An E-Mail is (Not) a Letter: the Ethnography of Correspondence and the Practice of Saving Letters and E-Mails

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Summary

After a short introductory review of the letter as a subject of anthropological/ethnological research in a Croatian context, the article, based on a conference presentation, deals with the issue of saving letters and e-mails, regarded as an element that can help us in understanding personal texts that people write and send to each other and in characterizing them as letters or e-mails, or both. The title of the article refers to two ways of thinking about e-mails which are quite different, if not opposed to each other. According to widespread opinion, letters cannot be sent by an electronic mailing system, which means that personal texts must be strongly connected to one or the other of the two types of medium of communication. One type of text is connected to the paper-letter, to its materiality and other characteristics, and the other – to the e-mail. The article argues that this two-fold division or classification is too simple. The article is partly based on published correspondence and partly on ethnographic research which is limited in generational, gender, geographical, temporal and other senses; however, it remains open to individual perspectives of people included in a particular practice.

Key words: correspondence practice, letter, e-mail, saving, ethnology/ethnography, Croatia.

Santrauka

Trumpai apžvelgės laišką kaip antropolginį/etnologinį subjektą Kroatijos kontekste, straipsnis tiria laiškų ir el. laiškų išsaugojimo praktikas. Straipsnio pavadinimas nurodo į du galimus galvojimus apie el. laiškus būdus. Pasak paplitusių nuomonės, laiškai negali būti įsiųsti el. pašto sistemos. Tai leidžia daryti išvadą, jog asmeniniai tekstai privalo būti susieti su vienu iš dviejų komunikacijos tipų. Vieną tekstų rūšį yra susijusi su popieriniu laišku, jo materialumui ir kitomis sa-

http://dx.doi.org/10.15823/alc.2014.23
Letters are not a kind of classical or traditional ethnological or anthropological subject that ethnologists/anthropologists normally investigate in the field. We don’t connect the subject of letters with the notion of ethnographic fieldwork, which is – many would say – the most important part of ethnological or anthropological research. There are numerous ways to explain what ethnographic fieldwork means (Amit, 2000). However, for the purposes of this article, I would like to define it as observing and participating in practices that the ethnographer wants to understand; making thick field-notes and descriptions about those practices as well talking to people whose practices he observes and wants to interpret or analyze. The basic characteristics of fieldwork are: going somewhere, finding people who want to talk about themselves, observing what they do, finding out their perspective on the something they do, also their feelings, beliefs, etc. As for letters as a subject of research, one can say that if letters are written texts, and they are, then we are dealing not with practices but with something fixed on paper or some other appropriate material, i.e. with written works that are commonly connected to traditional philological rather than ethnological or anthropological research.

In Croatian ethnology a letter appears only marginally and, when it does, it is considered solely as a type of historical resource used by ethnologists in their attempts to understand and describe the history of the discipline or as a resource for describing and explaining elements of some classical ethnological themes. I will offer two examples. One of them is an article (Potkonjak, 2004) about a historical figure of Croatian ethnology who wrote official letters to one of the most important institutions for the history of Croatian ethnology. The author of the article tries to find in the letters biographical facts that shed light on the professional life of the person that she writes about.

The other example concerns letters from the First World War, sent by a Croatian farmer fighting in the Austro-Hungarian army to his family back home (Muraj, 1977). His letters consist almost entirely of questions about farming and words of advice to the family on what to do and what not to do with the farm and the agricultural works. Taking into consideration
other elements of farming life at that time, the author of the article draws conclusions about the importance of the land for the peasants in that particular village at the beginning of the twentieth century. These are two examples of using letters as a resource in Croatian ethnology or cultural anthropology.

My approach is somewhat different. I am not interested in letters because of the facts that one can find in them. What I am interested in are the practices connected to letters, namely, the practice of writing, reading, and keeping letters, and the different ways of sending them. I am interested in questions such as these: why do people write letters, for what purposes, to whom, how often, what is conveyed by them; what do people feel when writing or reading letters, what do letters mean to a writer or a reader, and so on. The approach I take is connected to the anthropology of writing (Barton, Papan, 2010) or the ethnography of writing (Danet, 1998), a subdiscipline of ethnology/anthropology and a kind of methodology used in different disciplines, such as sociology, linguistics, cultural studies, and others. In recent years, or perhaps decades, letters, as well as other forms of writing, have become a subject of anthropological (ethnological) research and, within this field of anthropology of writing, they are not observed (solely) as written texts but rather as an element of correspondence practices.

