Folklore and the Internet

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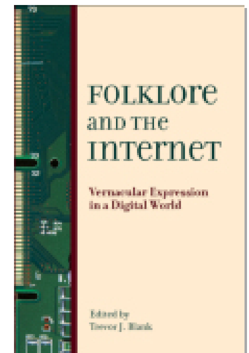

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Chapter 4

The *Forward* as Folklore: Studying E-Mailed Humor

Russell Frank

Folklore in the Age of Electronic Reproduction: Text and Context

On Sunday afternoon, 12 February 2006, I checked the *New York Times* website, as has been my custom since 9/11, to see if anything horrendous had happened since the morning papers arrived on my doorstep. The breaking news was that Vice President Dick Cheney had accidentally shot a quail-hunting buddy in Texas (Kornblut 2006).

The timing of the story was remarkable for me personally. The day before the shooting I had asked a friend to help me collect topical folklore, which I refer to as *newslore* (Frank 2004), by asking *his* friends to send me any e-mailed items they received. That Sunday morning, I had made the same request of readers of my column in the local newspaper (Frank 2006). By the end of that week I had hauled in forty-six jokes: thirteen Bush jokes, nine Cheney jokes, six Enron jokes, three Bill and/or Hillary Clinton jokes, and fifteen miscellaneous jokes, half of which I would consider newslore (see the appendix at the end of this chapter for a sampling).

The volume of material I received suggests that e-mail has become a robust medium for the transmission of jokes, especially topical jokes. As I will attempt to show in this chapter, these forwarded e-mail messages, or *forwards*, challenge canonical folkloristic ideas about the importance of performance and context and the roles of individual creativity and

audience response in textual variation. At any given moment they may also be a reliable guide to those news events, public figures, and joke types that have captured the public imagination. The jokes in my collection consist of verbal, visual, and verbal/visual jokes, but most of the examples I will include here will be visual and verbal/visual ones, since they represent a more significant departure from traditional joke cycles than the verbal jokes.

The advent of netlore came at an awkward time in the history of folklore studies. Beginning in the 1960s and culminating in 1972 in a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* that was subsequently published as a book (Paredes and Bauman 1972), the dominant paradigm for folklore research shifted from collecting and comparing folkloric texts to observing and describing when, how, and why those texts emerged in specific social situations. Text was inextricable from context; to study folklore was to watch it being performed.

The shift in research methods was wholly consistent with longstanding conceptualizations of "the folk" as members of small communities whose interactions with each other are mostly face-to-face. But while the research paradigm was shifting, more and more people were gaining access to electronic media that allowed them to communicate in ways that did not require them to be in each other's presence. And some of that communication, inevitably, was folkloric in nature. If these mediated folkloric communications differed from face-to-face communications only in lacking the full-bodied presence of the participants, folklorists could perhaps have safely ignored them and continued studying folklore in more contextually saturated situations. But, of course, each new medium changes to some degree the *way* people communicate.

In his collections of "folklore from the paperwork empire," Alan Dundes made a convincing argument for considering hand-drawn cartoons and parodies of memos, government documents, news releases, and the like as folklore despite the lack of oral performance (Dundes and Pagter [1978] 1992, 1987, 1991b, 1996). By collecting and presenting the texts with little regard to their contexts, Dundes reminded us, first, of the intrinsic value of the texts themselves, and second, of the essential role of the analyst in making sense of those texts. "No piece of folklore continues to be transmitted unless it means something," he wrote, "even if neither the speaker nor the audience can articulate what that meaning might be" (Dundes 1987, vii).

With the advent of computer-mediated communication, however, other folklorists offered evidence that those who interact electronically constitute, as John Dorst put it, "communities that, though dispersed,

display attributes of the direct, unconstrained, unofficial exchanges folklorists typically concern themselves with." At the same time, Dorst conceded that these exchanges "are not readily susceptible to the conventional methods of performance analysis and ethnography of speaking" (1990, 180). Similarly, Bill Ellis wrote that the existence of virtual communities "challenges our assumption that folklore is the property of small, localized groups," while acknowledging "the difficulty of gathering contextual information" (2002, 1).[1]

Yet Ellis (2002), Baym (1993), and Fernback (2003) have gone a long way toward showing the possibilities of "virtual ethnography" (Mason 1996) by focusing on online discussion groups. Whether they are fans of daytime television soap operas, as are Baym's informants, or contributors to an assortment of message boards, as are Ellis's and Fernback's sources, these people are doing more than exchanging items of folklore; they are conversing, and their conversations include their reactions to the folklore.

Still, even if virtual relationships offer some of the satisfactions of the face-to-face variety, virtual ethnography cannot possibly have the texture of an account of actors, scene, and setting, especially if most of one's material comes, as mine does, via e-mail rather than participant-observation in a virtual community. Here, the element of performance is almost wholly absent. As Brad Templeton, founder of the Rec.Humor. Funny site, puts it: "You don't get the advantage of delivery, surprise or a funny face. You don't get a drunk audience [usually] or a chance to use your great German accent. You must prepare a joke that stands on its own" ("Submission Guidelines").

By "prepare," Templeton seems to mean "invent." Most of us, though, simply read or pass on jokes invented by unknown others. In what we might call (updating Walter Benjamin) the age of electronic reproduction, we pass these texts along in a form that is identical to the form in which we received them. Forwarding an e-mailed joke does not even entail retyping it: one hits the forward button, and the joke from the incoming e-mail is automatically reproduced in the outgoing e-mail. In other words, variation, long an identifying feature of oral tradition, has become the exception rather than the rule.[2]

The other half of the folklore-as-performance equation, of course, is the audience. We can, as Ellis has done, ask receivers and forwarders what they thought of this or that joke, but we cannot reconstruct their facial expressions, body language, and verbal responses, if any, at the moment they opened the e-mail. In a face-to-face joke-telling situation, the audience might signal appreciation for the joke by laughing, smiling,

nodding, or commenting. Members might feign appreciation either to spare both parties the awkwardness of a "lead balloon" moment or to conceal the fact that they didn't get it. Or they might express disapproval or indifference, verbally or otherwise. Those reactions may then influence the telling (or withholding) of additional jokes.

