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Folklore and the Internet

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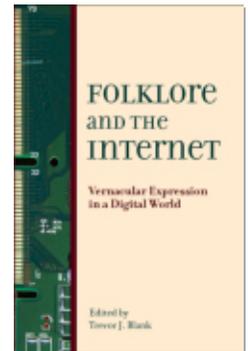
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Chapter 1

Digitizing and Virtualizing Folklore

SIMON J. BRONNER

One popular sense of tradition signals a human, even naturalistic connection. In this view, tradition is down home, out in the fields, back in the woods, where socializing, ritualizing, and storytelling occur unencumbered by machines or corporations. Hearing *tradition* uttered often raises images of family huddled around the dinner table at holidays or the neighborhood gang getting together for play, and it might be imaginatively set in opposition to the socially alienating quality of modernity dominated by technology. The rhetoric of tradition cited in folkloristic annals is not that far off from these characterizations, although it may broaden to a variety of settings—urban as well as rural, industrial as well as agricultural—and include folk transmission via a host of technologies, from printing press to photocopier (Bendix 1997; Bronner 1998). Still, analytical uses of tradition typically evoke a community's *naturally* authentic customs or face-to-face expressive encounters, in contrast to the artificiality of technology. The folklorist's *tradition* signifies cultural production of earthy artistic expressions, from homey proverbs to hand-wrought pots, which are said to be *folk* because they attach culturally to groups and repeat and vary. To be sure, the joke of the day or the latest rumor on the Internet may be pegged as lore or urban legend, but it is hard to shake the image of folk connections made around the campfire rather than through FireWire.

With the explosion of the Internet as the way that people communicate with one another, is tradition still relevant? After all, texting a joke to an unseen recipient is a far cry from gesturing and making eye contact with huddled buddies in the usual familiar place. In this chapter,

I examine, ethnographically and psychologically, the modernistic tendency to construct various cultural divisions, or binaries, to separate reality from fantasy or imagination. Such binaries include natural and artificial, public and private, analog and digital, group and network, relational and analytical, and especially folk and official. Although folklorists have previously noted that various communication technologies that emerged in the twentieth century, such as the telephone and photocopier, have altered the way that lore, as well as information, is spread, I find that the Internet, more so than other media, has unsettled many of the prior cultural binaries, which is evident especially in the rise of what I call the transgressive folk web. The Internet has become an essential tool of everyday life; it is also distinguished by being envisioned as a separate location or space in which traditions arise and are constituted.

A description often applied to cyberspace and natural space is that each is free and open, in the sense of unrestricted; each invites involvement on common ground, where participants can formulate social guidelines to organize themselves. From the perspective of the user, the Internet is a free medium that opens access to information. A formidable Internet social movement advocates for "open-source culture," in which collectivity, rather than acquisitive individualism, dominates and the communal spirit is manifested by making creative works, including software, that are entitled to copyright protection generally available to the masses (Truscello 2003). Unstructured in this ideal cyber-collective, the Internet could appear as one big open mess were it not for organizational tools that are left to users to put into place, thereby showing their orderliness in creating an *information system*. Practices that specially tag the organization of information and so become metaphors for vitality on the Internet are searching, surfing, and marking. The thrill of the dynamo-proportion search engine driving the conspicuous consumption of information is downright intoxicating, until the sobering realization hits that one has some serious sorting and sifting to do with the results to enable an effective virtual office. Structuring one's knowledge allows, like a grammar of language, the individual to communicate and think together with others.

In the gathering on the digital commons, though, Internet users can only approximate meeting, so when users talk of virtual reality much of its meaning is wrapped up in making a connection that is social as well as electronic, and that is where tradition comes in (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; Rheingold 2001; Swiss 2004; Žižek 2001). Perhaps most exciting, and troublesome at the same time, is that seated at screens, people negotiate the isolation of one-person/one-hard-drive material culture

with a Wi-Fi social breakthrough that allows, as never before, conversations between anywhere and the deep recesses of homes and offices. Examining the web landscape with touch screens on the go or mouse pads in cubicles, users recognize a fundamental difference between sites identified as official or corporate, which control content and broadcast information to a passive viewing audience, and those that allow posting, "live" chat, and free exchange. For many users, the latter constitutes the folk universe of cyberspace, in contrast to its elite realm. The folk realm is not located in a socioeconomic sector or particular nationality but instead represents a participatory process that some posters refer to as the democratic or open web.

Does where you are from matter anymore then? For folklorists, who are perennial commentators on the formation of cultural identity through the production of tradition in place, this context for transmission means rethinking business, or analysis, as usual (see Jackson 2001; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; Oring 1994). Although folklorists have an advantage among the scholarly pack who look critically at the Internet in having created a niche for themselves as specialists on vernacular expression through various forms of transmission, the engineered or mediated inter- and hyper-textual, visual assemblage that characterizes much of Internet communication provides challenges of identification and interpretation based on the discreteness of extracted artifacts of tradition (see Bronner 2006; Ketner 1976).

Now hold the phone. The traditional, or folk, web is not just a place for simulating storytelling around the kitchen table or bull sessions in the dorm room. Noting that much of folklore research was premised on the social intimacy or familiarity of people engaging in face-to-face oral communication, folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that rather than transposing pre-modern orality into the new media, folklorists need to start fresh, with the premise that "computer mediated communication, at least in its present form is *between* speech and writing. Listers on X-CULT-X dub this kind of talk putation, and speak of puting or putating. The words on the screen neither precede nor follow speech, though they often feel more like talking than writing. Electronic messages are neither a playscript nor a transcript, particularly in the interactive chat programs. They *are* the event" (1995, 74). She describes the kind of Internet vein mined by folklorists for textual humor, but many websites complicate the matter with visual imagery, often in motion, that is layered, embedded, and juxtaposed with other messages into a multimedia assemblage.¹ A folkloric term that could describe tralatitious Internet praxis, between reading and writing, assembling and visualizing, is the

process of relating (and the interactive mode of responding). Carrying a sense of doing more than scribing or sending information, it connotes reaching someone by relating narrative and belief, signifies the connection and assemblage in relating different sources to one another, and considers precedents in relation to the present.

Although it is tempting to see Internet communicative frames as more conversations from which one can extract tradition as rhetorical strategies, if not artifacts, surely something different is occurring when one is using a keyboard for “telling” a joke, yet it is a far cry from pecking out reports on the keys of a mechanical typewriter in a previous epoch. The computer monitor also has transformed from its previous incarnation as a television set in a couch-potato-filled living room of the past. What happens when keyboard and screen conjugate, and out of the union is born a vernacular communication form that by tapping on keys imitates the ease of conversation? What happens when producer and consumer merge in a single interactive medium as *prosumers*, who can readily create as well as consume the message, or product (Toffler 1980)? Is it not a symbolic breakthrough when instead of bowing to sacred icons, people can freely move them around on the screen, create their own avatar (drawing on Hindu mythology of the descent of a deity to earth), and in ordinary, secular life use a cursor like a cleric handling a pointer on sacred parchment scrolls or evoke with a hand symbol that locates a hyperlink the revered *yad*, or hand, in Jewish Torah readings? Maybe the big question, or byte, is whether beyond offering unprecedented access to materials of folklore amassed outside it, in the field, the Internet *facilitates*, *mediates*, or *produces* tradition on a computer screen. Do some or all of the productions tailor-made for the website phenomena YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Webkinz qualify as folk practices, and if so, well, so what? What are the various cultural texts, and contexts, of e-mails, text messages, listservs, blogs, vlogs, and homepages and how do they diverge from the face-to-face, in situ experience of field-recorded material? Is disembodied storytelling on the Internet really folkloric, after all? Is it real, even if it is in real-time? Or in computer lingo, what happens when in addition to digitizing folklore, for example, sending or posting jokes they heard orally, people virtualize it? How do new media technologies featuring the Internet—such as netbooks, video game units, media players, iPods, smartphones, and iPhones—relate to cyberculture?

These are key questions because folklore—a fundamental, timeless form of communication—is inextricably tangled up in the Web. Folklore as an expression of tradition has to be present on the Internet because

increasingly e-mail and listservs, often incorporated into the Web, have become the primary way that people *message, connect, and link*, if not talk, to one another, and hence incorporate the symbolic and projective functions that folklore distinctively provides. When people e-mail or post to a board, they often invoke, and evoke, folklore as a cultural frame of reference for creatively relating experience, particularly in narration and imagery that respond to ambiguity and anxiety. If saying that folklore is on the Web or is produced about it are relatively safe cultural calls, the signal claim that the Internet acts folklorically may give pause (see Dundes 1980, 17–19; Dundes 2005, 406; Ellis 2006). Yet upon reflection, the Internet as an expanding folkloric thoroughfare may help explain aspects that have confounded those technopundits who were sure that the vampire in the machine sucked users dry of their culture and creativity. As an icon of mass media, the Internet was certain, they said, to alienate us all and obliterate the last semblances of community and art we have (Ronnell 2001; Ross 2001; see also Benjamin [1936] 2007). How, then, has it been a tool of social connection, and consequently, of new expressive lore engendering digital, or virtual, culture?

To begin answering these questions, I move from the manifest appeal of the Internet as a social networking tool to the less discussed, but critical area, of its folk logic, which is steeped in the psychologically created frame of an open medium. In addition to suggesting concepts to guide the interpretation of folk web practice and sources for the social construction of the folk web, I provide a case study involving cultural responses to tragedy in 1987 and 2007 that allows me to compare folklore as oral and Internet traditions.

Social Factors and Folklorization

The basis of the claim for the Internet taking on folkloric qualities is the medium's interactive, instrumental quality; that differentiates it from television and radio, which divides people between broadcasters and listeners or viewers. Internet users are captivated by its capability to simultaneously send and receive, produce and consume, write and read (Tabbi 1997; Zukin 2004, 227-52). Precedent can be found in vernacular uses of photography, photocopying, and faxing. They invited manipulation of images and text to create a play frame in which humor, pathos, and memory were shared among members of a social network. The playful manipulation often came from an anonymous source that signified commentaries we might call *metafolklore* on values and attitudes about the very technology and institutional contexts that made the images and text

possible (Dundes [1966] 2007b; Dundes and Pagter 1975; Fineman 2004; Mechling 2004, 2005; Preston 1994; Roemer 1994). Many of these broadside-type sheets, surreptitiously produced in and circulated from photocopy rooms, found their way to bulletin boards and office walls, creating a foundation for the humorous postings one sees on the Internet today.

In my experience, folklore was present at the beginnings of computing, even before Internet and e-mail burst on the scene. When in its Neolithic stage of the 1960s I began computing, as one of the select high school math-team members who formed a geek clique, the gargantuan machine we thought was wondrous in its power was barely capable of a few mathematical calculations. But it still seemed light years ahead of the slide rules we were carrying around, and the idea of wiring into a machine what we did in our heads made us giddy. The machine was *the brain*, and we marvelled at its symbolization of things automatic, how it seemed self-acting, with apparently a life of its own. It suggested autonomy; unlike the automobile, it could run itself, evident in the digital installation of *autorun*. It could speak, through programmed message responses to user actions. I recall philosophical discussion of automorphism, the reproduction of forms, as a representative system. I wrote a program to generate automorphic numbers, maybe as a precursor to folkloristic fascination with repetition and variation of forms. These numbers are those that when multiplied result in the number appearing in the total (e.g., $5 \times 5 = 25$; see Kobayashi, Schmid, and Yang 2008). Binary language, the programming fundament of 1s and 0s that spawned a new science, also gave rise to inside jokes written into notebooks, such as “There are only 10 types of people in the world—those who understand binary, and those who don’t.”

