

Did Facebook Kill the Christmas Card?



Here is how much I'm craving some Christmas card love: When the third card arrived last week—that's right, bringing our total to a measly three—I opened it even though it was addressed to a Mr. and Mrs. D. Farrell. I realize that I shouldn't be reading other people's mail, but it didn't have a return address. And since I'm in no position to be picky given the year's record low haul, I put the

Farrells' card on my fridge. It's there to keep the other two, a Scottie dog with snowflakes from my husband's eightysomething cousin Bernice and a photo of two friends with their baby, from looking pathetically lonely.

My consolation is that I am not the only one feeling cardless. Here at *Slate*, we have been comparing notes, and the consensus is that many of us aren't getting the usual numbers of holiday cards, at least not the old-fashioned paper kind. Our investigation began last week, when "Human Guinea Pig" and "Dear Prudence" columnist Emily Yoffe sent around an e-mail asking if others had noticed a decline. "If it turns out everyone is drowning in Christmas cards," she added, "I will understand it's not a trend, it's just personal."

If anyone's fridge was covered, he or she was too tactful to say so. Instead, Emily's note set off a round of *me-toos*. "Last year we got at least a dozen," technology columnist Farhad Manjoo wrote. "This year there's been one." "I have been wondering if I offended my whole list somehow, the drop-off has been so severe," managing editor Rachael Larimore said. "We're down to about four," senior editor Dahlia Lithwick wrote, "mostly from Jewish people." A *Slate* staffer who will remain nameless (for fear of upsetting his current girlfriend) said that he'd gotten one card, from his college girlfriend's grandmother. This prompted Emily to jump back in: "They're the only people still sending." Others have received cards from auto dealers, paper delivery guys, and English people. (It was an Englishman who in 1843 [invented the Christmas card](#); today Britons are sometimes criticized for sending too many.) Margaret Talbot announced on [the "Double X podcast"](#) that of the two cards she'd received, one was from a local business and the other was from, "God bless it, the Hoover Institution."

Here, then, is my prediction: 2010 will go down as the year the holiday card lay dying. This is a nice, bold thesis. Of course, it might also be wrong. Caveats:

There are four mail delivery days between now and Christmas. Maybe later this week *Slate* contributors and staffers will be showered in greeting cards. Or maybe we're seeing a widespread shift toward the New Year's card, already the choice of secular types and procrastinators. We should add that we have no 2010 data to back

up our *Slate*-wide poll. Like all kinds of paper mail, holiday card deliveries have been steadily declining for years, but the postal service hasn't finished compiling its numbers for last December, let alone this one. And various greeting card industry representatives [predict only a modest drop](#) in card sales this year.

I meet their optimism with skepticism—it seems unfair to expect the greeting card people to trumpet their own decline. So let's leave aside the dutiful disclaimers and suppose that our experiences reflect a broader trend. The next question is this: Who killed the Christmas card? And why now? Here, our prime suspects:

1) **Frugality.** Why waste money on a piece of folded paper that's going to be chucked in a couple of weeks? The holidays are expensive, the economy is still wheezing, e-cards are free or almost free (more about them in a moment). The problem with this explanation is that companies like Shutterfly have made cards—nice, personalized ones with photos—ridiculously cheap. An economy model Shutterfly card, with envelope and stamp, will run you 99 cents. If you're an average 35- to 64-year-old, the post office says [you sent 16.2 holiday cards in 2008](#). That means that if you'd continued your seasonal greeting habit this year, you'd be out only \$16.04—more than [a pack of Squinkies](#), granted, but not much.

2) **The end of the address book.** As *Slate* contributor Noreen Malone wrote, "Honestly, no one really keeps their friends' addresses the way they used to, because there are easier ways to contact them." Many of us don't have the faintest idea where anyone lives these days, so addressing an envelope means sending an e-mail to get the person's address, at which point you have already fulfilled one of the main purposes of the exercise (reaching out to someone you aren't otherwise in touch with). This is precisely why I haven't managed to send out cards since 2005, despite my best intentions. Each year I eye the same circa 2006 carton of holiday cards with fear and self-loathing, and each year, my snail-mail contacts file gets more out of date.

3) **The triumph of the e-card.** We don't really buy this explanation. In theory, it makes sense: E-cards are free, or almost free, and you don't need a person's physical coordinates to send one. But whether or not you think it's a good idea to send your loved ones Jacquie Lawson-style animations of elves swaying to Christmas carols, an e-card is so unlike an actual card in both form and function that few people seem to consider it a substitute for the real thing. "Am I supposed to print it out and tape it to the mantelpiece?" asked Emily.

4) **Mom liberation.** This year, women made up a [majority of the work force](#) for the first time. But according to the [Greeting Card Association](#), we still buy an estimated 80 percent of all greeting cards. Maybe 2010 is the year we finally said, *To hell with it, I'm not staying up late tonight to lick envelopes.*

5) **Facebook**. Also known as the "I already know what you did last summer" theory. This is the one that most appeals to us. It checks the "Why now?" box. And when you look back at the Christmas card's evolution, it feels almost inevitable.

Once, not so long ago, people picked out a card they liked, wrote something inside, sent it off, and that was that. Then came the photo card. Even though some people initially found adding personal photos to cards a self-involved move, it soon became the default for people with kids. Meanwhile, the home computer was enabling another innovation: The holiday form letter, an immodest chronicle of a family's Very Busy, Very Exciting year. Somewhere along the way, between the photos and the form letters, the holiday card stopped being a note from one person to another and started being a mass broadcast.

But now, with Facebook so thoroughly insinuated into our lives, we already know where our friends (and our "friends") went on vacation, what they look like right now, and whether they've recently switched jobs. As Rachael put it, "You are already in touch with people you normally only talk to a few times a year, and they are already seeing pictures of your kids." In 2010, people don't need to wait for December to brag. They've been doing it all year.

What do you think—are we right that the Christmas card is going out of style? If so, what's the reason? And is this trend to be celebrated or mourned? Take our reader poll below or weigh in with a comment. We will be watching our mailboxes, and your replies, anxiously. And if you tell us it's not a trend after all, that it really is personal, we'll try to take it in stride.

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Kate Julian is an editor of **DoubleX**.

Illustration by Mark Alan Stamaty.