I think it’s pretty obvious that correspondence practices are nowadays greatly linked to a specific form of written communication, namely e-mail communication. Actually, these days it is really hard (but not impossible) to find people who write letters on paper. Paper-based written communication, as we well know, has been greatly replaced by communication by phone or via the internet. Thus, given the present status of written communication, ethnographic research which served in part as the basis of my presentation at the conference, concerned primarily practices of electronic communication. I started that research in 1999; it was partly finished by 2003. Today I have a rich electronic correspondence archive from that period, also many transcripts of interviews and correspondence at my disposal. Thus, in examining electronic communication practices, I used the ethnographic approach which, of course, has its advantages and disadvantages. One might regard as a disadvantage, especially if one wants to get a broader picture, the fact that an ethnographer can reach only a small group of people – extensive ethnographic style interviews with numerous participants cannot be conducted. But, in my opinion, one of the ad-
advantages is that the researcher can talk to people and ask them questions about their perspectives, about how they use communication tools, how they feel, etc. It doesn’t mean that this is the only way of learning about communication practices, but it can provide some interesting insights. In my case, the small group was a group of female correspondents, educated women in their late twenties or early thirties, who lived in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia.³ Considering this fact, it is important to stress the generational, gender, geographical, temporal and other limitations of the insights that I offer in this article.

The other aspect of my approach to letters, which I adopted later, deals with published correspondence from earlier periods. I looked for the same things in the correspondence, in Croatian, as in the e-mails; I did not focus on biographical facts, narration, connectedness to someone’s literary works, and so on. I was interested in *practices* of correspondence. These letters were written by famous people—writers, artists, politicians, among others. The lack of other sources—by which I mean, the lack of letters (or works) written by so-called ordinary people—is connected to the prevailing orientation of humanities in Croatia, which mostly deal with “great” people, important events and happenings, or famous works of art. There are only a few examples of published or otherwise publicly available texts of correspondence—or any other pieces of work—written by ordinary people (Ledić, 2000; Tkalčić, 2002). Still, be they famous or ordinary, they are authors that one can’t actually talk to and ask what they do and why, how they perceive their experience of correspondence practices. Therefore, I looked for answers to questions I’ve mentioned earlier not in conversations with participants but in the very letters written by people in the past. I was surprised to find many “answers” to questions that I was interested in, for example, sentences in which authors deal with the practice of correspondence. One can find comments on the exact time or moment of writing or reading a letter, places where these activities happened, feelings about letter-writing or about waiting for a letter to arrive, tools that are used and many other things that can be useful in imagining the totality of epistolary practice.

Summing up, I can say that I combine several approaches to the subject of letters, namely dealing with texts, conversing with participants, observing and participating in epistolary practice.

And now, I would like to move on to the subject presented in the title of my article. The short sentence of the title contains two nouns—e-mail
and letter – placed in a relationship that is not entirely clear. If we read the title without the words in the brackets, it says that an e-mail is a letter, but if we read it differently, including the words in the brackets, then it says that an e-mail is not a letter. I am not merely playing with words and brackets. I have used that sentence in the title so as to refer to two ways of thinking about e-mails which are pretty different, if not opposed to each other.

According to one opinion, letters cannot be sent by an electronic mailing system. Therefore, in spite of the growing presence of writing in communication practices and due to the rise of e-mail communication, much has been said and written about the death of the letter. In newspapers articles, on the web, in the media in general, and even in academic writing, the idea of the disappearance of letters was (and is) strongly present. One can talk about the widespread image of disappearing letters in today’s society. In the Croatian cultural space, for instance, there are many examples of nostalgia for letters. Of course, we can be nostalgic only about something that doesn’t exist anymore. If one looks at statistical data offered by different postal services, one finds that we are not dealing only with opinions or images of the disappearing letter. The number of personal enveloped letters has, indeed, declined over the past decades. Therefore, if we are talking about texts handwritten on pieces of paper, enclosed in envelopes, bearing a stamp, and sent by a traditional postal system to someone who probably lives far away, we can say that this form of written communication is disappearing or has already disappeared. If one talks about objects, one can say that letters are something from the past, whereas e-mails – written texts typed on a computer and sent by an electronic mail system – are something of the present. That opinion was presented by my interlocutors in their narratives. I have noticed that they did not think of e-mails as letters, but not only because of the different ways of conveying written texts from one point to another.

According to statements of my interlocutors as well as the many comments on epistolary practices in media nowadays, a letter is not just an object; it implies a special kind of text. When someone talks or writes about letters, he or she often thinks of texts that are written carefully, with many thoughts and emotions, and a special focus on the receivers. The image is something like this: when someone writes a letter, he or she takes all the time that is needed, chooses words carefully, puts them in the right order, thinks about the receiver, devotes time to him or her,
and so on. I would say that this is the prevailing image of the letter. By contrast, the prevailing image of an e-mail is completely different. If e-mails are not badly written (and often they are or that is what they are accused of), they are short, written hastily, at once rather that in a few days or hours, which was pretty common in paper-based communication, and so on. So, the special types of texts are strongly connected to one or the other type of medium of communication. One type of text is connected to the paper-letter, its materiality and other characteristics, and the other – to the e-mail. I argue that this division or classification is too simple, especially nowadays when electronic mail has almost completely replaced paper-based communication as compared with the transitional period of the 1990’s and the beginning of the 2000’s.

