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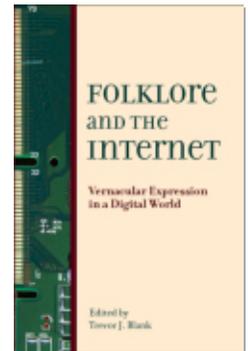
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Introduction

Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet

TREVOR J. BLANK

In his essay "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," Dan Ben-Amos asserts: "If the initial assumption of folklore research is based on the disappearance of its subject matter, there is no way to prevent the science from following the same road" (1971, 14). In similar fashion, Alan Dundes began his presidential plenary address to the American Folklore Society in 2004 with a grim outlook on the future of the discipline by contending that the "state of folkloristics at the beginning of the twenty-first century is depressingly worrisome" (2005, 385). Such alarm-sounding statements merit our attention, but the fact remains that this has been a recurring assertion within this academic discipline for some time (Oring 1998). Richard Dorson lamented in 1972 that in "a few more years, there will be no more folklore, and *ergo*, no need for any folklorists" (41); but as Dorson "responded by looking elsewhere and [subsequently] found folklore in the media and a folk in the city" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 302), we too must respond by looking elsewhere when such feelings of impending doom surface in folklore scholarship.

Folklore is a self-conscious discipline, and speculation on the future of folkloristics—the academic study of folklore—has been pessimistic at best. In a similar vein, Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs note that tradition "has been reportedly on the verge of dying for more than three centuries, [yet] . . . continues to provide useful means of producing and legitimizing new modernist projects, sets of legislators, and schemes of social inequality" (Bauman and Briggs 2003, 306). Despite all of the

doom and gloom, folklore "continues to be alive and well in the modern world, due in part to increased transmission via e-mail and the Internet" (Dundes 2005, 406). It is time that folklorists look to the Internet, not only to expand our scholastic horizons but also to carry our discipline into the digital age.

The formulation of the World Wide Web network has its roots in the Cold War tensions of the mid-twentieth century. The earliest incarnations were spawned in the form of the U.S. Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), created mainly in response to the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik. Beginning in 1958, ARPANET served the military and academic researchers as a means of communication and as a command tool for defense operations. E-mail technology was created in 1970, and by the 1980s people were interacting online through bulletin boards (discussion groups), MUDs (multiuser dungeons), and the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), a social network composed of Internet users from across the globe; later, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) followed (Hafner and Lyon 1998).[1]

The modern Internet emerged with the creation of the World Wide Web in 1989 by English computer scientist Timothy Berners-Lee. The development of HyperText Markup Language (HTML) and web browser technology allowed the Internet to expand from an exclusive academic forum into the worldwide phenomenon it is today. In 1992, the Internet was opened to the public domain.

> At the beginning of the 1990s there took place a fundamental transformation of the Internet . . . as the web became the center of the Internet and web browsers became the most common way of accessing it, transformations in the communication processes established over the Internet also took place due to the specific characteristic of the web and its browsers. The web introduced new ways of communicating over the Internet, facilitated the use of the net, leading to its popularization, and, to a great extent, also facilitated and promoted its commercialization (Bermejo, 2007, 73).

As the Internet developed as a communications facilitator, folklore emerged as recognizably on it as it did in "the real world." From the earliest moments of the modern Internet's existence, folklore was a central component of the domain, moderating the intersection of computer professionals with hackers, newfangled lingo, and the dispersal of stories, pranks, and legends (Jennings 1990).[2] Bruce McClelland notes that as a result, "the boundary between the actual and the virtual began to become blurred" (2000, 182). Established academics recognized both the power presented by the burgeoning of Internet folklore and the

importance carried by studying it: "Right now, all we have on the Net is folklore, like the Netiquette that old-timers try to teach the flood of new arrivals, and debates about freedom of expression versus nurturance of community . . . A science of Net behavior is not going to reshape the way people behave on-line, but knowledge of the dynamics of how people do behave is an important social feedback loop to install if the Net is to be self-governing at any scale" (Rheingold 2000, 64).[3] But while folklore emerged on the Internet, folklorists generally did not follow it.

When the World Wide Web took off in the 1990s, the allied disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and communication studies began paying careful attention to various sociocultural dimensions of the Internet, but amid this dialogue only a small handful of thoughtful folkloristic articles on the burgeoning Internet culture appeared (Baym 1993; Dorst 1990; Howard 1997; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 1996; Roush 1997). With few exceptions, folklorists have generally neglected the Internet as a venue for academic inquiry for nearly two decades, and a large portion of the existing literature on folklore and the Internet has been penned by armchair folklorists—scholars untrained in the vocabulary and methodologies of the discipline— through the lens of social science, communication, and literature degrees. Each year, the American Folklore Society's annual meeting boasts more papers and panels on folklore and the Internet than the year before, yet these papers have not found their way to a culminating publication. One of the first and only specialized folkloristic examinations of the Internet took place on the electronic pages of the graduate-student-run *Folklore Forum* of Indiana University,[4] which published a special issue on the topic in spring 2007 (volume 37, no. 1); the issue featured only *two* original articles on the topic (Blank 2007; Foote 2007).[5]

To seek out folkloristic literature about the Internet is to spend numerous hours piecing together data strewn about aimlessly, spanning many years and multiple publications. *Folklore Forum* notwithstanding, no comprehensive work that details the folkloristic approach to the study of the Internet has been produced to date. It is my hope that this book will help to fill that void. In a discipline seemingly obsessed with a fear of its own demise, the Internet provides a limitless frontier for contemporary scholastic possibilities. If it is currency we seek, then we needn't look further. "It is here, in the heat of a nascent technology," writes Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "that we can contemplate what folklore's contemporary subject might be," adding that "electronic communication offers an opportunity to rethink folklore's disciplinary givens and to envision a fully contemporary subject. It is not a matter of finding

folklore analogues between the paperless office and the paperwork empire. The differences are consequential" (1995, 72–73).

