

Carrier Pigeons: From Past to Present

Audrey Davenport
Butler University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall>

Recommended Citation

Davenport, Audrey (2018) "Carrier Pigeons: From Past to Present," *The Mall*: Vol. 2 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol2/iss1/23>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Mall by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

Carrier Pigeons: From Past to Present

Audrey Davenport

There is a good chance that you, or someone you know, has been defecated on by a pigeon. It's not that uncommon. Just the other day I was walking to class and heard what I thought was a large rain drop fall from a tree. Yet the sun was shining, so it could not have been. Turns out, I had just narrowly escaped the target zone of one of our feathered friends. Being pooped on by a pigeon, or any bird for that matter, is one of my worst fears. It's a day ruiner. A good hair day's nightmare. Sometimes it's considered good luck, but that's up to you. I have never really thought much about pigeons. They were always just there.

Sometimes in cities I'd see one that was prettier than the rest and I'd pay a little bit more attention than usual, but other than that, they didn't serve a huge purpose in my life. So, I didn't pay attention. However, they recently entered my life, demanding more attention, in a way I had not expected. My friend's phone died and she needed to text someone. My response was, "send a pigeon." Boom. Enter the pigeon, strutting its way into my heart. The more I thought about them, the more curious I became. I thought about how pigeons used to make up a significant part of our communication, but now they have become as common and as useless as a sock without its pair.

When we think of pigeons, our minds think of the slick, gray birds who eat crumbs off the pavement and who entertain old men. Yet pigeons had a past life as war heroes. As communicators and as a necessary stepping stone to how we consume news today. They've taken a winding path to "retirement." As the world has evolved, it's swept communicative technology with it. We now crave instant communication. We want to know what happened as soon as it happens. But if a pigeon hit you in the face, as fast as the last text you sent got to the person you sent it to, I think we'd view pigeons differently.

If you're looking for a pigeon, you're more than likely going to find them in a large, densely populated city. Cities cater perfectly to the needs of a pigeon population. They have plenty of food scraps, nooks to live in, and for the most part, they're not bothersome. Let's face

it, they are part of every park experience and really add to the “city vibe.” And you tell me, what’s a good St. Mark’s Square picture in Venice without all the pigeons?

Animals have been serving humans since the dawn of recorded history. Donkeys pulled carts in Pompeii. Dogs accompanied many explorers, famously a Newfoundland named Seaman joined Lewis and Clark on their expedition. And the story of Noah and the Arc is one of the first stories that mentions birds. As the story goes, Noah releases a dove out in search of dry land, but the dove comes back, indicating that there is none. The dove, a variety of pigeon, returned, displaying the homing instinct that they are famous for. The homing instinct is present in all birds, indicated by their ability to find their way back to their nests. Pigeons have been trained to have a higher degree of homing than most birds, which takes a long time and detailed handling to develop.

Edgar Chamberlain, a pigeon trainer himself, in his 1907 book *The Homing Pigeon*, says that the raising of pigeons and the development of the homing instinct is a calculated process. The trainer, or as they are also called “fancier,” has to have a deep understanding of the birds as well as an experienced hand to do the job effectively. These trainers are like the Geniuses at the Genius Bar in the Apple stores, they know everything there is to know about the technology and what needs to be done to fix it or make it better.

The carrier pigeon was bred for many years in order to achieve the specific characteristics that make them “Homers.” The Belgians can be attributed for the first variation of homing pigeon. They crossed various breeds of birds for physical characteristics that would make them good homers. This “base model” has been improved upon since then, but because the birds required lots of breeding and training, the earliest ones were kept by the wealthy, which improved their status even further. It’s like how buying the newest iPhone makes someone even cooler than they were before. These wealthy individuals simply had the newest technology, and soon everyone wanted it.

During the early stages of development, there were lots of carrier pigeons bred for optimal results. As Chamberlain says in his book, there were Carriers (*Columba tabellaria*), Dragons (*Columba tabellaria minima*), and Horseman pigeons (*Columba tabellaria minor*), the three basic types of pigeons from which others came. These pigeons were all the improved

version of the one before. However, they all remained part of the same family of birds, the distinctions coming from their physical attributes. Eventually, Horseman pigeons disappeared due to overbreeding, but the others remained part of the family. These pigeons were designed for success, much like technology today is designed to please the masses. Breeders wanted the sleekest, most efficient, and most reliable pigeons they could have. The public today wants the same thing, but with modern technology.

The homing quality in pigeons is actually similar to qualities in humans and other organisms. Pigeons, and all birds, use the topography of their surroundings to develop a mental map of where they are in relation to where their home is located. (Strasser et al., 1998). It's like craving a midnight McDonald's run, jumping in your car, and driving there and back without a GPS. You know your way home based on what is surrounding you, or the fact that you may have gone to McDonald's a few times before. These directions and knowledge of our whereabouts, are functions of the hippocampus, a region of your brain that controls our awareness of surroundings and our ability to know where we are in relation to other places. To complicate things, pigeons also are drawn back to their homes by the earth's magnetic field, which is different from humans. Pigeons don't look to their left and know that when they see the Chase Bank they're five minutes from home like we do. Although landmark recognition is part of it, the farther the distance, the harder to recognize specifics.

Because of the pigeon's physical characteristics as well as the trainable homing capability, these birds were excellent vehicles for wartime communication. This is probably the first use that comes to mind when carrier pigeons are brought up in conversation. During World War I, soldiers would often shoot pigeons out of the sky for target practice. They feared that they might be carrying a message to enemy lines, so shooting down pigeons was also a way of intercepting them and gaining a potential advantage. However, this would not have been an easy thing to do. Pigeons fly at an average speed of 77.6 miles per hour and have been clocked at speeds up to 92.5 miles per hour. Obviously, it beats having to wait for a messenger on foot or horseback, which are slower and have a higher chance of being caught.