These kinds of interchanges can be approximated by newsgroup or forum members who participate in threaded discussions, or by instant-message partners who may, in addition to commenting verbally, deploy such Internet slang as LOL (laugh out loud) or even ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing), or emoticons like the ubiquitous :-) or ☺.

The audience for an e-mailed joke will typically, though not invariably, receive the joke in private and may elect to spike it without opening it, spike it after opening but not reading it, spike it after reading it, forward it with or without comment, or respond to the sender. Feedback, then, is less observable, less immediate, and by no means assured. (In a face-to-face encounter, even a non-reaction is a reaction.) At best there may be short attestations to the quality of the item in question, either in the subject line or in the body of the e-mail. These may be appended by the friend who forwards it to you or by some earlier link in the chain of forwarders. A few examples from my own inbox:

- Subject: Laugh for the day
- Subject: Fw: You'll love this one! Give it a minute to load.
- Subject: Fw: Fwd: a little laugh??
- Hi, this attachment is hysterical; I hope you can unattach it and laugh along with it.
- Here's a good one.
- Hi Russell. Just got these today . . . Have a chuckle.
- No matter your political persuasion, these may make you chuckle—unless you are a personal friend or relative of Mr. Whittington [Vice President Cheney's victim].
- Would be funnier if it wasn't so tragic.
- This is one from my son in Issaquah, Wa. You will laugh!
- You might really like this one!
- This is definitely worth the look!!!
- Hope this works—it's a hoot!!

Meager as they are, these little blurbs offer insight into an aspect of joke transmission that rarely occurs in face-to-face contexts: the pivot from hearing a joke to telling it. If someone tells me a joke, I'm not likely to immediately re-tell that same joke unless I know a variation or think the first teller butchered it. But if I receive a good joke by e-mail, I am

quite likely to forward it. My comment, if I add one, may be read as both my reaction to the joke as an audience member/recipient and as my introduction to the joke as a performer/sender.

Also implicit in subject lines and appended comments is the awareness that the tingle of anticipation we once felt in response to the tone that signaled the arrival of a new item in our inbox is long gone. As the volume of e-mail has grown and the percentage of it that could be considered junk-mail has risen, most of us have become reluctant to forward netlore to our friends unless we're pretty convinced that it will be worth their time to look at. In a review of *Send: The Essential Guide to Email for Home and Office* (Shipley and Schwalbe 2007), humor columnist Dave Barry, in his hyperbolic style, gives us a pretty good idea of the widespread scorn for "Internet sludge"—and the people who forward it:

> You received a message addressed to many recipients—often a much-recycled joke, story, list, urban myth, etc. There are millions of these floating around; many of us simply delete them unread. But you, the "Reply All" abuser, read it and decide to respond with some clever comment of your own (such as "LOL"). And instead of hitting "Reply," which would inflict your reply only on the sender, you hit "Reply All," thereby forcing everybody on the recipient list to receive, and delete, yet another useless piece of e-mail. Please do not take this personally, "Reply All" people, but: everybody hates you. We hate you almost as much as we hate the people who mass-mail this Internet sludge in the first place. (Barry 2007)

In other words, the same considerations that govern our decision to seize the floor in face-to-face conversations apply in cyberspace. Though we are not the creators of the material and our "delivery" is not at issue, our judgment is under scrutiny. We get mildly irritated at those who waste our time; we appreciate those who offer a welcome diversion from our labors—and who give us something good to pass along in turn, to our own credit.

The act of forwarding thus tells us one very important thing: that the forwarders had enough confidence in their audience's response to believe that forwarding would enhance their prestige or, at least, do it no harm. Note how many of the attached comments listed above assert that the recipient *will* appreciate the item in question (the more cautious senders tell recipients they *might* like it or append question marks: "a little laugh??"). The risks of forwarding may be slight compared to the risks of live performance, but forwarding is a choice. One makes it with the awareness that addressees might be either grateful or annoyed to receive the item in question.

Another advantage that studying forwarded jokes has over observing traditional joke-telling or monitoring newsgroups is that it may be easier to get a sense of which jokes are popular at any given time. With most of the jokes that get forwarded to me by friends or family, my name is one of many on a list of addressees who are linked only by our relationship with the sender. In some cases, the body of the e-mail includes lists of the addresses of multiple rounds of recipients. Some of the subject lines look like this: "Fw: Fwd: Fw: Fwd: FW: The Talking Parrot," the five forwards serving as a clear indication of how widely distributed these items were. In one instance, the e-mail that came to me preserved three previous generations of addressees. The first round went to 25 people, the second to 13 people, the third to 25 people and the one that came to me included 34 people. If those 97 people in turn forwarded the same joke to 25 of their closest friends and relations, and then that cohort of 2,425 recipients did the same, one can see how quickly we get into some pretty large numbers. From these glimpses at the history of any given item it is no great stretch to say that any folklore text that lands in my inbox must land in a lot of other people's inboxes as well. It would be much more difficult to gauge the popularity of an orally told joke.

Knowing that all the items that come one's way are popular is not the same as knowing that all the popular items are coming one's way, however. In my own work on topical jokes I have had to consider the possibility that I am out of the loop, relatively speaking—that I may be receiving only a fraction of the jokes that are in circulation at any given time. One obvious way to augment my certainly incomplete and possibly even woefully incomplete trove of material is to go to the overwhelmingly vast collections on various websites.

Elliott Oring puts the problem with this kind of website nicely: often, it's "more like an archive than a repertoire" (2003, 139). In other words, most webmasters don't see themselves as gatekeepers, deciding which material deserves a wider audience. In keeping with the democratic spirit that informs much of the Web, they would rather let site visitors rate the jokes than do it for them. Some of the sites keep lists of the most frequently e-mailed items; others tout their most popular categories. In January 2008, for example, About.com's political humor page (http://www.politicalhumor.about.com/) listed these links in its "Most Popular" box: "Political Miniclips, Bushisms, Democratic Loyalty Quiz, Funny George Bush Pictures, and Late Night Political Jokes." Thus there is overlap in the public world of the websites and the private world of personal e-mail recipient lists: a surfer can find a good joke on a website, copy and paste it into an e-mail, and let the forwarding begin. Websites

such as Jokes Gallery (http://www.jokesgallery.com/) make it even easier for us. The site enables one to compose a message and send a joke to as many as ten friends. One can also subscribe and "receive hundreds of jokes each week" via e-mail.

