work commitments – the opportunity to connect with like-minded peers. At a time when the number of amateur photographers was soaring,³ and cultural activities were seen as a signifier of class and respectability,⁴ these 'small circles' were considered by contemporary commentators like Lund as a way for

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photographers to participate in polite society and, in doing so, to advance one's knowledge of 'photographic art and technique'.⁵

Their organisation, however, was rather different from the one that held together ordinary societies: 'there are no meetings and reporters to spread the news', Lund observed, 'no important gentlemen in the chair, and no "highly appreciative" audiences'.⁶ This was a system, in other words, that was hardly visible in the public domain and operated according to different hierarchies from those at work in photographic clubs that met in person. As Ernest W. Hawes, the secretary of the Kent Postal Camera Club, explained in 1900:

These clubs differ, broadly speaking, but little one from another; they all have a portfolio circulating so many times, generally once a month, to each member of the club, and on the receipt of the portfolio each member has to insert his own print and to criticise the work submitted for the purpose by the other members of the club to the best of his or her ability.⁷

To distinguish the organisation of postal clubs, then, was the fact that club life, and hence people's experience of photography, depended on a circulating portfolio to which members contributed images and text each time this reached them: the infrastructure of the postal system had created a new way for photographers to come together. What was the significance of this arrangement for the everyday lived experiences of amateur photographers?

Although photography and the postal service were two pivotal forms of communication in this period, their relationship, as Simone Natale for example notes, has been largely overlooked.⁸ Within the few studies that have addressed this connection, the mail has been discussed primarily as a *facilitator* of communication.⁹ However, the case of postal photographic clubs indicates that photography's intersection with the postal system did not simply make it easier for photographers living far apart to communicate with each other, but, most importantly, it also *transformed* the form of their communication in a way that impacted on photographers' perception of their own role within this process. As Shannon Mattern argues, 'People have not been mere beneficiaries of infrastructure; they have actually served as integral links within those infrastructural networks'¹⁰ in ways that 'create another role for individual and collective human agency'.¹¹ In this sense, to be transformed was not simply what and how members of postal photographic clubs could communicate, but also the role of individual agency within such a modern infrastructural system. In order to explore this transformation, this article considers postal photographic clubs as socio-technical networks that emerged from the confluence of 'everyday practices of ordinary people',¹² postal technology and photographic materials. Within this mutual entanglement of 'humans and non-humans', nothing is stable: 'society and technology', as Latour puts it, 'are not two ontologically distinct entities but more like phases of the same essential action'.¹³ This means, in the context of my analysis, that the intertwining of people and modern communication systems created the conditions for members of the postal clubs to assert themselves as modern actors.¹⁴ What follows thus investigates the influence that the postal service had on photographic practices and, consequently, on the cultural production of what, I will argue, were emergent photographic identities.

Recent years have seen photographic studies paying long-due attention to people's ordinary lived experiences of and with photography, which from the end of the nineteenth century were accelerated by the introduction to the market of cheaper and easier to use cameras.¹⁵ This article seeks to contribute

5 – Lund, 'Postal Photographic Clubs', 45.

6 – Ibid. On the practices of camera clubs and photographic societies, see Elizabeth Edwards, 'The Amateur Excursion and the Sociable Production of Photographic Knowledge', in *Either/And*, ed. Pollen and Baillie, London: National Media Museum 2013, available at <http://eitherand.org/reconsidering-amateur-photography/amateur-excursion-and-sociable-production-photogra/> (accessed 13 May 2019); and Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2012.

7 – Ernest W. Hawes, 'Postal Clubs', *Amateur Photographer* (6 April 1900), 274.

8 – Simone Natale, 'Photography and Communication Media in the Nineteenth Century', *History of Photography*, 36:4 (2012), 454. See also Simone Natale, 'A Mirror with Wings: Photography and the New Era of Communications', in *Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 2018, 34–46. Similarly striking, and equally unexplored, is the arrival of photography and the uniform penny post in Britain in 1839 and 1840, respectively. In the USA, postal reform was also almost simultaneous with photography. See, for example, David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communication in Nineteenth-Century America*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2006, 57–58.

9 – Alison Morrison-Low, 'Brewster, Talbot and the Adamsons: The Arrival of Photography in St Andrews', *History of Photography*, 25:2 (2001), 130–41; and Graham Smith, *Disciples of Light: Photographs in the Brewster Album*, Malibu, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum 1990.

10 – Shannon Mattern, 'Scaffolding, Hard and Soft: Media Infrastructures as Critical and Generative Structures', in *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, ed. Jentery Sayers, London: Routledge 2016, 321.

11 – Ibid.

12 – Shannon Mattern, 'Deep Time of Media Infrastructure', in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, ed. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press 2015, 104.

13 – Bruno Latour, 'Technology is Society Made Durable', in *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*, ed. John Law, New York: Routledge 1991, 116 and 129. See also Hevia's 'photography complex' that, drawing from Latour, he defines as 'a network of actants made up of human and non-human parts'. James L. Hevia, 'The Photography Complex: Exposing Boxer-Era China 1900–1901, Making Civilisation', in *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2009, 81.

14 – See also Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*,

trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, New York: Columbia Press 2013. 'Photography and Networks', a special issue of *History of Photography* guest edited by Owen Clayton and Jim Cheshire, includes a number of contributions that discuss the application of Latour's work to photographic studies and, more generally, systems of (photographic) knowledge production. See 'Photography and Networks', *History of Photography*, 41:4 (2017), 325–411.

15 – For a discussion of dominant approaches and new directions, see Gil Pasternak, 'Popular Photographic Cultures in Photographic Studies', in *Photography Reframed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture*, ed. Ben Burbridge and Annabella Pollen, London: I. B. Tauris 2018, 39–61.

16 – *Photography and Other Media*, ed.

Leonardi and Natale. See also Natale, 'Photography and Communication Media'.

17 – Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 2006, 10.

18 – C. R. Perry, *The Victorian Post Office: The Growth of a Bureaucracy*, Royal

Historical Society: Boydell Press 1992, 217 and 224–227. See also M. J. Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office Since 1840*, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2015, 55–66.

19 – Daunton, *Royal Mail*, 60.

20 – *Ibid.*, 55 and 57–58. The international convention on parcel post, signed in 1880 by several Universal Postal Union members, pushed Britain to develop its own national parcel post so that it could join in the possibilities for world commerce that the agreement had made possible. Léonard Laborie, 'Global Commerce in Small Boxes: Parcel Post, 1878–1913', *Journal of Global History*, 10 (2015), 235–58.

21 – These weights correspond to circa 3 and 5 kg. For an overview of parcel post rates, see 'Parcel Rates from 1883 to 2009', *Postal Museum*, available at https://www.postalmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Parcel_rates.xls (accessed 27 September 2019).

22 – Perry, *Victorian Post Office*, 227.

23 – *Ibid.* This passage quotes 'Post 16/31', *The Times* (18 August 1893).

24 – The number of parcels sent in 1890–91 was 46,228,000 (1.22 per capita), in 1900–01 was 81,017,000 (1.95 per capita) and in 1909–10 was 118,190,000 (2.63 per capita). *Ibid.*, 288.

to our understanding of such proliferation of practices by showing how photographic studies can benefit from taking into account the parallel sprouting of media and transport technologies that were affecting people's lives – a benefit that extends to other media studies, a case most recently made by Leonardi and Natale.¹⁶ It covers the period that goes from the emergence of postal photographic clubs in the early 1880s to the early 1910s, by which time they had become almost ubiquitous in Britain. Because of their ephemeral nature, postal photographic clubs have left very few archival traces. My investigation relies primarily on a close reading of the contemporary photographic press, which was often used by postal photographic clubs to advertise vacancies or to share examples of good and bad practice. Drawing on the methodology set out by Steve Edwards in his study of the photographic press in the 1860s, I have adopted a "volumetrics" of reading – a concern with the incessant, everyday speech of photographers¹⁷ that has thus provided the ethnographic voice for my research. Additionally, I have examined a small set of cover sheets from the 1890s currently held by the National Science and Media Museum, Bradford, to my present knowledge the only known material trace of these clubs.

I start by considering the role that the parcel post, a modern technology of both communication and transport, played in the emergence of postal clubs by facilitating the virtual mobility of photographers. I then explore how postal communication took place through distinct spatio-temporal and material experiences that enabled photographers to contribute actively to the form and content of communication, in doing so becoming part of a modern network. Finally, I discuss how this impacted on the social interaction between photographers in a way that transformed the perception of each member's individual role in the production of photographic meanings and values. As this article will hopefully show, postal photographic clubs were the cultural expression of a novel experience that created the conditions for photographers to reconfigure their own sense of self in the world.

