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Introduction
Old Practices, New Media

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Gayle King stopped laughing and turned serious. With gravitas, the *CBS This Morning* news anchor relayed an important and timely warning to her viewers. With Halloween only a few weeks away, police in states ranging from Pennsylvania to Washington and Colorado were urging parents to check their children's trick-or-treat bags for tainted candy. The danger, the report suggested, came in the form of marijuana-laced candy, which was barely distinguishable in taste from an unadulterated treat. After a short pretaped segment featuring video from the Denver Police Department and interviews with a local family and a doctor, the camera returned to the studio, where King quipped, "Remember when you were little you just wanted to avoid the house that had the apple and the raisins. Now . . . an apple or raisin seems like a good thing compared to what kids have to worry about today. That's scary" (Garrand 2019).

This perennial worry about contaminated Halloween candy should be familiar to any folklorist. King's off-the-cuff recollection was based on oral legends about Halloween candy being tampered with that were prevalent during her youth in the 1950s and '60s and have received mass media attention for almost as long (Grider 1984, 131–133). In the 1980s, Sylvia Grider observed the role media played in propagating and reinforcing this legend, writing that such reports "pass quickly into oral tradition and thus reinforce the syndrome" (133). Even though the phenomenon—which Grider calls "Razor Blades in the Apples Syndrome"—has its nebulous roots in oral tradition, the mediation of the phenomenon demonstrates an ongoing reciprocal relationship between institutional agents, mass media, and folk practice.

Worries about marijuana-laced candy in 2019 exhibited all these traits with one important addition–the panic started because of a post on social media. A few days before the report on CBS's morning news program, the police department in a small town in Pennsylvania seized various THC-laced edibles while executing a search warrant. Although there was no evidence

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that the owner had planned to give them out to children on Halloween, the police department—likely inspired by similar existing legends—posted pictures and a PSA to Facebook, advising parents to "be ever vigilant in checking their children's candy before allowing them to consume those treats" (Dickson 2019).[1] Although many commenters mocked this post by suggesting naiveté on the part of police (e.g., "No one is giving away their weed to your kids. Shits expensive and you're trying to scare people"), the story received coverage from a variety of local news outlets that took the warning seriously. A few days later, these local reports were picked up by national news media, and worrying about the dangers of marijuana-laced candy became a national news item. From there, just as Grider suggests, the reports (as well as the rumors they inspired) found their way back onto social networks, feeding further vernacular expression (this time much more sincere) and reinforcing the syndrome.

For scholars of digital media and folklore, this example may be unsurprising. After all, the internet's role as a conduit for folk practice has been well documented by a variety of scholarship over the last several decades. Early work on internet folklore by scholars like John Dorst (1990), Robert Glenn Howard (1997, 2005), Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), Bill Ellis (2001, 2002), Giselinde Kuipers (2002, 2005), Lajos Csaszi (2003), Jan Fernback (2003), Jeannie Banks Thomas (2003, 158–170), Russel Frank (2004), Alan Dundes (2005), Rosemary Hathaway (2005), Marjorie Kibby (2005), and Trevor J. Blank (2007) often looked at how pre-digital folk practices, like joke cycles or chain letters, were being extended and changed by the affordances of this new digital medium. Taken as a whole, this scholarship suggested that not only did folklore exist on the internet but also that digital media represented both an opportunity and a challenge for the future of folkloristics. Digital networks, Alan Dundes argued, were helping folklore flourish through increased transmission (2005, 405); but at the same time, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) noted, this new form of digital transmission complicated our basic understanding of folk groups and their practices.

In 2008, Robert Glenn Howard critiqued some of these early approaches for being too centered around discrete media texts. The goal of digital folklore scholarship, Howard argued, was to treat these communication events discursively and to attend to the "community processes that create, maintain, and re-create these expectations" (194). Such an approach, Howard suggested, reveals the fundamentally hybrid nature of vernacular expression. In 2009's *Folklore and the Internet* Trevor J. Blank built on Howard's perspective, adding that "the Internet is new territory for the

folklore discipline, and while we might be late to the dialogue, our perspectives and methodologies should not only broaden the scope of Internet studies but provide important insights into the process of everyday life in the modern technological world" (17).