Reflecting back on it, I see the humor laid the groundwork for understanding the significance, as folklore, of multiple meanings in digital thinking. For the uninitiated, 10 refers to the number ten, but in binary, it means the number two, and in keeping with the praxis of writing programs, the joke makes sense only when written. It also has its variations, often given serially like a discussion thread, such as “There are only 10 types of people in the world—those who understand binary, and those who get laid”; “There are three kinds of people in the world: those who can count, and those who can’t”; “I must have heard that joke 1100100 times”; and “1010011010, the number of the Beast”—666 in binary (Beatty 1976; Binary Jokes 2008). In response to the spate of lightbulb jokes all the rage at the time, computer geeks could imagine an automated light bulb that changed light bulbs: “How many lightbulbs does it take to change a lightbulb? One, if it knows its own Gödel

number" (see Dundes and Renteln 2005, 187). Much of the discussion was about speed that like acting out a heroic John Henry test, could be shown to outpace human effort. The buzz was about the advent of a new Pax Automatica age ushered in beside the cultural revolution by youthful rebellion. It would be one in which society depended on information and information gave youth power, or so we surmised from memorization of Marshall McLuhan's work, which pronounced the revolutionary implication of instantaneous, automatically provided information, mediated through technology (McLuhan [1964] 1994; see also Virilio 2001).²

The room the machine occupied was papered with photocopied, scatological folk wisdom, such as "Garbage In, Garbage Out" made to look on a flat sheet like a homespun motto; a flow chart beginning with the question "Does the Damn Thing Work?" and showing the arrow for *no* leading to a command box plainly advising "Shitcanit"; and an instructional graphic captioned "Understanding the Technology" that showed a toilet with arrows pointing to the input and output areas and a backup system of a chamber pot (compare Dundes and Pagter 1991b, 161–62; Dundes and Pagter 1996, 120–21). Perhaps inspired by this risqué gallery that other rooms lacked, giving us a special status and some weird looks for our geekness, our first deviations from the instructional text included cartoon characters made from computer-generated lines and circles. In an animated way, it showed we had a life and could humanize science. That material representing playing with the machine generated more excitement than long invariable printouts of calculations and data, truth be told. I do not recall talk of sneaky viruses at that time, but frequent reference was made to the ghost or devil in the machine and the belief that the thing had a mind of its own, which is still echoed today (Jennings 1991, 143–58). We did not call this material folklore, but it was significant to our folk logic regarding the control we exercised over the technology and the world we wrought, as we struggled to make the huge technological dragon do our bidding (see Dundes and Pagter 1996, 6–7, 58–61). Others made this folkloric connection about the artificial being that humans then seek to rein in, judging from the naming of an early supercomputer developed in the 1950s as Golem after the Jewish legend of a creature made from clay.

Alan Dundes was among the first folklorists during the 1970s to spot the computer's leavening of folklore: "So 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). The folklore he reported, as early as 1958, was about computing as a suspect occupational pursuit on the

periphery, probably because of the potential for human displacement. Thus he documented esoteric lore of computer programmers and an exoteric tradition in the general society about the computer and those who were authorities on it. He explained the rise of this jokelore about computers and computer programmers as a function of a need by suspicious folk to project symbolically, and externalize, anxiety about the change wreaked by technology, anxiety that appeared to be part of the modern condition. In advance of security fears and rumors about the Internet leading to scam and identity theft, Dundes noted that "there is widespread genuine anxiety that the use of the computer to gather personal data may bring us to the point where dossiers contain more information about a person than the person himself knows" (1980, 18).

Such fears, including that machines would replace humans in controlling daily life, have been enduring concerns as computer technology has advanced. They have forced reflection on issues of control and power, culturally perceived as a conflict between the promise to individual users that they can hold the "power of the Internet" in their hands and the realization that self-interested multinational corporations exact tolls on the information superhighway. Although Dundes did not predict the Internet would be the dominant interactive medium and household appliance it became, he, in thematizing folklore about the computer, offered a hypothesis about human control through vernacular means that in its comprehension of the impelling urge by users to create folklore-type materials in and about digital technology, anticipates the Web. As he put it, "it is folklore itself—including the jeketelling process—that ultimately separates man from machine, or does it?" The example he gave was this: "A super computer is built and all the world's knowledge is programmed into it. A gathering of top scientists punch in the question: 'Will the computer ever replace man?' Clickity, click, whir, whir, and the computer lights flash on and off. Finally a small printout emerges saying, 'That reminds me of a story'" (Dundes 1980, 18–19).

Thing is, what constitutes a story in the new media is related differently than elsewhere, on humor sites where viewers rate the story's funniness and respond with variations or in blogs and chat rooms where they editorialize. Even more than transmitting items classifiable as stories that are comparable to analogues in pre-digital form, people on YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace employ emergent interactive practices—represented by that "clickity, click, whirr, whir, and the computer lights flash on and off"—that users in the Internet age identify with digital custom. These demand our critical cultural attention.

During the 1990s, when the graphical interface of the World Wide Web became widely available, the Internet took on more of the characteristics of a visual culture than an electronic post office or business tool. The development of Web 2.0, referring to the quantum leap of the Internet from step one's display to a multiuser *platform*, resulted in an explosion of expressive material moving online, which widened computing from techno-headed, self-isolating geeks to nonspecialists, ordinary users, engaging in daily activities online. Arguably, it made the Internet more of a folkloric thoroughfare and mediator than it was when it was still conceived as an intelligence, military, or academic tool or as a desktop publication. It could now be used easily to create public activity in the form of social networking sites, wikis, and blogs; it allowed audiovisual uploading as well as downloading, collaboration as well as individual tinkering. If in my technologically Neolithic stage, folklore was outside of our awareness even when we engaged in it, by the time Web 2.0 burst on the scene, with the beginning of the new millennium, reference by developers, not folklorists, to the folk character of the Internet was explicit. *Folksonomy*, a portmanteau (one of many in digital culture, indicating fusion and hybridization as technological evolution) of folk and taxonomy, entered Internet lingo to stand for the emic, or user-generated, practice of collaboratively creating and managing tags to annotate content (Howard 2008a; Mika 2007). Folksonomies are ubiquitous in popular social bookmarking and photography sites such as Flickr, Librarything, Esnips, and Del.icio.us, where users are aware of who created tags and can see other, assigned tags. The vernacular implication is that this kind of taxonomy can provide an alternative to the corporate-controlled search engine with its monopolistic, industrial image. Another significant connotation is recognition, in the growing, user-generated fondness for folksonomy, that patterns of emic categorizing and organizing in the openness of cyberspace are key cultural practices defining boundaries and shared ways of thinking about information and, hence, are markers of identity.

A key characteristic of the Internet that distinguishes it from face-to-face talking is how visual it is. Users look at a screen, allowing images and texts to be combined. Adherents to verbal communication might argue that this visibility takes away from the use of imagination to picture what is heard. Yet visualization on a screen adds a level of suspicion about whether what one is looking at is "real." That is why, I contend, people think of Internet information as simulated, or *virtual*, which is probably derived from the term *virtual image* in optics. Unlike the sense of touch, which can be used to verify physical evidence, sight merely

identifies and is known to be manipulable. Suspicion can be created that one is “just seeing things,” witnessing an optical illusion, or viewing an altered image. If one of those claims are true, you are liable to be accused of being “out of touch with reality.” Touch, though it also can be manipulated, especially if not supported by sight, is considered in vernacular logic more reliable. Sure facts are tangible, gripping, clinching, and hard. Visual information, as the proverb “Seeing is believing” attests, involves belief rather than certainty. The proverb used to continue with “but feeling’s the truth.” The special experience is one that “touches us deeply.” To be sure, photographs are posted on the Internet as visual proof, but arguments, and narratives, can arise about the activities outside the frame or the accuracy of the image inside the frame. Especially when images are broadcast from peer to peer in a play frame, the Internet becomes folklorized through the discourse of belief involved. The perceptions that every picture tells a story and that it attracts unseen viewers only add to the Internet’s folkloric dimension.

The Internet’s visual character gives the impression that it broadens experience. One can see off into the distance, but touch is at hand. Locality—where one lives and interacts with others—is described in terms of touch as well as tradition—the earth beneath your feet, the feel of familiar furniture, the handshake on the street. Sight looks out on the horizon rather than feeling at home; ringing in one’s head might be the expansive sense of the visual conveyed by *see the world* or *look to the future*. The Internet carries this sensory implication further by reference to the World Wide Web and with the visual connotation of Google, the largest search engine. A Google Doodle (a variant of the company’s logo) featured eyeglasses on the logo. The founders actually took the company name from *googol*, which refers to the large number 10^{100} , but many users perceive a connection to googly eyes. (Following this idea of visual broadening, the first search engine was called the *Wanderer*.) The rhetoric of the *information superhighway* and *cyberspace* expresses working the Internet to accelerate away from the here-and-now and the potential to take in everywhere and everything. As exhilarating as that sounds, it does not come without some anxiety about freedom and the information overload involved. Questions of identity and security arise, for if someone can be everywhere, then to where and to whom does one belong? Where is the safe haven of home? A formidable folk construction to temper the radically individualized world of the digital screen is the creation of groups linked by sites identified as such or as lists and networks. Folklore also arises among users to caution about unfamiliar sites and attachments as one wanders afield from the homepage or gets

too curious or lascivious about what is out there. They include stories of attack sites ("CNN News Alert," "Pictures of My Party"), virus-infested attachments ("Shakira's pictures," "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs"), and worms ("An Internet Flower for You," "A Card for You") released by virtual tokens from abroad ("Virus Hoaxes & Realities" 2008).

The visual practice of web posting differs from the vernacular use of photography, photocopying, and faxing because it is more widely available and can be more thoroughly personalized. In Dundes's joke, the machine runs by itself; on the Web, people imagine that they personalize the machine in their own image and often approach it like a workshop in which the screen constitutes a virtual canvas or desktop. Users can arrange and symbolize material on the Web as virtual reality to create a persona that was literally screened through postings and sought-out kindred spirits. The wonder of the Web is the graphic material open to view—graphic in a visual sense and also in its uncensored quality, suggesting the freedom of expression of a folk, or informal, commons in which participants regulate action through tradition rather than through arbitrarily imposed rules. Cognitively, a binary has been constructed between analog print as the regulated, institutional world of potential censorship and the digital Web as the open, uncensored folk domain.

Theoretically a wide open field, the Internet's cultural hangout has proved especially attractive to youth, who, the public imagines, better their elders with the informational capital of new media and often use it as a secret language beyond parental and professorial monitoring (Bronner 1995, 232–46; Sullivan 2005). In an individualistic society placing faith in technological progress, the energy of youth is channeled into innovation that will displace the establishment culture of older stuffed shirts; fashion, fads, and trends of the young dictate the popular culture, media and retail outlets remind consumers. Children embrace the communication potential of the folk Internet and shape it into their own image and culture supposedly because they are preoccupied with social and pubertal concerns rather than business applications.

Youth has also influenced the growing compactness of the Internet, which can be utilized on the run and in private, away from home and the watchful eye of authority.³ Youth are thought to engage the Internet particularly because they have more to say, fantasize, or worry about, and they derive gratification from widening their circles of contacts into definable networked cliques. It enables their transition out of the home, giving them the physical mobility and social connections often associated with cultural passage into adulthood. The openness of youthful endeavor is indicated by the number of electronic means to tell others

what one is doing. Facebook has a prominent feature of posting what one is doing presently and Twitter is a service to stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: what are you doing? This linkage of action to age is yet another way that the Internet mediates and alters tradition.

Also conspicuous on the Web are efforts to virtualize rituals of change, joy, and grief, such as virtual wedding chapels, church services, and cemeteries (Goethals 2003; Hutchings 2007). The folk web has not in reality replaced rites of passage, but it often elaborates upon them in virtual photo sites, which arguably have transformed album keeping and photocopying of humor into digital culture. As the folk web is embraced by all ages, beginning even before children can read, it becomes part of ritual routine, through creation of electronic family albums, virtual cafes, and support groups composed by parents; niche sites for ethnic-religious networking; matchmaking and chat rooms assuaging loneliness for singles; and memory-making by older adults in scrapbook and memorial sites. So don't get me wrong; I am sure that graybeards can putte with the best of the young whippersnappers, but my point is that cultural expectations have been created for who is wired and doing the wiring of society. The old pastoral model of folklore that evoked wisdom of yore being *handed down* by a golden ager may lead us to think that digital culture displaces tradition, but we might instead conceive of digital culture fostering a *handing up* of vernacular knowledge by young, wired wizards with mythic imagination and social ebullience.

A dramatic tension is apparent in the metafolklore about the Internet hosting an unseen power who can spy one's codes and inscriptions. Theoretically, power is assigned to the user to select who sees them—all or some—but fear of unwanted viewers—lurkers, authorities, and hackers—generates a folklore of its own. If the Internet is performative by virtue of the self-conscious act of *going to a site* for viewing or listening, it is surely different by virtualizing a context of security and secrecy that does not depend on a time and place of assembly (Laurel 1991; Simmel 1906). People presume that communication in this medium ripples like a wave outward and can be caught by any number of strangers; an important function of folklorization of the Internet is the interpersonal controls that people impose to secure the channels or conduits of interaction. The Internet's saturating, expansive features to facilitate *logging on anywhere* and being *always on* raise images of defying nature and sleep in a 24/7 format and are frequently mentioned as defining characteristics of the medium. People on the Internet do not ask whether it is too late to call with a story, and posters of images appreciate that they *go*

up instantaneously and are always retrievable. More than miming the actions of natural reality by giving flowers or posting a note to project feelings onto objects or language, while working in a structural form confined to three dimensions, the representation on the screen evokes in our minds the possibility of innovation in expanded, stringed dimensions and of reconstitution of traditions in new, unforeseen or hidden perspectives that only the computer can reveal (Randall 2002; Waldrop 1985; Weingard 1988).