So why have folklorists taken so long to systematically study the impact of the Internet? The exact reasons that folklorists as a group have predominantly ignored the Internet and technologically based folklore are uncertain. Folklore theory holds that folkloric expression is reflective and serves as a "mirror" of societal and cultural values; folklorists should therefore use this mirror to analyze society and culture. This ought to encourage a scholarly examination of the Internet, due to this format's status as a major agent of communication (especially over the last decade). Still, folklorists of the late twentieth century have not budged. This lack of motivation in studying the use of folklore in burgeoning technology could conceivably rest within the ideologies bestowed upon folklore trainees prior the advent of the Internet and computerlore. Perhaps Richard Dorson's fears regarding the permeance of "fakelore" made the unverifiability of technologically based folklore a skeptical topic among new and old folklorists alike. Maybe it has been folklorists' favoritism toward the study of vanishing cultures and traditions, or "old-timey stuff" (as Henry Glassie used to call it in his graduate lectures).[6]

Or, perchance, could it be that no one scholar (or group of scholars) has stepped forward to guide the discipline into studying this field? There has been plenty of internal chatter about the Internet at folklore meetings, and the occasional journal article, but folklorists have not engaged in a greater dialogue with allied disciplines. Once folklorists liberate themselves from their self-imposed boundaries of scholastic inquiry, they will be able to complement or challenge the concepts put forth by scholars in fields such as sociology, communications, and popular-culture studies.

As Simon Bronner (2002) notes, the Internet is often thought of as mass culture par excellence, but it is hard to miss its qualities as a system of and a storehouse for folklore.[7] Still, the inherent intangibility of the Internet's interface may have made some ethnographers hesitant to engage the format. After all, Ben-Amos' classic definition of folklore assertively emphasizes that "folklore communication takes place in a situation in which people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly" (1971, 12–13), yet he also declares that folklore "is the action that happens at [the time of the communicative event]" and, as such, "is an artistic action" (10). This is confusing when carried over into an Internet context. Clearly, communicative events take place, but the lack of face-to-face interactions contradicts the instinctual efforts of

the ethnographer. These are only a few of the potential reasons why folk-lorists have neglected the Internet as a venue for scholastic inquiry.

It is important to note that not *all* folklorists turned a blind eye to the possibilities of studying folklore and technology.[8] Alan Dundes, one of folklore's greatest thinkers, knew that technology was a friend of the folklorist, not a foe. He wrote (as Bronner reminds us in chapter 1) that "technology isn't stamping out folklore; rather it is becoming a vital factor in the transmission of folklore and it is providing an exciting source of inspiration for the generation of new folklore" (1980, 17). Unfortunately, it appears that the majority of folklore scholars have missed this statement. While folk processes will exist so long as humans communicate and create, the academic discipline of folklore continues to be at risk of disappearing into other fields, either by way of assimilation or by a change in terminological boundaries. There has been internal bickering over the term "folklore" itself and its applicability as an ideological label for what folklorists study (Bendix 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Oring 1998). Regina Bendix notes that the field of folklore resists "semantic imprisonment" and thrives "on interdisciplinarity of method and thought" (1998, 237). So there is still confusion as to what exactly constitutes folklore, and presumably the debate will continue so long as there are constituents to argue about it.

For the purposes of this book, it is important to define what, specifically, constitutes "folklore," particularly in an Internet context, in order to better frame the ideological underpinnings by which the authors and editor operate. Folklorists must be careful to carve out their niche in the scholarly dialogue so as not to confuse their approaches with those of anthropology or sociology. Not every issue involving electronic communication is necessarily a folklore issue, and we must equally examine the modifying terms that fall under the umbrella of "folklore" in an Internet context. What comprises vernacular expression? What do tradition, belief, legend, performance, and narrative mean in an Internet context? How does the Internet complicate notions of folk group, of audience, and of the dynamic, reflexive character of performance? As a mediatory agent, how does the Internet affect expression, engender unique folk-loric material (and thus become a distinctive folk product itself), and reconfigure the nature of communication as a form of cultural maintenance and definition?