The Parcel Post and Photographic Mobility

Until the early 1880s, the parcel trade was controlled by private couriers, particularly railway companies.¹⁸ Their reach, however, was limited. While the railway service was rather cheap and effective for sending local parcels, the existence of many different railway companies, each with its own rate, made this service impracticable when it came to longer distances.¹⁹ A parcel post regulated by the Post Office, which had been flagged as necessary by the postal reformer Rowland Hill as early as 1837, was finally introduced in 1883.²⁰ Thanks to the new Royal Mail service, it was now possible to mail packages up to 7 lb in weight across the country; in 1886, the limit was increased to 11 lb.²¹ Its public appeal was remarkable, so much so that it was run even if at a deficit.²² As Perry notes, 'partly this stemmed from the difficulty of eliminating a service which *The Times* ten years after service began termed "an adjunct of daily life"'.²³ Indeed, tens of millions of packages were sent annually.²⁴

The introduction of this service was concurrent with the increase of amateur photographers in Britain, facilitating their engagement with photography in two main ways. Firstly, the parcel post offered a practical solution to the transportation of a still cumbersome camera apparatus. While the more portable celluloid film had been on the market since the late 1880s, many – self-appointed 'serious' – amateur photographers continued to prefer dry plates into the new century. As the *Amateur Photographer* advised its readers in 1907:

a good many firms – Harrods, Benetfinks, and such like – will now send you plates by post, post free; so when on tour you could arrange to find a box awaiting you at

each stopping-place, with no great expense. Your used plates you could post home in the emptied box: the unused ones you would load into your camera or slides – to be emptied only when you reached your next waiting supply.²⁵

This exemplifies how the service was used to supply a still largely absent degree of independence to one's ability to photograph when travelling; or, to put it differently, how an increasingly mobile society took to the parcel post as a way to overcome one of the perceived limitations of camera technology – its bulkiness. Photographers appreciated the 'great convenience'²⁶ of travelling unencumbered that the service allowed because they could move more swiftly, which camera manufacturers were mindful not to impair by providing, as in the case of the 'Postal Photographic Company', a 'prompt dispatch'.²⁷

Secondly, this new ability to move photographic materials was a key factor in the formation of virtual spaces in which photographers could meet: postal photographic clubs. Soon after the introduction of the parcel post, the number of postal clubs in Britain began to soar. Sources are scant, especially because many of these clubs, considered to be minor, were not listed in the photographic annals. Nonetheless, comments published in the photographic press reveal their growing presence. In 1887, for example, the *Amateur Photographer* noted that 'considerable interest is now being attached to the establishing of "Album Clubs," "Postal Albums," etc.'.²⁸ By 1899, Lund could recommend that 'good judgement should be exercised in choosing a name for the association, such vague titles as the "Postal Photographic Club" or "Postal Camera Club" having ceased to be distinctive'.²⁹ Numbers continued to grow, and by the turn of the century the press reported with frequency on the formation of new ones. 'It may probably be said that about a quarter of the amateur photographers in this country belong to one or more postal photographic clubs',³⁰ wrote Hawes in 1900. 'The postal photographic clubs have become of late a very important feature of British photographic life', 'Waverley' – a pseudonym – similarly remarked in 1902, adding that 'the number and variety of these small bodies is more remarkable than the casual observer might at first think'.³¹ Many ordinary photographic societies also started 'inter-society' circulating portfolios.³² By 1912, *Amateur Photographer and Photographic News* could comment that 'There are a great number of these in the country, and many are run as a section of a photographic society'.³³

A key reason for their popularity, J. Eaton Fearn³⁴ and Reginald A. R. Bennett³⁵ explained in an article published in 1887 to help 'those who are taking up the working of Postal Photographic Clubs',³⁶ was that 'man is essentially a social being'.³⁷ For 'the isolated individual who dwells in the solitude of the country [...] separated from his *confrères*', they argued, the only way is 'to join one of the many Postal Clubs'.³⁸ There is ample evidence that it was this desire to communicate with others that motivated many to start or join a postal club, particularly in those instances in which geography was a barrier: 'a monthly album', C. Aylmer from Kilcock, Ireland, for example wrote in 1885, 'would especially benefit amateurs in the country';³⁹ 'for the isolated, out-of-the-way workers who have few means of communicating with the brethren in the craft, who cannot visit the exhibitions, and cannot, perhaps always get the journals', another similarly noted in 1902, 'the postal club is of the greatest value'.⁴⁰ Their communication was sometimes supplemented by the sharing of members' portraits. For example, Fearn and Bennet recommended that '[it] is a good idea to ask members to put in their own likenesses, wither taken by themselves (*i.e. developed*, etc.), or professionals, in the second round, this serves as a kind of general introduction'.⁴¹ 'The arrival of the portfolio is looked forward to with great interest by all', concurred the *Junior Photographer*, which had launched its own postal club, 'and by none more

- 25 – A. Wheelman, 'Cycle and Camera', *Amateur Photographer* (13 August 1907), 146.
 26 – C. H. Bothamley, 'Touring with a Camera', *Photographic News* (29 May 1885), 347.
 27 – 'Notes and Comments', *Amateur Photographer* (3 September 1907), 213.
 28 – 'Our Views', *Amateur Photographer* (1 April 1887), 150.
 29 – Lund, 'Postal Photographic Clubs', 45.
 30 – Hawes, 'Postal Clubs', 274.
 31 – 'Waverley', 'Postal Clubs', *Amateur Photographer* (17 July 1902), 52.
 32 – Francis James Mortimer, 'Hon. Secretaries and a Note on Circulating Portfolios', *Photographic News* (29 March 1907), 252. These included, for example, the 'circulating portfolio' of the Great Yarmouth Camera Club, 'Societies' Meetings, Great Yarmouth', *Amateur Photographer* (1 April 1892), 276; the 'postal club' of the Manchester Amateur Photographic Society, 'Editorial Focus. Manchester Amateur Photographic Society', *Practical Photographer* (April 1900), 119; the 'club portfolio' of the Birmingham Photographic Society, 'Editorial Focus', *Practical and Junior Photographer* (December 1900), 138; the 'postal club' of the Govan Camera Club, 'Echoes from the Societies', *Photographic News* (14 February 1902), 106; and the 'postal section' of the Balham Camera Club, 'Postal Portfolio', *Amateur Photographer* (9 July 1907), 25.
 33 – 'Topic of the Week & Editorial Comment. The Circulating Portfolio', *Amateur Photographer and Photographic News* (18 March 1912), 283.
 34 – J. Eaton Fearn was the secretary of the 'Argosy Postal Photographic Club', see 'Our Views', *Amateur Photographer* (22 July 1887), 25. In 1891 he started the 'Postal Bromide Club', see 'Postal Bromide Club', *Amateur Photographer* (10 April 1891), 271. The secretaryship of the 'Argosy' passed to C.F.L. Barnwell, see C.F.L. Barnwell, 'Letters to the Editor. Argosy Postal Club', *Amateur Photographer* (7 September 1894), 155.
 35 – Bennett was the secretary of the Postal Photographic Club from 1886 until at least 1910. See 'Our Views', *Amateur Photographer* (8 October 1886), 171; and 'Brevities. The Postal Photographic Club', *Amateur Photographer and Photographic News* (27 September 1910), 312.
 36 – 'Our Views', *Amateur Photographer* (1 April 1887), 150.
 37 – J. Eaton Fearn and Reginald A.R. Bennett, 'Postal Photographic Clubs', *Amateur Photographer* (1 April 1887), 153–4, 153.
 38 – *Ibid.*
 39 – C. Aylmer, 'Letters to the Editor. A Monthly Album for Amateurs', *Amateur Photographer* (6 February 1885), 276.
 40 – 'Waverley', 'Postal Clubs', 52.
 41 – Fearn and Bennett, 'Postal Photographic Clubs', 153. Original emphasis.

42 – ‘Postal Club of the Junior Photographer’, *Junior Photographer* (January 1899), 118.

43 – Ernest W. Hawes, ‘Letters to the Editor. Kent Postal Camera Club’, *Amateur Photographer* (8 May 1896), 396.

44 – ‘The Anglo-Celtic Postal Photographic Society’, *Amateur Photographer* (30 April 1903), 364.

45 – ‘Amateur’, ‘Letters to the Editor. Circulating Album’, *Amateur Photographer* (26 November 1886), 255.

46 – A. R. F. Evershed, ‘Letters to the Editor. Postal Photographic Club’, *Amateur Photographer* (16 September 1887), 123.

47 – Wentworth A. J. Crokf, ‘Letters to the Editor. Re Negative Exchange Club’, *Amateur Photographer* (4 January 1889), 7.

48 – ‘Societies’ Notes’, *Amateur Photographer* (13 October 1893), 251.