"The Pigeon Express" was the name given to the line of specially trained pigeons working in the field alongside the soldiers. You may be reminded of "The Pony Express," an

early form of speedy long distance communication. Riders would gallop horses at full speed to different “docking stations” along a route and trade out their tired, worn down horse, for a fresh one, continuing until they reached their destination. The Pigeon Express worked similarly. However, the issue with pigeons is that they only work one way. Pigeons would be “homed” to a determined docking station, one where many other pigeons were also trained to home to and this way when the pigeons came back, the messages would all be in one space. Soldiers would carry pigeons into the field in backpacks, special cages, and in structures attached to the tops of trucks. When the pigeons were tossed, the term used for releasing a pigeon carrying a message, they would find their way back to the docking spot. But trainers were not able to toss a pigeon from the docking building back to the soldier it came from.

Pigeons were extremely valuable during the war, just as much as the people who trained them. In his book *Pigeons in the Great War*, Lt.-Col. A. H. Osman writes, “On the 17th of August 1928, I received a letter from my old chief under whom I last served on the Headquarter’s Staff at Horse Guards, saying that ‘during the war he scarcely or properly appreciated all that pigeons did for the cause,’ adding, ‘Now I know better.’”

The trainers deserve an equal amount of respect because they were the ones responsible for the pigeons getting where they needed to go. Towards the beginning of WWI, a Voluntary Pigeon War Committee was formed, whose purpose was to train, distribute, and handle the pigeons for the duration of the war (Osman, 1927). They issued permits to soldiers that stated that they were able to carry pigeons, and this permit was required upon inquiry. It may seem bizarre that whether we will start to demand new technologies at any cost. After all, that’s what technology is supposed to do, surpass what preceded it.

It’s pretty evident that pigeons have been around for a while, way longer than the Apple products that have taken their places. But in a way, carrier pigeons were our world’s first step towards “instant messaging.” They were able to do what cars could in a fraction of the time, making them faster than anything that we’d had before. Although, after acclimating to this type of “instant” communication, people became impatient when it came to waiting for the “traditional” types of communication (letters, telegrams, etc.). The need for quick communication during wartime changed the playing field for how information was communicated on a daily basis.

Being able to know what was happening as soon as it happened stated to become the world's new normal. People liked it and they didn't want to wait if they didn't have to. Soon writing letters was out and text messages were in.

So, what about if your phone dies, and your less than sympathetic friend tells you to "send a pigeon"? You would no longer have the safe, blanket-like security that lets you know that the message you sent has been received. Yourself and others would be thrown into a panic, not knowing where you are or what you're doing. You could have been abducted by aliens! Fallen into a well! Been hit by a meteorite! Anything! But you can't tell anyone, because your phone died, and no one is going to know in that moment what has happened to you. Part of you might feel a little bit cheated. This phone was supposed to have a good battery life, specifically so that this wouldn't happen. But since when did we have to pay for certainty and is it okay to make us pay for it? Being uncertain is uncomfortable. And people pay for comfort and certainty all the time. Extra leg room on a plane or knowing what you got on your test as soon as you can. We combatted these things with programs that allow you to check your grades and choose your plane seat, but these all still rely on the internet, computers, or phones. Knowing immediately brings comfort to us all, thus we have developed into a population that needs to know. Right. Now.

The technology of today (iPhones, computers, etc.) carries with it a guarantee that the information you send gets to its intended destination. And it should, because that is exactly what they are designed to do: outwit uncertainty (i.e. the recipient will get the message). There are features on phones that let the user know that the message has been received, just in case they didn't already believe it. The "read receipts" and "delivered" indicators let the sender know that the other side has gotten the message. Coupled with this is the anxiety that we feel if someone doesn't text us back within five minutes. If we are "left on read," an overwhelming urge to "double text" comes over us. Not able to wait for the next one and not knowing if that person will or will not get back to you. There is a hope that they will, unlike the certainty that we get with a "read receipt." We thrive off the immediate acknowledgement and consumption of information and are impatient otherwise.

Just think about what it would be like to wait. To wait and to now know whether what

you're sending was going to make it, or if you failed that test and won't pass that class. What if we all had to take a leap of faith and perhaps send a pigeon? Just picture it, waiting outside, blue sky above you, and seeing a bird, coming back to deliver what you've been waiting for. Relief washes over you and a smile appears on your face. Our cell phones put us in direct contact with others every day. And even though pigeons were our first "instant messaging," they still had a whisper of faith that flies alongside them because no one knew for certain whether that pigeon would make it.

This is unnerving because it throws our faith, hope, and trust onto the chopping block. In a time where we had to wait for information, we trusted that we were going to get it eventually. But now, technology is trusted, not other people, and you have to rely on your device. Faith is also thrown into question. When soldiers tossed pigeons, they hoped and prayed that the message it was carrying would make it to where it needed to go, and they had faith that it would get there. And today we need to screenshot texts and send them to our friends before we reply, just to make sure that what we were going to say was okay. But you can't screenshot a pigeon.

Pigeons were our life lines, our connection to the outside world, to others. Sounds a lot like technology today, doesn't it? Carrier pigeons shouldn't be swept under the rug as a minor detail, they should be celebrated and appreciated as a valuable piece of the communication development puzzle. They are the 1st generation iPhone of the 1930s. And this doesn't mean that I'm going to let a pigeon poop on my head, but maybe if one did, I wouldn't be quite as mad.