In many ways, scholars like Blank and Howard (2013b) were at the forefront of the current digital turn in folklore scholarship. In the last ten years, this corpus of digital folklore scholarship has grown to include studies of vernacular religion (Howard 2011), contemporary legends (Tucker 2012; Tolbert 2013; Peck 2015; Blank and McNeill 2018), legend trips (Kinsella 2011; Tucker 2018), ostension (Peck 2016; Tolbert 2018), humor (Blank 2013, 2015; Peck 2015; Rezaei 2016), memes (Phillips and Milner 2017; Blank 2018; Peck 2019), tradition (Blank and Howard 2013b; Szpila 2017), performance (Buccitelli 2012), curation (Kaplan 2013), fan communities (Ellis 2012, 2015), virtual worlds (Gillis 2011; Lau 2010), blogging (Glass 2016), fake news (Frank 2011, 2015; Mould 2018; Peck 2020), health and medicine (Kitta 2012, 2019), computational methods (Tangherlini 2013, 2016), indigenous voices (Cocq 2015; Dubois and Cocq 2020), race (González-Martín 2016; Bock 2017; Buccitelli 2018b), disability (Blank and Kitta 2015; Milbrodt 2019), social movements (Thomas 2018), posthumanism (Thompson 2019), and intersections between folk and popular culture (Foster and Tolbert 2016; Blank 2018).[2] In other words, despite Blank's well-founded worry that the field was "late to the [digital] dialogue" (2009, 17), it appears that folkloristics has spent the better part of the last ten years making up for lost time.

However, the internet has been changing over the course of this decade of study. Digital communication technologies have become inextricably integrated into the everyday lives of millions of Americans (Buccitelli 2018a, 1), and devices like smartphones have drastically increased on-the-go access as well as access across the globe (Tsetsi and Rains 2017). In addition, web traffic has become highly centralized among a few major social media sites and social networks (Tufekci 2017, 134). Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube focus on supplying users with the tools to create their own content while also providing users with a steady stream of content created by others. The vernacular expression that takes place in these web locations is highly visible not only to other users but also to a variety of institutions, including politicians, journalists, advertisers, and the corporate ownership of the platforms themselves. In short, we are living in an age of constant connectedness that is defined by social media.

Much like the opportunities and challenges noted near the turn of the twenty-first century, the centrality of social media in our current cultural

moment raises new questions and complicates existing answers regarding the nature of digitally mediated folklore. What happens, for instance, when informal transmission becomes subject to a proprietary algorithm? How does increased social media interactivity from a variety of institutional agents, ranging from journalists and advertisers to the president of the United States, complicate our understanding of vernacular hybridity? How does social media function as an intermediary between folk practice and mass media, and what happens when mass media covers a social media folk behavior that never actually existed? These are just some of the fundamental questions about contemporary folk practice in the age of social media that the chapters in this book strive to answer.

This book, *Folklore and Social Media*, is meant to reflect a decade of strides in the study of digital folklore while also considering the opportunities and challenges facing the next decade of scholarship. Our central premise is that digital folklore scholarship needs to take both the "digital" and "folklore" elements seriously because social media fundamentally changes folk practices in new, often invisible ways. In some respects, social media makes digital folklore look more familiar than ever. The affordances built into social media platforms encourage hybrid performances that appear informal and everyday while also offering significant space to obfuscate backstage behaviors through editing and retakes. The result is that expression online becomes increasingly reminiscent of traditional forms of face-to-face interaction while also hiding its fundamental differences.

Although a folk practice like the "Razor Blades in the Apples Syndrome" may look similar in 1984 and 2019, the affordances of social media affected nearly every aspect of the 2019 panic—how it emerged, how people initially reacted to it, how it got institutional attention, and how that institutional attention fed back into the network as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Digital folklore scholarship needs to be careful not to simply reduce our encounters with social media to their seemingly equivalent forms of unmediated everyday communication. The affordances of social media mean that we folklorists can't just apply our existing tools uncritically in this new space; instead, we must continually develop new tools and consciously adapt old ones if we are to remain viable experts of contemporary culture in this emerging media environment. The scholarship contained in this anthology is meant to demonstrate various ways in which we might refine our methods and analyses in order to develop a more complete view of the vast and complex informal and traditional dynamics that define an era of folklore and social media.