49 – *Amateur Photographer* (8 January 1897), 38.

50 – *Amateur Photographer* (26 February 1897), 165.

51 – Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2011, 223.

52 – Hawes, ‘Postal Clubs’, 274.

53 – See, for example, Jessalynn Marie Keller, ‘Virtual Feminisms’, *Information, Communication and Society*, 15:3 (2011), 429–47.

54 – ‘Postal Pictorial Club’, *Amateur Photographer* (17 March 1904), 224.

55 – *Amateur Photographer* (19 December 1905), 488.

56 – ‘News from Many Sources’, *Photographic News* (17 May 1907), 402.

57 – *Amateur Photographer* (10 November 1908), 455.

58 – ‘Topic of the Week & Editorial Comment. Circulating Folios’, *Amateur Photographer* (29 April 1912), 427–28.

59 – ‘Brevities’, *Amateur Photographer* (23 February 1914), 185.

60 – Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, London: Sage 1994, 252.

than ourselves. Since many members have contributed their own portrait, we are all getting to know each other very well’.⁴²

Where the members of each postal club lived is largely unknown – I have not been able to trace any list of members’ addresses. It seems clear, however, that the majority would not have shared geographical proximity – the exception being ‘inter-society’ arrangements. Gathering photographers who lived far apart is something that was also often encouraged. For instance, when Hawes wrote to the *Amateur Photographer* to advertise vacancies in the Kent Postal Camera Club, he was keen to specify that ‘the circulation of the portfolio is not restricted to the county of Kent, as perhaps its name implies’.⁴³ Similarly, the Anglo-Celtic Postal Photographic Society, launched in 1903, ‘aim[ed] at bringing together a proportionate number of workers in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and the Isle of Man’.⁴⁴ The name itself of these clubs, which infallibly hinted at their mobility – Circulating Album Club,⁴⁵ Postal Photographic Club,⁴⁶ Negative Exchange Club⁴⁷ and so on – indicates that the postal system both defined and made their existence possible in the first place. By contrast, ordinary clubs usually included their own, static, location in their name; for example, Brechin Photographic Association, Sheffield Camera Club, Cardiff Amateur Photographic Society. As postal clubs proliferated, which raised the need to be distinctive, geotagging continued to be avoided while a reference to their mobility to be included: in the 1890s, for example, clubs included the Light and Truth Postal Photograph Club,⁴⁸ Hand-Camera Postal Photographic Club,⁴⁹ and Sun and Co. Postal Club.⁵⁰

It is difficult to assess whether postal clubs provided new ways for coming together for reasons of gender, class and ethnicity, since there is no direct reference to this in the sources that I have consulted, but the dynamics enabled by their infrastructure suggest that this could have been possible. For example, although within some clubs the members shared their own portraits, it would not have been possible to check whether this matched the sender, and the address remained perhaps the only more reliable indication of status. Additionally, as Laura Otis observes in relation to the telegraph, ‘communications technologies invite people to try out alternative personae’,⁵¹ thus the veil of anonymity provided by the lack of physical interaction could have enabled some to participate in previously inaccessible circles or to be more experimental with their photographic practice. Anonymity was also guaranteed by the fact that admission was usually gained not through invitation or recommendation, but by submitting specimens of one’s work to the secretary, for assessment. Similarly, although the press usually referred to the members of these clubs using the generic male gender – ‘brethren’ in the example quoted earlier, but also ‘his or her ability’⁵² as cited earlier in this article – it is certainly possible that these networks also opened up a new space for women in public life, as an early incarnation of women’s emancipation online.⁵³ Although I have not been able to trace any list of members’ names, from the turn of the century many of the secretaries were reported to be women, for example in the Postal Pictorial Club,⁵⁴ the Teifi Postal Camera Club,⁵⁵ the Amateur Postal Club,⁵⁶ the Perseverance Postal Camera Club,⁵⁷ the Zodiac Postal Camera Club⁵⁸ and the Postal Photographic Society.⁵⁹ In none of the materials I have examined was their gender given any notice by the commentators, which suggests this was or had become a common practice.

What this overview shows, then, is that thanks to the parcel post, photographers were able to overcome the stationary condition imposed upon themselves by their locality, potentially social status or, we could imagine, limited or lacking means to travel, through a form of communication that relied on what we could describe as the vicarious transportation of photographers themselves. Lash and Urry have noted that ‘modern society is a society on the move’, and that ‘the modern world is inconceivable without these new forms of long-distance transportation and travel’.⁶⁰ In this sense, the postal service did not simply add to the existing communication system but, most importantly, provided a modern infrastructure that expanded people’s personal mobility: while

tourist photographers were able to enjoy a new experience of physical mobility, members of postal photographic clubs participated in one of virtual mobility. In other words, the parcel post created the conditions for the emergence of new relationships based on modern connections, what Uricchio has described as 'spatial and temporal dimensions that exceed those normally available to human subjects'⁶¹ and Harvey calls 'time-space compression'.⁶² As the following section explores, a crucial component of such form of mobility was people's direct participation in the production and circulation of the portfolios, and thus in the form and content of communication itself.

New Spatial, Temporal and Material Experiences of Modernity

Hawes, who we encountered in the introduction, had noted that postal clubs 'differ [...] but little one from another; they all have a portfolio circulating so many times'. It is certainly the case that, by the turn of the century, portfolios assembled en route, so to speak, were the predominant system in use. Yet this had not always been the case. Some of the earliest postal clubs had used albums as a support – soon discarded because they were heavier than portfolios and thus more expensive to post – and circulated the material *after* the album or portfolio had been assembled by the secretary. For example, the Photographic Exchange Club, launched in 1884, required 'each member to send in monthly prints from two negatives [...] These would be mounted in an album and send round from member to member in rotation'.⁶³ The Postal Photographic Society,⁶⁴ the Lantern Slide Exchange Club⁶⁵ and the Postal Photographic Comparing Club⁶⁶ followed similar practices. The members were invited to 'interchange ideas with each other'⁶⁷ or add 'criticisms and notes',⁶⁸ which was usually done through the notebooks and criticism sheets that accompanied each parcel, but this largely amounted to a response to a predefined product that had been shaped by the secretary's own choices of selection and sequencing, as well as introductory comments. Similar to what would have taken place in the context of an ordinary society, the secretary – who as Lund noted 'is essentially president as well as secretary'⁶⁹ – provided clerical support and creative direction, which put them in a position of control over the content and configuration of the postal club's communication.

However, members soon became more actively involved in the production of the portfolio itself, adopting what the secretary of the Photographic Exchange Club described, following the remodelling of his own club, as the 'pass-round-the-hat method'.⁷⁰ As Warburg, the secretary of the Postal Camera Club, noted in 1906, 'the method of sending the prints to the Secretary, on whom it lays extra trouble, is not so good as the other, which works regularly and automatically'.⁷¹ Let us consider, for example, the guidelines that Fearn and Bennett put together in 1887 to advise anyone interested in starting a postal club, a passage that is worth quoting at length because it exemplifies the configuration since followed by the great majority of these organisations:

The first thing to be considered, in starting an 'Album Club,' is whether it shall take the form of a regular photographic album, or a light case in which the photographs shall travel from member to member [...] In either case some means ought to be provided for members to criticise, and give advice on, each other's prints. This, if a case is to be used, is best afforded by a sheet of paper placed round each print by the member inserting it, and numbered to correspond with the print [...] When it gets back to the member who inserted it, he takes out both photograph and sheet of paper, and thus has a continual memorandum of the opinions and advice of the other members of that print. He then inserts another photograph and sheet of paper in its place, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Members should be asked to give full details of the prints they insert, either on labels, with which the originator of the club may supply them, and which may be fastened to the backs of their mounts, or in the pages of a note-book sent round with the photographs [...] In the case of an *album*, the labels may be fastened to the opposite page to that on which the prints are mounted, and facing them. The details asked for should include

61 – William Uricchio, 'Ways of Seeing: The New Vision of Early Nonfiction Film', in *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film*, ed. Daan Hertogs and Nico De Klerk, Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum 1997, 123.

62 – David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Blackwell 1990, 240. See also Peter Conrad, *Modern Times and Modern Places: How Life and Art Were Transformed in a Century of Revolution, Innovation, and Radical Change*, New York: Knopf 1999; Peter D. Osborne, *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel and Visual Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000; and Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983.

63 – Henry Sturme, 'Letters to the Editor. To Cycling Photographers', *Amateur Photographer* (31 October 1884), 54.

64 – 'The Postal Photographic Society', *Photographic News* (8 June 1883), 355.

65 – 'Our Views', *Amateur Photographer* (9 January 1885), 213.