McClelland simplifies folklore by describing it as "communicative behavior whose primary characteristics . . . are that . . . it doesn't 'belong' to an individual or group . . . and in the modern context therefore transcends issues of intellectual property; and [that] . . . it is transmitted

spontaneously, from one individual (or group of individuals) to another under certain conditions, frequently without regard for remuneration or return benefit. As it is transmitted, it often undergoes modification, according to the inclination of the retransmitter" (2000, 184). This description weighs communication and transmission more heavily as essential components than do traditional notions of folklore, which celebrate the role of creativity and aesthetics. Nonetheless, folklore isn't limited to orality. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that "folklore as a discipline has tended to conceive the everyday in largely aesthetic terms" (1998, 308), pointing to Ben-Amos' definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups" (1971, 13) and the American Folklife Center's characterization as "community life and values, artfully expressed in myriad forms and interactions" (Hufford 1991, 1).[9] Elliott Oring puts it succinctly by saying that folklore "is about people—individuals and communities—and their aesthetic expression" (1998, 335). A reliance on *aesthetics* seems to place a stronger emphasis on tangibility as a measurement of what constitutes folklore than the terms *communication* and *transmission* might allow. Furthermore, it leaves room for prejudice— what one person may find beautiful or important conversely may seem ugly or frivolous to another. This is problematic.

We mustn't be afraid to challenge the boundaries of the folklore discipline. For too long we have regurgitated folkloristic studies or have been subsumed by other disciplines' methodologies. I propose a combination of the aforementioned definitions, as they all present limitations to the study of folklore on the Internet and oftentimes to other subdivisions of folkloristic inquiry. For this book, and hopefully beyond it, folklore should be considered to be the outward expression of creativity—in myriad forms and interactions—by individuals and their communities. The debate then falls to what constitutes *creativity* or even what constitutes *community*. *That* should be the job of the folklorist to argue cogently one way or another.[10] The resulting analytical construct, formed by the scholar in reaction to the character of folklore, is where a folklorist is needed for interpretation and indeed is qualified to comment.

It may be noted that *tradition* is curiously absent from this definition. As Simon Bronner notes, Dan Ben-Amos worried that tradition "prevented the folklorist's subject from expanding to emergent performances in mass culture" (Bronner 2002, 30). I share this concern.[11] Robert Glenn Howard reminds us that "what is essential about folkloric expression is not a 'traditional' origin. Instead, it is . . . 'continuities and consistencies' that allow a specific community to perceive such expression as traditional, local, or community generated" (2008a, 201).[12] A caveat

worth mentioning is that my definition risks being conceived of as too broad, a longstanding problem in separating folklore from allied disciplines. However, I submit that folklore is empowered by its diversity; this definition is purposefully inclusive to capitalize on that strength of the discipline.[13]

If my definition may stand, then what merits folkloristic study? William Wells Newell believed that "technology, specifically print, produces the social distinction between high and low that generates folklore," and further posited that "genuine folklore" is lore that escapes print (1883, v). But we mustn't forget that print promoted folklore and allowed folklorists to "constitute the oral in relation to a distinctive technology of detachment and extension" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 309). The Internet is the new "print" technology, duplicating our materials from the physical field and transferring them (though not necessarily always altering them) into an electronic vernacular. The result is similar to the way that printed versions of folklore originally stimulated oral tradition in the past.[14] The Internet does not diminish the potency of folklore; instead, it acts as a folkloric conduit. "Electronic messages are neither a playscript nor a transcript . . . They *are* the event," writes Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995, 74; emphasis in original).

Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that technology can bring the vernacular into sight, thus facilitating community culture and promoting nationalism—traditional byproducts and correlates of folklore. The Internet has altered established notions of social identity, which has made stigmatizing constraints such as gender and race less relevant than they are in the physical world (McClelland 2000, 182). One must then ask, has this been a positive thing? I believe it has been. Due to its inclusivity, the Internet has helped to re-facilitate the spread of folklore through electronic conduits. Robert Thompson points out that "we have really returned here, in spite of the centralization of technology, to the old-fashioned definition of what folk culture used to be . . . We have these jokes and stories that will never see the printed page that exist only as glowing dots of phosphorous. It's not word-of-mouth folk culture but word-of-modem culture" (Grimes 1992, C14, quoted in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996, 50).[15]

With regard to the burgeoning "telectronic age," John Dorst, in 1990, worried that "our discursive practices as folklorists do not equip us very well to deal with these unprecedented and complex conditions of cultural production" (189). This may have been true twenty years ago, but the Internet has fundamentally changed the world we live in today and has been absorbed into the everyday life of folklorists of all generations.

It is not a foreign commodity; it is a tool of cultural production that we utilize on a daily basis. As Howard notes, Dorst recognized "the capacity for network communication to blend vernacular and institutional modes of communication in ways that frustrated distinctions between 'folk' and mass media" (Howard 2008a, 192). This blending has been problematic for ethnographers, as the Internet's "field" is sometimes construed as foreign to them. It is difficult to find one's bearings at times. Nevertheless, the cyberfield is increasingly engaging humans despite its liminal state.

While the remoteness of the Internet may seem unappealing to the folklorist, Regina Bendix reminds us that "the field has never confined itself to 'remoteness,' and that its most interesting and least dogmatic thinkers have always found the ubiquity of expressive culture (across time, space, class) most intriguing" (1998, 243). Folklore continues on the Internet whether we examine it or not,[16] so it is practical to study folklore in an Internet context. We must rethink the topics that have previously captured our interests and contemplate their Internet correlates. Perhaps some folklorists fear that the Internet will undermine the credibility of their work or negatively impact the content of their research, but it should be noted that "new technologies do not necessarily displace, replace, or eliminate earlier ones. They alter the relations among them and incorporate one another—with far-reaching effects" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 310). In the fraction of a second it takes for the human brain to send a command to the index finger, a single transmission of text can be distributed to potentially thousands, even millions of people. Internet users are frequently participating in many interesting folkloric activities online. Chain letters, "end of the Internet" websites, and forwarded humor are all ubiquitous. The Internet's proclivity for pseudonymous interaction and the ease with which texts can be transmitted make it the ideal location, instead of oral and journalistic venues, for the resurfacing of narrative texts.