Finally, in keeping with the cyberspace mania for interactivity, many of the jokelore websites invite visitor comments, which brings us back to the cyber conversations I mentioned at the outset. In February 2007, the Suburbarazzi website asked visitors whether jokes about Anna Nicole Smith's death were inappropriate. More than half of the 300 respondents said yes—a surprising number given that this is not a random sampling of the population but people who choose to visit websites devoted to jokes. Perhaps the most intriguing response was this one: "About her, yes. About the media's insatiable, vulture-like coverage of her, no" (http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/138725).

The distinction recalls studies of jokes about the Challenger disaster that proposed that the jokes were less expressions of insensitivity about the tragedy than they were expressions of exasperation at media coverage of the tragedy (Oring 1987; Smyth 1986). A modest amount of coverage of a celebrity's life might prompt an appropriately modest response to her death: perhaps some of us would feel a little bit sad. Disproportionate coverage brings out the contrarian in many of us: we don't feel *that* sad. The jokes are a form of folk-media criticism, a collective eyerolling over the news media's lack of restraint. They have less to do with the foibles of the celebrities themselves than with the unseemly level of news-media interest in them. There may be an element of self-mockery here as well: we who get caught up in the mediathon and thereby make it possible (which is to say, profitable) ought to be ashamed of ourselves.

As it happens, I have found that much of the material on the humor websites is pretty lame, from which I infer that it has not circulated as much as the material I receive via e-mail or that made the lists of "most e-mailed." The best site for my purposes has been Rec.Humor.Funny (http://www.netfunny.com/rhf/), which subjects all submissions to the site moderator's own critical eye, with a view toward keeping the archive to a manageable size. Since the size issue is an important consideration for me also, I wound up relying on Rec.Humor.Funny as my guide to the best topical jokes. I still prefer the way forwarding, by approximating some of the risks of performance, winnows the supply of jokes down to what might be thought of as a collective repertoire, but the online discussion of jokes on the humor websites suggests how forwarded jokes and electronic archives might be used in tandem: the

forwarded jokes give us a better sense of which jokes are in widest circulation at any given moment; the websites give us a better sense of what people think about the jokes.

Forwarded Joke Topics and Types

It is not entirely clear how the subject matter of online jokes differs from the subject matter of face-to-face jokes, if it differs at all, but my preliminary sense is that electronic communication is particularly well suited to topical folklore: just as the Internet lends itself to the reporting of news as soon as it happens, it lends itself to registering instantaneous responses to the news—including jokes. One way to test this proposition is to work with the Center for Media and Public Affairs' annual list of the most-joked-about topics by television's late-night comedians (http://www.cmpa.com/punchlines.html). It stands to reason that what those guys find jokeworthy is fodder for amateur jokesters as well, especially when we factor in the likelihood that the late-night comedians (Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O'Brian, et al.) set the joking agenda for the country. (When Dan Quayle's name surfaced as a possible presidential candidate in 2000, a joke suggested that the late-night comedians would be glad to have him back in public life: "I recently saw a poll on the news showing that Dan Quale [*sic*] had 7% of the Republican support. I found this very disturbing—I had not realized that such a large majority of our nations [*sic*] comedians were Republicans.") The CMPA's 2006 list—1. President Bush, 2. Dick Cheney, 3. Bill Clinton, 4. Mark Foley, 5. Hillary Clinton—tracks fairly well with my week's worth of forwards, with the exception of Florida Congressman Foley, whose sexual overtures to congressional pages came to light later in the year. The Enron/Arthur Andersen scandal was five years old by them, so it's no surprise that it was no longer fodder for the TV comedians.

Looking at ten years' worth of CMPA lists reveals several distinct patterns. First, unlike the Associated Press's annual list of the top ten stories of the year, with which it overlaps, all the CMPA entries are people, not topics such as the economy or oil prices. Second, most of the people are politicians. (They are also mostly men, but that follows from their being mostly politicians.) Third, as Oring (2003, 129–40) has also noted, Bill Clinton has had remarkable staying power as a joke target, remaining at or near the top of the list even after he left the White House and before he became more visible during his wife's presidential campaign. Here is my own composite list of top joke targets based on number of years on the CMPA list from 1997 to 2006:

1. Bill Clinton (10 for 10)
2. George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton, and Al Gore (8 for 10)
3. Dick Cheney (7 for 10)
4. Saddam Hussein (4 for 10)
5. O. J. Simpson, Janet Reno, Monica Lewinsky, Martha Stewart, Osama bin Laden, Arnold Schwarzenegger (3 for 10).[3]

Armed with the CMPA lists, one can then go to the humor websites and search for particular joke topics. This raises one of the thorniest problems in dealing with Internet humor, the problem of professionalism and copyright. As broad as the definition of folklore has become, we stop short of saying that the jokes Jay Leno tells on the *Tonight Show* or the news story parodies that appear on the Onion website are folklore, at least initially. But netizens are notoriously casual when it comes to attribution. If people see or hear a joke they like, they pass it on, usually without bothering to say where they got it. So one thing that troubles me as I grapple with this material is what would happen if I traced an oft-e-mailed joke back to a professional source.

The list of "Top Ten Cheney Excuses" for accidentally shooting his hunting companion, for example, was unattributed to any source. "Top Ten" lists are a regular feature of the Letterman show, but they also inspire people to compose their own. Was this a Letterman list or a Letterman-like "folk" list? It was easy to find out it was from Letterman. Does this disqualify it from consideration as folklore even though it may closely resemble a joke whose provenance cannot be determined? Is known authorship or payment for services rendered a meaningful disqualifier? Tracing a joke to its source is a practical matter. Should we make the success or failure of this sort of detective work determinative of whether the joke is folklore or something else? If we make circulation a criterion, provenance ceases to matter. Whatever its source, a forwarded and reforwarded joke becomes folklore by virtue of its wide circulation. Its creator, even if he wants to sue for copyright infringement, should be flattered.