66 – T. T. S. Metcalfe, 'Letters to the Editor. Postal Photographic Club', *Amateur Photographer* (20 March 1891), 203.

67 – Sturme, 'Letters to the Editor. To Cycling Photographers', 54.

68 – 'The Postal Photographic Society', 355.

69 – Lund, 'Postal Photographic Clubs', 47.

70 – 'Cycling Photographic News', *Wheel World* (March 1886), 129.

71 – John C. Warburg, 'Postal Clubs and their Management', *Photographic News* (5 January 1906), 6.

make of camera, lens, stop used, exposure, light, time of the day, month, plate, developer, toning bath, subject, remarks of any kind.

In the note-book, several pages should be devoted to further details of members' prints, for which there is not room on the labels; also space should be left for queries and answers, miscellaneous notes, etc. [...]

Twelve members is a good number for one club. If each member keeps the case two days, and then forwards it to the next, it ought, theoretically, to go round in one month. Practically the journey from one member to another takes another day in nearly every case, so that more time will elapse before it returns to its starting point. Sundays are best excluded from the two days, as there is no parcel post on that day. Each member should be requested to insert a certain number of prints per month; two ¼ plates or ½ plates is a good allowance in a club of twelve members. Members may be fined three-pence each day they detain the case over the allotted time, which leaves a 'balance in hand' for the purchase of a new case when it gets knocked to pieces in the post, which, alas! it speedily does.⁷²

72 – Fearn and Bennett, 'Postal Photographic Clubs', 153–54. *Original emphases*.

Although different clubs had different rules for what concerned, for example, the number, size and type of the prints that each member was expected to contribute, the theme of the photographs or the amount of fine to be paid in case of delay, this text introduces a working framework that remained largely unchanged throughout the period considered in this article. An 'album' or portfolio 'case', accompanied by supplies for sharing information and criticism – 'sheet[s] of paper', 'labels', or 'note-book' – enabled the communication by 'travel[ing]', thanks to the Royal Mail service, 'from member to member'. Upon receiving the parcel, the member added their own photograph(s), 'giv[ing] full details' for it, inspected and commented upon the work of others and then sent the parcel on. This was a circular process: at the beginning of each new rotation – or 'cycle of revolution',⁷³ as Lund once described it – the member removed their own work and others' criticism of it, and inserted a new photograph with its own details, a process that Fearn and Bennett described as continuing '*ad infinitum*'. In order to keep the momentum of this 'ever-circulating portfolio'⁷⁴ or 'evercirculator'⁷⁵ 'to go round in one month' or a similar predefined period, each member was expected to perform the actions of examining, commenting on and changing prints within a limited and pre-established timeframe, usually from two to four days, and 'fined' if they did not conform with this swift temporality.

73 – Lund, 'Postal Photographic Clubs', 47.

74 – *Ibid.*, 45.

75 – 'Progress in the Postal Club', *Junior Photographer* (August 1898), 12–14, 12.

Figure 1, which shows the first page of an article penned by Staniland E. Pugh in 1909 on starting a postal club, offers a visual representation of the materials that members exchanged. The sketches illustrate a 'strong and useful portfolio' of 'about 15 by 12 inches in size', inclusive of a 'table of rules [...] pasted inside one of the flaps'; 'a supply of cover sheets (see sketch in heading) [...] 10 by 8 in size, with a fly-leaf upon which the criticisms are to be written'; 'postcards (fig. 2) [...] to be used for the purpose of keeping the secretary informed of the whereabouts of the portfolio'; and 'a page in the notebook (fig. 3)' with 'the order of circulation' (see fig. 2 and fig. 3 in figure 1).⁷⁶ A typical portfolio, Pugh added, also included 'a small envelop pasted inside the portfolio [...] to hold a sufficient supply of postcards'; a 'large brown paper envelope [...] for the purpose of containing prints which have circulated once [...] to remain until it reaches its owner a second time'; and 'a quarto-sized notebook [...] intended to enable members to communicate with one another'.⁷⁷ In line with standard practice, Pugh recommended 'that the membership be limited to 15 or 20'.⁷⁸ As Warburg for example explained, with a membership of thirty 'each album takes four months to circulate once', while 'smaller membership has the advantage for a quick circulation', which was preferred.⁷⁹

76 – Staniland E. Pugh, 'Conducting a Circulating Portfolio', *Amateur Photographer and Photographic News* (5 January 1909), 5, 6.

77 – *Ibid.*

78 – *Ibid.*

79 – Warburg, 'Postal Clubs and their Management', 6.

Because the portfolio and its contents were constantly altered, and the prints that each member removed when the portfolio reached them were often repurposed for exhibitions or competitions, physical traces of their operations have proved elusive. The only known material is a set of thirty-four criticism sheets (what Pugh described as a 'cover sheet') that belonged to photographer Alfred

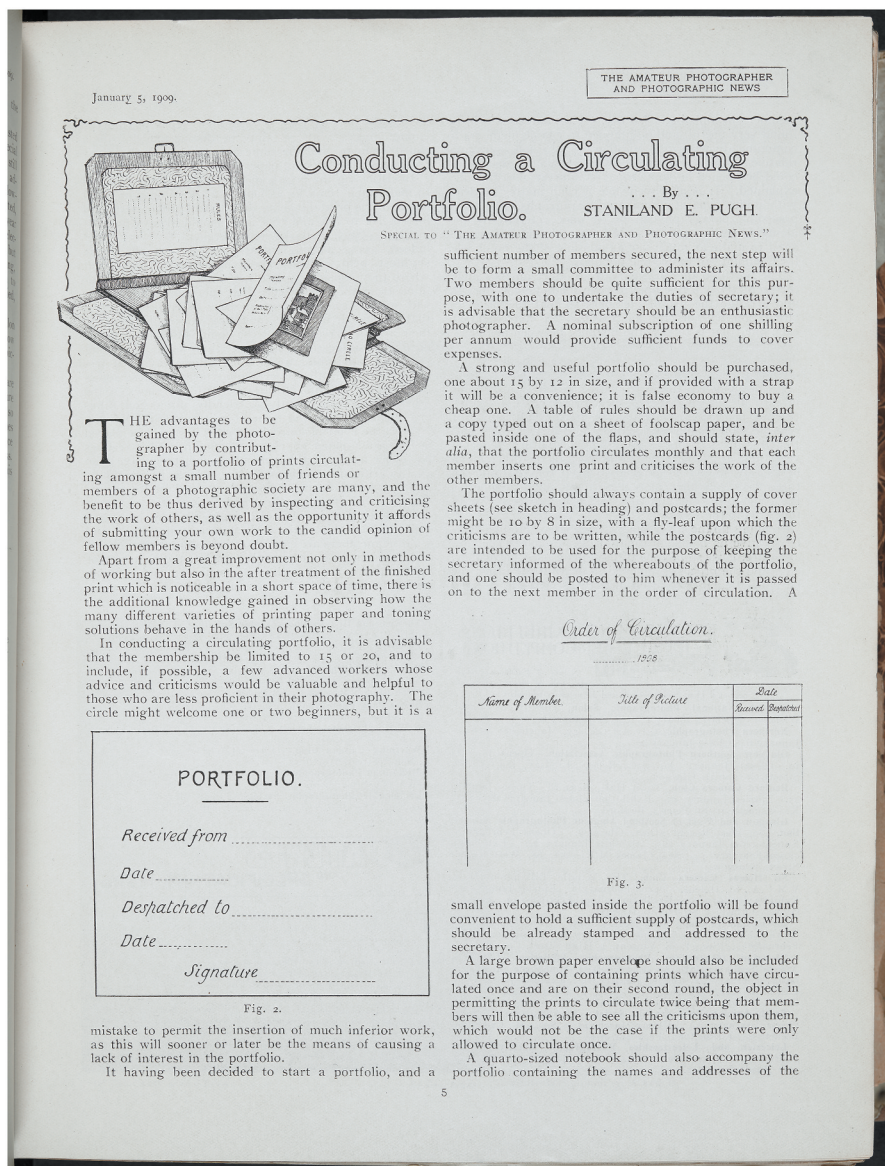


Figure 1. First page of the article by Staniland E. Pugh, 'Conducting a Circulating Portfolio', *Amateur Photographer and Photographic News* (5 January 1909), 5. © British Library Board. Shelfmark: 1909 General Reference Collection LOU.LON 375.