So let's look at online narratives for a moment. By nature, e-mail hoaxes and forwarded humor cannot exist without the Internet, as they are exclusive to this venue. Through the microcosm of topical humor, Bill Ellis notes that "traditionally, folklore has been seen as a localized phenomenon . . . While previous collections from before 1987 stressed oral tradition, the anonymity of frequently forwarded messages has quickly made this the preferred mode of circulating topical humor," further adding that the "increased internationalism of email conduits now makes it normal, even commonplace, to exchange impressions and reactions across continental and even linguistic barriers . . . Comparing the

content and form of [topical humor] to previous oral-based collections may reveal some significant ways in which the Internet has impacted the folk process" (2001, section 4). In this regard, Daryl Cumber Dance holds that due to its contemporary accessibility, "techlore" has supplanted the paperwork empire as one of the most popular new forms of folklore: "With the advent of E-mail, pieces that were formerly copied and circulated are now sent with one click of the mouse to a long list of one's associates—who often send them on to other groups of acquaintances" (Dance 2002, 647). With topical humor, Liisi Laineste adds that "collecting jokes on the Internet is becoming . . . unavoidable" (2003, 93). In a research setting, then, the text becomes both a primary and a secondary document, depending on the researcher's inclinations for its use.

In the pre-Internet age, one may have seen chain letters or text sprites in the form of letters sent pyramid scheme-like to random addresses or as a component of computerlore or Xeroxlore (Dundes 1965a; Dundes and Pagter 1975, 1987, 1996; Fox 1983). The Internet provides an anonymous medium for web users to quickly disseminate information, which often leads to a more authentic performance of the user's true self (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002). In this sense, the Internet is an ideal channel for the transmission of folk narratives, due to its anonymity and efficiency in the speedy dissemination of ideas. For researchers, the electronic transmissions of narratives provide a greater paper trail to test out theorizations on the role of conduits in narrative transference. In their oral context, legends are richly evocative of society's fears, hopes, anxieties, and prejudices, and folklorists decode these narratives to reveal and analyze the cultural attitudes expressed within. The Internet provides a new opportunity for us to study legends and their subsidiaries, such as chain letters and e-mail hoaxes. While orally transmitted legends convey societal fears and prejudices in coded language, electronically transmitted narratives express these sentiments more abrasively, due to the sender's anonymity (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002; Blank 2007; Eichhorn 2001; Fernback 2003; Kibby 2005).

Folk groups are readily identifiable on the Internet, as evidenced by chat forums, blogs, online political activity, fan web pages, and a plethora of other interrelated concepts. New traditions are being forged in online communities, and web lingo—emerging in such forms as net-derived lingo (see netlingo.com), wiki-based Internet vocabulary databases like urbandictionary.com, or the communal folk wisdom of online discussion groups—demonstrates the uniqueness of Internet expression.[17] Of course, these assertions are complicated by a lack of empirical data and physical connectivity between the researcher and his informant. As

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has contemplated, "What do terms like *group* or *community* mean when strangers at computer terminals at the far ends of the world type messages to each other? . . . The electronic vernacular is neither speech nor writing as we have known it, but something in between, and increasingly, with the convergence of technologies, it is multimedia" (1998, 284; emphasis in original).

The digital world is paradoxically familiar, due to its governing social dynamics, and simultaneously foreign, due to its virtual format. The ethnographer faces many challenges that must be taken into consideration with the Internet. Milton Shatzer and Thomas Lindlof contend that ethnographers "cannot make adequate sense out of communication" without the ability to observe nonverbal behavioral cues, noting that e-mail and other online communications bypass the social pecking orders imposed in group interaction, such as eye contact, seating arrangements, and characteristics such as "gender, race, expertise, or organizational position" (1998, 178).[18] Coming from the perspective of folklore studies, I disagree. It is foolish to become fixated solely on the subconscious or nonverbal processes of communication. Is cyberethnography illegitimate because it equalizes the social statuses of its users? By ignoring cyberethnographic data, aren't we discounting a very important social dynamic that is taking place? We should be interested in how people express themselves, in whatever manner that occurs. Admonishing cyberethnography for its lack of physicality limits the scope of the researcher's analysis and is narrow-minded. While an expression may appear differently in the online world than it does in the physical world, there is room for analysis on the distinguishing characteristics between the two.