Besides freedom of expression, the Internet putatively liberates artistic communication from materiality, but hardly immaterial, the folklore of the Internet is consequential stuff that invites human participation. In this way, it is conceivable to envision the difference in method and theory between natural and virtual reality that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett invited folklorists to contemplate by thinking about the betwixt and between characteristic of Internet communication. Additionally virtual traditions deviate from the definition of folklore as artistic communication in small groups, which Dan Ben-Amos inventively suggested as a modern definition of folklore in context; in a digital age they appear as layered (and often non-linear) symbolizations or processes in multivariable, interactive networks (Ben-Amos 1972; Labbo 1996; Laske 1990; Sommerer and Mignonneau 1999). Although naturalistic tradition is often associated with precedent from way back when, the Internet's flattening, or disregard, of time invokes the view that something being on the Internet is sufficient to show this pre-existent characteristic of tradition. The implication is that this something has its own independent existence that involves an artificial fusion of new and old, text and image, and creativity and tradition. Folklorists and other cultural scholars may be concerned that in this kind of tradition the electronic tools of forwarding and copying and pasting standardize and stabilize texts, taking away the variability that marks cultural identities in natural contexts, but the serial reproductive process of homepages and forums appears to foster commentary and communal alteration, often with an instrumentality that signifies cultural space (Baker and Bronner 2005, 346).

A process of bricolage, that is, combining different images to create new forms, appears in the new media transmission and is characteristic of a consumer society, and there is evidence of alterations and selections that represent national and regional identities, such as the cultural divides in the global Internet phenomenon of 9/11 humor (Ellis 2003). These variable photo pastiches and riddle jokes divided between an American leitmotif of masculinist unity under stress facing an exoticized, feminized enemy and European satire deflating American

leadership and arrogance. American jokes often expressed a militarist desire for revenge, such as the common joke, "What is Osama bin Laden going to be on Halloween? Dead!" British jokes, by contrast, blurred the tragic events with images drawn from the media, as in "Bin Laden is going to be on [a cooking show] next week. He'll show how to make a big apple crumble" (Ellis 2006, 630; compare Dundes and Pagter 1991a). After following the quick folkloric response on the Internet, folklorist Bill Ellis pointed out that "American jokes and British jokes were available to both cultures online, sometimes posted together on the same message boards. However, it seems clear that regionally generated social rules about humor continue to play an important part in determining which jokes spread and where they go" (Ellis 2006, 630). This symbolization is a reminder of the function, indeed the imperative, of folklore as a culturally variable frame in which to express or resolve feelings, ambiguities, and conflicts under conditions of stress. It also suggests not quickly dismissing nationalistic and regional affiliations in the embrace of the Internet as a global village in cyberspace that subverts nation-states on land (Stratton 1997). The Internet incorporates folklore by offering spontaneous transmission bounded by a number of social, localized configurations, and one might argue that it expands the folkloric frame because it extends the creative, reproductive, and often transgressive capability of oral communication with visual imagery and instantaneous response. Indeed, to spotlight the interactive quality of the Internet, many sites encourage agonistic, rather than harmonious, relationships. On these pages, a button is frequently labeled with the folkloric idiom *talk back*, inviting an impudent reply that will start a heated exchange, virtualizing and ritualizing *getting in your face* (Millard 1997).

Symbolically, the Internet may be cast by Hollywood as a displacement machine reminiscent of industrial giants obliterating cottage-housed artisans, but it is also a tool for maintenance of diverse subcultures because it allows multi-layered social interaction that is difficult to maintain in a dispersed society. In this regard, it is deep as well as open; users often talk about subtexts and an archeology of sites, with hidden links or tags that reveal meanings not apparent on the surface (Wilbur 1997). Although the openness of cyberspace is hailed, dangers are narrated in a folklore about fringe or nefarious groups latching on to the Internet and masking their predatory intentions with slick homepages. Supposedly a tool of massification, the Internet has also spawned a belief that it expands social diversity by allowing communication of people on all sorts of interests or fetishes (Poster 2001). To account for multifarious networks fostering idiocultures (cultures created through

shared group interactions rather than through their place on the land) on the Internet, we can apply the multiconduit hypothesis from folkloristic theory. It holds that “folklore texts do not pass through an orderly, regulated trail from person to person but generate their own, specific linkages that carry messages through society” (Dégh 1997, 142; see also Dégh 1993; Dégh and Vázsonyi 1975). Thus textual and visual reproduction on the Internet does not necessarily homogenize cultural expression. Instead, the Internet’s potential for free, spontaneous transmission fosters renewal and innovation by participants working within a traditional frame of reference. Indeed the posting of sources in website counters, e-mails, and listservs suggests a quantification of the multiple conduits of transmission that is onerous to attain in the naturalistic field and when observed often presumes degeneration (see Ellis 2003; Fine 1979, 1980, 1983; Oring 1978). The belief is pervasive in cyberculture that expressive payloads users launch into cyberspace are always new, “to boldly go where no man has gone before,” to quote from an often folklorized line from the television show *Star Trek*. Fear and folkloric belief in conspiratorial, imperial deception reigns among open-source advocates who worry that cyberspace will not always be open or deep—rhetorical representations of virtual folklorization—as the state or corporation seeks to regulate it and bring it under its wing rather than letting the masses constitute it (Stelter 2008; Truscello 2003). Thus the metafolklore of the Internet also refers to the possibility that the folk web will be shut down or forced underground. Its practice can therefore change, and that leads to examination of the characteristics that now allow it to function for social and cultural purposes.

Digital and Analog, Analytical and Relational, Visual and Virtual

An Internet means of transmission raises questions about what kind of cultural practice on digital equipment constitutes folkloric enactment. The association of generations and periods of time with technology, such as the computer age and the iPod generation, implies that lives are structured by what we own and do. Such generational labels refer to tools that users harness for individualistic purposes; users are in a sense digital selectors who can create multiple personas suited for different web events. People materialize digital power in everyday life by hanging equipment on belts, which is reminiscent of emboldening gun holsters from the Wild West; opening laptop lids as if lifting a treasure lid or secret spy code unit; and flipping open phones with a sound effect like

an attention-grabbing switchblade. Whereas going to the mailbox by your house is an occasional, pastoral behavior, or what computer geeks derisively call *snail mail*, the cyberculture instantaneous experience of checking and receiving mail is constant and intrusive, especially when engaging in instant messaging, a rhetoric that suggests instant gratification. Although inexpensive webcams, often built into computers, make it possible to look our conversation mates in the eye, communicative practice on the Internet surprisingly has resisted going live.⁴ Or maybe it is not so surprising if one considers the folkloric qualities that people want to embed into their interaction. Being disembodied allows for role playing, speech play, visual representation, bricolage, and sometimes anonymity, each of which supports elaboration of the self—and connection to a group—through expressive material. The frame requires some boundaries to manage risks in communication. Some limitations are policed and legislated, and a tradition of folk regulation has arisen governing such transgressions as those represented by the vernacular terms *flaming*, *snarking*, *lurking*, *spamming*, *phishing*, *socking*, and *thread bumping* (Millard 1997; Stivale 1997). In other words, the Internet opens up investigation not just of the texts it produces but the behaviors it spawns, which draw attention to themselves as repeatable *practices* related to logging on and thereby rhetorically become ingrained into culture as *praxis*—representations for generalizable actions such as interfacing and downloading (Bernstein 1971; Bronner 1988a; Johnson 1999; Lavazzi 2001).

Talk of an all-encompassing digital age and digital culture constructs a binary with analog culture that merits closer scrutiny. This binary, which privileges the advancement of digitization, implies a number of structural oppositions: large/small, new/old, artificial/natural, formal/informal, electronic/manual, and discontinuous/continuous. The implication of this rhetoric is that thinking has shifted as the technology and culture have changed. Emblematic of the digital/analog difference is the clock. The analog version is understood by positions of hands on a dial that make reference to the natural occurrence of lines and shadows formed by the sun, which can be read by relative positions. *O'clock* thus signifies the position of an observer in the center, where 12 o'clock considered straight ahead. The digital clock takes out representation and the observer. Time is instead represented in exact numbers or language that can be received anywhere and in any form. Display is continuous and does not represent position so much as express a code. Analog is considered more interpersonal and tactile because it can be equated with the direct perception of sensation (Gregory 1970, 162–66; Stewart and

Bennett 1991, 24–29). Digital is conceived as artificial and solely visual as it depicts time in alphanumeric symbols or icons framed in mechanistic rectangles instead of analog's naturalistic circles and hands.

Digital comes from the Latin *digitus* for finger, suggesting discrete counting, converting real-world information into binary numeric form. Analog contains reference to the Greek *logos* positing meaning that comes from its related senses of "word" (or "say") and "reason"; folklorists use *analogue* in its sense of an item in relative position to another. Further, the strategy of holding up group and context as vital to the definition of folklore is analogic because it is relational, emphasizing the immediate characteristics and fragmentation of the event, or performance. Whereas, *repetition* and *variation* and *practice*, which are more commonly applied to folklore in new technology, including the Internet, have a digital connotation that underscores linear continuity and aggregate data (see Bronner 1988a, 2000; Dégh 1994; Drout 2006; Dundes and Pagter 1975; Köstlin and Shrake 1997; Koven 2000). Analog culture, often attributed to the touch-oriented world of tradition, especially in pre-modern society, derives meaning from sensory aspects of perception (Stewart and Bennett 1991, 28–32; Bronner [1986] 2004). Cultural practices are more often circumscribed than delineated. People derive significance from face-to-face encounters because the appearance of people, what they do, and how they do it convey an encircled, functional reality (Stewart and Bennett 1991, 29). Thus storytelling in analog culture is an event defined not just by a text but by a physical setting and the perceptions between tellers and audience (Georges 1969; Oring 2008).

Digital culture emphasizes representations of reality and outcomes of *messages*. Thus it may seem to connect more people, but it judges meaning less from social relationships and appearances than from textual similarities. Arguably, in an analog context, meaning is attached immediately to events as they are perceived within a small group; it is more sensitive to the natural, immediate social context. It privileges the ground of turf while digital values the action of surf. Both analog and digital culture are capable of producing and expressing tradition, but they may perceive it differently. Analog culture might be said to be relational and localized, with a high degree of sensitivity to experience, context, emotions, relationships, and status—within a place. Digital culture relies on analytical, inductive thinking that takes observable events to form informational pieces linked in causal chains and categorized into universal criteria (Stewart and Bennett 1991, 41–42; Cohen 1969, 841–42; M. O. Jones 1971). Much of this linkage, analytical thinker Alan Dundes pointed out, tends to be linear and is reflected in folklore, particularly folk speech, that is

oriented toward vision rather than touch, the individual rather than the group, an outcome rather than a process, the future rather than the past, and progress rather than stability (Bronner [1986] 2004; Bronner 2007; Dundes 2004; Lee [1950] 1968). We can understand the misplaced perception that the Internet is devoid of folklore as a relational, evolutionary outlook: anything digital is equatable with machinery that replaces the human capacity to emote and embody. But viewed operationally or analytically, digital culture as represented by the Internet is replete with *construction* and *assemblage* of multi-layered messages into virtual, rather than natural reality. One of those constructions is the presumption that digital is preferable because it is more efficient, more essentially human, leading to a certain illusion that the digital world is culture free. One can arrange a continuum of thinking set, as it often is, in scenarios appropriate, for example, to decision making. It is indeed possible to analyze the folklorization of the Internet as the cumulative acts of organizing and tagging an ever-expanding array of messages. These acts are focused less on the immediacy of the event than on its spread, creativity, traditional character, simultaneity, and heterogeneity of transmission (see Bronner 1986, 122–29; Lowe 1982; McCallum 2001).

As daily practice rather than special performance, the Internet structures perceptions outside of users' awareness. One can talk about how folk beliefs about Internet usage involve its global reach, classlessness, democratization, and gender neutrality (see Poster 2001; Wallace 1999), but expressed beliefs about the Internet do not always characterize it consistently. In the rhetoric of transmission, the Internet is frequently noted for both its mass globalization and acquisitive individualism as well as its freedom and collectivity, even by its most avid, or addicted, fans. One can discern cultural expectations when logging on that affect the kind of traditions created online. Cognitive associations are frequently made between geekdom and being emasculated, yet holding cultural, if not social capital. Country singer Brad Paisley in 2008 had a chart-topping hit with "Online" that was replete with these beliefs. He sang over and over again, "I'm so much cooler online" and explained, "When you get my kind of stats, It's hard to get a date, Let alone a real girlfriend, But I grow another foot and I lose a bunch of weight, Every time I login." As these lyrics indicate, the Internet lends itself to hyperbole, which often translates into rumors, legends, and humor of tall-tale proportions.

