Folklore and the Internet

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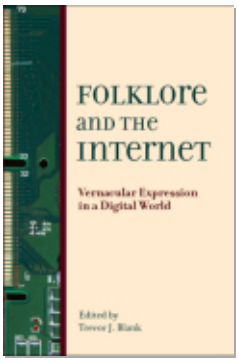

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Chapter 3

The End of the Internet: A Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice

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Digital Folk Culture

I was working in the kitchen with my husband one night, preparing a dish of deviled eggs to bring to a dinner party, when I was first struck by just how much influence digital culture has over our daily lives. As a household we are, of course, as wired-in as many people are these days—we communicate via e-mail and text message on a daily basis, and we use the Internet to plan our trips, buy gifts, and arrange our schedules—but this was something more, something deeper. My husband was carrying a plate of boiled eggs from one counter to another when he lost his balance. He saved himself from a fall, but the eggs weren't so lucky; as I watched, they slid to the edge of the plate, teetered on the lip, and finally fell, bouncing away across the kitchen floor. In his moment of frustration, grabbing hopelessly at the falling eggs, my husband exclaimed, "Control Z!" I looked at him in surprise. Still holding the plate, he bemusedly explained, "Undo—it's the undo command. I wanted to undo it." He said he could picture himself instinctively reaching for the keyboard—ring finger on the CTRL button, middle finger on the Z—the minute he realized the eggs were falling. It was his first, immediate reaction to a mistake. CTRL-Z! Undo.

My husband and I were born on the cusp of what Marc Prensky has dubbed the *digital native* generation, people born close to 1980 who are all "'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games

and the Internet" (2001a, 1). My husband and I were born in 1976 and 1977, respectively, but as the first online bulletin board systems were up and running in the late 1970s, we technically get in under the wire. Birth dates aside, my husband's digital reaction to a real-world mistake clinched it for me; in a way my parents never will be, my husband and I are fully ensconced in a digital culture that shapes how we perceive the world around us.

Prensky's idea of digital natives has become a key concept in the field of education, where scholars are trying to figure out exactly how (and how much) to alter their pedagogy for a generation of students whose perceptions of the world (if not the very structures of their brains) are likely fundamentally different from those of previous generations (see Bennett , Maton, and Kervin 2008). The trouble, of course, is that the majority of the people who are behind current pedagogical decisions are digital *immigrants* who, while adapting to their environment—as do all immigrants to varying extents—still retain their accent, which can be seen in "such things as turning to the Internet for information second rather than first, or in reading the manual for a program rather than assuming that the program itself will teach us how to use it" (Prensky 2001a, 2). According to Prensky, other nondigital accent markers are:

> printing out your email (or having your secretary print it out for you—an even 'thicker' accent); needing to print out a document written on the computer in order to edit it (rather than just editing on the screen); and bringing people physically into your office to see an interesting web site (rather than just sending them the URL). (2001a, 2)

These behaviors alienate natives, who perceive in them a distinctly foreign, and somewhat incomprehensible, worldview.

While the implications for education are fascinating, what I am interested in here is the basic idea that the digital world is a *culture*, one that a person can be native or nonnative *to*. Folklorists have recently been challenged by a host of apparent "traditions" that emerge at lightning speed from the Internet and its attendant technologies, and the question of whether or not folklore can be found in this environment remains somewhat up in the air. I feel that the idea of a digital culture is not simply a metaphor that can be expanded into further metaphorical concepts such as nativity, but that it is also an accurate, literal description of a component of digital society. Ward Goodenough's definition of culture, first penned in 1957, long before the Internet was an everyday reality, posits that a society's culture is made up of "whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members" (1964,

36). Any newcomer to an Internet chatroom, or a Facebook page, or even a back-and-forth mobile phone texting scenario, will know that there exists a certain shared body of knowledge about how to behave in such settings. Folklorist John McDowell similarly suggests that folklore "is the study of traditional modes of expression and thought as they surface and evolve in the course of social interaction in human communities" (Williams 2001). Both these definitions target the fact that culture, and more specifically folk culture, deals with knowledge gleaned from social interactions. As Bruce Mason notes, the Internet "is a 'virtual' home to many millions who have gone ahead and made the Net a space in which to create a lived culture" (1996, 4). Monica Foote agrees: "Those who frequent chat rooms and use instant messenger programs have developed their own folkspeech, [and] online communities function according to their own sets of customary behavior" (2007, 27). As with any process of acculturation, newcomers to these digital situations aren't handed a manual about how to express themselves most effectively to the locals; they learn as they go, informally picking up on how best to blend in through observation and participation. Hence, a digital culture.