W. Brunwin, a member of the Light and Shade Postal Photographic Society and the Light and Truth Postal Photographic Club.⁸⁰ Figure 2 shows the front page of one such sheet, which he submitted to the Light and Shade society in April 1896. Following the template, Brunwin included information about the taking, developing and printing of two photographs of Spains Hall in Finchingfield, Essex, both glued on the inside, while members commented overleaf (see figures 3 and 4 for an example of this). The criticism sheet used by the Light and Truth club looks similar: the front page includes sections for 'Subject, with any notes of interest' and 'Technical Particulars', while photographs and members' criticisms are overleaf. Each sheet was commented on by between eight and eighteen members in the Light and Shade society, and between five and eleven in the Light and Truth club, fluctuations that probably reflect the changing overall number of members, the fact that not everyone might have criticised each print and members' absence from home due to work or personal commitments – which, as the photographic press indicates, they were expected to communicate to the secretary via postcard. As each portfolio circulated monthly, members would have had an average of two days each to complete their contribution.

80 – The material is held by the National Science and Media Museum, Bradford, object number 1991-5052. The cover sheets for the Light and Shade Postal Photographic Society (18.4 × 23.6 cm), which circulated monthly, include all months from December 1895 to September 1898 except February, October and December 1896, March, April and December 1897 and January, July and August 1898. The cover sheets for the Light and Truth Postal Photographic Club (16.3 × 21 cm), also monthly, include March, May, June and September 1897 and March, May and October 1898 only. On the Light and Truth club forms, Brunwin gave as his residence Shalford, a village in the Braintree district of Essex.

These examples describe a cultural practice of production and circulation of photography-related content that took place within what would appear to be a tightly regulated space. 'I must impress upon members the necessity of being punctual both in forwarding the prints and despatching the albums', admonished Frederick G. Reader, the secretary of the Photographic Album Club, in 1886, 'otherwise the workings of the club will fail'.⁸¹ The 'successful working' of a circulating portfolio, wrote the *Amateur Photographer* in 1902, 'is largely dependent on unflinching punctuality, and every member of this must feel that he is a unit on which much depends, so that any neglect on his part may disorganise the whole'.⁸² Accordingly, as in Fearn and Bennett's guidelines, secretaries drew up detailed rules of conduct intended to enforce the smooth circulation of the parcel and the dispatch of the postcards, and imposed fines 'for delays in forwarding the portfolio, non-insertion of prints and other sins and omissions'⁸³ or, as in the case of the 'Mercury Supplement' Postal Photographic Club, 'struck [members] off the list'.⁸⁴ This strict regulation of time and behaviour can be understood as part of that broader Victorian concern with rational leisure and respectability that informed cultural practices in the nineteenth century.⁸⁵ The use itself of postcards, which enabled secretaries to track, and hence control, the travelling portfolio, sought to discipline photographers. Siegert, for instance, has noted that the postal practice of 'registering the distance between bodies on a post card', which was implemented in order to safeguard letters against loss and theft, 'provided records and surveillance'.⁸⁶ Conversely, in abiding by these rules, the members of postal clubs could demonstrate social conformity and participation in the system of modernity; as Gunn writes, 'what served to unify the middle-class, above all, was culture'.⁸⁷

Simultaneously, however, those same dynamics that created conformity and standardisation also gave to the clubs' members a degree of control over both the form of the album or portfolio and its circulation. Although Lund claimed that a secretary 'virtually has absolute control of the scheme, and provided he exercises his power in a reasonable manner no one is likely to question his prerogative',⁸⁸ they only saw the content of the portfolio the moment it was their turn to receive it. Additionally, trying to monitor the location of this constantly moving object was a cause of anxiety. 'The work is arduous and never-ending', wrote the secretary of one such club in 1902:

Every day [the secretary] has to be in touch with the three or four albums constantly circulating [...] there is the tiresome man who always forgets to send the album on at the proper time, so that the poor secretary has endless work in writing and urging the defaulter's attention to punctuality.⁸⁹

'There is no end of worry attaching to a club of this kind', he continued, adding, in relation to the submission of content considered to be unsuitable, that 'a strong secretary should be on his guard against any such threatening degeneration'.⁹⁰

This tension between what we could describe as standardisation of practices versus the unpredictable actions of individual members was embodied in the materiality itself of each parcel. For instance, in the sketch that accompanied Pugh's article (figure 1), the content of the portfolio is represented in an untidy, or perhaps unruly, state. The contemporary press often noted the rather disorderly appearance of those they received for criticism: in 1887, the *Amateur Photographer* described the Postal Photographic Album as 'not an album, but a box [...] The prints are loosely wrapped in a sheet of writing paper'.⁹¹ Similarly, the *Practical Photographer* noted in 1899 that the portfolio of the Amateur Postal Club was 'fairly overflowing with its multitudinous contents',⁹² while the cover sheets of the Talbot Album Club 'appear to us inconveniently small, they ought to be the full size of the portfolio, which would enable the contents to be kept straight and tidy instead of becoming dog's-eared as is the case at present'.⁹³ By contrast, Pugh's article reproduced the table of rules, postcard and sheet that included the order of circulation with

81 – Frederick G. Reader, 'Letters to the Editor. Photographic Album Club', *Amateur Photographer* (10 December 1886), 280.

82 – 'Notes from the North-East', *Amateur Photographer* (16 January 1902), 56.

83 – Lund, 'Postal Photographic Clubs', 46.

84 – Iris, 'Photography. Facts, Fads, and Fancies', *Leeds Mercury* (22 April 1899), 19.

85 – Bailey, *Leisure and Class*. For a discussion of the regulation of time as one of the central features of the modern 'disciplinary' society, see Anthony Giddens, 'Time and Social Organisation', in *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1987, 140–65.

86 – Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, trans. Kevin Repp, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1999, 28.

87 – Gunn, *Public Culture*, 24.

88 – Lund, 'Postal Photographic Clubs', 47.

89 – 'Waverley', 'Postal Clubs', 52.

90 – Ibid.

91 – 'Our Views', *Amateur Photographer* (28 January 1887), 38.

92 – 'Editorial Focus', *Practical Photographer* (October 1899), 310.

93 – 'Editorial Focus', *Practical Photographer* (March 1899), 87.

MONTH April 1896

—❖— Light and Shade ❖—

Postal Photographic Society.

Hon. Sec., J. E. UNDERWOOD, Devonshire Square, Loughborough.

Photographed by A. W. T. Brunwin

Subject Spains Hall, Finchingfield Essex.

Date <u>April 6th</u>	Exposure <u>abt. 4 seconds</u>
Time <u>11-30</u>	Plate <u>1 Paper 2 1/2 In. Ord</u>
Light <u>Dull</u>	Developer <u>Pyro-Metol & Soda</u>
Lens <u>R.P.</u>	Paper <u>P.O.P.</u>
Stop <u>f. 16</u>	Toning Bath or Developer <u>Sul. & Pyro</u>

Other Particulars :

CRITICISMS TO BE WRITTEN OVERLEAF.

This form must be attached to the Print to which it refers.

PALLET & CO., PRINTERS.

Figure 2. Cover of criticism sheet by Alfred W. Brunwin for 'Spains Hall, Finchingfield, Essex' submitted to the Light and Shade Postal Photographic Society, April 1896. 18.4 × 23.6 cm. Object number 1991-5052. © National Science and Media Museum / Science and Society Picture Library.

a higher degree a precision. These were the objects under the secretary's control – as the originator of a club, the secretary would make the rules and determine the order of circulation – or, as in the case of the postcards, the objects that were meant to exercise control. This indicates, then, that the flip side of the rigorous cooperation that the system demanded was the production of a space that members were actively involved with and, consequently, that allowed them a degree of freedom. As Waverley commented in 1902, 'each member places his prints, mounted according to his own fancy, and got up after his own ideas'.⁹⁴ Similarly, a few years later, Warburg observed that 'the contents of the portfolios [...] alter from member to member'.⁹⁵ Brunwin's criticism sheets offer an intriguing example of this. In the one discussed earlier (figure 2), for instance, he left the 'Other Particulars' section blank but included a handwritten note with an extract about Spains Hall from Bernard Burke's *Family Romance* (1853), which he secured to the form by threading it from the inside – the white thread, knotted on the outside, is visible on the left-hand side of the document. His personalisation of the forms is also illustrated by the handwritten note, this time taped to the front of the criticism sheets, that accompanied his submissions to the Light and Shade society in October 1897 and February 1898; by his choice to sometimes include more than the required one photograph and to adapt the template in order to include all their details; or by the fact that on twenty-seven of the sheets he meticulously carved out eyelets in order to secure the prints – the others were glued.

94 – 'Waverley', 'Postal Clubs', 52.

95 – Warburg, 'Postal Clubs and their Management', 6.

Figure 3. Inside of criticism sheet by Alfred W. Brunwin for 'Study of Partridge Sitting' submitted to the Light and Shade Postal Photographic Society, June 1896. Print on silver chloride paper, 18.4 × 23.6 cm. Object number 1991-5052. © National Science and Media Museum / Science and Society Picture Library.