In his compilation organized around American regions, *The Greenwood Library of American Folktales*, Thomas A. Green listed over eighty discrete texts he contextualized as folklore in cyberspace. Many are oral legends and chain letters adapted to the distributive medium of

the Internet with the instruction to “forward asap,” but others use a digital medium to comment on electronic communication’s distinctive qualities. An example is the rumor that the federal government will charge a 5-cent surcharge on every e-mail delivered to offset losses by the U.S. Postal Service (Green 2006, 4: 262–64). A variant accuses newspapers and the popular press of repressing the story. It invites users to harness the power of the Internet to “E-mail to EVERYONE on your list.” It speaks to the democratizing, freedom ideal of the Internet and at the same time to the belief that superstructures representing the power elite inevitably flex control. As one variant states directly, “The whole point of the Internet is democracy and noninterference” (Green 2006, 4: 264). This idealization of the Internet as an untethered, unbureaucratized *commons* suggests that although it is certainly viewed as postmodern in its transcendence of space and time, it is popularly constructed in the model of the pre-modern village, which raises comparisons to a global village governed by tradition rather than nationalistic rule of law. Its interactive empowerment and constructiveness are among its culturally expected, addictive features. We can connect this belief to the multiconduit model of folklore. Folklorist Linda Dégh, writing about the conduits of face-to-face communication, asserted that “transmission of traditional messages in natural contexts is essentially free; arbitrary limitation of this freedom encroaches upon the normal functioning of the conduit” (Dégh 1997, 143).

References to the democratization of the Internet in popular discourse raise the question of its American-ness or Western-ness, especially considering the big developer names of Microsoft, Apple, and Google are American-based (Stewart and Bennett 1991, 17–44; Cohen 1969; Lee [1950] 1968).⁵ What is implied by the American preoccupation with the constructiveness of culture, counter to the European emphasis on the rootedness and givenness of folk culture in the natural landscape and the Asian perception of groupness constituted by social homogeneity and historical antiquity (see Bronner 1998; Dundes 1982)? American conceptions have often been distinguished by presenting culture as an outcome of social interaction, even if temporary and overlapping actions. Instead of comprising received traditions to be unselfconsciously followed, culture—and websites—can be constructed, created anew, to meet needs of the moment or person (Mechling 2006). In a constructivist concept of culture, individuals choose with whom they affiliate and the customs in which they participate; they may hybridize different traditions to create a distinctive cultural persona. Alan Dundes characterized his definition of folk group, for instance, as a “modern” and “American concept” due to the idea of social linkage rather than birthright: “*any group of people whatsoever*

who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own” (Dundes 1965b, 2).

Dundes’s reference to “two or more persons” as the social minimum of the group rhetorically implied that these persons produce culture working in interaction with one another. This constructivist outlook, which does not assert a baseline for the extent, location, economic status, literacy, or antiquity of the group, lends itself to the centrality of the network as the social basis of folkloric communication on the Internet. Using *network* as a term before the advent of the Internet, folklorists Beth Blumenreich and Bari Lynn Polonsky understood that “folklore is individually determined and based, not ‘group’ determined and based. Moreover, the individual’s folklore is determined by the nature of his interactions and experiences. This suggests that folklore can be most profitably studied in terms of interactional communicative and experiential networks—ICEN’s, as we shall call them” (1974, 15; see also Augusto 1970; Fine 1983). Blumenreich and Polonsky conceptualized networks to be face-to-face connections of choice in which obligations are decentered from family and community and recentered in the heterogeneous organizations that the individual chooses. Unlike communities in which one resides and consequently interacts with others, networks are broadly expandable and transcend time and space. Virtual networks, according to a dictionary of *New Keywords* for the information age, are central to the development of choices, and “imagined to be a means of establishing electronic communities (networks of people sharing beliefs and/or interests at a distance) at a time when long-term communities are said to be disappearing” (Webster 2005). Networks are integrally tied to technological change that facilitates increasing, simultaneous flows of information through cumulative, expandable social conduits. Although the buzzword *information* makes the communication sound like bundles of sterile minutiae, folklore is one of the strategies commonly employed to give a sense of tradition and hence identity to participants in the network, and to enliven the information with a cultural frame of reference.

Transmitting Tradition in Analog and Digital Eras: Lessons from the Budd Dwyer Saga

One way to test the production of tradition through interactive or mediated networks is to compare the production and use of lore in analog and digital eras. I had a chance to do that by being in the middle of an

oral joke cycle that emerged in 1987 in Pennsylvania, and in the twentieth-first century took new forms on the Internet, for a global audience. The subject of the humor was Pennsylvania State Treasurer R. Budd Dwyer who committed suicide at a televised news conference in the capitol building in Harrisburg. For months, regional media had been devoting coverage to Dwyer's conviction for accepting a \$300,000 bribe in exchange for a no-bid computer contract. Corruption trials were nothing new to the state capital, but what was unusual was Dwyer's prominent executive position. Prosecutors had brought a parade of underlings in for graft, but Dwyer was the highest official in the Dick Thornburgh administration to come to trial. If he made headlines as a big fish, he also drew notice for hanging around local watering holes. Asking to be called by his chummy middle name of Budd rather than his first name Robert, Dwyer was known for his neighborly familiarity around town, and he had a cherubic face and congenial style. He came from the unassuming-sounding town of Meadville and, after starting out as a high school civics teacher, worked his way up in the Republican Party from state senator to state treasurer. He was a regular sight on Harrisburg sidewalks, and he had the reputation for being approachable and affable. Some whispered that he got ahead by being the party's water carrier, that he was just a bumpkin, but regardless, he was recognized as one of the state's political honchos.

January 22, 1987, looked like an ugly day to commuters descending on Pennsylvania's state capitol as cheerless dark clouds hung over the city. Cleanup had finished of inauguration celebrations two days earlier for the new Democratic administration of Robert P. Casey, and state workers settled back into their routines. The statewide magnet of the Pennsylvania State Farm Show in Harrisburg, an indoor agricultural fair attracting half a million visitors, had cleared out a few days before, as the winter holidays became a distant memory. The day started with one of those January frosts that brought a frown to the thousands who made their way to work for the area's largest employer—state government. To top things off, a heavy snowfall that began that morning snarled traffic and kept children from school. As the snow depths increased, state workers were sent home, and most schoolchildren who never ventured out were taking seats in front of their televisions. Budd Dwyer decided to go ahead with his scheduled press conference anyway. The next day he faced sentencing, and he was looking at the likelihood of a long prison sentence for the federal crime. Most commentators expected Dwyer to use the occasion to reiterate his innocence and announce his resignation. Reporters, photographers, and television camera operators gathered in

his office at 10:30 a.m. Several noticed that the furniture had been rearranged to create a barrier between where Dwyer was about to speak and the reporters, but they made no protestation of the set-up. When Dwyer entered the room, he insisted that the door to the adjacent room be closed, restricting the room to 30 or so reporters and a handful of aides. These were unusual actions on the state government beat, but the reporters figured these were unusual times for Dwyer, the state's highest fiscal officer, now facing disgrace.

Dwyer read a long rambling statement declaring his innocence. He opened by saying, "This has been like a nightmare, like a life in the twilight zone. It wouldn't surprise me to wake up this minute to find out I was home in my bed and had just had a terrible nightmare. That's how unbelievable this has been. I mean, I've never done anything wrong and yet all this horrible nightmare has occurred to me." Dwyer blamed former Governor Dick Thornburgh for starting the probe because of a feud between them, and he criticized the press, FBI, judge, and jury for their handling of the case. But he saved his harshest words for the aggressive, ambitious state prosecuting attorney with the flashy name of James West. He then called for a review of the judicial system, a system that he felt had failed him. Occasionally he seemed to force back tears as he hurried through his speech. He skipped past pages of the text and told reporters they could read it later. Some of the reporters from television stations prepared to leave, but Dwyer called them back, saying, "I think you ought to stay, because we're not finished yet" (Cusick, Meyers, and Roche 1987).

After about 25 minutes, Dwyer came to the last page of his speech. He did not read it. Instead he handed three sealed envelopes to his aides.⁶ He reached into his briefcase on the desk, took out a manila envelope, and pulled out a .357 Magnum revolver. He held it up and with his other hand reached out like a football back fending off tacklers. Several reporters began to yell at him, "No, no, don't do this." Over the shouts, he announced, "Please leave the room as this will, as this will hurt someone." He looked like he was about to say something else, but as the shouts of the reporters grew, he put the gun in his mouth and holding the gun with both hands pulled the trigger. Forty-seven-year-old Budd Dwyer died instantly. His body fell back against the wall and slouched down in full view of whirring cameras. Blood splashed behind his head and dripped down from his nose. Dwyer's press secretary closed out the event by stepping out in front of the body and saying, "All right, show some decorum."

Shortly after 11 a.m., the largest of the midstate's television stations interrupted programming and reported the news of Dwyer's suicide.

With no warning of graphic content, the station ran the video without editing. A flood of calls came into the station protesting showing the tape when so many children were home watching. Drawing comparisons to coverage of the Kennedy assassination and the Challenger shuttle disaster, the station answered on the air that it was reporting the news as it happened, even if it was disturbing, and showed the tape again, though warning viewers this time about the graphic contents. Other stations also showed video but edited out Dwyer pulling the trigger. They offered phone numbers of crisis intervention centers to help those who had watched the video and felt anguish as a result.

The unread portion of Dwyer's statement revealed that the suicide for the cameras was planned. It stated, "I am going to die in office in an effort to see if the shameful facts, spread out in all their shame, will not burn through our civic shamelessness and set fire to American pride. Please tell my story on every radio and television station and in every newspaper and magazine in the U.S. Please leave immediately if you have a weak stomach or mind, since I don't want to cause physical or mental distress." But distress he did cause, among many viewers, who phoned stations to request shelving the video.

The story went national quickly. Cable News Network (CNN) showed a slightly edited version of the video, while the major networks carried the news without showing the tape. The Associated Press sent out photos showing the entire sequence of Dwyer's suicide, but included the warning: "They are very graphic photos of Dwyer with the gun in his mouth and pulling the trigger. We call to your attention that they may be offensive to some readers." Newspapers across the country included stories on the event, but Pennsylvania's offered the most graphic depictions, most notably the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which to the chagrin of many readers splashed photos on its pages of Dwyer putting the revolver in his mouth and falling to the floor (Cusick, Meyers, and Roche 1987, 16A). Ironically, in many circles the media's handling of the event became the story rather than Dwyer's message. *Time* magazine, for example, commented that "while most newspapers and TV stations carried only edited footage of the incident, two Pennsylvania stations aired the full sequence of the suicide—prompting hundreds of viewers to phone in protests" ("Milestones" 1987). A few days later reports of a televised suicide by a public official in Australia, apparently in imitation of Dwyer's event, came on the air and kept the controversy stirred. Looking for precedents to mark the events as a pattern, a search of news archives came up with the televised suicide in July 1975 of Christine Chubbuck, a host of a local variety show in Sarasota, Florida, but it had

not had the worldwide attention grabbed by the act of political figure Dwyer. The Dwyer story resurfaced on 19 June 1987, in one of those "ripped from the headlines" fictional adaptations on the popular television series *Hard Copy* broadcast by CBS. Perhaps replacing Dwyer with a female lead was a nod to Chubbuck, but the plot clearly echoed the details of Dwyer's case. In the show, a public official is hounded by reporters for her alleged participation in a kickback-for-contract scheme. She calls a televised press conference, declares her innocence, pulls a gun out of her purse, and in words reminiscent of Dwyer's, says, "Leave this room if you can't stand the sight of blood" before she commits suicide. The drama implied that media coverage drove her to ruin, and she got back at the press by committing the suicide in front of the reporters and cameras.

The show did not revive Dwyer's story. In reality, the national networks had given time on one night to the story. Stations in Pennsylvania continued their coverage for weeks with reports of reactions from various officials, speeches at the funeral, and subsequent investigations. By most accounts, Dwyer's suicide hit Pennsylvanians, especially Central Pennsylvanians, hard. The counseling center at Penn State Harrisburg put out a statement five days after the suicide reading, "We are aware that the events surrounding the recent public suicide of State Treasurer, R. 'Budd' Dwyer have generated considerable discussion and reaction in our community. We also know that a public and traumatic event of this kind may impact on individuals in different and sometimes unexpected ways." The center invited individuals to air their feelings with them. Also venting their feelings were reporters on the capitol beat who had been part of the news rather than spectators to it. They were now being interviewed instead of doing the interviewing. The questions were difficult: Could they have stopped it? Could they have known? Did they contribute to it? (Smith 1987; Parsons and Smith 1988).