One obvious limitation to working with the CMPA lists is that jokes on television, even late-night television, are going to be much tamer than the "folk" jokes on the Internet. This means that not only are we going to see different jokes on the same topics, we will also see jokes on different topics. Dead celebrities are a prime example of a topic that might be off-limits on television but not in cyberspace, where anything goes, even if, as we have seen, one can find arguments between defenders of the harmlessness of sick jokes and those who are censorious of them. Interestingly, I have found far nastier jokes on humor websites than in

my inbox, which again suggests that forwarding is more subject to the constraints of face-to-face interaction than posting, anonymously and invisibly, to a website.

In any case, my week's worth of forwarded jokes from early 2006 tracks pretty well with the CMPA lists. The task before me was to trace the individual items back to the news that precipitated them and then ask Elliott Oring's open-ended question of each: "What does this joke communicate?" (1992, 17). Such a question did not bind me to a single, invariably reductive theory, but the idea I return to again and again in my own work is that topical jokes are subversive. They violate the rules of deference and discretion when it comes to authority figures, bodily functions, and social conflict in a way that may appear anarchic, even nihilistic, but that is, at bottom, quite moralistic: their target is hypocrisy. Their mood is grimly amused exasperation with false piety, with speaking respectfully of those who deserve no respect, with euphemism, with all attempts to ignore the 800-pound gorillas in the room. In Mary Douglas's words, the joke "is an image of the leveling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones" (1991, 297). Orwell wrote that "every joke is a tiny revolution" (quoted in Powell and Paton 1988, 40). I will offer an example of how one might analyze a topical joke a little later in this chapter, but first let's take a quick look at which joke *types* are most popular online.

Whether one is sitting down to compose a poem or a song or a joke, the easiest way to go about it is to find a tried-and-true form and fill it with (slightly) new content. Most jokes are either riddles or stories with punch lines. Riddles are questions with unexpected answers. Look at enough of them and, as with "What was the last thing to go through X's mind?" or "What's the difference between X and Y?"[4] (or the flip side, "What do X and Y have in common?"), you see variations on several questions:

- What does/did X say to Y?
  Q: What did the Zen Buddhist say to the hot dog vendor?
  A: "Make me one with everything."

- What does X (if it were an acronym) stand for?
  Q: What does WACO stand for?
  A: We aren't coming out/We all cremated ourselves, etc.

- How many Xs does it take to screw in a light bulb?
  Q: How many bureaucrats does it take to screw in a light bulb ?
  A: Two. One to screw it in and one to screw it up.[5]

The story jokes are more varied. One persistent motif is the presence of three or more characters who engage in some form of one-upmanship. In a common subtype, the three characters have arrived at the pearly gates. Another story-joke type involves a magic lamp, a genie, and three wishes. A third joke type, as we have seen, is the Top Ten list. A fourth type is the parody, with a wide assortment of subtypes—parodies of Dear Abby letters, of newspaper stories and television news reports, of press releases, of chain letters, of commercials, of movie posters, of office memoranda, of instruction manuals in general and frequently asked questions (FAQs) in particular. Here's a widely circulated mock chain letter that parodies many of the popular rumors and legends circulating online. I found this version at Anvari.org:

> To all my friends, thanks to you sending me chain letters in 2003, the following occurred:
>
> I stopped drinking Coca Cola after I found out that it's good for removing toilet stains.
>
> I stopped going to the movies for fear of sitting on a needle infected with AIDS.
>
> I smell like a wet dog since I stopped using deodorants because they cause cancer.
>
> I don't leave my car in the parking lot or any other place and sometimes I even have to walk about 7 blocks for fear that someone will drug me with a perfume sample and try to rob me.
>
> I also stopped answering the phone for fear that they ask me to dial a stupid number and then I get a phone bill from hell with calls to Uganda, Singapore, and Tokyo.
>
> I stopped consuming several foods for fear that the estrogens they contain may turn me gay.
>
> I also stopped eating chicken and hamburgers because they are nothing other than horrible mutant freaks with no eyes or feathers that are bred in a lab so that places like McDonalds can sell them Big Macs.
>
> I also stopped drinking anything out of a can for fear that I will get sick from the rat feces and urine.

> I think I'm turning gay because when I go to parties, I don't look at any babe no matter how hot she is, for fear that she will take my kidneys and leave me taking a nap in a bathtub full of ice.
>
> I also donated all my savings to the Amy Bruce account, a sick girl that was about to die in the hospital about 7,000 times. Funny that girl, she's been 7 since 1993. . . . .
>
> I went bankrupt from bounced checks that I made expecting the $150,000 total that Microsoft and AOL were supposed to send me when I participated in their special e-mail program.
>
> But I am positive that all this is the cause of a stinking chain that I broke or forgot to follow and I got a curse from Satan himself.
>
> IMPORTANT NOTE: If you send this e-mail to at least 1200 people in the next 10 seconds, a bird will crap on you today.

Visual Joke Genres

While it was certainly possibly to craft photographic and videographic jokes and parodies before the digital age, computers have made them far cheaper and easier to produce and distribute. The "virtual Niagara of lore flowing over the electronic grapevine" (Brunvand 2001, 65) includes *photoshops*, or digitally altered photos; *mash-ups*, which are clips made from extant commercials, films or news footage; folk animations; and parodies of print advertisements or movie posters. There are a number of fairly obvious reasons for the popularity of commercial parodies and jokes: our lives are saturated with these messages so they spring readily to mind for the creator of a parody and are readily recognized by the receiver of the parody. Plus, they cry out for parody because they are so inherently cynical. Whatever they purport to be about, they are always ultimately about one thing: selling goods or services. The more "warm and fuzzy" they are, the more cynical they seem to be. MasterCard's "priceless" campaign, which debuted in 1998, is among the warmest and fuzziest. Therefore, it is among the most oft-parodied.

