

Episode 5: Talking Love Letters in the Digital Age with Iris Lee

Molly Schwartz:

David Ormsby-Gore was a British ambassador and an adviser to President John F. Kennedy. Recently, at the house of his descendents, they've found a stack of letters from Jackie Kennedy that hadn't been found before. It included a letter that rejected his proposal of marriage. There has been intense interest generated over what these letters contained and the insight it gives into Ormsby-Gore's and Kennedy's relationship. Next month they will auction these letters off to help pay for renovations on the Gore's house.

Love letters are valuable. Many of us keep love letters, that we've written or received, from ourselves or those of our relatives. But not as many people are writing love letters anymore. Many of us communicate with our loved ones via email or text message. Do we care about saving those? Are they as important? And if so, how do we do it after the technologies that we used to send them grow obsolete and we can't access them anymore.

Iris Lee, a metadata analyst at the American Museum of Natural History in NYC, decided that she wanted a way to save the SMS text messages that told the story of the beginning of her relationship with her partner Kris. After contacting Verizon to no avail, she decided that the best way to save them would be to enter the texts, manually, into a spreadsheet. Iris was kind enough to share the story with me of why she decided to create this spreadsheet and what it means to her, and how her natural inclination to save messages of past relationship shapes her personal and professional life.

Iris Lee:

My name is Iris Lee, I work at the American Museum of Natural History in the library I'm a metadata analyst working on a grant project, I've been there for six years.

So me and my partner Kris met not too far from here in the East Village at a bar, I was meeting up with some some friends, we got together on Wednesdays to just celebrate the middle of the week we had made it through and he happened to be there one night. And, you know, we just hit it off, and the very first text he sent me was that night, we had kind of hopped to a different bar, and I was with only one of my friends, a librarian, and we were talking at the bar and oh I saw him texting, and I'm like oh, he's one of those, you know like oh you're going to be texting at a bar but you're hanging out with us, uh huh. and then he was texting me, so that kind of started, I don't know, this trend of sending these cute messages back and forth to each other. I guess the rest is documented in the spreadsheet. So these text messages kind of felt like they were maybe a part of that narrative,

You know, this was before we had smartphones. I tried looking into Verizon to see if I can retrieve my messages online, but there was no way to do that, you can only see when you sent

it to whom, so you only kind of got the traffic, and not the content, and so I decided I was going to start this spreadsheet because I wanted to hold onto those messages. And you know now with these smartphones we have apps that will do that for you, but with these quote unquote dumb phones, I wanted to save the content in any way that I could and being a data person, a spreadsheet seemed like the best solution. I do have my spreadsheet. I have date, time, message, the sender, and if there was a picture I had a description of the picture

So I went to school as an archivist, and there is definitely an inclination for me to want to save things, especially when they're sentimental. And so I think it was an impulse coming from this archivist side of me that said, you know, you should hold onto this because this is, this is really it's a nice aspect of your relationship that you might wanna show your kids one day, you know I might want to show Antony these.

I haven't really talked to anyone that's like as, I don't know, as anal as me. Crazy ... who does this, who puts a spreadsheet together? I want to know. Come out of the woodworks. Yes, I wanna know, because I feel like, I don't know where I had the time to do this, but I did, and I'm happy that I did, and I just, I'd like to know if anyone else is saving their text messages.

Molly Schwartz

Are other people out there saving their old text messages? How? Why? In an attempt to find some answers to Iris's question, I contacted Dr. Michelle Janning, a professor of sociology at Whitman College and the Chair of the Council of Contemporary Families Board of Directors. In 2013, Dr. Janning conducted a survey of over 800 people that gave some really interesting insight into what people do with love letters.

Michelle Janning:

The survey asked questions of people that included topics like, do you save love letters, if you've been in a romantic relationship, where do you put them, how often do you look at them, why do you look at them, are they digital, are they paper, is there different meaning between the digital and the paper messages that you've saved and why? And we also asked them about the meaning people attach to digital communication versus paper communication versus Audio-visual communication when they are apart from their romantic partner.