During the weeks that followed Dwyer's suicide, reporters regularly queried psychiatrists for advice. Most commented on the feeling of hopelessness that Dwyer must have felt at a time when he thought he had achieved the pinnacle of success in public life. Dr. John Fryer, deputy medical director of the Philadelphia Psychiatric Center, was quoted as saying, "To do it in this way is to really get back at everybody and make sure nobody will escape. The rage must have been overwhelming. The time-honored theory about suicide is aggression turned inward. But it was Dwyer's public expression of rage that separates him from most suicide victims." Dr. Steven Schwartz, chief of adult psychiatric services at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, added: "It's a nice extra bonus

to make others suffer like they tried to make him suffer. The act was directed at newspeople and the populace who hounded him giving them something to remember. If you're going to do such a grand act of autonomy and power, why not do it on the biggest stage you can? It's screaming to the world, 'You didn't do anything to me, I did to me!' In addition to speaking on talk shows and news programs, psychiatrists went out to the schools and spoke to schoolchildren who witnessed the event (Herskowitz 1987; Lewis 1987).

Nowhere in the coverage was the rise of jokes about the event mentioned. Nor was humor circulated through youth networks mentioned anywhere as a way to adjust to the trauma of the event. But the lore was hard to miss. The jokes began spreading the day after the event. Among the first I heard were "What was the last thing Budd Dwyer's wife said to him?" (answer: don't go shooting your mouth off) and "What was the last thing to go through Budd Dwyer's mind?" (answer: his teeth). The jokes were brought to my attention by students in class at Penn State Harrisburg, the school where Budd Dwyer's son was enrolled. A reporter who had been interviewing me about folk beliefs of Central Pennsylvania asked me whether I had heard the jokes. When I asked him whether he was questioning me for an article, he replied that no, he did not think his paper would run such a story because it might be construed as in bad taste. Instead, he was asking me for personal reasons. He had gone to a journalism convention in South Carolina, and when the Pennsylvania reporters got together, he said, "all they did was tell these jokes." "No one else knew them," he added, "just the Pennsylvania people." Yet the jokes had the characteristics of other joke cycles based on televised tragedies, such as the Challenger space shuttle disaster of 28 January 1986, jokes which coincidentally were getting around again after replays of the event on its one-year anniversary (Bronner 1988b, 129-30; Oring 1987; Simons 1986; Smyth 1986). Jokes in the Challenger cycle, many referring to schoolteacher-astronaut Christa McAuliffe, had precedents in oral tradition. A joking question making the rounds after the tragedy such as "What was the last thing to go through Christa McAuliffe's mind?" (Answer: ass, teeth, sheet metal, fuselage, tile) resembled jokes about Grace Kelly's fatal auto accident of 1982 such as "What was the last thing to go through Grace Kelly's mind?" (ass, windshield, teeth). Probably older is the bawdy joking question often collected from youth, "What's the last thing to go through a bug's mind when he hits the windshield?" Answer: "his asshole" (Barrick 1987; see also Barrick 1982). The central characters in these jokes were celebrities who all had connections to the technology that did them in (McAuliffe

to spacecraft, Kelly to a luxury automobile, and in Dwyer's case to contracted computers). Humor about all three also played on the unnatural deformity of their bodies as a result of unexpected tragic events that were intensely photographed or filmed.

Mac E. Barrick, a folklorist at Shippensburg University, also in Central Pennsylvania, heard the Dwyer jokes too. We polled our classes immediately to trace the cycle of lore as it took its course, and compared our findings. When Barrick interviewed his students on February 4, all twenty-six had heard the jokes. I also had twenty-six students, and on January 28, twenty-two of twenty-six had heard the jokes. Of those twenty-two, nineteen had seen the unedited version of the video (eighteen in Barrick's class), and sixteen thought he was guilty (fifteen thought so in Barrick's class). Fifteen of the students knew at least two jokes, five knew three, and two knew one. From whom did they hear them? They said other college students. Making other inquiries, I found that the jokes were not restricted to college-age youth. I heard them from children as young as the sixth grade and from adults in their thirties, but I concluded that they were most popular in the age of adolescence through the early twenties.

A total of 23 percent of respondents told me they heard a Budd Dwyer joke the day after the suicide, but over 86 percent heard their jokes three to five days after the suicide. Both men and women heard the jokes, but men appeared to prefer telling them. In Barrick's class, equally composed of men and women, 36 percent heard the jokes from both men and women, whereas 64 percent heard them solely from men.

The joke cycle had two waves. During the first wave in the first five days after the event, the most popular jokes were joking questions playing on the answer "don't go shooting your mouth off." The questions varied from "What did Budd Dwyer's wife (mother, press secretary) say before his press conference?" to "How did you know Budd Dwyer was a politician?" Second in popularity were joking questions playing on beer commercials or beer characteristics. One might hear "What did Budd Dwyer's press secretary say to the coroner?" The answer: "This Bud's for you." Or there's "What do Dwyer and flat beer have in common? No head." Or "What kind of beer has no head? Budd-Dwyser." And "What happens when you shake up a Bud? It blows its cap." Third in popularity were joking questions offering another misplaced phrase or pun. "What were Dwyer's last words to his wife?" one asked, and then supplied the answer of "I need this job like I need a hole in the head." Then there's "What's worse (or better) than a pistol in your washer?" Answer: "A bullet in your Dwyer." Other jokes were in the form of remarks, such

as "Budd Dwyer got so fed up at work the other day he shot his brains out, but now he has half a mind to go back to work." This could also be rephrased as a joking question such as "Did you hear that Budd Dwyer shot himself? Now he has half a mind to go back to work." These jokes apparently have cognates in humor about the head injury to James Brady during the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan in 1981. The "hole in the head" answer in the Dwyer jokes has precedent in "What did James Brady say to Reagan that day? I need this job like I need a hole in the head." And there was the follow-up: "What did James Brady say later at the hospital? I have half a mind to go back to work."

During the second wave of orally circulated jokes, students composed new jokes or recycled Challenger disaster jokes by applying Dwyer to them. Typically offered at bar or dorm get-togethers, the jokes in this cycle rarely went beyond the group. Some of the composed jokes were: "What did Budd Dwyer say to his secretary at the end of his press conference? The envelope please." "What did the guy say when he went into a bar? Gimme a Bud and blow the head off of it." "What's Budd Dwyer's favorite beer? Colt 45." "What's Budd Dwyer's favorite toothpaste? Aim." "Why did Budd Dwyer put money behind his head? He wanted to see his face on a dollar bill." "What's the Budd Dwyer memorial coin? A washer." A large share of the composed or adapted jokes were sexual in nature: "What does Budd Dwyer have in common with a good Catholic girl? No head." "What do Tom Selleck's girlfriend and Budd Dwyer have in common? They both had Magnums go off in their mouths." "What did Budd Dwyer and Liberace have in common? They both put things in their mouths they shouldn't have." "What's the difference between Budd Dwyer and Rock Hudson? Budd Dwyer put a bullet in his head and Rock Hudson put a head in his butt." The common recycled Challenger disaster jokes were: "What color were Budd Dwyer's (Christa McAuliffe's) eyes? Blue—one blew here, one blew there" and the one about the last thing to go through his (previously her) mind. "What's the new Capital Cocktail," another joke went, and the answer was "Straight shot and a Bud" (the Space Shuttle Cocktail was "7Up and a splash of Teacher's"). The second wave in the Budd Dwyer joke cycle subsided by the end of February, and in March when I asked about the jokes, no new ones had been heard.

The Budd Dwyer joke cycle took on the swift-timing and mass-society characteristics of other celebrity tragedy jokes, but the Dwyer jokes were restricted almost exclusively to Central Pennsylvania. Although the entire nation had heard of Dwyer after the event, it was in Central Pennsylvania that adjustment was called for; it was in Central

Pennsylvania that the suicide was graphically displayed; and it was in Central Pennsylvania that Budd Dwyer's name and, particularly, his image were familiar sights. He was a person who you could run into having a beer in a local tavern or conversing on the street. The jokes thus created an incongruity between the unassuming figure and his celebrity status. There were overtones of the bumpkin overwhelmed by the city, but mainly, especially to those living around Harrisburg, the jokes were understood in the context of political corruption so familiar to state government (Keisling and Kearns 1988). In addition to covering Dwyer's case, Harrisburg's media reported at the same time news of graft in contracts for the building of the capitol addition and the indictment of several state judges for accepting bribes. Along with Dwyer, the Republican Party chairman was convicted and several other state officials were implicated. As Frank Lynch, a reporter for Harrisburg's *Patriot-News* at Dwyer's trial, told me, "Everyone did it, but Budd Dwyer just got caught, that's all. Budd became the symbol of Pennsylvania politics" (Bronner 1988b, 86).

But it was the way Dwyer went out of politics that attracted humorous comment. It was the airing of the analog tape of Dwyer taking his own life and seeing the bloody result that forced young viewers to come to terms with the harshness of death. Perhaps especially wrenching for vulnerable adolescents was this public figure's ultimate statement of failure and hopelessness, an avowal that was repeated a few days after the suicide by a teenager in York, Pennsylvania, who took his own life by shooting a gun into his mouth. In the first wave of jokes, related in face-to-face encounters within the local setting, could be heard the outlets, on the one hand, of laughter at a community tragedy. On the other hand, to many young men, telling the jokes was a sign of their toughness, an aggressive demonstration of their ability to be unshaken by the horror of the graphic suicide. Still, most of the students I interviewed acknowledged that laughing at the event in the days following the suicide eased the tension in the air. Many of the students interviewed also considered the jokes irreverent and derived adolescent satisfaction from the rebelliousness of telling them, at least to one another. The event was a disaster to Pennsylvanians not only because of the taking of a life but because the corruption that they knew ran rampant and was taken lightly had a tragic end. It was a disaster because it brought death close to home, close to children American society tries hard to shelter (see Dundes 1979, 3-14).

The first wave of Budd Dwyer jokes had raised talk about the televised broadcast of his suicide, his guilt or innocence, and the context of political corruption around the city in general. The second wave focused

on the act of joking itself. It played with the joking form, rather than providing humorous comment on the historical and political context. In the second wave of jokes, a shift is apparent from Dwyer's predicament to creating humor through the extension of word play and the realization of incongruity. The jokes emphasized the sexual and violent content that marks other joke-telling sessions during the college years. Dwyer became a temporary vehicle for varying the expression of these themes. But these jokes were not successful; they did not spread and they often received a grudging reception when they were originally told.

Budd Dwyer jokes spread orally had a limited time and place, but on the Internet Dwyer lore has taken a different visual form and has gone global. Twenty years after Budd Dwyer's death, a Google search of his name produced 37,600 sites. Among the sites were several tributary memorial sites, MySpace and Facebook pages using his name (including a few rock bands), <http://www.budd-dwyer.com.remember.to>, and lots of wikis on his biography, including gorewiki.org on which a clip of the shooting looped repeatedly. The jokes resurfaced, either on sites dealing with sick jokes generally or on humor sites (often under the subject category of *suicide*) that prefaced the jokes with explanations of Dwyer's conviction and press conference. Although some of the sites referred to the jokes as texts of particular meaning to Pennsylvanians, most networks categorized them more generally. For example, the Comedy and Jokes Community included Dwyer's death among a "list of crazy, weird and even funny deaths of prominent people in the last 100 years" (posted 29 August 2008). The most common joke listed among different sites was word play connecting Budd Dwyer with commercial icon Budweiser beer: "What's the difference between Budd Dwyer and Bud Lite? Bud Lite has a head." In fact, many sites misspelled Budd's name as Bud, assuming that it was a nickname that fit his constructed persona of victimized everyman.

More likely than repeating jokes, Internet chatters discussing Dwyer were fond of spouting a joking proverbial comparison, "Like Budd Dwyer, I'm going out with a bang" (Domi 2008). Discussing a rumor that the Dwyer saga would be made into a movie, one discussion group started a thread of humorous comments: "He sure went out with a bang. Hahahahaha; Hey man, nice shot! Muhahaha; Now that's what I call a sack lunch" (Mencia 2008). A MySpace page repeated the "out with a bang" line but used it to express gothic subculture by respecting Dwyer's "style" for going "out with a bang and make sure those who did you wrong remember it forever" (Laurelei 2008). Dwyer's name along with the "bang" line came up often when a suicide made the news. When a

Pennsylvania district attorney went missing in 2005, a poster in a discussion thread commented “I guess he didn’t want to go out with a bang like Bud Dwyer” (Will 2005). Different anonymous posters contributed to a parody of the typically just-the-facts Wikipedia entry for Dwyer in the Uncyclopedia. The “out with a bang” line was there expressed as “Dwyer’s career had hit a rough spot, but he still managed to go out with a bang” and a spinoff at the end, “He then proceeded to give the audience a piece of his mind; those closest to him received that and more” (“Budd Dwyer” 2008). Whether functioning as “gross humor” to shock readers by its insensitivity and therefore question societal norms, or to temper disturbing thoughts of death, the repetition and variation of the “out with a bang” remark resonated with viewers because of Dwyer’s public event and subsequent celebrity status. If Dwyer jokes had previously been symbolic of cultural communication that one would not read in the newspapers, Dwyer images in the digital age signified the openness of the Internet and the ability—in some cases, the obsession—with making a public mark in cyberspace. Among the many suicides discussed, Dwyer’s stood out because it was public, as the Internet was, and vivid footage challenging social norms was available.