The "priceless" commercials show people having a delightful time and the prices of the various goods and service they are enjoying. What it all adds up to, though, is not the sum of the costs, but the pricelessness of the experiences. "There are some things money can't buy," says the voiceover. "For everything else, there's MasterCard." The verbal/visual parodies hinge on the dual meaning of the word priceless. MasterCard

uses it to mean "worth more than money can buy." As parodists use it, it's an all-purpose superlative, as in "too funny" or "too perfect." A Google search for "priceless parodies" yields dozens of sites. Their messages are consistent with what Oring (1987) found in the Challenger joke cycle, with its plays on well-known TV spots for beer (Bud Lite), shampoo (Head and Shoulders) and soft drinks (7UP). Paraphrasing Dorst (1990), Ellis, who includes the credit-card spoof in his study of 9/11 humor, writes that topical jokes appropriate "mass media imagery in order to challenge official definitions of reality" (2002, 2). Here are a few news-related examples from my collection:

1. Elian

The photo, which is untouched, shows two armed men in helmets, goggles, and olive-drab uniforms. The one in the foreground appears to be confronting a frightened-looking civilian who is holding a young boy in his arms.

> A Rubber Inner Tube and Trip to America: $17.38
> A Plane Ticket from Cuba for Dad: $325.00
> A FULL SWAT Team w/Automatics: $75,000
> The look on the little bastard's face: Priceless

The back story: The photo, taken in April 2000, would be recognizable to most people. It appeared on the front page of many newspapers as the culminating moment in a long tug-o'-war over a six-year-old Cuban boy named Elian Gonzalez. Elian had fled Cuba in a motorboat with his mother, who died en route to Florida. The boy, found floating on an inner tube, then went to stay with his relatives in Miami. The boy's father wanted him to return to Cuba. On one side were those who thought Elian should be reunited with his father; on the other were those who thought the boy would be better off remaining in the United States. Finally, Immigration and Naturalization Service agents were ordered to seize the boy from his Miami relatives and take him to his father. This was one of those mediathons where coverage of the story was out of all proportion to the importance of the story. The parody put the boy—but really, the story—in its place. This was not the final battle in the great twentieth-century war between communism and democracy. It was a custody battle.

2. Bush/NASCAR

The news photo shows President Bush shaking hands with a man in a jumpsuit emblazoned with patches from makers of various

automobiles and automotive parts. A number of similarly attired men look on. A crowded grandstand is in the background.

> Air Force One Flight: $1,000,000
> Extra Secret Service: $200,000
> Having the Taxpayers Foot the Cost of Your
> Campaign Stop: Priceless

The back story: NASCAR dads—white men who tended to be culturally conservative but receptive to Democratic appeals on economic issues—were identified as "the election cycle's hottest new constituency" during the 2004 presidential race. President Bush dropped in on the Daytona 500 in February 2004, greeted the 180,000 spectators and said, "Gentlemen, start your engines." Both engines and spectators roared.

One of the marvels of Bush's career is that an Ivy-League-educated scion of a wealthy New England family succeeded in representing himself as a regular guy from West Texas. The creator of this parody wasn't buying it. The parody could have served as an illustration of Ellen Goodman's column in the *Boston Globe*: "All this was billed—and I do mean billed—as a presidential, not a political, visit" (2004). The purpose of Bush's drop-in, Marc Cooper wrote in the *Nation*, was "to burnish the Everyman cultural pose that Bush has so successfully honed, and this was a ripe audience" (2004).

3. Bush/Cocaine

The photo shows a smiling President Bush in the cabin of an airplane, presumably Air Force One, with a plastic water-pipe in his hand. The wording on the familiar overlapping red and gold circles of the MasterCard logo has been changed to read MasterRace.

> New Bong: $50
> Cocaine Habit: $300
> Finding Out that the Good-Old-Boy Network Can
> Still Rig an Election in the Deep South: Priceless
> For the rest of us, there's honesty.

The back story: When reporters asked candidate Bush in the summer of 1999 whether he had ever used cocaine, he declined to answer, apart from alluding to his "irresponsible youth." Many drew their own conclusions. The rest of the parody links Bush's lack of candor about drug use with the way he allegedly stole the election by stealing votes in Florida.

4. Bin Laden

These next three examples are similar. One shows Osama bin Laden in the crosshairs.[6]

> Trip to Afghanistan: $800
> High-Powered Sniper Rifle: $1,000
> Hotel Stay with Accessible Roof: $100
> Scoring a Head Shot on Osama bin Laden: Priceless
> For everyone else, there's cruise missiles.

The next version shows photos of a bullet, a rifle, a commercial jet, and a head shot of Osama bin Laden.

> Ammunition: $12
> New Rifle: $385
> Airline Travel to Afghanistan: $1,349
> Clear Line of Sight: Priceless

The third photo shows a bomb.

> Gross Weight: 15,000 lbs.
> Aluminum Powder Explosive: 12,000 lbs.
> Unit Cost: $27,318
> The Look on Their Faces When This Ugly
> Motherfucker Falls into Their Tent: Priceless

The back story: These parodies come across as criticisms of the Bush administration's failure to bring Osama bin Laden to justice, though that may not have been the intent of the creators. The fake ads suggest that getting bin Laden is so clearly desirable and should be a very simple matter, in terms of both logistics and expense: Why, then, is he still at large? Perhaps, the parodists did not believe Bush's tough talk about wanting bin Laden "dead or alive." The more typical American approach would be to capture and try him in a court of law, as was done with Saddam Hussein. Seizing someone, which can only happen with troops laying hands on him, is a lot more complicated than killing him, which can be accomplished at a distance.

5. Hillary Clinton

The photo shows Hillary Clinton shaking the right hand of a soldier who has crossed the middle and index fingers of his left hand, signifying that he is not as pleased to be meeting the senator as it would appear.

Haircut: $8
BDUs: $100
Knowing You Just Mocked the "Smartest Woman On Earth" Right Under Her Fat Elitist Nose: PRICELESS!!!

The back story: According to Snopes.com, the photo, taken in Iraq in 2003, has not been altered. An alternative version, sans the Priceless parody, offers this explanation:

> Picture shows that this guy has been thru Survival School. He's giving the sign of "coercion" with his left hand. These hand signs are taught in survival school to be used by future POW's to send messages back to our intelligence services viewing the photo or video. This guy was being coerced to holding hands with Hillary. Little did she know that he would tell us.