Internet scholar Denise Carter mentions that ethically, "cyberethnography is similar to conventional ethnography because the four main moral obligations of dealing with human subject research are the same: the principle of non-maleficence, the protection of anonymity, the confidentiality of data, and the obtaining of informed consent" (2005, 152). Moreover, communication "in the absence of face-to-face interaction and at a distance is as old as the circulation of objects . . . and the transmission of signals" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996, 21). As I have suggested before, the "lure of the foreignness of the field may be [a reason why we resist] the Internet as an appropriate place to conduct fieldwork. After all . . . conducting fieldwork 'in the field' is a tradition of the folklore discipline itself. However, as times change, our profession must progress accordingly" (Blank 2007, 21). It is undeniable that the psychological identification of place has been forged in the online format. With this in

mind, I have posited that the Internet's "field" cannot be separated from the traditional field to which folklorists are accustomed. While there are fundamental differences between the two—specifically, that the former is virtual and the latter, physical—they are bound by common themes.[19] Both have folk groups, customs, lingo and dialects, neighborhoods, crimes, relationships, games, discussion groups, displays of emotion, banking, commerce, and various other forms of communication and education (Blank 2007).

It is important to realize that just because the Internet is virtual, or "doesn't exist" as McClelland (2000) contends, it still has an inherent base in the real world. The fact remains that there is a human behind everything that takes place online, and this is where the folklorist's field-work on the Internet should begin. We must ask ourselves, how do we interact with the computer as ethnographers and as participants? Who are the folk in cyberspace (the cyberfolk, if you will)? What makes them different from the traditional folk? What are the constraints or exigencies that dictate how they carry themselves in an Internet context? When we begin to answer these questions, we can then make a case for what constitutes vernacular expression and how these expressions evince creativity or traditional components. Howard says that norms and forms can be properly termed *vernacular* when they "signal local or 'home born' qualities of a particular human communication." He further asserts that vernacularity "can only emerge into meaning by being seen as distinct from the mass, the official, and the institutional" and argues that "there is a class of online discourse that is properly termed 'vernacular' because it invokes characteristics that are recognized as distinct from those recognized as 'institutional,'"[20] adding that while "this conception might frustrate our desires to rigidly locate discrete documents that are amateur or professional, traditional or mass mediated, its flexibility provides the theoretical language necessary for speaking about the inextricably intertwined nature of public and private, personal and commercial, individual and group in the communications that new technologies have made possible" (2008a, 194–95).[21] The vernacular comes to have meaning when it is alien to some institution (Glassie 1999; Howard 2005). Scholars may look at the same things, and draw the same conclusions, but they report their findings in their own discipline's terminology. Folklore is too important for that. We *are* the folk—as participants, as scholars, and as citizens. Our insight is needed.

Richard Bauman discusses the traditional concept of the homogeneous folk society as imposing a set of blinders on folklorists, skewing their attention away from conditions under which differences of identity

gave shape to the social use of folklore (1972; 1983; 1992). I believe that institutional hegemony runs the risk of imposing similar blinders on the scope of folkloristic inquiry. As scholars, we mustn't neglect technology and mass culture. "Mass culture uses folk culture," writes Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and "folk culture mutates in a world of technology" (1998, 307).[22] She further notes that "the very technologies that threaten to displace oral traditions are also the instruments for preserving them" (1995, 70). The Internet is changing the game for folklorists and allied scholars; moreover, it is fundamentally changing culture and the way we should think about it (Putnam 2000). "The electronic inscription and reproduction of folklore forms merely epitomizes and makes especially visible the wholesale transformation of social and material relations that characterizes our historical moment" (Dorst 1990, 183).

The Internet has shifted the social constructions of community, often taking on its own unique characteristics and modes of expressions. Participatory media, notes Howard, offer "powerful new channels through which the vernacular can express its alterity" (2008a, 192). Creativity is at the center of folkloristic inquiry, and the manifestations of online identity formation, artistic expression, folk religion, and the social dynamics of community construction are all important venues for analysis.[23] However, as Howard also notes, "there is no 'pure' or finally 'authentic' vernacular. Instead, the vernacular needs the institutional from which to distinguish itself . . . no pure vernacularity exists, only degrees of hybridity" (2008a, 203; see also Howard 1997, 2001, 2005; Lawless 1998). Christine Hine addresses this point: "Ethnography of the [I]nternet can, then, usefully be about mobility between contexts of production and use, and between online and offline, and it can creatively deploy forms of engagement to look at how these sites are socially constructed and at the same time are social conduits" (2009, 11). For Richard Bauman, "members of particular groups or social categories may exchange folklore with each other on the basis of shared identity, or with others, on the basis of differential identity" (1972, 38). Couldn't this extrapolation be applied to a folkloristic study of the Internet? It may be easy to find a text on a venue like the Internet, but the context may be difficult to ascertain. This is a challenge that folklorists can and must overcome as semiotics and the other cultural processes filtered through the Internet demand our attention (Mechling 1993).

In building off of these ruminations, *Folklore and the Internet* hopes to widen the dialogue about the Internet as both an ethnographic field and an area of folkloristic inquiry. This book is about the intersection of folklore—in all of its multifaceted incarnations—and the Internet.

More importantly, the volume attempts to use a folkloristic perspective to critically examine and contribute to the literature on the sociocultural and performative nature of the Internet. Many of the topics traditionally explored by folklorists—such as humor, expression, tradition, narrative transmission, commemoration, religion, and ritual—have taken on new or modified lives in the digital world. The new essays comprising this book will explore the depth and flexibility of the Internet as a viable site of ethnography and scholarship, in addition to its relevance as a host for identity and communal expression and as a purveyor of various narratives and beliefs, ranging from topical humor to apocalyptic hyperbole.