This can be confirmed by an analysis of the different elements of correspondence practice; however, in this article I would like to refer to just one of those elements, namely a practice that can reveal notions about letters and e-mails – the practice of saving or keeping or archiving somebody’s correspondence. Why did I choose this topic? Letters are considered to be texts and objects which are very important in someone’s private life. If something is really important to us, we would probably want to save it and keep it from losing. My research has led me to believe that practices of saving or storing one’s correspondence can tell us a great deal about the importance of what is or is not being saved. That is why I focused on providing an answer to the following questions: do people save their private electronic correspondence? Did they save their correspondence from some earlier period? What do they think about that? How do they save correspondence, what choices do they have and why, what are the differences between saving electronic correspondence and preserving correspondence from the non-digital age?

I’d like to illustrate my point by the example of a famous Croatian female writer and poet Irena Vrkljan. She emigrated to West Germany in the 1960’s for personal rather than political reasons. Speaking about her migration to Germany in an extensive interview, published together with her intimate prose, the author refers to several letters that she took with her the day she traveled to the new country and a new life. It is important to know that, according to her memoirs, her luggage was very small – just one suitcase with a couple of practical things, such as clothes, a map of the city, also personal things – pictures and books, and, of course, letters. We don’t learn any details about these letters, but we can nevertheless as-
sume, if not conclude, something about their importance in the author’s life, because they found their place among the small group of personal objects that she took with her. Some years later, she brought them back to Croatia because, as she said while still in Berlin: “If something happened, nobody could read them here.” (Vrkljan, 2004)

One can find similar examples of saving, keeping, and storing personal letters in various passages of literature – autobiographies, diaries, intimate prose, published recollections; any one of them could have been chosen to illustrate my point.

Together with this image of letters saved, one can mention a different one, that of letters lost some time in the past. But, of course, those letters can be discovered, and, according to people who describe such findings, that is always exciting. This image also contributes to the notion of the importance of letters in one’s personal life.

By contrast, some letters are accidentally or deliberately destroyed, some stay lost forever. Authors who write or talk about them, by the very fact of remembering them, confirm that the letters were important to them for one reason or another. To give just one example, one of the most famous Croatian folklorists, MajaBošković-Stulli, mentions remembering a lost letter written to her at the beginning of the Second World War by the man she loved; at that time they were separated because of the fascist regime in Croatia (Bošković-Stulli, 2007). She remembered only a couple of sentences of that letter, but the way she talked about it says a lot about the importance of that little text written on a piece of paper and sent to her.

Numerous collections of published or unpublished letters of well-known people, also numerous private letters kept for some time in so-called ordinary families, confirm the assumption that letters – or, rather, particular letters – are things that we keep and don’t throw away with other temporary things.

All the examples I have mentioned and all similar examples from Croatian literature that I haven’t, but could have provided, refer to paper correspondence and letters. But what about saving and keeping electronic correspondence? Do people save their personal electronic correspondence? If they do, what is the status of that correspondence in the totality of memorabilia? Is there anything to keep?

Some of my interlocutors and correspondents talked or wrote about the insignificance of e-mails, seeing them as – I quote – “some kind of
temporary communication.” They didn’t refer only to e-mail messages from mailing lists, or informative messages sent by different institutions, or messages that belong to pragmatic or business communication, but also to personal or private communication. One of my interlocutors said:

When I write an e-mail, I have a feeling of some kind of transience. It’s similar to chatting: you exchange words with other people, but most words go down the drain. You don’t remember much of the conversation. It is completely different when you write a letter. A letter is something permanent, something that one will read over and over again. You don’t read e-mails again. You read them and then you forget about them.

Trying to underline the temporality of e-mail communication, one of my interlocutors compares a text that appears in e-mail messaging with a text in her diary and says:

When I write a diary, I write something that I will read again. And when I write a letter, I know or suppose that somebody will read it carefully and keep it for the future. But when I write an e-mail, I am sure that the person who I write to will only scan and forget the letter or even delete it, so I don’t try to be a careful or dedicated writer. I just put some words in it and send them without thinking.