The Snopes site says there is no evidence of outright coercion (http://www.snopes.com/photos/military/crossed.asp). Oh, and BDUs means "battle dress uniforms" (I had to look it up).

I have only begun to look at live-action and animated creations, so I will devote the remainder of this discussion to photoshops. The apparent verisimilitude of the photographic image drew pranksters right from the start. Photos could be faked before the film was exposed—by arranging a tableau—and after—by cutting out one image and pasting it onto another. Folklorists have been interested in two types of hoax photographs: spirit photographs, which purport to capture ghosts and other otherworldly manifestations on film (Wojcik 1996), and tall-tale photographs, which typically show a gigantic fruit or vegetable on a farm wagon or railroad flatcar, or a chimerical beast like the jackalope—half jackrabbit and half antelope (Welsch 1974). As the name implies, the tall-tale postcard is offered as real; gullible souls like I was at age twelve when I saw my first jackalope card might even believe it.

The best of these images are pretty seamless: if you disbelieve them, it isn't because the cutting-and-pasting was poorly executed, but because you know enough about the world to doubt the existence of supersized potatoes or antlered rabbits. But when the cutting-and-pasting involved real scissors or knives and real paste, it took considerable skill. And there was still the problem of the slightly raised surface of the superimposed image, resolved only by taking a photograph of the photograph. At that point, the project became not just labor intensive, but costly. Computers, then, don't allow us to do what could not be done before as much as they allow us to do it better, more easily, and, aside from the initial outlay for

hardware or software—presumably purchased for purposes other than doctoring photographs—less expensively. This, logically, makes it more likely that people with a modicum of skill will alter photographs just for the fun of it.

In his survey of what he refers to as World Trade Center humor, Ellis expresses surprise at "the proliferation of 'computer-generated cybercartoons' . . . a phenomenon that will need much closer study in the future" (2002, 13). *Cybercartoons* is a good name, to the extent that the closest analog for most of this material is the political cartoon, but I prefer the term *photoshops* to *cybercartoons* or *computer-generated art* for two reasons. First, most of these images are digitally altered photographs rather than cartoons, which I think of as drawings, whether they are drawn by hand or with the aid of the computer. Second, *photoshops* is the preferred (emic) term among people who create, upload, and archive the images.[7]

Evidence of the robustness of the culture of photoshopping is found on websites like the aptly named Worth1000.com, where aficionados offer step-by-step instruction in how to achieve such effects as "zombifying, gender bending, face swapping, fattening, and aging." Also included are guides to the making of a specific image:

- How I turned a stack of pancakes into something you probably wouldn't want to find on your plate
- How I puppetized Charlize [Theron]
- How to turn Tom Cruise into an alien ("Photoshop Tutorials")

Worth1000.com hosts what it calls a "daily manipulation contest." Those who would enter photoshopped images involving Britney Spears, President Bush, "scantily clad women (i.e. in bikinis) for no practical reason," "Star Wars references," the Statue of Liberty, the World Trade Center, Hitler "or Nazi references," or Osama bin Laden "or terrorist references" are advised that these are "annoying overused entries (clichés)" and therefore are unlikely to win ("Entering Contests"). Here, too, the best material seems to be forwarded.

As with verbal jokes, photoshopping lends itself to commentary on the news, for the simple reason that news photographs constitute a readily available supply of images to play with. Consider this e-mailed photo, which bore the subject line "Got Fish?" and was accompanied by this comment: "Disgusting. But funny." The photo showed the two presidents Bush on what appears to be the deck of a sportfishing boat. George Bush the elder, smiling in cap and windbreaker, is holding a fishing rod. George Bush the younger, grinning in leather jacket

and sunglasses, is holding a striped bass. That's the foreground. In the background we see nine or ten people, most of whom, if not all, appear to be African Americans, wading through waist-high water on a city street.

Here is some of what one needed to know to understand why the photograph was disgusting but funny. The Bushes are members of the leisure class, which likes to do things like sportfishing. The streets of New Orleans had flooded when Hurricane Katrina made landfall the week before. Many African American citizens of New Orleans are poor and therefore lacked the ways and means to heed the order to evacuate the city. They were trapped. Then-president Bush in particular and authorities at all levels of government in general were perceived as being catastrophically and criminally slow to respond to the gravity of the situation. The message of the photo: the Bushes are so out of touch with the plight of the poor, especially poor blacks, that they saw the flooding of New Orleans as nothing more than an opportunity to do a little fishing. The name of the file is BushVaca.jpg—an abbreviated version of Bush vacation. The subject line "Got Fish?" refers to the long-running (and much-parodied) "Got Milk?" advertising campaign.[8]

Thus far, the meanings I have teased out of this photo explain only why it's disgusting. To understand why it's funny, you have to know that the photograph is a fake, which is to say you have to know that it is possible to digitally alter or combine photographs in ways that make the altered photo almost indistinguishable from a photograph of a scene as it appeared to the photographer through the camera's viewfinder. Snopes.com says it received many "Is this real?" inquiries about "Got Fish?" and displayed the original photos from which the spoof version was made (http://snopes.com/katrina/photos/recreate.asp).

That some people believed these images to be true tells us two things: (1) even though we are routinely exposed to and aware of realistic digital images, our kneejerk response to the physically plausible image (as opposed to, say, a horse's head on a man's body, which would be a physically implausible image) is to accept it at face value; and (2) we are likelier to believe a physically plausible image if the content accords with beliefs we already hold. In the present instance, I suspect the believers are those whose boundless contempt for George W. Bush makes them susceptible to almost any calumny. The fact that "Got Fish?" hadn't appeared in any newspapers wouldn't surprise them. If you believe "Got Fish?" it's no stretch to believe in conspiracies to suppress news. Presumably, these people did not find the photograph amusing.