96 – Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 2005, 51.

97 – Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso 2006, 36.

98 – Andreas Wittel, 'Towards a Network Sociality', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18:6 (2001), 51.

99 – Similar forms of participatory culture can be identified in the amateur printing presses or scrapbook culture in mid-nineteenth century America. Paula Petrik, 'The Youngest Fourth Estate: The Novelty Toy Printing Press and Adolescence, 1870–1886', in *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850–1950*, ed. Elliot West and Paula Petrik, Kansas City: University Press of Kansas 1992, 125–42; and Ellen Gruber Garvey, 'Scissoring and Scrapbooks: Nineteenth-Century Reading,

We can then say that while the photographic press had been instrumental in the development of what Jennifer Tucker has defined as a 'brotherhood' of photographers that emerged from the shared ritual of reading the same papers,⁹⁶ constituting an 'imagined community', following Anderson's influential analysis,⁹⁷ the postal service fostered the development of a modern network by facilitating a form of collective participation in constructing, sharing and cyclically remixing photography-related material. This can be seen as an early incarnation of the 'network sociality' that, in his analysis of the information age, Wittel contrasts to the idea of community. While the latter 'entails stability, coherence, embeddedness and belonging', network sociality is 'not based on mutual experience or common history but primarily on an exchange of data', a social relation 'constructed on the grounds of communication and transport technology'.⁹⁸ Similarly, the network created by the postal service was not rooted in a sense of place nor simply on a more abstract notion of photographic community, but in the cooperative circulation of cultural objects that bore the signs of others' presence. This was an informal bottom-up mode of communication where meaning and value were created within this process of circulation, morphing with each mail delivery, thanks to the members' individual active participation.⁹⁹ The preference for portfolios over albums, dominant from the 1890s onwards, only added to the amorphous structure of the material that travelled from member to member. The postal services can thus be understood as one of

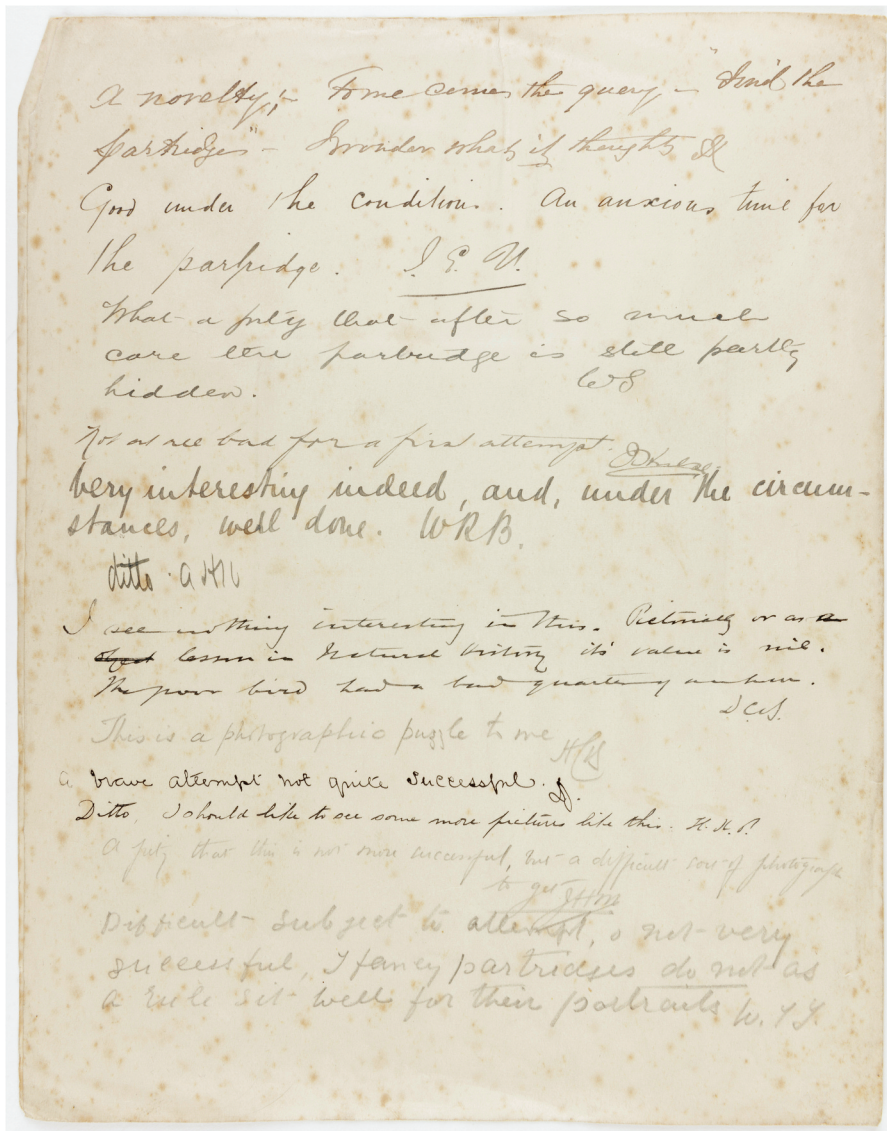


Figure 4. Back cover of criticism sheet by Alfred W. Brunwin for 'Study of Partridge Sitting' submitted to the Light and Shade Postal Photographic Society, June 1896, showing members' comments. 18.4 × 23.6 cm. Object number 1991-5052. © National Science and Media Museum / Science and Society Picture Library.

those infrastructures that, Paul Edwards writes, 'simultaneously shape and are shaped by – in other words, co-construct – the condition of modernity [...] To be modern is to live within and by means of infrastructures [...] [which] allow us to control time and space'.¹⁰⁰ In other words, this use of the postal service was different from premodern systems in the sense that it 'create[d] both opportunities and limits'¹⁰¹ or, as Mattern discusses in relation to modern urban infrastructures, meant to create 'active and informed citizens' – "proper" photographers – but produced the equivalent of 'a site for radical meetings and rallies',¹⁰² what Edwards describes as a 'decentralized, distributed, networked forms of power'¹⁰³ and Wittel as 'network sociality'. This space, I argue, created the conditions for the emergence of new photographic possibilities. As Edwards continues, 'Building infrastructures has been constitutive of the modern condition [...] In redeploying emerging infrastructures to their own ends, users participate in creating versions of modernity',¹⁰⁴ and by extension novel versions of themselves. In this sense, the postal system was both a material and a cultural infrastructure in that it facilitated the emergence of a modern, networked, sense of self that, in turn, implicitly challenged the 'centralised, hierarchical forms of power' represented by the dominant photographic discourse of this period.¹⁰⁵

Remaking, and Recirculating', in *New Media, 1740–1915*, ed. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2003, 207–25. For a contemporary analysis of this, see, for example, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York: New York University Press 2013.
 100 – Paul N. Edwards, 'Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems', in *Modernity and Technology*, ed. Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey and Andrew Feenberg, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2002, 186. Original emphasis.
 101 – Ibid., 191.
 102 – Mattern, 'Deep Time of Media Infrastructure', 100.
 103 – Edwards, 'Infrastructure and Modernity', 210.
 104 – Ibid., 191 and 222.
 105 – Ibid., 210.

The Networked Photographer

As a result of a new experience of communication, members of postal clubs were placed in a transformed relationship to one another. On the one hand, this was felt to be closer than what other social interactions, for instance those taking place within ordinary societies, could offer. For example, in 1902, following the launch of the Leeds Photographic Society circulating portfolio, the *Amateur Photographer* commented that such arrangement ‘will put the members more in touch with each other, always a difficulty in large societies’.¹⁰⁶ The general assessment was, in fact, that postal clubs were particularly successful in creating a keen sense of unity and participation amongst photographers. ‘The photographic enthusiast’, Fearn and Bennet wrote in 1887, ‘counts the days to the next arrival of the Postal Album, so anxious is he to know the exact date when he will have the pleasure of inspecting its contents’.¹⁰⁷ ‘No one will deny’, Leonard Castle, Secretary of the Quarterly Photographic Portfolio, similarly noted in 1910, ‘that many of these circulating portfolios are doing good work in keeping warm the enthusiasm of the members’.¹⁰⁸ Writing about the telegraph’s impact on people’s sense of self, Otis argues that ‘From the 1850s onward, as more and more people began communicating through telegrams, the public [...] began to understand themselves as “connected” and to envision themselves as cross-points in a net’.¹⁰⁹ By being part of such network, she continues, one’s identity was ‘defined through one’s connections to others’.¹¹⁰ It is in this sense, I argue, that the dynamics of postal photographic clubs shaped their members’ identity: the particular way in which photographers came together influenced each members’ own experience of photography and sense of their own role in this process because this was defined through one’s interaction with others. Central to the production of this particular form of sociability – and, by relation, individuality – were the entwined acts of reading and writing as a framework for looking at, and consequently understanding, photography.

