I Examined My Relationship By Examining My Inbox (Turns Out, Not a Good Idea)

By Emily Smith

As a scientist who studies online dating data, I've spent a lot of time quantifying how other people fall in love. I began to wonder whether it was possible to apply the same methods to my own relationship. I told myself it was for the sake of science: I was acting out of professional curiosity, and would understand others' relationships better by putting myself under the mathematical microscope. But it would be more honest to admit it was also because I missed my boyfriend. After spending three years at college with him, I had left to study for a year at Oxford; this was my equivalent of flipping through photo albums.

But what data to use? We rarely text or take pictures. But in the four years since we began dating, we've exchanged an average of four emails a day, which works out to more than 5,500 emails: if we had just typed out literature to each other, we would've recently completed *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,* though we won't finish *Infinite Jest* for another six years or *In Search of Lost Time* for another nineteen. When I told my boyfriend I wanted to statistically analyze our emails, we had the following conversation:

Him: I think you should ask my permission to do that.

Me: I wouldn't ask your permission to *read* the emails. Why should reading them using a computer be any different?

Him: You're going to find some weird pattern and break up with me.

Me: Either that will be warranted by the data, in which case it's a good thing, or it won't, in which case I'm a bad statistician. Are you saying I'm a bad statistician?

This is what scientists call "obtaining consent".

It was dark and drizzling when I walked back alone to my Oxford dorm room, curled up around my laptop, and dove into the digital record of our relationship. I was unsurprised to find that our emails became more frequent after I left for England. But I felt a jolt when I discovered that I sent my boyfriend far more emails than he sent me.

I closed my program, called my boyfriend and asked him why, according to the data, I missed him more than he missed me. He said that wasn't true, he just preferred to talk on the phone rather than sending me emails. I went back to the data to see if it substantiated his claim, and indeed it did: he used "call me" and "phone" more frequently in his emails.

Having avoided one potential breakup, I returned to the data and looked at how the average length of our emails changed over time...