In chapter 1, Simon J. Bronner raises the question of whether the Internet fosters distinctive cultural practices that could be called traditional. This is a major concern for folklorists, who have noted the blending of oral and electronic transmissions. Can Internet folklore be separated as distinct? If so, what differences permeate? Utilizing a comparative case study in the folklore generated around the publically televised suicide of Pennsylvania's State Treasurer R. Budd Dwyer in 1987, Bronner revisits his own documentation of orally transmitted jokes among college students. The footage of Dwyer's death still circulates widely on the Internet twenty years later and has resulted in new folkloric responses, either expressing the event comically—in discussion threads with joking proverbial comparisons—or as tragic narratives that describe the footage as "haunting" and therefore relate it to the stresses of modern life. Bronner finds these expressive reactions to the footage to be commentaries not just on unnatural death, but also, since it was a publicly televised event, on the Internet itself. He ties this case study to concepts about the Internet of "mythic proportions" and to their implications for the way that people think about virtual traditions in a computer, or Petabyte, age. In so doing, Bronner distinguishes between a folk and an elite Internet, with the former characterized by user-generated material and cultural tropes. These include youth-orientation; expressions of the Internet's visual character; the use of initialisms and responsive threads; themes that generate beliefs and narratives related to death, sex, security, and identity; and a tendency toward scatology. Throughout his chapter, Bronner shows the differences in how analog and digital ways of thinking affect the conceptualization of tradition on the Internet, noting that the folk Internet is analytical in its structure, rather than relational.

If we can discern the qualities of the folk Internet, what else bears attention? Folk narratives have often been a subject of great interest among folklorists, since they convey societal fears, hopes, expectations, and celebrations. Elizabeth Tucker examines the relationship between

websites' renditions of missing women's stories and legends about the ghosts of murdered women in chapter 2. Besides offering warnings, legends reflect society's fears, especially about women's vulnerability to danger. Tucker examines two websites about young partygoers who disappeared, as well as one website about a group of missing women from the street culture of Vancouver, Canada. The international attention paid to the disappearance of Natalee Holloway stimulated exchanges on these websites in which true, false, and dubious reports of Holloway sightings displayed legend dialectics in action. On the most active websites dedicated to missing women, the objective is clearly to safeguard those women who still live. Here, the guardians of the living are not ghosts, but caring women who exchange narratives in order to protect younger women from fatal mistakes. Through these websites, Tucker demonstrates that legend dialectics, already well-studied in relation to oral narratives, also apply to websites about women who have mysteriously vanished. In so doing, she helps to establish the validity of the Internet in examining narrative forms.

In chapter 3, Lynne S. McNeill investigates the ways in which the Internet facilitates the creation and propagation of folklore through the lens of "End of the Internet" websites. As a textually based folk form devoid of the intricacies of Web 2.0 (such as interactivity and social networking), McNeill believes that these sites exemplify the possibilities the study of folklore can have in an Internet context. She explores the idea of "digital natives"—the generation born into communication technologies—and how the general acceptance of this concept implies that there is a distinct culture on the Internet to which one can be native (or nonnative) and in which individuals can function. McNeill holds that it makes perfect sense that folklore would emerge on the Internet in a normal and even expected way; this locus is simply another conduit of person-to-person communication and, as such, should encourage folkloric transmission just as efficiently as other folk forms. For McNeill, electronic venues such as Facebook and texting devices reconceptualize face-to-face communication and thus operate in the same spirit. These are important expositions to contemplate as we argue for the validity of Internet studies, which rests on vernacular principles such as nativity and distinguishable expressive traits.

Electronic mail has become a robust medium for the transmission of jokes, especially topical jokes. Unlike oral joke-telling, the "telling" of an e-mailed joke typically entails forwarding an unaltered text at whatever moment one happens to receive it, without regard for either what the recipients are doing at that moment or how they will respond when they

read it. In chapter 4, Russell Frank examines the folkloristic mechanics of these transmissions. The content of these forwarded e-mail messages challenges canonical folkloristic ideas about the importance of performance and social context, as well as the roles of individual creativity and audience response in textual variation. Though the influence of social context is weaker on forwards than it is on orally told jokes, the impact of cultural context appears to be much stronger. Just as the Internet lends itself to reporting news as soon as it happens, it also is prone to registering instantaneous responses to the news—including jokes. In this regard, Frank believes that forwarded jokes may be the most reliable guide we have to which news events, public figures, and joke types have captured the public's imagination at any given moment. He therefore examines several joke types in an Internet context, including riddle jokes, story jokes, and digitally altered photographs.

In chapter 5, William Westerman considers the creation and authorship of the online encyclopedia known as Wikipedia. A product of the "open-source" movement in computer programming and a *wiki*, or editable online text, Wikipedia is by definition self-governing and ever-changing, and thus is an illustration of the folkloric process. This chapter considers the sociology of how knowledge is created and disseminated by a community of several thousand writers and editors who have voluntarily taken up the task of creating the world's largest encyclopedia. Westerman argues that Wikipedia's community of editors and writers is a folk community that has established rules concerning what counts as reliable knowledge and sources and how various points of view can be incorporated to come up with a text that is ultimately impartial. He examines the process through which a nascent community defines its own epistemology and its own rules about neutrality and bias in scholarship. Drawing on folklore scholarship concerning the concept of the group, the philosophical field of social epistemology that has been defined by Steve Fuller (2002), and the extensive archival pages of Wikipedia itself, Westerman posits that knowledge communities, like all folk groups, have to deal with the question of bias in what they produce. What is unique to this occupational folk group of writers and editors, however, is that authority is self-regulating, and they emphasize distributing knowledge as a form of disseminating power.