Those who laughed at "Got Fish?" didn't recognize it as a fake because they were able to spot the telltale signs of a cut-and-paste job, but because the conduct depicted in the photo was so breathtakingly inappropriate to the situation. Borrowing Elliott Oring's language (1992), "Got Fish?" is appropriately incongruous in multiple ways. Although digitally altered photographs have become commonplace, we continue to marvel at how realistic a fake can look. The disconnect between the visual plausibility of the image and the implausibility of the conduct is startling, but it would not be funny if the conduct, though literally false, did not express a figurative truth. If we laugh at "Got Fish?" we laugh because someone has cleverly brought together these disparate scenes to craft a false, yet maliciously apt representation of the Bushes' perceived insensitivity and disengagement.

Summary

This overview barely scratches the surface of the world of forwarded jokes, but I hope I have made several points. First, e-mail may be the most popular medium we have at the moment for the transmission of jokes. Second, though forwarding lacks most of the elements of a real-time performance, it may be a more naturalistic medium than humor websites—to the extent that receiving a joke via e-mail is more like hearing a good one from a colleague who pops his head in your office door, whereas going to a website is more like going to a comedy club or watching a comedy show on television. Third, it offers almost a daily snapshot of which joke types and topics are popular. Fourth, it lends itself to a genre of humor—the visual joke—that is barely possible in face-to-face joke telling. And fifth, as I tried to show in my brief discussions of the "Priceless" parodies and the "Got Fish?" photoshop, we needn't be stymied by the dearth of social-contextual information, given the abundance of cultural-contextual information. By going back to the news-media sources of the jokes and to the humor websites that register reactions to the jokes, we can begin to understand what they have to tell us about how computer jockeys across the land are reacting to the news of the day.

Appendix: A Week in the Life of My Inbox

Here is a sampling of the jokes that poured into my inbox during the week of 12 February 2006:

Sunday, 12 February:

- Two digitally altered photos under the subject line “German Pope Makes Changes in Mass.” The first shows Pope Benedict XVI raising a glass of beer instead of a chalice of wine. The second shows him bearing a pretzel where the eucharist would be.
- A joke letter to the IRS, in which the taxpayer encloses “four toilet seats (value $2,400) and six hammers (value $1,029), bringing my total remitted to $3,429,” to pay a $3,407 tax bill. (Citing a *USA Today* story, the taxpayer proposes sending the $22 overpayment to the Presidential Election Fund in the form of one 1.5-inch Phillips-head screw.

Monday, 13 February:

- An outsourcing joke. The doctored photo shows a man pedaling a stationary-bicycle-like generator that he is using to power up his laptop, the lid of which is labeled, “Microsoft Tech Support Center #25 Bombay.”
- Two jokes about President Bush:
    1. “Never Underestimate the Power of Makeup.” This joke features a series of before-and-after photos of women who look plain before, then glamorous after. The last pair shows a horse’s rear end before and the face of George W. Bush after.
    2. “This just in: In an attempt to thwart the spread of bird flu, George W. Bush has just ordered the bombing of the Canary Islands.”[9]

Tuesday, 14 February :

- Two more Bush jokes. One is lyrics to “The Kennebunkport Hillbilly,” sung to the tune of the “Beverly Hillbillies” theme song. The other is a journalism ethics joke. While taking pictures of a flood you [a photojournalist] see President Bush hanging on to a tree limb for dear life. “You can either put down your camera and save him, or take a Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of him as he loses his grip on the limb. So, here’s the question and think carefully before you answer the question below: Which lens would you use?”
- A Bill and Hillary joke dated 7 February 2001. Hillary asks Bill why he keeps a box under their bed containing three beer cans and $81,000 in cash. “Whenever I was unfaithful to you,” Bill says, “I put an empty beer can in the box under the bed to

remind myself not to do it again." Hillary figures three infidelities in thirty years of marriage isn't bad. Then she asks about the cash. "Well," Bill says, "whenever the box filled up with empty cans, I took them to the recycling center and redeemed them for cash."

- A Bush-as-numbskull joke dated 9 February2001. During a visit to the White House, President-elect Bush uses the bathroom. Later, he tells Laura how impressed he was with President Clinton's solid gold urinal. Laura shares this story with Hillary. That evening, Hillary says to Bill: "Well, I found out who peed in your saxophone."[10]

Wednesday, 15 February:

- A parody of the White House's handling of Cheney's hunting accident in the form of a transcript from "Ye Olde Briefing Room," in which a presidential spokesman stonewalls questions about Vice President Aaron Burr's role in the death of Alexander Hamilton (attributed to Salon.com).

Thursday, 16 February:

- Three Bush jokes, including this one:

  While suturing a laceration on the hand of a ninety-year-old man, a doctor and the old man were discussing Bush's health-care-reform ideas.

  The old man said, "Well, ya know, old Bush is a post turtle."

  Not knowing what he meant, the doctor asked him what a "post turtle" was.

  And he said, "When you're driving down a country road, and you come across a fence post with a turtle balanced on top, that's a post turtle. You know he didn't get there by himself, he doesn't belong there, he can't get anything done while he's up there, and you just want to help the poor thing down."

- A Cheney hunting joke in the form of an animated game. Cheney raises his shotgun. A covey of quail flies up from the trees. One is instructed to click one's mouse when one wants Cheney to shoot. I do so. Cheney spins and shoots one of the three people standing off to the side.

Friday, 17 February:

- "Unconfirmed Urban Myth (1/19/02): Hard Laughter." A female news anchor in Michigan, the day after it was supposed to have

snowed and didn't, turned to the weatherman and asked, "So, Bob, where's that eight inches you promised me last night?" Not only did the weatherman have to leave the set, but half the crew did too, because they were laughing so hard.