Digital natives, those people whose entire lives have been spent immersed in digital culture, live in a world defined by constant connectivity—"being in touch with friends and family at any time from any place" (Frand 2000, 14) is both important to them and easily achieved through communications technologies. This interactivity is at the core of the distinction between a generation whose main observed technology was television and one whose main observed technology is the Internet, and it is this possibility for interaction that allows folklore to flourish and a distinct culture to develop in a digital setting. Browsing the Internet is not a passive experience—users are contributing, communicating, learning, and teaching by example within a community whose ability to erase geographical limitations is astounding. This, of course, defies the original purposes of the Internet; no longer simply a tool for particular realms of activity such as business or government, the Web, just like any public gathering place, has become a setting for normal, informal, daily social interaction. And just as with any other location where such interaction occurs, folklore emerges. As Georges and Jones, in their excellent introductory text *Folkloristics* explain:

> The word "folklore" denotes expressive forms, processes, and behaviors (1) that we customarily learn, teach, and utilize or display during face-to-face interaction, and (2) that we judge to be traditional (a) because they are based on known precedents or models, and (b) because they serve as evidence of continuities and consistencies

> through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief, and feeling. (1995, 1)

It will become evident that communications technologies, especially the Internet, provide the setting for such folkloric emergence and transmission.

The main difference between the Internet as a setting for social interaction and a more concrete location in the "real world" is the speed at which information can be located and socially exchanged. Even the telephone, once the peak of communications technology, pales in comparison: while one can call a friend who lives in another country and immediately be able to communicate freely, one cannot pick up a phone and ask to be connected with someone—anyone, anywhere—who shares his or her interest in, say, mushroom identification, or hostelling, or furniture making (see Rheingold 2000). The Internet, on the other hand, allows like-minded people who would never otherwise meet (whether due to physical, geographical, or situational obstacles) to find each other almost immediately. It is the *pace* and *scope* of these social processes that have increased so exponentially.

Despite the common judgments of nonnatives, the social connections that digital natives forge over the Internet are genuine and very real. Setting aside the question of social connections initiated and sustained entirely over the Internet, digital natives conduct much of the business of their everyday family and friend relationships through digital mediation as well. Jason Frand notes that digital natives do not perceive communications technologies as "technology" anymore, and compares the situation to the telephone, which many digital immigrants see as a fairly unmediated form of personal communication:

> Alan Kay, a member of the 1970s Xerox PARC team who went on to help create the Apple Macintosh, has described technology as 'anything that isn't around when you're born.' Stated another way, if you can remember using your first one ever, it's technology. For most of us with an industrial-age mindset [as opposed to an information-age mindset, which Frand associates with the digital natives]—those of us who are in our mature years (say, over thirty)—telephones, automobiles, and television aren't technology, but computers, the Internet, the Web, and the expanding world of cellular telecommunications are all technologies. Technology, then, to the information-age generation, is everything that surrounds computers and is made possible by computers, but only incidentally the computers themselves. (2000, 16)