There were other, different notions about e-mails at that time, but the prevailing attitude of my interlocutors towards e-mails was similar to that of the woman quoted. Here we are talking about explicit attitudes, about something people say when you ask them a question. But one can obtain “answers” to one’s questions in other ways, for instance by asking people about other things, by observing them when they participate in particular practices, by corresponding with them, etc. So although the woman I quoted says that she doesn’t save e-mails and doesn’t think of e-mails as something important, her e-mails to me and to some other correspondents reveal that she actually saves some e-mails and re-reads them. In one of her e-mails she writes:

[…] do you know what I am doing all evening? I am reading old e-mails, crazy me […] I don’t know what happened to me, but it’s a little funny, and also a little sad. […] I actually started to write my diary, so I needed one old e-mail and […] then I found myself reading other old e-mails.
There are a lot of examples like this one. I am not going to quote all of them, but I want to stress that explicit statements about something do not reveal everything about the actual behavior of people. So, when ethnologists like me want to interpret one particular practice, they have to take into consideration a number of things. If I used only statements obtained in interviews, I would conclude that personal e-mail communication between people who participated in it was insignificant. But taking into account many other things, I reached the conclusion that e-mail communication is not so unimportant, and it is not always something that people delete or at least don’t think or mind about. Of course, I don’t have enough time to present all of my findings about keeping and saving e-mails, but I can conclude that the question of the importance or the unimportance of personal e-mail communication, of keeping or deleting e-mails, is not as simple as it seemed to me when I started researching it. One of the prevailing findings was that my interlocutors didn’t want to keep e-mails, didn’t think of them as significant and important in their personal lives, but, in time, some e-mails turned out to be important for them and they started to think about them as something that they would like to keep for the future. I think that this is connected to the transformations that have happened since the first period of e-mail use, namely the period from the end of the twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first century, which was, in many ways, a transitional period from paper-based communication to electronic-based communication. It was a period when e-mails started replacing telephone conversations, but people still wrote letters on paper. Later, people started to replace their paper-communication with e-mail communication and many ways of writing paper-letters have moved to writing e-mail texts. Nowadays, when someone writes an e-mail, they can follow the telephone type of conversation (short sentences and other characteristics of oral communication, etc.), but they can also follow the paper-based type of communication (which means writing long sentences, thinking about them in great detail, devoting time to writing, and so on). Of course, here we are talking about constructed types of communication (because there is a lot of overlapping and, actually, we can’t extract two or more practices that are clean, precise or unambiguous), but sometimes these constructed types can help us interpret and analyze everyday practices and transformations that occur in time.
Conclusions

As a paper which deals with just one element of correspondence practice, based on a limited corpus of texts and a limited number of interlocutors, and as a paper which no more than explores the rich area of correspondence saving practices, the article does not have the ambition to offer any (final) conclusions about the relationship between letters and e-mails; it only tries to give direction to the possible ways of comparing letters and e-mails and the possible answers to the question: are e-mails letters or are they not? There is no one answer to that question, quite the contrary, and the issue of saving letters and e-mails, here presented only in draft form, is one of the issues that can help us in imagining possible answers. One of those answers is that we can send letters not only by a traditional post system but by an electronic mailing system as well, which means that e-mails are letters or, rather, they can be letters. In that case, the word letters refers to a special kind of texts, not to objects or ways of conveying texts. Through the practice of keeping and saving texts written and sent to someone by traditional or by electronic mail, one can learn something about the importance of those texts to the receiver and that the practice can help us in understanding those personal texts and in characterizing them as letters or e-mails, or both.

References

1 This article is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the conference The Letter in Literature and Culture (Vilnius, September 2014). The presentation at the conference was based on insights from my book published under the title Pismo, poruka, mejl: etnografijakorespondencije (A letter, a message, an e-mail: the ethnography of correspondence) (Pleše, 2014).

2 I try to find answers to the earlier mentioned questions primarily in conversations and different types of interactions among participants of correspondence practices. It can be said that my research is conducted in accordance with standard ethnological procedures, including interviews and participation in (correspondence) practices.

3 Focusing on electronic correspondence doesn’t mean that we talked only about electronic practices of correspondence, quite the contrary. At that time, many of my interlocutors still participated in part or at least recalled their own correspondence practices before the electronic age.

4 Traces of that opinion can be found in the different terms used for texts we send to each other. In Croatian, the term we use for texts sent by an electronic mail system is e-mail or e-mail message, not e-mail letter (although, as in English, we can also find in Croatian examples of the usage of the term e-mail letter; but this is very rare). So, we send and receive e-mails or messages.
My insights into contemporary communication practices indicate that the notion of a letter as an object affects the notion of an e-mail that isn’t a letter. The materiality of a letter and the so-called non-materiality or the lack of materiality of an e-mail were extremely important for participants in their understanding of what a letter metant and were closely attached to their image of a letter. It has something to do with differences in notions about paper-letters and e-mails. Materiality is not important on its own, but it must be taken into account because it can lead us to a better understanding of the prevailing notions about letters and e-mails.

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