Molly Schwartz:

According to her research, it's not at all uncommon for people to save text messages that carry memories about current or past romantic relationships:

Michelle Janning:

People who save texts and put them in a special folder, say on their smart phone, are absolutely out there, and there are in fact digital apps that help facilitate that. Two of the inspirations for my research, one was a friend of mine who had a folder that should put on her phone called texts from cute boys. Which I thought was great, and that she saved to remind herself about the people that she was communicating with, and that she could bring it with

her wherever she went, she didn't have to store it away in a drawer or something like that, that it reminded her of those kind of relationships everyday. And the other was I'd read an article in the New Yorker about a South Korean app called "Between," which basically, it sort of visually mimicked time memory box that's on your phone and that you and your partner can share notes and pictures and letters and little ideas and save them in a special folder and you save the app with that person. So people are absolutely doing that. Even though the numbers are smaller in terms of my research about what type people save, the the fact that there are these kind of creative ways that people are using digital communications and folders therein to have that relationship in a communicative way be a part of their everyday lives, I think is really interesting, and I wouldn't want to dismiss that as a possibility for couples to have meaningful communication that they save. I think a lot of people also though are afraid of, what feels like the fleetingness of the digital communication, so for example saving a text seems precarious, I don't know where it goes, a cloud is maybe not as secure to store something as my underwear drawer. And then you have other people that say, my underwear drawer is not very secure because somebody could come in and take it, so I'm going to save it in DropBox. So I think the fear of losing the object as a memory object changes when it's digital and paper, but we find people on both ends of the spectrum of "it makes me nervous." We're changing the definition of what it means to save something, and we're changing the definition of what it means for something to be meaningful that you don't necessarily have to hold in your hand.

So when it comes to what people do, they don't do it very much, when it comes to what people save, they prefer paper, but they also don't do it very much. So there's a little bit of a mismatch between an ideal and a reality,

Molly Schwartz:

The results of Dr. Janning's research can be found in her book coming out in May called *The Stuff of Family Life: How our Homes Reflect our Lives*.

Iris and Kris manually typed in 283 text messages from the first two years of their relationship, but then had a son, Antony, and the idle time that they used to have to type up text messages got subsumed into the demands of parenthood. But they always kept their old phones, even keeping it charged so that one day they could finish entering all the text messages. But alas, their plans to finish the spreadsheet were thwarted when something unexpected happened to one of their old cell phones, where the remainder of the text messages were saved ...

We never got around to finishing it, and I had always wanted to, we kept that cellphone around, kept it charged. I remember this too, it was a winter day, and I was just wanting to make something warm because, any reason to turn the oven on, and then my son Antony he threw it in the oven, I didn't know it, and I I cooked it. Oh well

As someone who clearly has a strong instinct to save the documents and artifacts of the past, both in her work and personal life, I got curious about what other media Iris has stored from relationships over the years. How else did she communicate with loved ones? What else did she keep?

So I don't just keep spreadsheets of text messages but I also, I do have some mix tapes, [00:30:48] I made a lot of mix tapes when I was younger, I'm a Gen Xer, I made a lot of mix tapes and I got a lot of mix tapes too, I kept those the good librarian that I am, when I was living in California, I had them all nicely catalogued I try to organize them by date received I guess I've always been a metadata librarian at heart. I didn't come into the library profession until later, I'm a career changer, I used to be a graphic designer but I've always been interested in data, it's something that always, and organizing data in a way that is useful. I just needed a way to be able to find my stuff make it make sense, otherwise, I was keeping everything, I was a pack rat, I was keeping everything and you know I just needed to get some control over it, you know this is a very common feeling amongst librarians and archivists, right, you just want to get control over your stuff, so that's what I wanted to do, I just wanted to organize my life a little bit, and I guess that's always been an inclination in me.

Molly Schwartz:

Davy Rothbart also understands the drive to save objects that hold memories.

Davy Rothbart:

I'm a crazy collector, so it's not just other people's found notes that I save. I have a box in my parent's attic all the love letters and little funny notes I traded with friends in junior high and high school. When I would write these love letters to girls I was dating in high school and college, I would sometimes photocopy my letters to them before I mailed them, I don't know why, did I think I was such a brilliant writer that these needed to be kept for posterity? And those things they give me an insight into myself and what I was like at that age, so there is value in them. There's something really meaningful about having the record of the early stages of a relationship.

Molly Schwartz:

But Davy isn't just fascinated by the stories that his own notes tell. He is also fascinated by other people's notes and the glimpse it gives into their lives, their stories. This is what inspired him to launch FOUND Magazine in 2001 as a place to collect and share the notes that people find lying around.