Dwyer was known to many viewers only on the Internet, where he achieved cult status for engineering his own death on tape. Dwyer’s parting sentence, “Stay back, this could hurt someone,” is frequently cast in a play frame through a list of comical, “famous last words throughout history” that is posted on many sites. Dwyer’s name also rates listing along with celebrities Rosie O’Donnell, Michael Jackson, and Maury Povich as an example, in chat jargon of IDIFTL (I did it for the lulz), referring to an internet drama one causes (“I Did It for the Lulz” 2008). Reporting Dwyer’s notoriety on the Web under the headline, “Dwyer Suicide Lives On,” the print version of the *Philadelphia Daily News* informed readers that “The former Pennsylvania state treasurer is an *Internet cult figure*, his final moments posted on Web pages as a curiosity or a *sick joke*” (Russell 1998; emphasis added). The reporter thought the main audience for the “gruesome suicide” was youth because the subtitle of the piece was “Sex Isn’t All That Parents Should Monitor on the Web” (Russell 1998). In keeping with the untethered reputation of the Internet, many bloggers narrated the footage as evidence of governmental conspiracy, suppression, or vendetta. Posts, expressed like urban legends, stated that independent investigations proved that Dwyer was framed and hounded to his death. Unlike television, which hid reality for the benefit of corporate suits or governmental higher-ups, the Internet opened access and invited commentary much as oral tradition might. In culture critic’s Christie Davies’s

words, "Television is hegemonic, the Internet libertarian" (2003, 30). She theorizes that "Television, far from creating a global village, destroyed local communities and institutions, leaving behind a mass of atomized and alienated individuals, but the Internet is now enabling them to recreate virtual substitutes for the world they have lost . . . [the Internet] is a free, decentralized electronic medium in an otherwise controlled and restricted age" (Davies 2003, 34). Dwyer jokes in 1987 responded largely to television and commented on its moral authority to suppress a public suicide as well as the adjustment to the images that leaked through. By the Internet age, the Dwyer tape was widely available and prompted more belief and narrative response than textual production. It brought out the line between the folk and official web.

Another common reaction to Dwyer's footage on the Web that raises comparison to folk communication systems is that it haunts. It is narrated in terms reminiscent of ghost stories or spectral sightings and the figure of Dwyer can appear to be a dubious image rather than a real person. When jokes circulated at the time of Dwyer's suicide, the connection to everyday life was clearer than years later when the footage was posted on the Internet. "Videotape instantly helps negate the 'real-ness' of any situation," journalist Daniel Kraus wrote of the Dwyer Internet tape thirteen years after the public suicide occurred. He observed that the Dwyer tape has a "friend-of-a-friend" validation because someone tells someone else to view it and "conjure up very similar scenarios time and time again" (Krauss 2000). As it showed up on various sites, the footage lost clarity each time it was copied and redubbed; the blurry man on the tape looked ghostly, several posters commented. As with ghost hunters and legend trippers who go out in search of an encounter with the dead, viewing the tape involves both a morbid urge to view death and a repulsion from it. Seeing the footage invites narrative speculation about Dwyer's motivation or the forces that worked upon him that might also work on the viewer. Discussing the tape on MetaTalk, Phaedon wrote, for example, "I couldn't believe what I saw at first was real," to which Vacapinta responded, "It's a video of a desperate man blowing his brains out in public. It's haunted me since" ("Suicide Video Link" 2007). Daniel on MySpace independently wrote on his page, "This one haunted me . . . as desensitized as I thought I was, this one's been beating up my noggin for a couple of days" (Daniel 2008). He narrated that "You basically see him make the decision to end his life in his eyes, and you hear the gunshot, and the next thing you see is his lifeless body" (Daniel 2008). Along with the feeling of being haunted by the Dwyer footage the reactions mentioned include disbelief in the action viewed

and the strong lingering character of it. Although a supernatural element is not apparent in most posts, the footage elicits responses that it is “unbelievable” and “incredible,” which leads to comments addressing the unnaturalness of the death. It suggests a common folk strategy of ghost stories and beliefs to elicit responses about unnatural death and the vulnerability of mortals (see Thomas 2007a).

Whether framed as sick, apparently insensitive humor or tormented, sensitive narrative, Dwyer’s story apparently carried a different message on the Internet in the twenty-first century than it did in dorm talk sessions in the twentieth. Whereas in its oral communicative context of Central Pennsylvania, it often was accompanied by comments on the problem of local corruption and the desperation of a popular public figure, Internet discourse turned his name into a metaphor for a stupid or outrageous media act. As a result of Internet posting of his death tape, Dwyer according to blogger David Eisenthal, “became something of a . . . joke” by two decades after his death (Eisenthal 2007). As blogs invite feedback, Eisenthal received several responses, many of which noted how easy it is to view the video of his death on the Internet, as it should be, which stood in contrast to how much controversy was raised when it was on television. The implication in the digital age is that the prosumer Internet, unlike consumer media, is an open public commons in which anyone can express opinions and all information is appropriate; this process comes to the fore in the posting of shocking images. In web discourse Dwyer became more a character in a narrative than a person with a biography. And that discourse takes on the character of conversation in a dorm or back room, which is instantaneous, even simultaneous, with content that emphasizes the colloquial, often defiantly incorporating, in the frame of the discussion thread, what elsewhere would be considered taboo or indecent.

In 2008 the wiki and chat site Urban Dictionary listed six different definitions of *Budd Dwyer*, arranged into a linear thread. The site has the participatory feature of allowing viewers to rate each definition, which reveals the cultural production of celebrities through perceptions. The first posted definition was “to commit suicide on television,” and it gave the example of “they feared he could pull a Budd Dwyer.” One topical reply worried that resigning New York governor Eliot Spitzer would “have a Budd Dwyer moment.” Another definition referred to the difference between understanding the event on television and on the Internet with the comment “this was pre-internet, mind you, so they weren’t used to seeing stuff.” It received the most votes of approval, perhaps because it reminded viewers of the openness of the folk web

and assured contemporary users that they were wiser and more aware than the days when the airwaves were censored. One poster complained that Dwyer as a term was not sympathetic; “he was an attention whore drama queen,” Tien Duong baldly wrote, but his comment received more thumbs-down than thumbs-up symbols. Clearly not feeling pressure from any censors, Reservoir Dog got approvals for reporting the term used during fellatio. The poster explained “When getting a blowjob from a hot girl, you cum so hard that it shoots out her nose simulating Budd Dwyer’s public suicide” (“Budd Dwyer” 2008). Usage was not due to Dwyer being a household name, which he was not, but to the easy availability of the suicide video on the Web, which gave him notoriety for a new generation.

The visual material was grist for thread mills that impelled posters to express beliefs—and express metafolklore about modern mass media. Internet images of Dwyer’s suicide invite evaluations of the immediacy, and even exhibitionism, involved in making a mark in post-modern digital culture.⁷ On the blog Modern Television, filmmaker Phillip Patiris posted a photo of Dwyer but resisted showing the “cheap thrill” of the video clip. He explained that despite his “unassailable belief that the wide-open web as a culmination and synthesis of all previously existing media is a place where anything and everything should (must) be presented . . . it’s about time that people were forced to develop for themselves that lost, civilized art of responsibility and *discerning* by giving them access to every temptation available” (Patiris 1999). He argued that the Internet was unbridled and uncensored in the spirit of oral communication, but restraints, in the form of netiquette traditions, were developing to guide use of the Web. On the folk web, accusations, using folk terms, that posters are *flaming* (being intentionally provocative or insulting) or *snarking* (portmanteau of snide and remark) are akin to children’s folk jeers, which keep group members in line by shaming them into conforming to standards of behavior (Knapp and Knapp 1976, 58–75). The disadvantage on the Web is that a jeerer cannot get in a culprit’s face, but group pressure is applied through the discussion thread, often using the power of the Internet’s instantaneity. The spread of Dwyer as a character or metaphor led Patiris to comment, for example, “It’s all so instant here in cyberspace . . . witness e-mail and newsgroup flaming and the rise of incivility as people give in to their immediate and emotional impulses, immediately transmitted to the whole world, a form of exhibitionism” (quoted in Lynch 1998).

The video of Dwyer’s suicide appears in several versions, short and extended, on YouTube, among other sites. The conversation in dorm

rooms and offices in 1987 has been replaced by a running thread debating whether the video is camp or creepy. The first post to the extended version was "I just pissed and shit my pants," one of several referring to losing bodily functions while watching it. Whether or not that was a positive or negative statement, it was followed with the applauding line "That was a good screamer! Good job!" and the not so laudatory "D*it that scared me!" Often posted as a link with an invitation to view it, the video also provoked some irate posters to complain about the posters who had "shit on them" or "fucked with their heads." Viewing a visual image without historical context, some posters questioned the veracity of the footage and filled in a plausible narrative. RJA Haven, for instance, commented "Does he really shoot himself in here or is this a spoof?" to which michaeldog responded that it was real and "he committed suicide so his family could reap off the benefits" (HurricaneAJW2 2008). As if to underscore the openness of the Internet, a frequent comment on the cultural impact of Dwyer's event was to refer to a sketch for a television pilot by comedian Norm MacDonald in 2005 mimicking Dwyer's comments before committing suicide at a press conference. Although that never made it to television, as the story goes, on the Internet one can freely view and respond to videos about suicide, intermeshing both the comedic and the serious.⁸

The understanding of the Internet as open and visual was apparent, for example, in the case of "90 Day Jane," who announced her intention on a blog to commit suicide on the Web in ninety days. She in fact referred to Dwyer and Chubbuck's televised public suicides as models for her act but insisted that she was not depressed or seeking attention. She did intend to comment on the alienation of her young generation whose "biggest obstacle is beating Halo 3" ("90 Day Jane' A Hoax, Takes Down Site" 2008). Responses ranged from sympathetic notes to vulgar accusations. She blogged each day leading up to her announced doomsday and received hundreds of comments on each of her posts. Word got around the Web and apparently college lounges, judging from the poster who wrote "It was all my college spoke about in the last week" ("90 Day Jane' A Hoax, Takes Down Site" 2008). One curious fellow blogger, wrote, "Like any site you hear about from a friend, there are thousands of other 'friends' out there telling their friends, and *your* friend is surely not the *first* friend to tell their friends" ("90 Day Jane' A Hoax, Takes Down Site" 2008). Alarmed by the reaction, she shut down the site and explained that her blog "was meant for me and (what I ignorantly thought would be) a small number of people who might find it on BlogSpot. It is the result of me tapping into the darkest part of myself

and seeing where it led" (Douglas 2008). She imagined the site in a play frame, wherein the context would be understood by participants as if they were located in a social space, but as a viewed image, it spread quickly and was used to comment on the function of the Internet as a cultural location. She recognized that on the Internet people intensified their honesty and emotion. What began as a commentary on the "true human connection on the internet" ended up showing the extent of folkloric construction as the Internet distributed the material and image of a disturbing topic.

Classic theories to explain suicide concern who is likely to take their lives and the motivations for doing so. Emile Durkheim (1951) in particular argued that each society has a collective inclination toward suicide, and he posited social causes for its regularity. Dwyer's case combines elements of each of Durkheim's three categories of suicide—egoistic, altruistic, and anomic—and this encapsulation of social motives in a public declaration is partly responsible for its notoriety. In the egoistic category, the underintegration of the individual into society is brought into light; altruism is at work in advancing a religious or political cause, reflecting a heightened sense of integration; anomie results from problems coping with new opportunities or developments, especially when the person has been previously representative of societal beliefs and practices (Simpson 1951, 14-15). Coupled with this social perspective is the psychoanalytic view that suicidal individuals seek to internalize aggression they hold toward others. In any case, suicide draws attention to itself because it is considered unnatural, particularly with modernization and its premise of progress and increased ease of life due to technological innovation. Suicide is intrusive and transgressive, therefore, because it uncovers the remaining deep crisis in modern society (Simpson 1951, 17).