I have found this to be true among my college-age students (and among many of my peers as well). For example, in the study of folklore great emphasis has been put on orality and the face-to-face context in which folklore is learned and performed. This idea has, of course, already been complicated by the learning and dissemination patterns of such folk forms as graffiti, autograph-book verses, and chain letters (both paper and e-mail forms), and I often find myself explaining the concept to students as person-to-person rather than face-to-face, as the former is a phrase that still emphasizes the individual, personal communicative qualities of folk culture that distinguish it from the mass broadcasts of most popular culture, yet one that also allows for mediated interaction. Interestingly, however, Frand's observation that digital natives no longer see their communicative tools as mediating technology is accurate. I would argue that my students increasingly consider online chatting, social networking, and mobile-phone texting to be a form of unmediated face-to-face contact. Their Facebook pages and MySpace profiles are as much a daily presentation of self as their demeanor and speech are in real-life social settings. Distinguishing these virtual spaces from "real life" is actually inaccurate—they *are* real life to the people who use them. The digital natives identify so strongly with their phones and online accounts that they do not recognize any meaningful difference between casual interaction through technology and casual interaction in person—texting and chatting *are* "face-to-face" communication.[1]

Considering this, it is completely natural that folklore would emerge in these social contexts—folklore emerges *anywhere* where informal, everyday, face-to-face social interaction takes place. As Dell Hymes explained in his presidential address at the 1974 AFS meeting, "folklorists believe that the capacity for aesthetic experience, for [the] shaping of deeply felt values into meaningful, apposite form, is present in all communities, and will find some means of expression among all" (1975, 346). There is no reason why a digital community should be treated differently than any other community that Hymes may have been describing. It may take on new forms and shapes, and may be transmitted in new ways, but folklore is definitely alive and well in the digital world.

The emergence of traditional expressive forms on the Internet, and the observation and re-creation of them by other people in new contexts, has not gone unnoticed by the Internet community itself, which has adopted the concept of *memes* to identify what folklorists would call folklore.[2] According to memetic theory, memes are small, self-replicating cultural units (Dennett 1990, 128), "ideas or fragments of ideas which are capable of being replicated as they pass from brain to brain and thus

are subject to evolution in the form of random mutation and selection" (Foote 2007, 31). While the content may not always fall into what a folklorist would identify as "traditional," Richard Dawkins (who coined the term as the cultural analogue to genes) offers a definition of memes that comes close to folkloric ideas:

> Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catchphrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. (1976, 206)

This description could very easily apply to the transmission of folklore; while not focused on a particular group within which a meme (or a tradition) is transmitted, the basic idea of a piece of lore surviving through a combination of successful transmission and cultural relevance (a process of natural selection, Dawkins would say) is not far off base. The adoption of this term by Internet users to describe aspects of Internet experience (images, videos, phrases, exchanges, etc.) that are propagated via the tools of the Web (e-mail, blogs, forums, etc.) should be of interest to folklorists. Monica Foote, in an article on avatar images in online communities, encourages the use of memetics in folklore study, but she does caution that the two areas are not interchangeable:

> The scope of study of memetics is much wider than that of folklore, as anything whatsoever created by imitation falls within the purview of it, rather than just that material which fits the narrower definitions of traditionality and belonging to the folk. That is to say, all folklore is made up of memes, but not all memes are folklore. (2007, 31)

Realizing these limitations, it is still useful to consider the Internet content self-consciously labeled by users as memes, as this designation will often point the way to genuine digital folk traditions.

There have been a wide range of Internet memes that have waxed and waned in popularity over time, and as digital culture has shifted and evolved, the memes associated with it have evolved as well. Taking the digital-native metaphor to its extreme, we actually a have more complex situation than the simple dichotomy between immigrants and natives. We have digital *settlers* as well, nonnative adults who pioneered new frontiers of digital technology and who are responsible, as are all

pioneers, for shaping the cultural foundations upon which future generations would build their native lives. These digital settlers perhaps know the roots of digital culture better than many of the natives (who may easily be unaware of how their own culture came to be while still functioning perfectly within it), and these settlers' needs, desires, and efforts are distinct from the culture that is now emerging within a fully formed setting. Web 2.0, an Internet defined by interactivity and collaboration, is the result of the digital natives' growing influence over their own domain as they age. If we look back to the inception of the Internet as a general-use communication medium, we can see that memes, the folklore that emerged from early social interaction on the Web, reveal much about the acculturation of a digital pioneer settlement.