As introduced by the previous section, in lieu of oral communication, photographers used criticism sheets and a notebook ‘to criticise, and give advice on, each other’s prints’ and also to share more general ‘queries and answers, miscellaneous notes, etc.’. The written text occupied a prominent position in the circulating portfolio, widely considered as important as the images themselves to enhance members’ learning. ‘The advantages to be derived from membership to clubs of this kind’, Hawes, for example, wrote in 1900, ‘are two-fold, namely: (1) The value of the criticism written by every member on each print, or rather on the loose sheet of paper attached to each print for the purpose, and (2) the inspection of the prints themselves’.¹¹¹ ‘Development of the Critical Faculty’, wrote *Photographic News* in 1906, ‘is one of the advantages of the postal club. Each worker becomes an art critic, and because he will in turn be criticised, more thought and care are bestowed on his criticism than is often the case’.¹¹² ‘The benefit to be thus derived by inspecting and criticising the work of others, as well as the opportunity it affords of submitting your own work to the candid opinion of fellow members’, concurred Pugh in 1909, ‘is beyond doubt’.¹¹³ An important reason for the need to combine the acts of reading, writing and looking was that what made a print successful, from either a technical or an aesthetic point of view, was not objective or absolute knowledge but something that depended entirely on established practices and values. Learning to take a successful pictorial photograph, for example, meant acquiring the proper cultural capital, which could then be demonstrated by selecting, composing, lighting and subsequently printing one’s photographs by following precise conventions.¹¹⁴ The text was thus key to ‘increase the knowledge of practical photography’¹¹⁵ or to improve ‘the study of pictorial photography’,¹¹⁶ because it could transmit a type of information that was not self-evident in the photographs themselves. Or, to put it differently, postal clubs were considered to be particularly effective in forming pictorial

106 – ‘Notes from the North-East’, 56. In 1898, the Leeds Photographic Society had a membership of 150 members. Henry Sturme, *Photography Annual*, London: Iliffe, Sons & Sturme Ltd 1898, 71.

107 – Fearn and Bennett, ‘Postal Photographic Clubs’, 153.

108 – Leonard G. Castle, ‘A Note on Portfolio Criticisms’, *Amateur Photographer* (26 April 1910), 414.

109 – Otis, *Networking*, 221.

110 – *Ibid.*, 10.

111 – Hawes, ‘Postal Clubs’, 274.

112 – ‘Pro and Con. A Weekly Discussion on Photographic Procedure and Practice. Postal Folios’, *Photographic News* (2 November 1906), 877.

113 – Pugh, ‘Conducting a Circulating Portfolio’, 5.

114 – See, for example, *Photographic Vision: Pictorial Photography 1889–1923*, ed. Peter Bunnell, Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith 1980. See also note 5.

115 – Henry Sturme, ‘Letters to the Editor. A Monthly Album for Amateurs’, *Amateur Photographer* (6 February 1885), 275.

116 – ‘Progress in the Postal Club’, 12.

photographers because they could teach members how to write, and thus talk and think, about photography *as a prerequisite* for taking ‘proper’ photographs – I have not found a single postal club that only shared images.

Members’ active participation in the production of the portfolio, however, also meant that *they* were the authors of photographic discourse: in the absence of ‘important gentlemen in the chair’, as Lund noted in the quotation with which I started this article, what made a photograph good or bad, or simply how one should talk about photography, had to be negotiated amongst members. In the comments that members of the Light and Shade Postal Photographic Society and Light and Truth Postal Photographic Club wrote on Brunwin’s criticism sheets, disagreements on compositional or technical matters are not infrequent. For instance, the view of a crossroad in Shalford Green, two members agreed, ‘would be improved by clouds’ and ‘certainly a few clouds would be an improvement’, while a third opined that ‘certainly this does not want clouds’; on a photograph of Shalford Church, W. R. B. wrote that ‘I should be inclined to cut off a little on the left hand side’, to which F. M. replied that ‘I should not cut off a little on the left as W.R.B. suggests’; while a photograph of a snow scene was praised by one as a ‘success in carbon work’, but questioned by another as ‘In what respect does this excel as carbon print? Somewhat lazy’.¹¹⁷ Figure 3, which shows Brunwin’s contribution to the Light and Shade society in June 1896 – the ‘No.2’ on the top left corner of the cover sheet indicates that this was the second portfolio circulated that month – is particularly intriguing because he chose to submit a photograph that he considered to be unusual. As he noted in the ‘Other Particulars’ section, ‘This was done as an experiment. The partridge is sitting on wheat which, as you will observe in the right hand of corner, I had to hold back with my stick and take off the cap with the other hand. Rather an anxious time for the partridge!’ The criticisms on the back of the sheet (Figure 4) show a mixture of positive and negative responses, and perhaps the ambiguity in knowing how one should look at or comment the photograph: for example, ‘A novelty’; ‘Good under the condition’; ‘What a pity that after so much care the partridge is still partly hidden’; ‘Not at all bad for a first attempt’; ‘Very interesting indeed, and, under the circumstances, well done’; ‘I see nothing interesting in this. Pictorially or as a lesson in natural history its value is nil’; ‘This is a photographic puzzle to me’; ‘Brave attempt not quite successful’; ‘Ditto. I should like to see some more picture like this’; and ‘A pity, that this is not more successful, but a difficult sort of photograph to get’. To emerge from such exchanges was the realisation that everyone came to photography from different perspectives, and that one’s opinion was perhaps as valuable as the next. This is not to say that individual members were not influenced by or sought to conform with the dominant aesthetic discourse of the time – they certainly did, as this allowed them to demonstrate social status and moral worth. Instead, my argument is that being integral participants of postal photographic clubs, rather than simply beneficiaries of the infrastructure, transformed photographers’ role in the wider photographic discourse: the production of photographic knowledge, and hence what gave it value, depended entirely on the idiosyncratic and kaleidoscopic experiences of the individual.

Indeed, this was a freedom of expression that alerted some secretaries, who realised that many of the conversations that took place within postal clubs could not have developed within the much more structured space of an ordinary society. ‘It is amusing sometimes’, ‘Waverly’ noted in 1902, ‘how a member will take up a half-a-dozen or more pages of a club note-book in a drivelling and long-winded discussion on some point that interests him, or virulently attacks some other member or work he doesn’t understand or care for’.¹¹⁸ Or, as ‘Old Portfolio’ (a pseudonym) wrote in two articles for the *Amateur Photographer*, to be criticised was often the fact that photographers contributed to the discussion what *they* were interested in, rather than what the established – and considered respectable –

117 – Light and Shade Postal Photographic Club, May, June and February 1897
Underlining in original.

118 – ‘Waverly’, ‘Postal Clubs’, 52.

photographic discourse demanded. In the first piece, 'Old Portfolio' disapproved of 'Mr. Champignon', who 'all he seems to live for (if he doesn't live on them) is fungi'; 'Mr Convention', who 'Every round submits the same sort of view, technically perfect in every case'; and 'Fogg', wondering in conclusion 'Why don't they make some radical change in their methods, and widen their scope?'¹¹⁹ In the second article, which started with the sarcastic remark 'What different ideas seem to exist in the minds of different members, as to the function of criticism!', attention was directed to 'De Wit', who 'will never let slip a single chance of demonstrating his peculiar humour'; 'Mr Ditto' who, 'with his invariable "Agree with the above" is hardly a great accession to the criticism'; 'G. Arrulous, Esq. I've never known that man to write less than four lines of every photo'; and 'Ego. With that fellow, it's a never-ending holding-up of his own work and methods'.¹²⁰ What someone like 'Old Portfolio' saw as a cacophony of personal views, however, was in other instances experienced as a fertile terrain for individual photographers to express, and thus realise, their photographic potential. Writing about the Postal Camera Club, Warburg, for instance, described how:

Difficult words flitted across the pages of the note-book, words like *subjectively* and *objectively*, *idiosyncrasy* and *personal aesthetic expression*. Words of which we grasped the meaning for a moment, only to lose it in a labyrinth of conflicting ideas. Of course the discussion led to no decision. Such discussions never do. Nevertheless they are extremely useful. They make one think of problems which one would not otherwise consider.¹²¹