The Internet records folk commentary on suicide and makes it part of the process of questioning modernization. Arguably, the Internet brings suicide out into the open; made public through Dwyer footage and 90 Day Jane blogs, it becomes more vivid and accessible. That presentation raises conflicts that drive narrative and belief about the *collective conscience*, to use Durkheim's terms, at work in a cyberculture. The circumstances of Dwyer's suicide became on the Internet secondary to the perceptions of it by postmodern viewers. Memories of the act, especially in relation to historic corruption, were not solicited as much as ethical considerations of it as disrupting public, bureaucratic life. The Dwyer tape came to symbolize the Internet itself and forced reactions as a metamesage about the cultural implications of a technology that allows viewing

of a suicide tape. Whether treated as comical or haunting, Dwyer's footage is among notable images on the Internet that compel folk responses as a way to deal with postmodern anxieties and ambiguities. Posters put themselves in Dwyer's shoes and created narratives that conveyed or subverted values for the present day. One telling response, which was uttered frequently, was that the video made posters think about what it meant when frustration led them to say they wanted to "blow their brains out" or shoot themselves. They thus used the Internet as an imaginative platform to question the boundaries between fantasy and fact, virtuality and reality, life and death.

Logic and Psychology of Internet Praxis

The Internet's distributive traits separate it as an electronic medium from the one-on-one communication of telephone calls and fax machines. The Internet layers an assortment of captioned material, graphic and textual, brought together through the marvel of electronic cut and paste on a *page* or *site* (often *under construction* in computer lingo) in a process comparable to the bricoleur's overlay technique in scrapbooking and album keeping. The scrapbook is a personal document, and yet is made attractive and recognizable to others because at some point it is shared in a selected network of family and friends. Sites such as Facebook and MySpace, especially, virtualize and folklorize the scrapbook and album by programming that encourages users to make comments and effect designs for *friends* to view and respond to with their own remarks. *Blogs* (a portmanteau of web and log) can have handles or tags rather than real names and often thematize the cultural frame of reference around special interests or identities (Lieber 2009). Although bloggers have been compared to diarists and e-mail to postal writing, the distinctive features of visualizing discussion *threads* and leaving comments and responses as *posts* merits a different kind of comparison to the anonymous or tagged messages in latrinalia that have been documented as folklore (Dundes [1966] 2007a). Defecation inspires writers to inscribe traditional verse on stalls, such as "To the shithouse poet/In honor of his wit/May they build far and wide/ Great monuments of shit" and "Those who write on shithouse walls/Roll their shit in little balls/Those who read these words of wit/Eat the little balls of shit" (Dundes [1966] 2007a, 372–73). Inscriptions are often arranged in a vertical chain with an initial message followed by responses by different writers below it. Linguist Allen Walker Read hypothesizes a motivation for these anonymous writers that can be extended to Internet posting: "the well-known yearning to

leave a record of one's presence or one's existence" (1935, 17). That writing in this individualized context is often associated with defecation led Alan Dundes to relate this impulse to an infantile desire to play with feces that was displaced by *making one's mark* on the wall (Dundes [1966] 2007a, 373).

An analogue is apparent to this scatological function in the posting of photocopied humor on bulletin boards and cubicle walls, which often subverts the corporate, machine-like setting with visual references to bathroom behavior, where nature calls and people are naturally themselves. Internet users may also associate the bathroom with modern ritual beliefs, from calling out in childhood revenants such as Bloody Mary in the mirror to narrating deaths and assaults occurring there during adulthood. My interpretive purpose is not to reduce all Internet usage to the expressive process apparent in latrinalia (you might call that *bullshit*, but isn't that more evidence of the cultural trope?). It is to extend the Dundesian interpretation of graffiti as a projection of infantile repression of scatological taboos to the psychology of folk empowerment in the technology-driven information age by comparing the latter to the naturalistic context of toilets. Folklorist Jeannie Thomas noticed in 2007, for example, the preponderance of bathroom ghosts in modern folklore and theorized that the bathroom has a liminal location in the home or institution: "it is simultaneously the unclean room and the room where we clean our bodies. As such, it is a place we feel ambivalent about, and it is associated with significant cultural issues: body functions that are seen as unclean, disease, sexuality, dirt, health, and intimacy" (2007a, 38). Of special significance to the computer metaphor is the notion of restrooms as public places where people rely on technology to do private things and therefore feel vulnerable. Many of the prime images offered on the open medium of the Internet—health, death, sex, and social connection—extend the issues Thomas mentions that are raised by the sequestered bathroom. The computer's space is often envisioned as an artificial-sounding cubicle or station that is necessary to daily function but also may cause discomfort because of a person's inadequacy with the technology or fear of being overwhelmed. Defecation can produce both relief and shame, and its product, known euphemistically as *resents* in childhood, is equated in folklore to official *paperwork* on a desk or screen. In corporate lore distributed by photocopiers, fax machines, and computer, for instance, the image of an outhouse or a child on a potty appears, with the caption, "The job is never finished until the paperwork is done!" (Dundes and Pagter 1975, 160–62). The action of the toilet is further symbolized as a model for information technology in humorous

signs such as “We Welcome Advice and Criticism and always *rush* Them through the Proper Channels (One flush usually does it!)” (Dundes and Pagter 1991b, 102).

Before you roll your analog eyes, consider this: regardless of whether the Internet is hailed or reviled for enabling the rapid distribution of material, much of that material is labeled as rumor that is said to *smear* and slander (from the root for scandal or shameful conduct). As I noted in responses to the Dwyer suicide tape, many posters linked the presentation or viewing of the material to defecation (“I shit in my pants watching,” “intense shit,” “holy shit,” “some kind of shit.”). Of folkloristic significance is that Internet practice is widely viewed as yeast for *spreading* stories that call for an evaluation of their truthfulness (see Mikkelson and Mikkelson 2008; Oring 2008). Indeed, a website launched in 2008 with the domain name Fightthesmears.com was predicated on the presumption that the Internet fosters the *zooming* of hearsay, according to a report in *Time* (Tumulty 2008). Particularly sensitive to “the blogosphere’s superheated rumor mill,” according to *Time*, presidential candidate Barack Obama referred to “dirt and lies that are circulated in e-mails” being “pumped out” (Tumulty 2008, 40). Prime examples of popular Internet sites promoting verbal smearing are the-shit.net, JuicyCampus.com (replaced by collegeacb.com), and hecklerspray.com, replete with scatological references in their titles and aimed at youth. Another, spokeo.com, which is advertised as a social-network-based deep search engine, shows on its home page a string of teenage girls whispering, with hands over their mouths, in one another’s ears above the text “Want to see something juicy?” As of 2008, YouTube featured 4,160 videos posted with titles that included “talking shit” and Facebook listed over 500 groups for “talking shit.” Many of these posts relate their sharing of *inside* or *juicy* information as providing *the straight poop*.

What is the connection to latrinalia? A play frame is established in the stall in which a person is released from the restraint of workaday society, and the wall becomes an open, uncensored discussion board and canvas on which creative messages and drawings can be sequenced, similar to the heralded form and function of many blogs (Longenecker 1977). An individual in the stall, itself located within official space, connects to other people anonymously while engaging in a natural act. Many listserv postings, too, are framed as informal rather than business and relay rumors with the invitation to give feedback. Accusations of *playing on the Internet* often imply that the user is engaging in idle *chatting* or rumor-mongering with others. The privatized context of defecation in a public, institutional setting compels us to consider the psychoanalytic

interpretation of graffiti and threading as using an infantile smearing impulse to signal human freedom, especially in the symbolic equation of playful writing and anality, which bears application to the pose of sitting in front of a screen (Dundes [1966] 2007a).

Is there symbolic significance in the fact that Facebook's primary form of communication is privatized *writing on the wall*? Another clue to the folk logic of the Internet is MySpace's two standard *blurbs*, in computer lingo: "About Me" and "Who I'd Like to Meet." The use of blurb is an Americanism referring to a short, overblown endorsement of a book; it has a connection in sound and meaning to the colloquial use of *blurt* (usually accompanied with *out*) for anal wind. In computer talk, it is common to refer to having a flood of messages fill up a user's drive, which is periodically emptied, and the user anally feels impelled to organize accumulated material into boxes that can be emptied. Notably, odious messages labeled *junk*, or *spam* (from stigmatized canned luncheon meat), suggest repulsion against being befouled or smeared (expressed in the satire of the traditional proverb "To err is human, to really foul things up takes a computer."). Excretory references to digital work are also apparent in the common computer-age adages "Garbage In, Garbage Out" and "A clean house is the sign of a broken computer." Early in computing, UNIX users assigned scatological names to punctuation marks such as *splat* for an asterisk and programmers' lore referred to the *bit bucket*, a magical trash can in which computer gremlins stash or excrete gobbled data (Beatty 1976; Jennings 1991, 105). Later *bladder* or *bladderball* became terms for an obnoxious string of emails sent to a large list, rather than being contained. Self-referential responses to rumors about the Internet, such as the one that Congress will vote on whether or not phone companies can charge long-distance rates for accessing the Internet, repeat variations of "When will people realize that they are spreading any shit they believe into," "these people are full of crap," and under the heading of "Polluting Internet," the "videos [on the rumor] are all a bunch of crap load of shit" ("2012: The Year the Internet Ends" 2008; see also Green 2006: 4 262–64).

Anxiety that the folk character of the Internet will be lost comes through in a narrative directly relating defecation with computer use. In 2003, a story circulated that Microsoft was developing an Internet-capable toilet. In some reports, it was called an iLoo (from the British term *loo* for toilet). According to the narrative, the stall would be equipped with a wireless keyboard and an extensible, height-adjustable plasma screen located directly in front of the seated user. The story appeared to confirm that no place was immune from the Internet's reach, but a detail

also equated human control with wiping and smearing: the toilet would come with special paper imprinted with URLs that users may not have tried. Snopes.com, a reputable urban legend reference site, declared iLoo a hoax but quoted a newspaper interview with a Microsoft official who said, "People used to reach for a book or mag when they were on the loo, but now they'll be logging on! It's exciting to think that the smallest room can now be the gateway to the massive virtual world" ("iLoo" 2007). The excitement the official cited presumably extends to being seated at the screen within a cubicle, where privatized *logging on* enacts the titillating, smearing praxis of building "far and wide, great monuments of shit."

Although it is often noted that folk initialisms are common in electronic communication, rarely interpreted is the preponderance of scatological references in online chat lingo:

AS = Ape Shit
 BAG = Big Ass Grin
 BS = Bull Shit, Brain Strain, Big Smile
 BTSOOM = Beats the Shit Out of Me
 CYA = Cover Your Ass
 DILLIGAS = Do I Look Like I Give a Shit
 EE = Electronic Emission
 ESAD = Eat Shit and Die
 FOS = Full of Shit
 LMAO = Laughing My Ass Off
 PITA = Pain in the Ass
 SEG = Shit Eating Grin
 SOGOP = Shit or Get Off the Pot
 SOL = Shit Out of Luck
 SOS = Same Old Shit
 SSDD = Same Shit Different Day
 TS = Tough Shit, Totally Stinks
 TSFY = Tough Shit For You
 UY = Up Yours
 WTSDS = Where the Sun Don't Shine
 WTSHTF = When the Shit Hits the Fan
 YGBSM = You Got to be Shitting Me
 YS = You Stinker
 ("List of Chat Acronyms & Text Message
 Shorthand" 2008)

Maybe some of this impulse comes from the ejective or retentive praxis of users in a seated position. Much visual humor associates toilets and

electronic technology involving inputs and outputs. The position of the user may invite commentary because it brings into question boundaries of private and public, play and work, natural and technological, and freedom and restraint that are of concern on the Internet. The common folkloric forms of initialism are more than linguistic devices to save space; they also signal subversion of the institutional use of initialisms and acronyms in bureaucratized modern life (Jennings 1991, 91–108). Visualizing the computer as a toilet (such as in the examples I previously mentioned from my math team experience) reflects the need to humanize technology and institutions, lest they replace or control humans, but it also is congruent with the social negotiation between the pleasure derived from ejection and the social restraint on its appearance (Jones [1912] 1961, 413–37). Moving beyond one-on-one communication, the Internet frequently makes use of an informal, scatological frame of reference to distribute playful material widely, which is tantamount to the smearing of feces, such as in references to the ease of *slinging mud*, *dishing dirt*, and *spreading shit* online. In this way, it signifies exhilaration, maybe compulsion, and a certain amount of aggressive rebellion. In the writing-defecation equation, one leaves a potentially embarrassing or satisfying remark and maintains a presence in a globalizing medium that blurs the divisions between private and public. This is not to say by any stretch that on the Internet users are imitating defecation. The point is that rhetorically, scatological initialisms and symbolic references to smearing signal, indeed demarcate, the folk web.