The Last Page

In the mid- to late 1990s, the Internet was coming into more general use and was just beginning to reveal its applicability to consumption, information retrieval, and virtual communication. ARPANET, the military body that initially governed the Internet, was decommissioned in 1992 and the U.S. government relinquished control over the majority of its infrastructure, leaving behind a web of interconnected private service providers that would become the Internet as we understand it today. According to one timeline, the 100,000 web servers in use in January 1996 exploded ten-fold in just over a year to 1,000,000 web servers in April 1997 (Information Today 2007).[3] This exponential growth in servers is also reflected in individual users. In 1996, approximately 45 million people were using the Internet; when NASA broadcast pictures from the Mars Pathfinder online in 1997, NASA's website had 46 million hits in one day. By 1999, the Internet browsing population had tripled to 150 million users ("Internet Timeline" 2000, 68). Jon Guice of NASA's Ames Research Center feels that it is the assessment of the Internet's history in terms of *users* rather than *technology* that reveals the surge. He enumerates networks, computers, users, and locations:

> In 1994 the global Internet, defined as access to e-mail, comprised over 15,000 networks, 2.5 million permanently connected computers, and 25 million people in 125 countries, by one estimate. By the close of the next year, the number of networks, computers, and people had roughly doubled. Statistics such as these are controversial in their details, but no one disputes the upward curve. Even the most conservative definitions yield results showing what any experienced Internet user can attest to: rapid growth. (1998, 203)

This explosion of generalized use of the Internet for social, commercial, and business purposes in the late 1990s sets the stage for the arrival of a fascinating Internet meme. A number of websites cropped up at this time, each claiming to be the "end" of the Internet. Despite the sensationalistic possibilities, these sites are not an "end" in the sense of the demise of the concept as a whole, but the "end" in the sense of the end of a book, the "last page," as some sites call it. This Internet meme comes in a variety of forms, but the message is consistent: that the user has reached the end of the Internet and must now stop browsing or turn back. Many versions of this website go beyond simply announcing the end and offer suggestions as to what the user should do now that he or she has reached the end. The following are a selection of such texts:

> Attention, please.
> You have reached the very last page of the Internet.
> We hope you have enjoyed your browsing.
> Enjoy the rest of your life.

> Congratulations, you have reached the End of the Internet. To get back to the Other End of the Internet please click on the back button on your browser 3,307,998,701 times.
> Many thanks.
> The Internet Team

> The End
> Turn back you have reached the
> Last page on the Internet.
> (Note: for safely reasons will the last surfer please switch off all the servers before leaving.)

> WARNING
> You have reached the end of the Internet.
> There is nothing more to see.
> Please go back now.

> You have reached the end of the Internet.
> If you think you have reached this page in error you have not. It is simply because you have been online too long and had nothing better to do.
> This Is The Very Last Page On The Internet.
> Please turn off your computer!!!
> Go outside and play!!!
> The End.

You Have Reached The End Of The Internet
There is nothing more to see or do here.
Turn off your computer.
Take a break.
Go for a walk.
Read a book.
Have a cup of tea.
Sit and stare at the natural world.
You get the idea . . .
Remember to wiggle your toes and get out of your head.
Thank you and have a nice day!

Attention:
You have reached the very last page of the Internet.
We hope you have enjoyed your browsing.
Now turn off your computer and go outside.

You have reached the end of the Internet.
We hope you have enjoyed your experience.
Now go outside and play.

The Page at the end of the Internet.
Well Done! This is the last page.
You have now reached the end of the Internet. This is it. There are no more links and no more pages to visit.
This means that you can now turn off your computer, make yourself a nice cup of tea, and contemplate what you are gong to do with the rest of your life now that you've finished viewing the Internet.

This is just a small sampling of numerous iterations of the End of the Internet (EOTI) meme. The traditional elements that are preserved across all the versions are plain to see: an announcement of the end and a recommendation of what to do next. The dynamic elements typically come in the specific recommendations of what the user should do, but even here we have some consistencies; suggestions that target a natural, peaceful life—making tea, reading a book, going outside—are predominant. The visual makeup of the sites is also a dynamic element, but the majority of the variations are in the details, such as font size and color. Almost all of these websites are very simplistic in design.