Davy Rothbart:

It was a love note that actually started the idea of doing FOUND magazine in the first place, one I found on the windshield of my car, in Chicago, I came out late one night and my name is Davy, but there was a note on my windshield addressed to Mario. So I was like alright, well what's this all about, so I plucked it off my windshield, and it says, "Mario I hate you, you said

you had to work, then why's your car here? At her place? You're a liar! I hate you I hate you, signed Amber p.s. page me later?" I just loved how she's so angry and upset, I hate you I hate you you're a liar, but then she's also kind of sweet and hopeful at the end, you know, p.s. page me later. I think she still wants to get back together with him. And of course it wasn't Mario's car, it was my car, so he got blamed for being at her house, whoever that was, and really it was my car all along. So I always wished she'd left her pager number so I could've paged and told her the mistake. But just seeing that note, and there's so much story in such a small 50-word note, that it just made me think about all the notes and letter I've found over the years, and all the ones my friends have found, and I thought, we needed a way to share this stuff with other people, and Found Magazine seemed like a natural way to share what we were finding with everybody else.

A certain degree of voyeurism is healthy. You know we're surrounded by strangers all the time, walking down the street, sitting on the bus, it's natural to be curious what other people's experience of being human is like. I think that's what these notes give us in a really potent sense.

As the technology evolves the way people find stuff also is evolving, so people are communicating digital more and more still find stuff. A lot of emails arrive in someone's inbox meant for somebody else.

And not everything is some gem, but maybe 1 in 10 might be, so rather than seeing this as trash, they're kind of rescuing it from oblivion, this little fragment, this human story. We get these little glimpses into the lives of strangers.

Molly Schwartz:

Clearly, Davy isn't the only one who enjoys reading other people's notes -- the magazine has been so popular that it has spun out into a podcast and even a musical.

Given Iris's dedication to saving the messages and objects that carry memories from her past in a format that will allow her to access them in the future, it shouldn't be surprising that she works as a metadata archivist at the American Museum of Natural History, where she uses a metadata schema to encode more information about the historical documents in their archives so that they are easier to link together and find.

Iris Lee:

As a metadata analyst and librarian, my job is to make historical documents accessible for people to find so, what I've been doing for the last few years is working in a schema called EAC-CPF, which is Encoded Archival Context for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families

It's been an important one for us because it's been an important one for us because it allows us to create relationships among the people of the museum, expeditions that they've gone on,

the scientific departments that they worked at. So it really starts to build this network of really the material that we have in the museum, I mean that's why we did it.

That's why we did it cuz we wanted to bring those archives back together, That's when we realized, oh there's some stuff over here about Central Asiatic expeditions, and oh in this department we have some stuff about Central Asiatic expeditions. We just wanted to intellectually put them back together.

It's nice to be able to put a name to a face in an image, we have this great image of Roy Chapman Andrews on a camel with his guide, and I don't know that guide's name, but, you know, there's a potential for us to be able to identify him now that we have more information about that expedition.

Molly Schwartz:

So many love letters from over the years, stored in archives, attics, and basements, have lived on to tell the stories of past relationships, both our own and those of the people who came before us.

If any of you are out with good stories about how you save your texts, please tweet to Library Bytegeist @LibBytegeist, because Iris Lee wants to know.

Thanks so much for tuning in, and I hope you spend this Valentine's Day celebrating the amazing human capacity to love. And don't forget you can subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, or SoundCloud to never miss an episode.

Related Books, Articles, and Links:

Dr. Michelle Janning's upcoming book, *The Stuff of Family Life: How Our Homes Reflect Our Lives* published by Rowman & Littlefield:

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442254794/The-Stuff-of-Family-Life-How-Our-Homes-Reflect-Our-Lives>

FOUND Magazine: <http://foundmagazine.com/>

FOUNDpodcast: <https://www.facebook.com/FOUNDpodcast/>

Cassettes from My Ex: Stories and Soundtracks of Lost Loves, by Jason Bitner, co-founder of FOUND Magazine:

<https://www.amazon.com/Cassette-My-Ex-Stories-Soundtracks/dp/0312565526>

"Archiving Cell Phone Text Messages" by Mike Ashenfelder on the Library of Congress' blog *The Signal*: <https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2012/04/archiving-cell-phone-text-messages/>

"Total Recall: How to Back up all the text message on your iPhone" in *Wired*:
<https://www.wired.com/2013/11/backup-sms-iphone/>

Music and Soundtracks

Opening and closing track: "Magic" by Otis MacDonald
"Scissor Vision" by Letter Box

Tools used to record this podcast

Blue Yeti microphone: www.bluemic.com/products/yeti/

Transcribe: transcribe.wreally.com/app

Reaper: www.reaper.fm/