- Five Enron / Arthur Andersen jokes:
    1. "How to Explain Enron to Your Children": facetious explanations of feudalism, fascism, communism, totalitarianism, capitalism, and finally Enron venture capitalism follow.
    2. The second is a parody appeal to adopt, for only $20,835 a month, an Enron executive who is "living at, or just below the seven-figure salary level."
    3. The third consists of a series of sample math problems from 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. In the 2000 problem a businessman's costs exceed his sales receipts, yet he makes a substantial profit. "This is verified by his auditing firm, Arthur Andersen . . ."
    4. A teacher asks her pupils what their fathers do for a living. When it's Jimmy's turn, he says his dad is a striptease dancer in a cabaret for gay men. Later, the teacher asks Jimmy privately if what he said was true. Jimmy blushes and says, "I'm sorry, but my dad is an auditor for Arthur Andersen and I was just too embarrassed to say so."
    5. The fifth joke is a first-person account of an encounter with a ragged twelve-year-old boy who is holding a one-hundred-dollar bill. The boy tells a sad tale of his impoverished family and about being deprived of his other hundred-dollar bill by an older boy. The writer asks him why he didn't cry for help. The boy says he did, in vain. "How loud did you scream?" the writer asks. The boy whispers, "Help me!" The writer grabs the other hundred and flees. The account is signed "Kenneth Lay, Enron CEO."

- Two unattributed political jokes (one of which is a metajoke):
    1. I don't approve of political jokes . . . I've seen too many of them get elected.
    2. How come we choose from just two people for President and fifty for Miss America?

- A Social Security joke:

    Kathy and Suzy are having a conversation during their lunch break.

    Kathy asks, "So, Suzy, how's your sex life these days?"

Suzy replies, "Oh, you know. It's the usual, Social Security kind."

"Social Security?" Kathy asked quizzically.

"Yeah, you get a little each month, but it's not really enough to live on."

- A couple of Bill Clinton jokes:

  1. Clinton is in the supermarket picking up some things for the new office in New York when a stock boy accidentally bumps into him. "Pardon me," the stock boy says. "Sure," Clinton replies, "but it'll cost you."
  2. The second is a letter from Clinton to the "Federal Aviation Agency" suggesting that strippers be employed as flight attendants to prevent hijackings. "Muslims would be afraid to get on the planes for fear of seeing a naked woman, and of course, everyone in this country would start flying again in hopes of seeing a naked woman. We would have no more hijackings, and the airline industry would have record sales."

- A joke about three fallen religious leaders. "Jesse Jackson, Jim Baker [*sic*], and Jimmy Swaggert have written an impressive new book . . . It's called: *Ministers Do More Than Lay People*."
- A Bush-as-numbskull joke in which he eats his first bowl of matzoh ball soup and asks, "Do the Jews eat any other parts of the matzoh, or just the balls?"
- The Cheney joke of the day is a two-panel photo cartoon. In the first panel, Dick Cheney is on the phone; in the second, Bill Clinton is on the phone. Cheney is saying, "Bill—interested in doing a little quail hunting next weekend?? Bring the wife!"

Saturday, 18 February:

- A joke about a new Japanese student in an American school who incurs the wrath of his classmates by being the only one to correctly identify the sources of some famous quotes from American history. As the classmates mutter imprecations, Suzuki mistakenly thinks that these, too, are quotes, so he continues to name incorrect, but humorously apt sources: Lee Iacocca, George Bush, Bill Clinton, Gary Condit. Seeing how the teacher is reacting to this little scene, one of the students says, "Oh shit, now we're in BIG trouble!" To which Suzuki responds, "Arthur Andersen, 2001."

- Two more Bush-as-numbskull jokes and a Bush administration light bulb joke:

    1. Bush is on a plane that is about to crash. There are five passengers on board but only four parachutes. Bush is the third passenger to grab a pack and jump out of the plane. That leaves the Pope and a twelve-year-old boy. The Pope, citing his advanced age, offers the last parachute to the boy. The boy assures him there are still two parachutes left: the president took his schoolbag.
    2. Bush, Einstein, and Picasso arrive at the Pearly Gates at the same time. Each must prove to St. Peter that he is who he says he is. Einstein does so by filling a blackboard with the theory of relativity, Picasso by sketching a mural. When it's Bush's turn he asks, "Who are Einstein and Picasso?" St. Peter says, "Come on in, George."
    3. "How many members of the Bush administration does it take to change a light bulb?" The answer is ten [I include only the three best of these ten]:
        - One to tell the nations of the world that they are either for changing the light bulb or for eternal darkness;
        - One to give a billion dollar no-bid contract to Halliburton for the new light bulb;
        - One to arrange a photograph of Bush, dressed as a janitor, standing on a stepladder under the banner "Bulb Accomplished."

Notes

1. Oring (2003), on the other hand, argues that it is possible to learn as much or more about the webmasters who traffic in jokes as we learn about a casual acquaintance who tells us a joke in the "real world."
2. Web cameras and Internet telephony have introduced the possibility of using voice, gesture, and facial expression and, therefore, variation, in online joke telling.
3. The only other surprise on this list, apart from Bill Clinton's dominance, is former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno. My suspicion, soon confirmed, was that most of the jokes had to do with her central role in the protracted battle over custody of six-year-old Cuban refugee Elian Gonzalez in 2000. But I was also reminded that she ran (unsuccessfully) for governor of Florida in 2002 and that she took some of the blame for the FBI's disastrous raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993.

4. A subtype of the "What's the difference" riddle involves a spoonerism:
   Q: "What's the difference between a rooster and a lawyer?
   A: A rooster wakes up in the morning and clucks defiance . . ."
5. For a discussion of light bulb jokes, see Dundes (1981).
6. The image recalls a photocopied cartoon of the Ayatollah Khomeini's face appearing in a gun sight's crosshairs that circulated via fax machine in 1979 (Dundes 1991a).
7. See, for example, Choe (2001) or Park (2002).
8. Another "Got Milk?" parody aimed at George W. Bush shows him with a bag of cocaine and a bit of white powder on his nose. The tag line is "Got Coke?"
9. This joke is reminiscent of a joke about the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in California: after the earthquake struck, President Bush dispatched Vice President Quayle to the epicenter. The vice president flew to Orlando. According to the Rec.Humor.Funny website, Julian Bond originally made a similar joke about Dan Quayle during a speech at the University of Colorado in 1989. The site says Bond was quoted in the *Boulder Daily Camera* as having said, "He thinks *Roe v. Wade* are options for crossing the Potomac."
10. President Clinton's saxophone playing became famous when he appeared on the *Arsenio Hall* late-night television show during the 1992 campaign.