Most use only text and basic (if any) graphics. This perhaps indicates their creation by nonprofessional users, but the lack of interactive and collaborative qualities also reveals the sites' *terminus ante quem*; these sites are strictly a Web 1.0 phenomenon.

As far as being a form of folklore, these websites are closely related to the fax and copier lore that Dundes and Pagter collected in their four *Paperwork Empire* volumes ([1978] 1992, 1987, 1991b, 1996). For all that these websites make use of their digital nature, they might as well be printouts. They also share the burden of newfangledness that Dundes and Pagter had to wrestle with when identifying their Xeroxlore as legitimate folklore:

> One thing this volume clearly demonstrates is the existence of folklore in the modern urban technological world. The idea that folklore reflects only the past is incorrect. Yes, some folklore reflects the past, but there is also folklore, ongoing, current, which reflects the present, the culture of today. As more and more individuals move from rural to urban settings, a trend which is observable in many parts of the world, the folklore of offices and of bureaucracy is bound to continue. The office copier greatly facilitates the transmission of this folklore. For this reason, we think it is incumbent upon folklorists to document this tradition, and to document it as it happens. Were folklorists to wait fifty or one hundred years to investigate the traditions contained in this book, they might be unable to do so. (1991, 20)

If copier technology facilitated the rapid transmission of folklore, the Internet has multiplied that speed exponentially. It is similarly incumbent upon folklorists to document the early instances of emergent folklore on the Internet, before it disappears or its irrelevance to current culture becomes too great.

Xeroxlore is actually an excellent precedent for the acknowledgement of static web pages as items of folklore; Dundes and Pagter were fighting against understandings of folklore that relied heavily upon chronology, communal (re)creation, and orality. Thus they had to turn to more pragmatic indicators of folkloric nature when identifying photocopy and fax materials as folklore:

> It is possible or likely that there are individual creators for every item. Our point is that an item, however or whenever created, becomes authentic folklore once it has undergone repetition and variation. We have multiple versions—with variation—of almost all the items. (1987, 14)

Similarly, the EOTI sites—although each is created by an individual—come in multiple versions; every one has its own levels and types of variation from the others. And like all folklore, all versions are equally legitimate; there is no one "correct" or "authentic" version. In the true

spirit of folklore, we can even find parodies of these websites, and, as Grant C. Loomis points out, parody "implies a familiarity with the original creation" (1958, 45). In parodies, we see a powerful generic sensitivity to the original form, with enough conservative elements remaining amid the humorous changes for the original to be a reference point. Thus, we find:

> Beginning of the Internet.
> This page is the beginning of the Internet.

and

> Welcome to
> The Middle Page of The Internet
> This page is dynamically adjusted to remain at the exact middle of the Internet. If you have browser problems, or if pages take a long time to load, please visit this page to reorient your browser.

If the parody proves the rule, then we get a clear confirmation of the generic conventions of this folk form.

As a folklorist, my curiosity has been piqued by the question of *why* this Internet meme was so popular in the mid-to-late 1990s. Most of the sites were created during this period, and most have not been updated since. My attempts to contact the originators of the sites met with poor results. It may be that the contact links for the sites are out of date, or perhaps my queries were diverted to junk-mail folders, but I only heard back from a few creators. Of the responses I did receive, none was very satisfactory. One was quite straightforward: "When did you make this?" "1994." Why? "Lack of motivation to make anything worthwhile." "What were your inspirations?" "Beer." Another response was a bit more thoughtful: the creator wanted to inspire people to "get back to the basics" and live unplugged for a while.

I imagine that the many other iterations of the EOTI meme can also be explained as falling somewhere between these two divergent motivations. The similarities in wording (and occasionally in form) clearly indicate monogenesis—most of these pages are created by people who have seen one already. The message resonates enough for people to want to re-create it themselves rather than simply refer friends and family back to the same page they discovered. What motivates the replication of this folk form? Why was the idea that the Internet has a "last page" so resonant with the early online community?