One reason why Warburg considered this plurality of views to be positively generative is most likely because the Postal Camera Club, composed of photographers 'very high in the photographic world',¹²² was widely considered to be one of the 'leading pictorial photographic postal clubs in the United Kingdom'.¹²³ As such, the views expressed by its members aligned with the dominant photographic discourse of this period. However, if Warburg's judgement differed in value from what other secretaries were noting, his assessment of the circulating portfolio was largely the same: it not only increased members' individual contribution to the form and content of communication, but also multiplied its points of origins, making each member feel on a level playing field with others. In other words, the postal service influenced how photographic discourse was produced and circulated and, in the process, reframed.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, an important reason why photographers themselves enjoyed being part of a postal club was that this was felt to be more open to individual experiences than ordinary societies. As 'Waverley' wrote in 1902, 'There are many drawbacks to the ordinary photographic society. For my own part, I dislike them so strongly that I never could belong to one'. On the other hand, a postal club, he continued, 'has no particular tendency to mould a worker – to mould its members into a narrow-lined school, as has the ordinary society, so that if a member has original ideas, he has full play, and room to work them out'.¹²⁴ Similarly, *Photographic News* reported in 1906 that the members of the Dundee and East of Scotland Photographic Association 'find the circulating portfolio is more valuable to them than the society itself, with all its meetings' because 'in the circulating club members devote all their attention to the work and the members themselves, whereas in a photographic society their time is mostly given to lectures, demonstrations, and lantern shows which may not touch at all on the question of their own individual experience'.¹²⁵

What is particularly interesting in these comments – which, in turn, can help us understand photographers' experience of postal clubs more generally – is the recognition that the circulating portfolio allowed the photographer *as an individual* to assert themselves. In an ordinary society, the calendar of winter and summer events – broadly 'lectures, demonstrations, and lantern shows' and photographic excursions, respectively – was normally planned by the secretary, president or

119 – 'Old Portfolio', 'Meditation on a Postal Photographic Club', *Amateur Photographer* (31 May 1901), 444.

120 – 'Old Portfolio', 'Further Meditations on a Postal Photographic Club', *Amateur Photographer* (7 August 1902), 105.

121 – Warburg, 'Inaugural Address', 398. Original emphases.

122 – *Ibid.*, 399.

123 – 'A Postal Camera Club Exhibition', *Amateur Photographer* (5 December 1905), 456. Members included Francis James Mortimer, the editor of *Photographic News*, Alexander Keighley, who like Mortimer was also a member of the Brotherhood of the Linked Ring, Samuel L. Coulthurst, Vice-President of the Manchester Photographic Society, and the studio photographers John Furley Lewis and Oscar Hardee. Warburg, 'Inaugural Address', 395–96.

124 – 'Waverley', 'Postal Clubs', 52.

125 – 'News from Many Sources. Postal Photographic Club', *Photographic News* (13 July 1906), 558.

a committee: the wider membership, especially in larger societies, participated in these events but was not directly involved in their constitution.¹²⁶ Additionally, as both these examples indicate, some members felt that they were expected to conform to the dominant view promoted by their society – ‘mould a worker’ – or that there was no space to express or explore ‘their own individual experience’. Conversely, the space created by a circulating portfolio enabled each member to focus on their own experience – ‘members devote all their attention to the work and the members themselves’; ‘if a member has original ideas, he has full play, and room to work them out’. As *Practical Photographer* noted in 1899, referring to postal photographic clubs more generally, ‘The note book section seems to be more actively supported than is usually the case in these clubs. Each member takes it in turn to start a discussion’, covering ‘such subjects as “Flash-Light Photography,” “The Best All-round Printing Process,” “Should Alum be Used in Development?” one or two methods of storing negatives, snap-shots, and a multitude of other matters’.¹²⁷ This analysis thus suggests that while an ordinary photographic society was viewed as seeking to merge the individual with the collective by encouraging the former to adopt the values, aesthetics and practices of the latter – and, hence, a particular ideology – the engagement fostered by postal clubs, their empirical experience, displaced the hierarchical relationship between the individual and the dominant discourse embodied by the collective. This, I argue, allowed the former to see themselves as distinct from the latter. Hartmut Rosa posits that ‘social-structural processes of modernization cannot occur without some correspondence in the construction of subjective senses of self [...] social-structural transformation through modernization must necessarily go hand in hand with a transformation of identity’.¹²⁸ In this sense, the network produced by the infrastructure of the Royal Mail as used by these clubs created the conditions for the modern realisation of an individual identity because the process of co-producing the meaning and value of a circulating portfolio depended on the dialogue between different but equally weighted views, rather than being regulated externally by the secretary or president of a society, or by the editor of a photographic periodical. This was another main difference between their relationship and the imagined community at the centre of Anderson’s, and thus Tucker’s, analysis: while in the latter each individual ‘is well-aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others [...] whose identity he has not the slightest notion’,¹²⁹ within each postal club the relationship between members was far from imagined. Therefore, by carrying the traces of a plurality of experiences and perspectives, the circulating portfolio allowed photographers to see themselves as part of a modern network of their own making, simultaneously evidencing the fragmented and rhizomatic nature of photographic knowledge itself. This impacted on how photographers could understand their own role within the process of communication, implicitly questioning the production of knowledge about the photographic. We could then think of these photographers as popular modernists because, as I have argued elsewhere in relation to a similarly constitutive photographic practice, ‘they broke with previous modes of thinking about photography [...] while never really looking beyond the petty matters of everyday life’.¹³⁰ Although members of postal photographic clubs did not consciously seek a transformation of their photographic self, their active participation in a modern network meant that their identities became inevitably adaptable and reconfigured. We can then say that the postal network was instrumental in affording to amateur photographers a new form of mobile and networked sociability that created the conditions for the emergence of a novel sense of self, in turn influencing how photographers could conceptualise the production of meaning and what made photography valuable.

126 – See, for example, Lyddell Sawyer, ‘Sociability in Photographic Societies’, *Photographic News* (18 May 1883), 309–10; and ‘Photographic Excursions’, *Photographic News* (2 August 1892), 504–05. For commentary, see note 6.

127 – ‘Editorial Focus’, *Practical Photographer* (April 1899), 123.

128 – Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 5.

129 – Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 35.

130 – Sara Dominici, “Cyclo-Photographers”, *Visual Modernity, and the Development of Camera Technologies, 1880s–1890s*, *History of Photography*, 42:1 (2018), 59.

Conclusion

The cultural production of modern photographic identities that I have described was then realised through the entanglement of people's activities, postal technology, and visual and textual materials. As I have argued, the infrastructure of the postal system responded to the desire for mobility of late nineteenth-century society, simultaneously shaping the modern photographer as a fundamentally independent but equally constitutive particle of the photographic world. By considering the postal system as an infrastructure that enabled a collaborative form of communication thus illuminates how the emergence of a photographic individualism was also the product of socio-technical networks that fostered a new relationship between the individual and the collective. Furthermore, this demonstrates that the history of photography contributes to a wider media studies because, as Mattern shows, 'historic forms of communication also *inform* and function as part of today's media infrastructures':¹³¹ as more than just a visual system, photography has played a central role for the production and circulation of knowledge in modern life, and it is as such a social and cultural force that we should evaluate its connections and impacts on modern communication infrastructures. Crucially, the significance of the postal service for photography was indeed not – at least, not immediately – in the visual product. As the aims of postal photographic clubs broadly aligned with those promoted by the photographic press or the more prestigious photographic clubs and society, the images that their members took were not dissimilar from those that many other amateur photographers were taking at this time.¹³² However, what had begun to change was the process through which knowledge about the photographic was understood to be produced: this marked a passage from the institutionalisation of photographic discourse to its critique as embedded in the plurality of voices evidenced by the constantly changing portfolio. The making of knowledge at a key moment in the history of the medium – the emergence of popular photography – was in this way influenced by technology-enhanced everyday experiences of modernity more generally. The case of members of postal photographic clubs can then be understood as one of those clusters of everyday photographic culture that were pulling towards the diversification of photographic practices and discourses in this period.¹³³ The voice of the individual photographer as a marker of individualism had started to gain momentum.

131 – Mattern, 'Deep Time of Media Infrastructure', 105–106. Original emphasis.

132 – Their prints were sometimes published by the photographic press. See, for example, 'Amateur Postal Club', *Practical Photographer* (October 1899), 310–11; 'Concerning Our Postal Club', *Junior Photographer* (January 1900), 115–17; and *Photographic News* (5 January 1906), 1, 2, 19 and 20. For a description of the content of the prints, see 'The Monthly Album Club', *Amateur Photographer* (1 May 1885), 58; 'The Monthly Album Club' (29 May 1885), 121; and 'The Monthly Album Club' (3 June 1885), 201.

133 – Dominici, "Cyclo-Photographers"; and Sara Dominici, 'New Mobile Experiences of Vision and Modern Subjectivities in Late Victorian Britain', *Science Museum Group Journal*, 12 (2019), available at <http://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/browse/issue-12/new-mobile-experiences-of-vision/> (accessed 9 March 2019).