To be sure, users locate the folk web by referring to other transgressive practices. The fact that information is most often viewed without direct contact with its creator fosters the emergence of a metalanguage for expressing the gesture, emotion, veracity, and humor that typically accompanies face-to-face interaction. For example, online chat noticeably employs initialized sexual expressions that are transmitted by both men and women as *natural* symbols of aggression, particularly by teenage users: WTF for What the Fuck, FFS meaning For Fuck's Sake, FOAD for Fuck Off and Die, GFY for Go Fuck Yourself, GTFO for Get the Fuck Out, and STFU for Shut the Fuck Up. Users with whom I discussed this penchant suggested to me that less stigma is attached to disembodied swearing online and it marks messages as conversation, especially youthful talk associated with being brash and high-spirited. As with scatological references, this swearing also helps to demarcate a folk or play frame characteristic of the folk web. Referring to the presumption that in an analog world typing is considered formal or is institutionally supervised, a representative comment was that tapping out or texting

WTF provided a high, or felt transgressive in a way that speaking the words, if one was inclined to do so, did not. This rhetorical strategy raises questions about the symbolization of phallic or pubertal power in technology (essentialized, for instance, in light bulb jokes in which there is a double entendre for screwing in a light bulb as sex and technology), and for many cultural critics, about the gendered or patriarchal posturing of the Internet (Dundes 1981; Miller 2001). In relation to the previous argument that scatological impulses are projected onto the *Net* (slang for Internet that draws attention to its function as a catchall receptacle as well as a linguistic clipping of *network*), one can note the fear of being smeared extended to being feminized sexually. This is evident in the motifemic slot filled by *fucked* or *fouled*: SNAFU (Situation Normal All Fouled/Fucked Up), FUM (Fucked/Fouled Up Mess), and FUBAR (Fouled/Fucked Up Beyond All Repair) (Jennings 1991, 107). The adoption of these terms from military lore may not be coincidental, because an analogy can be made between soldiers entering a vernacular cultural register with this speech and computer users as indoctrinated, masculinized trainees using the computer as a phallicized weapon (Fleece 1946). In addition, the Internet historically has roots in military intelligence and is often associated with other institutionalized groups such as universities, hospitals, and corporations. Moreover, the Web can be construed in digital folk belief systems as representative of a formal, routinized organization that users need to humanize or even subvert (often signified by creative variation and parody) and about which they need to vent aggression.

Folklore about the Web often creates, as its other, a money-grubbing bullying elite aligned with corporate, scientific, and government interests that seek to control, censor, and bureaucratize the Internet. The folk web in this construction represents the tradition of a democratic, participatory commons and the value of openness and inclusiveness. The cyberculture wars are imagined as a David-Goliath battle of ordinary, disempowered people affiliating with tradition against scientists and bureaucrats who carry the brand of technology and modernity and would deracinate the Internet commons. Yet despite the cautionary tales and rumors of the end of the open Internet, the mass of user-generated data on the Web suggests the expansion of a folk system, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, that is characterized by peer-to-peer sharing of handed-down wisdom and by the priority of practice over scientism. A notable declaration of user independence for the Internet, in the touchstone technology publication *Wired* magazine, carried the headline "The End of Theory," printed as "The End of Science" on the magazine's

cover (Anderson 2008). The basis of the shift in authority, according to the magazine's editor Chris Anderson, is the "massive corpus" of reachable information that is a sign of a new revolutionary epoch dubbed the "Petabyte Age." In previous iterations of data, organizational analogies were used: folders, files, and libraries. "Petabytes," Anderson wrote, "are stored in the clouds" (2008, 108). By this cosmological analogy information is visualized, in almost supernatural terms, as being beyond human reach and comprehension.

Technically, a *petabyte* is equal to one quadrillion bytes (1000^5 or 10^{15}) and symbolizes an extraordinary amount because of the significance of *quad* (from the root for *four*), a unit representing abundance as *three* in Western thought stands for completeness (Dundes 1980). It also refers to automorphism because of the fifth power (five being an automorphic number) to which the official measure of 1000 is put. In Internet usage, the vast amount of data can be expressed in petabytes: Google processes about 20 petabytes of data a day. "This is a world," Anderson philosophizes, "where massive amounts of data and applied mathematics replace every other tool that might be brought to bear . . . Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity" (Anderson 2008, 108). Web phenomena are therefore described as patterns rather than models, rationalized in analytical terms as correlations rather than outlined relationally as causation. It may appear, as Anderson claims, to be "a whole new way of understanding the world" (2008, 109), but it also may be a virtualization of a mythic world in which one's experience is connected to everyone else's. The essence of the mythic, as stated by anthropologist Eric Dardel is placing oneself "in the current of the whole world's life" ([1954] 1984, 229). He contrasts the modern world, "dominated by logical and historical concerns, with our explanations ruled by the principle of causality," with the mythic, "which shows itself in convictions or in beliefs, in 'verities' which we declare to be true" ([1954] 1984, 230). The mythic as seen on the Internet is *present*, not in the past or future, and it is not set in place but in repetitive patterns with sources in precedents that we may call tradition. This comes out in the awe for the mass of data in its fantastical universe. Not envisioned as comprising things such as those in a file, cabinet, or library, it is ethereal, an *ethernet*, and references the lights, whirrs, and clicks that manifest cosmic forces. There people engage mythic meanings, especially through the Internet's responsive quality, which produces relational narratives by users in the play frames, commons, or *rooms* of the Web and raises discourse about the logic of virtuality.

Although an argument can be presented that Internet communication in on-line cafés or chat rooms simulates the mythic, it does not necessarily result in the production of expressive lore. To be sure, many networks revel in their group's thematized communication with its initialisms, narratives, and beliefs that distinguish the group and represent the Internet as a cultural space. Carrying over the idea from community life of creating lore so as to give identity to the group, communication on the Internet is culturally marked by self-referential genres. An example is the neologism *meme* for a digital file or hyperlink propagated quickly from peer to peer on the Net. Many memes are in fact folkloric because they often take the form of catchphrases, rumors, schemes, and legendary material, and arguably this praxis has a folkloric reference because it is taken from the Greek root of *mime* for imitation or repetition, but has been altered to sound more like *gene* as the unit of cultural transmission on the Net (Jeffreys 2000). The invented term draws attention to the Net's state of matter as data, reproducible and variable, and its difference from the social forces in life. Such constructions force folklorists—and other scholars of culture—to think long and hard about standing on the shoulders of giants who restricted their concept of folklore to oral or naturalistic tradition.

How folklore is enabled for its users by virtualization and how it is differentiated from the face-to-face world referred to as analog culture demands rethinking assumptions and questions about the workings of tradition, once thought to be a product or relic of the past, arising out of the land and group or belonging to *others* who are at a remove due to their lack of technological advancement or cosmopolitanism (see Bronner 1998). The issue with virtual tradition is not so much to ask whether geeks, gamers, and bloggers constitute a folk group the way a previous generation of folklorists, confronted with the assembly line, phonograph, and telephone, asked "Is There a Folk in the City?" and "Is There a Folk in the Factory?" (Dorson 1970; Nickerson 1974). To be sure, that can be answered with lists of computer slang, emoticons, and initialisms that mark cultural knowledge and, consequently, identity for a group (Jennings 1991; Jordan 1997; Preston 1996). The significance of understanding the Internet rhetorically as a folk system is its suggestion of ways that technology allows everyone to enact, and alter, in some form tradition, whether thought of digitally or analytically. This is especially compelling as the Internet becomes more portable and pervasive, becoming the primary mediator of cultural connection. Boundary maintenance occurs not so much by the corporeal traits of ethnicity, region, gender, and occupation, although they may enter into

the communicative equation. One affiliates with any number of overlapping, often temporary global and local networks, lists, and interests, often corresponding to age and organizational divisions. And most perplexing to communicative scholars like folklorists, these affiliations are often imagined through multiple avatars, roles, profiles, personalities, and addresses. So who is doing the talking—or connecting?

The answer to this question returns us to the original point about the significance of conceptually putting the Internet and tradition together. As a fundamental human capacity and need, the production of folklore to represent tradition is a continuous vital force, and it is imperative to view how it is enacted with, and problematized by, media, old and new. Indeed, we may comprehend the way, in a new wired age, folklore is digitized and virtualized, or we may folklorize the age, perhaps outside our awareness. Or to quote the motto I see now on the wall of the computer lab, put up now by a new-generation geek, “Oh, what a tangled Web we weave when first we practice.”⁹

Notes

1. In my background this assemblage is familiar rather than *sui generis*, as many web aficionados would claim. Talmudic study involves navigating pages that have a central textual core surrounded by commentaries, often at odd angles, in different domains on the page. See Rosen 2000.
2. I have argued in *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History* (1986) that the incorporation of the rhetoric of technology into the intellectualism of the 1960s, which represented in part a shift in cultural applications of the history of science from natural history to physics, influenced the rise of interaction, network, and dynamics as keywords in folkloristics. See Bronner 1986: 106-29. Indeed, discourse on harnessing computers as an analytical tool goes back to this period (see Dundes 1965a; Holbek 1969; Maranda 1967; Petöfi and Szöllösy 1969; Sebeok 1965).
3. Miniaturization in Internet-equipped devices may also be a function of the influence of Japan’s technological designers who operate in what has been dubbed a *compact culture*. Major Japanese computer manufacturers such as Sony, Toshiba, and Hitachi catered to the demands of consuming Japanese youth, who do not have privacy in small dwelling spaces and use the devices in mass transit and public areas. The pattern of compactness was prevalent in Japan before it became widespread in the Americas and Europe (see Lee 1992; Yoshida, Ikko, and Tsune 1982).
4. Precedent can be cited for this cultural response in the history of technology. At the 1964 New York World’s Fair, Bell Telephone hailed the “picturephone” as the next mass cultural appliance. Video technology allowed speakers on either end of the telephone to see each other, but despite a formidable marketing campaign, consumers did not buy into the vision. Historians of

- technology generally agree that consumers wanted to preserve the informality of appearance that not seeing callers permits (see Liparito 2003).
5. Stewart and Bennett (1991) culturally exemplify the difference between analog (relational) and digital (analytical) thinking as a contrast between Buddhist and Western approaches to perception. They offer different interpretations of a folk proverb to make their point: "The American proverb, 'still waters run deep,' (as a way of describing a quiet, thoughtful person) would be rendered differently by the Chinese. In Mandarin, a profound thinker would be described as 'great' or 'valuable' rather than deep. Also, in Japanese, horizontal allusions to size, rank, or multiplicity more often render the quality of thought than vertical allusions to depth. Both for the Chinese and Japanese, the thinking process is seen as much less deep than it is by Americans and other Westerners. External social roles and relationships, for instance, receive much more emphasis than the nature of one's thought processes. Put differently, the Chinese and Japanese tend to have a highly developed sociological sense but make relatively little use of psychological analysis" (24–25). Another difference is in ordering knowledge. As Stewart and Bennett (1991) explain, Buddhists' "perceptual theory minimized the distinction between direct sensory information and knowledge obtained through fantasy or inference, inducing them to treat perceptual objects and mental products similarly. Concrete objects and abstract concepts were situated side by side on a single dimension, and abstract ideas could be represented as concrete objects. The objective world was exhaustively described but without the rank ordering which Westerners impose on reality by classifying objects and events according to their importance" (24). For other comparisons of Asian and American thinking processes related to tradition, see Bronner 1998, 475–82; Nakamura 1964, 130–33; White 1994. Lee (1992) particularly adapts this contrast to technological differences.
 6. Later it was revealed that one envelope contained instructions for Dwyer's funeral; another held his organ donor card; and the third contained a letter to Governor Robert Casey asking him to appoint Dwyer's wife, Joanne, to succeed him as state treasurer (see Cusick, Meyers, and Roche 1987, 1).
 7. As an example, see the digital folk art of a fictional *Nintendo* "shooting" game featuring Budd Dwyer (with an exploding, pixelated face) as the main character: http://bluntobject.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/429px-budd-dwyer_nes.jpg (accessed 30 June 2009).
 8. Although the image and audio track of the suicide footage did not get reaired on television in the digital age, they were featured on a number of commercial films and CDs. Probably best known is its use in the movie *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and the singles "Hey Man, Nice Shot" (1995) by alternative rock band Filter and "Get Your Gunn" (1994) by Marilyn Manson.
 9. The phrase is a takeoff on the poetry of Sir Walter Scott, renowned for his folkloristic collections as well as creative writing, in *Marmion* (1808), Canto Sixth, stanza XVII. His poetic lines were "Oh what a tangled web we weave, When first we practise to deceive!" Sometimes a variation of the computer satire is "Oh what a tangled website we weave."