In the introductory sections that follow, I offer a brief explanation of some of the affordances that structure social media as well as digital

communication more broadly. I suggest that the reciprocal relationship between these affordances and the proliferation of social media has encouraged the emergence of everyday behaviors that express new forms of (1) connection, (2) fluidity, (3) visuality, and (4) visibility. These traits, I argue, serve as an entry point for understanding how the contemporary digital folklore differs from pre-digital and pre-social media. Having established this foundation, I then provide an outline of the chapters contained in this volume and suggest how this scholarship extends our understanding of the relationship between folklore and social media.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION IN AN AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Networked digital communication technologies offer the potential to decouple interpersonal connection from geography and locality (Lee and Lee 2010; Blank and Howard 2013b). *Connection* in the digital age enables interaction between groups and individuals who would not otherwise meet in the course of their everyday lives. As a result, digital communities tend to form based around mutual interests or similar values (Birch and Weitkamp 2010, 905). Early work by Nancy Baym (1993), for instance, demonstrated the utility of digital communication for connecting geographically diverse soap opera fans. Similar dynamics of connectivity form the basis for a diverse range of digital communities, including the Black Lives Matter movement (Thomas 2018), Christian fundamentalists (Howard 2011), vaccination skeptics (Kitta 2012), trolls (Phillips 2015), anime fans (Ellis 2012), fans of the supernatural (Kinsella 2011; Blank and McNeill 2018; McNeill and Tucker 2018), and sleep-deprived nursing mothers (Cooper-Rompato 2013). These communities may emerge in their own discrete web spaces, but in the age of social media, these connections often emerge as a subset of linked interactions that exist on a larger website.

Social media builds on these connective affordances by also strengthening our connections to those we see every day (Blank 2013, 101–102). In her study of networked media use among adolescents, danah boyd (2014), notes that teens tend to use the internet as a social space to hang out with their friends—occupying a similar role to the mall, movie theater, or arcade in decades past (see also Hundley and Shyles 2010; Winocur 2009). For young people, these technologies enable connections that allow them to circumvent limitations and continue maintaining their face-to-face friendships, even after curfew or without a car. Adults, despite working under different sets of constraints, often use social media similarly—Facebook's

chat function might help a couple stay connected during their workday, or a group chat might help sustain casual conversation among a group of friends even after one has moved to a different city and another has a newborn to look after.

The connections enabled by digital communication are always on, offering the potential for users to "feel emotionally close and connected to others even when they are physically apart from them" at all hours of the day (Patchin and Hinduja 2010, 199). This creates an expectation for constant connectedness. At 3:00 in the morning, a user can reach out to her Instagram followers or text a friend for advice. Often, this communication is faster and more frequent than pre-digital communication, even when interaction is asynchronous (Baym 2010, 8). As media scholar Henry Jenkins observes, this increased speed and frequency may intensify the social bonds between individuals or within a community (2006, 142).

Ongoing connection fosters community, and in the digital age, community membership tends to be defined by a sense of *fluidity*. Users are presented with many more options for where to engage and how to define themselves. At the same time, users are also better enabled to easily shift between those spaces and identities (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2007). Even the platforms themselves are constantly updating and changing their digital architecture (Neff and Stark 2004). Many scholars have referred to this aspect of digital communication as demonstrating "weak ties" or exhibiting "loose connections" (Green-Hamann et al. 2011, 464; Li 2011; Baym 2010, 125); however, digital communication scholar Ashley Hinck offers a compelling case for viewing these relationships in terms of fluidity. Whereas the idea of "weak ties" suggests an inferior way of associating, fluidity is meant to suggest a larger cultural shift, one in which "the agent chooses and constructs their own lifeworld from the vast array of options available in an increasingly globalized information society" (2019, 26). Fluidity, then, focuses attention on the simultaneously transient and inclusive role of choice among a multiplicity of connections (Castells 2012; Rainie and Wellman 2012). "Fluidity" denotes ease of shifting between typing an email to one's mother, upvoting a new post on Reddit, watching a livestream on Twitch, and posting a new story on Snapchat almost instantaneously (Blank 2018).