Rituals, folk belief, and religion are all respected components of folkloristic inquiry, but few scholars have written on the subject in an Internet context as prolifically as Robert Glenn Howard (1997, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2008a, 2008b). He further explores this area of study in chapter 6, which documents the power of what he has previously dubbed a

vernacular web of online expression (Howard 2008a, 2008b). According to Howard, vernacular webs are emergent communication performances that come into being as individuals navigate through online discourse. One such web is the one enacted by conservative Christians who believe they are engaged in an ongoing war against demonic spirits. Out of a perceived need to share strategies for combating these evil spirits, many educated and skilled Internet users see themselves as crusaders in a world led astray by the homosexual-rights movement, government conspiracies against Christians, New Age spirituality, and other belief systems (Howard 1997, 2000; Wojcik 1997). In this struggle, the Internet serves as an active battleground and as an example of a powerful vernacular web. Howard notes how the beliefs of these individuals have an influence that stretches from those individual believers, through popular press books, to online expression, and, ultimately, to their effects on the lives of those who do not believe.

Building on the themes of folk belief and ritual in an Internet context, Robert Dobler's chapter 7 examines the dynamics of the transition of spontaneous shrines into the virtual world of the Internet. Social networking sites like MySpace have emerged as mediators of the adolescent experience for an entire generation of American youth, creating online spaces in which teenagers negotiate identity and grapple with daily life. As such, events imbued with tragedy and grief cause the MySpace forum to transcend the boundaries of cyberspace and adopt characteristics of the physical world's response to grief via rituals. Dobler notes that the MySpace sites of the deceased often take on the characteristics of a spontaneous shrine, functioning as a virtual site of spiritual communion and creating a bridge between the living and the dead. Mourners frequently continue to visit the sites of their deceased friends, often leaving present-tense comments, echoing the poignant and striking characteristics frequently found on the notes and flowers offered at roadside crosses. Through cyberethnography, Dobler also observes divergent patterns between genders in their grieving rituals on MySpace and categorizes their distinctive traits. In so doing, he demonstrates how the Internet provides an innovative means of examining the processes behind the creation of spontaneous shrines, allowing folklorists to observe the workings of vernacular memorialization in alternative ways as traditional forms are adapted to the new digital mode of experience.

Lastly, Gregory Hansen explores "Public Folklore in Cyberspace" in chapter 8. This piece examines how folklorists use the Internet to educate nonspecialized audiences about folklore within various regions of America. Hansen probes public folklore's scope by establishing the major

goals and orientations used within folklife programming in the public and private sectors. He follows this with a typology of presentation modes used in the websites of public folklorists who work in a range of local, state, regional, and national agencies. His analysis of these various categories draws a correlation between web design and the five modes of documentary video production and filmmaking identified by Bill Nichols and developed by Sharon Sherman. Using these modes, Hansen demonstrates how websites include the elements of exposition, observation, interaction, reflexivity, and performativity as predominant orientations within the design of various sites. As an appendix, he includes an extensive annotated webography of sites relevant to public folklore.

To use a metaphor of material culture, the collection of essays in this book is a quilt. Individually, as "patches," they present a distinct viewpoint and unique insight into their respective areas of study, but collectively they represent a blanket of new ideas for the folklore discipline. All of these chapters see the Internet as an important analytic venue for folklorists and examine the possibilities for future research through case studies of narratives, religion, and education in an online context. While *Folklore and the Internet* doesn't have complete answers to all of the questions posed in this introduction, or to the myriad questions naturally imposed by the study of folklore, the chapters in this book seek to both highlight and digest these relevant issues as a thematic contemplation on the academic study of folklore and the Internet. Not all of the authors agree with one another's viewpoints or approaches. The Internet is new territory for the folklore discipline, and while we might be late to the dialogue, our perspectives and methodologies should not only broaden the scope of Internet studies, but provide important insights into the processes of everyday life in the modern technological world. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that the folklore discipline "is struggling to find a truly contemporary subject, one that is not just *in* the present, but truly *of* the present" (1995, 70; emphasis in original). Here it is.

We hope these essays demonstrate the validity of folkloric study and the Internet as a compatible duo; encourage new dialogues and contributions from scholars in the fields of folklore and allied disciplines; and engage readers seeking new insights into the Internet from a folkloristic perspective. In addition, we encourage feedback, dissent, and all of the pleasantries in between regarding our cause and hope that readers will take the dialogue begun in this book and continue it into the public—and virtual—domain.

Notes

1. There have been some thoughtful writings on the history of the Internet. See Okin (2005) or, for a brief treatment, Bermejo (2007, 57–73). While *Folklore and the Internet* is interested in a folkloristic approach to Internet studies, a few works from allied scholars bear further examination for broad overviews of computer-mediated studies: Healy (1997); Krawczyk-Wasilewska (2006); Kuntsman (2004); Silver, Massanari, and Jones (2006); Weber and Dixon (2007); and Wood and Smith (2005).