If the Internet were a book, actually able to have a last page, its hyperlinked nature—where within a given page there are one or more

links to other pages containing related information—makes the Internet read less like a novel and more like a Choose Your Own Adventure book.[4] Anyone who has ever temporarily marked their place in one of these books to jump ahead and read both possible plot options—and perhaps even the choices those options would each eventually lead to—can relate to how stressful it can be navigating the Internet at times. One can never be sure if one is getting the complete picture or missing out on some key point of information. I believe that it is this quality of the Internet, the overabundance of options, which made the idea of the "end" of the Internet such an appealing one to early users.

The Psychology of Choice

In the fields of personality and social psychology, research into the issue of *choice*—paralleling the Internet boom and beginning in the late 1990s— is applicable to this subject. The basic idea is that when it comes to making decisions, the more options one has to choose from, the better. As psychologist Barry Schwartz notes, when it comes to choice, "the presumption is, self-determination is a good thing and choice is essential to self-determination" (DeAngelis 2004, 56). This idea is often thought to be "common wisdom" or "intuitively appealing," phrases used in many studies of choice, but Alexander Chernev, a professor of marketing, has a more scientific view:

> This assumption is consistent with the prediction by classic economic theories that larger assortments should always be beneficial for consumers because they provide for a potentially better match between consumers' own preferences and the product offering. (2003, 170)

The scope of this idea is impressive, and, as explained by psychologists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper, it is not limited to simple purchasing situations (which is where many marketing studies apply it):

> It is the common supposition in modern society that the more choices, the better—that the human ability to manage, and the human desire for, choice is infinite. From classic economic theories of free enterprise, to mundane marketing practices that provide customers with entire aisles devoted to potato chips or soft drinks, to important life decisions in which people contemplate alternative career options or multiple investment opportunities, this belief pervades our institutions, norms, and customs. Ice cream parlors compete to offer the most flavors; major fast food chains urge us to "have it *our* way" (2000, 995; emphasis in original).

Early psychological studies agreed with this, too; for example, people were found to be happier when given the opportunity to choose between several different activities to perform than when assigned one by a moderator (see Zuckerman et al. 1978). This and other research appeared to show that the provision of choice increases motivation and enhances performance on a variety of tasks.

But numerous later studies indicate that empirical evidence runs contrary to this idea; there is a limit to the level of choice that is desirable. As a recent article in the *Monitor of Psychology* asks,

> Do you like your orange juice organic or regular, with or without calcium, or with minimal or maximal pulp? How about your toothpaste? Is it the herbal variety with added fluoride, the cavity-busting option with baking soda or the original formula with flavor crystals? Or *maybe*, the thought of having to select any of those options is keeping you out of the grocery store entirely—you'd rather scrape by on what's still in the house. Although an explosion of consumer choices may mean we sometimes get exactly what we want, too many choices can also overwhelm us to the point where we choose nothing at all. (DeAngelis 2004, 56; emphasis in original)

Anyone who has ever gone to a grocery store to buy shampoo can probably relate to this; a quick trip to my local Albertson's revealed that there are 127 different brands of shampoo for sale there. It is perhaps easy to imagine the frustration of living in a small isolated community and having only two brands of shampoo to choose between, but for as much as 127 initially seems like a better spread, it's not difficult either to imagine (or perhaps to recall) the stress of choosing just one from all of those options.

Most of the research that has been conducted on this topic deals with consumerism. A 2000 study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* used jam selection at an upscale grocery store as the field experiment. After the preliminary surveys had been completed—surveys designed to ensure that neither group of proffered jams (all of them from Wilkin & Sons, purveyors to her Majesty the Queen) included the most preferred or the most disliked jam options—the psychologists spent two consecutive Saturdays ("neither of which fell on a long holidays weekend" they assure us) at a tasting booth in the grocery store. One day they offered a limited selection of jams—only six kinds. The second day, they offered an extensive choice—twenty-four types of jam. The results were striking. While the extensive-selection booth showed more initial attractiveness to customers, drawing in bigger crowds of interested shoppers, the percentage of visitors who actually made

purchases was almost entirely from the limited-selection table (Iyengar and Lepper 2000).