The fluid nature of digital group membership among individuals means that every network location maintains a unique set of shared expectations derived from the product of ongoing group interactions yet belonging to no specific individual. Users only ever see a small, personalized slice of the network. Even on a major social networking site like Facebook users see *their*

Facebook, not *the* Facebook (although users commonly mistake the former for the latter). The shared expectations that emerge in these localized digital spaces on social media are "displayed, reinforced, negotiated, and taught through members' shared behaviors" (Baym 2010, 80), and "any newcomer to an Internet chat room, 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" (McNeill 2009, 82). These shared expectations, in turn, affect how individuals manage and perform within their social and group identities. Since users imagine each other within the confines of these shared expectations when communicating online (Blank and Howard 2013a, 12), these shared expectations guide and delimit the emergent possibilities for interaction (Pentzold 2011, 706).

Everyday communication in the digital age is also increasingly *visual*. Networked and mobile digital communication technologies allow users to easily capture and circulate media in the course of their everyday lives. Smartphones, for instance, make it easy to record a video or snap a photograph at a moment's notice. These devices have become ubiquitous, meaning that cameras are always on our person and easy to use. The result, as sociologist Martin Hand argues, is that "digital imaging and photography have become thoroughly ordinary accompaniments to communication and connection practices in daily life" (2012, 11).

While these technologies make it easy to document the everyday, it is the social networks they connect to that enable the circulation of this documented media via the click of a button. This novel landscape is aided by the prevalence of digital locations that forefront or integrate the visual. Social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and YouTube make uploading media and finding content widely accessible. Social networking sites make it easy to curate one's everyday life via media and to share that media with other users.

Social norms have embraced the affordances provided by these technologies and platforms in ways that make the visual documentation and circulation of everyday life not only possible but also expected. As Hand writes, the unprecedented levels of visual mediation in Western culture have led to social norms that support "the visual publicization of ordinary life in a ubiquitous photoscape" (2012, 1–3). Several other scholars have also noted this convergence between everyday life, digital media, and visual communication. Aaron Hess (2009), Christina Smith and Kelly McDonald (2011), Lei Guo and Lorin Lee (2013), and Kari Andén-Papadopoulos (2009) have argued that user videos posted to the popular social media website YouTube constitute forms of everyday argument. Similarly, scholars such as Blank

(2012), Milner (2013), and Peck (2014) have noted the popularity of image manipulation ("photoshopping") as a form of everyday argument on social media and as a resource for vernacular resistance of institutional narratives. Therefore, whether uploading pictures of a fancy meal or sharing a picture of oneself at a major tourist attraction, every image, Susan Murray notes, "becomes something that even the amateur can create and comment on with relative authority and ease" (2008, 151).

The resulting expressions integrate elements of visual, textual, and oral communication, but rarely fit wholly into any single category. "The devices," Hand writes, "enable and are enabled by new visual rhetorics and techniques, all of which are producing a novel landscape of screens and images" (2012, 3). Since digital communication often bears the signs of both written and spoken language, Nancy Baym suggests that it is best viewed as a mixed modality (2010, 63–64; see also Peck 2015). More than just remediation, digital technologies allow users to blend and extend written, oral, and visual communication in novel ways. The result, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett eloquently writes, "is neither speech nor writing as we have known it, but something in between, and, increasingly, with the convergence of technologies, it is multimedia" (1998, 284). Therefore, regarding digital communication as a mixed oral/visual/textual modality is fundamental to understanding the multi- and cross-mediated ways individuals choose to engage in acts of everyday expression in digital spaces.

By allowing users to more easily capture and circulate the details of their everyday lives across networks, the affordances of digital media make the practice of everyday life more *visible* (Peck 2016). A user might live-tweet his reactions to the latest episode of *The Bachelor*, interacting with other users as if they were present on the living room couch and hailing them into his Monday night viewing routine. Another user might be reminded by Facebook to send birthday wishes to a friend and is enabled to do so via a few button presses from 600 miles away. Other users engage in intense arguments with friends, acquaintances, and strangers on topics ranging from the personal to the political, which play out in myriad forms across status updates, tweets, and comment sections. Vacation and baby photos are expected forms of public self-documentation. Mobile applications allow users to check in at a concert, share a photograph of a meal at a trendy restaurant, or post a map of that day's jogging route, notifying their social networks of their location while also publicly displaying their movement through everyday life.

