

WARM UP

**1** How often do you send or receive emails? What about regular letters and mail?

**GLOSSARY**

**overnight:** *da un giorno all'altro*  
**tampering with:** *manomettere*  
**eat away at:** *erodere, rosicchiare*

**MORE ABOUT...**

- 2011: 3.1 billion email accounts
- 2015: predicted 4.1 billion email accounts
- Typical business user sends and receives 105 messages daily
- 2011: 2.6 billion instant messaging accounts worldwide
- 49% of email users live in the Asia Pacific region

Source: www.bbc.co.uk

**Snail mail vs email**

With the advent of email, many people said that regular postal services where letters, bills, bank statements and catalogues are delivered to your door would disappear overnight. This traditional system became known as snail mail due to the much longer time needed to receive the correspondence compared to the immediate nature of email. Even if snail mail is not obsolete yet, postal companies have certainly seen a drop in business as the use of email, instant messaging services and social networks continues to rise.

# Digitizing Physical Mail

A driver of a white Prius with a giant, red plastic flag fixed to its side is traveling through the hilly streets of San Francisco, undelivering mail from mailboxes. The driver is not a thief. He and the car are part of a start-up called Outbox that digitizes physical mail. The driver – or “unpostman” – visits Outbox subscribers’ homes three times a week. He collects the letters, bills, magazines and advertisements that were deposited there by official postal workers and delivers them to a warehouse. There they are opened and photographed, and the resulting digital files are sent electronically to the recipient through the Outbox website or other apps. For the cost of \$4.99 a month, subscribers no longer have to deal with their physical mail and can ask for it to be destroyed or for important items, such as a wedding invitation, to be re-delivered to their home.

Outbox has met resistance from the United States Postal Service, which has refused to collaborate with the company and has concerns over the destruction of mail. Tampering with mail is a federal offense, and there may be questions about the legality of a third party removing mail from a mailbox, even with permission.



The USPS has been slow to innovate and adapt to new technology, partly because of legislation that prohibits it from entering into new businesses. It also faces serious financial issues with losses of \$15.9 billion in 2012. The Postal Service has also seen technology eat away at its core business for years. The volume of mail handled by the USPS dropped from 202.8 billion pieces a year in 2002 to 159.9 billion in 2012. One bright spot has been an increase in shipping and packages, the result of the growing popularity of e-commerce.

Just because the USPS isn’t making snail mail a profitable business doesn’t mean it can’t be done. In addition to charging \$4.99 a month, Outbox has plans to eventually deliver ads through its apps. The company would be in a unique position to know what catalogs and brands a customer likes or dislikes and could charge marketing companies who wanted to reach specific demographics.



Adapted from <http://edition.cnn.com>

READING COMPREHENSION

**2 Read the texts and answer these questions.**

- 1 Why is traditional mail called snail mail?
- 2 What kind of company is Outbox?
- 3 What services do subscribers get?
- 4 What legal question does Outbox face?
- 5 How has new technology negatively affected the business of the USPS?
- 6 What positive affect has it had?
- 7 How does Outbox plan to make more profit in the future?

SPEAKING

**3 Discuss these questions in small groups.**

- 1 Do you think the services of Outbox are useful or pointless? Why?
- 2 Is it worth paying for someone to open your mail for you?
- 3 Do you think there are any privacy issues or environmental concerns with Outbox?
- 4 Are there any other advantages or drawbacks to this system?
- 5 How might subscribers react to Outbox's plans to deliver advertisements?
- 6 Would this business model be successful where you live?

WRITING

**4 In pairs, compare the characteristics of snail mail and email and fill in the table with your ideas. Then write a short essay presenting the advantages and disadvantages of each form of communication and say what you think will happen in the future.**

Snail mail	Email
<i>much more personal, can be kept for a long time, more secure,</i> _____ _____ _____	<i>quick, cheap, helps the environment,</i> _____ _____ _____