This same result has been seen in numerous other studies involving a wide range of products and other choices. While some work has been done to identify the mediating factors in this debate—to discover why sometimes the traditional expectation that greater choice is better does pan out[5]—the implications remain the same. The closer the number of options in any decision-making situation gets to infinity, the less inclined people become to actually take any of them.

This idea has rapidly gained widespread attention with regard to increasing choices within the realm of popular media. A recent *Los Angeles Times* article urged readers to "step back from the media buffet":

> As a nation, we spend on average two months of every year watching TV. Perhaps it's *not* crazy given that, according to the 2006 International Television and Video Almanac, we have 392 cable channels to choose from and 40,000 DVD titles. And let's not forget the 175,000 books published annually, or the hundreds of movies released each year and the billions of Internet pages. [And] still we want more. (Abramowitz 2007; emphasis in original)

Film producer Michael London attributes much of today's media-binging to the new opportunities for entertainment and quasi-entertainment presented by the communications industry:

> I've always been a media junkie. I've always been vulnerable to disappearing down the rabbit hole. When the rabbit hole has gotten bigger and deeper through the Internet, for people like me who multitask, it's created a real danger. It creates a perfect meltdown scenario to people who are vulnerable to trying to do too much at once. You can sit in your office, and you can be having a phone conversation while reading *Variety* online, and answering your e-mail, and having an IM chat with somebody. It sounds crazy, but it's not an exaggeration. (Abramowitz 2007)

Interestingly, the whole promotion of choice in the media—the idea that "new technologies would make possible greater individual choice of what to see and hear, and of when to see and hear it" (Berger and Burke 2005, 217)—paints readers, listeners, and users entirely as consumers, emphasizing the idea than even when the goal isn't explicitly consumer driven, the concepts from the marketplace will still be applicable.

Jeffrey Cole, director of the Annenberg School for Communication's Center for the Digital Future, has been conducting a long-term study on this very issue. After surveying 2,000 households over the past six years,

he and his researchers discovered that some of the most advanced users of technology were saying that they were starting to feel like they *had* to check their e-mail before going to sleep. As Cole notes, "it's really a function of being overwhelmed by the amount of things technology makes available" (Abramowitz 2007). If 127 kinds of shampoo at the store is overwhelming, consider the tens of thousands of results for "shampoo" on the popular shopping website Amazon.com. Whether the goal is shopping for products or interacting with friends, the Internet provides boundless opportunity.

The increasing pressure to take advantage of all of this at once is a serious issue; as Michael London noted, it's easy to experience a "meltdown" when trying to take it all in. When it comes to digital natives, however, multitasking is recognized as one of their unique skills:

> Digital natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multitask. They prefer their graphics *before* their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. (Prensky 2001a, 2; emphasis in original)

Digital natives are born into a world that bombards them with information from every angle—their coping mechanisms are built into their worldview. But what of the digital settlers and immigrants, those who have to undertake the (sometimes painful) process of acculturation to digital society, those who haven't been learning since birth how to navigate the endless possibilities that technology affords?

The ability of the Internet to exponentially multiply options in just about any decision-making situation—what to buy, where to invest, what treatment to seek, what information to utilize, how to fill spare time—makes it the ultimate arena for oppressive levels of indecision. As a research tool, the Internet has been compared to the ultimate library, but as the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) notes,

> the library has long been a metaphor for order and rationality . . . Contrast this world with the anarchy of the Web. The Web is free-associating, unrestricted and disorderly. Searching is secondary to finding and the process by which things are found is unimportant. "Collections" are temporary and subjective, where a blog entry may be as valuable to the individual as an "unpublished" paper as are six pages of a book made available by Amazon.com. The individual searches alone and without expert help and, not knowing what is undiscovered, is satisfied. (OCLC 2003)

While this seems to imply that ignorance is bliss—that Internet users don't know what they're missing when they find a limited amount of information on the Internet—I would argue that in many cases, especially for those who were adults when the Internet became available to the general public (and who recall the diligent, comprehensive research processes demanded by physical information collections), the opposite is true. While Internet searchers may indeed only be able to actually inspect and process a very limited amount of the information on the Web, these individuals are presented at every turn with an endless pool to choose from. In some cases, this is touted as a benefit of the Internet; access to information is no longer limited to what any particular institution is willing to reveal:

> The common theme is that the Internet is a popular, liberal, democratic, or even anarchistic medium. While having origins in the U.S. Department of Defense—a perennial irony for these stories—the Internet has grown to be a nonhierarchical arena for the free exchange of ideas and information. (Guice 1998, 202)

But for someone who is attempting to be comprehensive in a search for information, the lack of boundaries is a burden; when presented with unlimited information, searchers are very aware of the avenues they're *not* able to pursue. The process of deciding which of the vast array of information options to choose as one's smaller selection of usable data puts the searcher into the same position as the hesitant-to-buy, extensive-choice, jam-selecting group, but to an exponentially greater degree.

We can see Internet companies such as Yahoo, MSN, and Google attempting to address this with specialized search engines that filter the infinite information for us, that pick the best for us, that do the work for us. But the problem still remains, especially now that those filtering sites themselves are rapidly multiplying. Will I find the best deal through Amazon.com or through Yahoo!.Shopping? Will there be a specialized website I'll miss out on if I stick with the major search engines? How do I know when I've looked at enough? If twenty-four types of jam are sufficient to cause buyers to leave empty-handed, then the information available on the Internet is certainly enough to stunt any decision-making process. And yet, decisions must be made.

Conclusions

As an Internet meme—a form of folklore created by and relevant to digital settlers and immigrants—End of the Internet websites provide form

and expression for the growing cultural tension that emerged in the mid- to late 1990s as the Internet's exponential growth began to reveal the roles it would play in daily life. These websites, created at a time when non-native users dominated the creation of Internet content, dramatize the anxiety that the seemingly infinite nature of the Internet caused, despite the surface-level assumption that the increase in options provided by the Web could only be a good thing. Instructions to turn off the computer and join the "real world" imply that to these users, the Internet is not the real world, an idea that digital natives would find dubious. Another common suggestion, to "go outside and play," implies that surfing the Internet is work rather than entertainment, highlighting the often-stressful nature of web browsing for those who do not see it as a regular setting for casual interaction. For digital immigrants, the basic idea that the Internet *has an end* was resonant and meaningful, simply because it allows for the reassuring notion that options are anything but infinite. For digital natives, the infinite nature of the web is simply a given, a construct that levies no increased burden of effort simply because there never was a time in their lives when the options were fewer. In the emergence of Web 2.0 and its expansive opportunities for collaboration and interactivity, we can see the maturation of the digital natives as they begin to take the reins in the formation of their own cultural landscape. Soon, the message of the EOTI sites, which even now are rarely updated, will be completely irrelevant to users as the population of digital immigrants gives way to a complete culture of natives. So, while it's still meaningful: This is the end. Log off, shut down, and go outside and play.

Notes

1. Interestingly, my students now make a distinction between texting or chatting and e-mail, which is seen as a much more indirect form of communication, probably due to the time-delayed nature of the interaction. While texting and chatting are conducted in real time, as an in-person conversation would be, e-mails are non-immediate, and thus are relegated to "business stuff," as one of my students put it. According to this student, e-mailing is for intermittent communication with parents and professors; texting and chatting are for socializing with friends.
2. A Wikipedia search for "Internet Phenomenon," a common phrase used to identify an image, video, phrase, or idea that moves through the digital community gaining variations and parodies, automatically redirects to "Internet Memes."
3. By 2002, it had multiplied by ten again.
4. This is a series of children's books published by Bantam from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. They were written from a second-person perspective and

featured multiple possible endings, based upon what line of action the reader chose at various points within the narrative.

5. Often this occurs when there is a pre-articulated combination of ideal attributes. In other words, when a consumer enters into a purchasing situation with a set of desired qualities that they want their final purchase to have, then a larger selection is helpful, as there is a greater likelihood of the specific qualities being shared by one product, and the (otherwise stressful) process of elimination is expedited by the predetermined criteria.