2. Jennings's *The Devouring Fungus* (1990) may have been one of the first attempts to examine the folkloric aspects of the shifting currents in technology from the computer/Xeroxlore age to the possibilities presented by the interconnectivity of the Internet. If nothing else, it's an interesting timepiece about changes in folkloric transmission at the end of the 1980s, particularly since it examines "tales from the computer age" only a few years before the modern Internet exploded onto the scene. See also Sproull and Kiesler 1992.

3. This originally appeared in an electronic version in 1993. See also Shea (1994) for a further treatment of the phenomenon that Rheingold is referencing.

4. Full access to past and new issues of *Folklore Forum* is available at http://folkloreforum.net. Archived issues can be found at https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/1168

5. This isn't a criticism so much as it is a disappointment for the lack of interest in the subject matter from seasoned folklore veterans and graduate students. In soliciting entries for this book, it was particularly difficult to find contributors whose primary research interests revolved around the intersection of folklore and the Internet, but many people had a secondary or peripheral interest in the subject matter. Hopefully this will change soon!

6. My thanks to Libby Tucker for sharing her memories of this.

7. Bronner's assertion was expanded upon via personal communication with the author in September 2008.

8. As cited earlier, several scholars have made a name for themselves examining folklore and technology, such as John Dorst, Robert Glenn Howard, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, among a handful of others.

9. See also Marvin (1995).

10. For example, I often ask myself, does a locale require "tradition" in order be considered a "community"? This is a question that could be further examined in great detail by folklorists.

11. See Ben-Amos (1972) for further contemplations on the limitations posed by the inclusion of "tradition" in defining folklore.

12. See also Baym (1993) and especially Georges and Jones (1995), where the idea of "continuities and consistencies" originates. Additionally, see Howard (2008a).

13. My thanks to Robert Glenn Howard for his assistance in clarifying this point.

14. For an example of how sixteenth-century folksong collectors' performances benefited from, and were not diminished by, print, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998, 309–10).

15. That said, in chapter 1 of this volume Simon J. Bronner argues that there are distinguishable "folk" and "elite" cultures on the Internet.

16. Arjun Appadurai (1986) explores this concept in greater detail.

17. For example, urbandictionary.com is interesting because it presents slang and linguistic culture not only from the Internet, but also from the physical world. It can thus be seen as a facilitator in the relationship between the offline and online world. This should be of particular interest to folklorists who study topical humor, word play, and verbal dueling, as this venue is moderated by anonymous contributors from across the globe and features a combination of narrative lore found in multiple cultural venues.

18. Jan Roush astutely synthesizes some of the main ethical and practical considerations folklorists face in utilizing the Internet for conducting field-work: "Does fieldwork . . . have to be conducted in face-to-face interviews in order to be defined as fieldwork, or is any medium sufficient? . . . How does an effaced interview conducted through electronic mail or real-time Chat groups alter the performance, the context of the collecting? Further, since Internet access is for now limited to a privileged few participants, how representative of vernacular culture is this type of fieldwork? . . . [W]hat assurances does the collector have that the informants are actually who they say they are, an issue particularly crucial in collecting certain types of lore like gender lore? . . . How does the collector obtain valid consent forms? Further, if consent forms are transmitted through say, the medium of e-mail, can this collected information legally be archived?" (1997, 45). These are all valid questions to ponder, and I encourage folklorists to contemplate them further.

19. I believe this assertion is supported by other scholars in allied disciplines. Citing over three years of ethnographic research, Denise Carter reported that her informants found their online community "just another place to meet friends" and that "many of the friendships formed . . . are routinely being moved offline." Consequently, Carter concludes, "the basic tenets of online friendship appear to be impossible to separate from the traditional everyday concept of friendship itself" (2005, 164). This supports my belief that the authenticity of the data collected online is as valid as data collected in person (Blank 2007). Of course, the question remains as to whether the Internet increases a person's likelihood to interact as a non-authentic self, but as Christine Hine so precisely stated: "The point for the ethnographer is not to bring some external criterion for judging whether it is safe to believe what informants say, but rather to come to understand how it is that infor-mants judge authenticity" (2000, 49). For a thorough discussion of authentic-ity as it relates to folklore studies, see Bendix (1997).

20. This assertion is supported by the arguments presented by Simon J. Bronner in chapter 1 of this volume.

21. For a review of the origins of the term "vernacular," see Howard (2005, 327–28).

22. See also Bronner ([1986] 2004); Dégh (1994); and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1983) for a deeper discussion of mass culture and its influence on and interaction with aspects of folklore. Howard (2008a, 200–01) also reviews the literature on folklore and the mass media quite appropriately and effectively.

23. John McDowell has utilized the Internet as a medium in his F351 folklore classes at Indiana University ("The Folklore of Student Life"). Through

archival data and student fieldwork, he has pieced together an impressive website that displays a sample of Indiana University folklore from the past and present. I encourage readers to visit it at http://www.indiana.edu/~f351jmcd/. I think that this site is yet another demonstration of how we can think of the Internet not only as a tool for folkloristic inquiry, but as a comrade in the presentation of our work and methods. For a thoughtful report on the concerns folklorists may have with these types of digital media, see Underberg (2006).