These public displays of connection are vital to personal identity work on social networking sites (Van Doorn 2010, 585; Toma and Hancock

2013, 322) and, as Howard notes, "if the vernacular process of public self-imagining were to stop, no geographic location would be there to bind the individuals together" (2008, 202). As a result, sharing these quotidian details forms the backbone of social media and the Web 2.0 era. This can create a legitimating effect, allowing fringe or subcultural behaviors to transcend from the periphery toward the mainstream (Jenkins 2006, 142). Through these public displays on a mass scale, a silly trend like planking can become a full-blown cultural fad. These trends point toward the emergence of a culture of sharing, through which connection and expression create new potential for visibility and awareness of everyday practices (Peck 2016).

The visibility of everyday life enabled by new media creates an awareness that individual actions exist as part of a larger body of practice. As everyday acts circulate across networks and become more visible, users begin to recognize them not only as distinct actions but also as parts of a larger practice. Digital communication scholar Limor Shifman (2014) observes that by documenting and sharing everyday actions across networks, users make these formerly ephemeral and interpersonal communication events more visible across space and more persistent over time. The sum total of these interactions is catalogued on a variety of web locations, allowing previously uninitiated users to quickly learn about the myriad variations at play (Kaplan 2013). This mass sharing inadvertently results in a widely accessible archive of everyday practice where "it only takes a couple of mouse clicks to see hundreds of versions" (Shifman 2014, 30). The outcome of these changes in visibility, Shifman argues, is an increase in user awareness of the overall sum of these actions (29). The affordances of the digital age enable users to see their individual actions not only as discrete forms of everyday expression but also as connected to a larger body of everyday practice. In other words, the visibility created by digital communication makes users more aware of genres of expression in their everyday lives.

This increased visibility carries implications not only for vernacular expression but also for institutional influence. The visibility created by networked communication hails the attention of a variety of institutional agents looking to report on popular trends, to capitalize on the next "big thing," or to communicate in a vernacular mode for the purpose of strategic communication. A political campaign, for instance, might harvest publicly available demographic information to micro-target individual users by promoting appealing features while concealing less appealing ones (Howard 2006, 179), and a corporation can monitor large-scale social media trends as well as individual users crowdsourced to prominence (Uldam 2016). A major news network might spend part of its newscast covering a hashtag

trending on Twitter or allow web users to respond to a story by using a certain hashtag. Similarly, users may circulate a bystander video or a blog post that provides initial or timely coverage to an event not yet covered by local news, creating visibility and possibly even setting the agenda for subsequent coverage by major news outlets (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013, 139; Zelizer 2010, 245; Howard and Hussain 2011, 36). Conversely, when mass media coverage of digital trends feeds back into the network, it might reify and spread those trends, occasionally turning viral hoaxes into widely practiced reality (Peck 2020). Visibility, then, should be construed as a mixed blessing. It can give everyday users some influence over institutional narratives, but it also creates new opportunities for institutional influence and appropriation of everyday communication.

FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

As this introduction makes clear, the affordances built into devices like smartphones and into platforms like Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat have created new possibilities and expectations for everyday expression. Folk behaviors, practices, expressions, and creativity are similarly extended by the affordances of contemporary digital media, creating an environment that looks both familiar and uncanny. But, at the same time, social media offers new opportunities for institutions looking to sell products, bypass fact checkers, harvest data, or influence people. Increasingly, various institutional agents are adopting a vernacular mode and engaging in forms of influence that are increasingly hard to separate from everyday interactions. In other words, social media complicates our understanding not only of how folklore is expressed and transmitted but also of how folk practices can be deployed as a resource to reinscribe or resist dominant power structures.

The chapters in this volume are dedicated to teasing out the ways in which social media extends existing folk dynamics while also creating new possibilities, challenges, and power relations for vernacular and institutional interaction online. Our authors take a variety of approaches to addressing these issues, ranging from participant observation and digital ethnography to computational approaches and close textual analysis. Similarly, the studies in this volume approach folklore and social media from a variety of angles—some chapters are centered on the digital folk while others focus on institutions that adopt digital folk practices or on the relationship between mass and social media. But consistent among all of these perspectives is a recognition that a folkloric approach is crucial to understanding the increasingly central role that social media plays in our culture.

Folklore and Social Media begins with Sheila Bock's chapter, "#LatinxGrad-Caps, Cultural Citizenship, and the 'American Dream.'" Bock examines social media posts marked with the hashtag #LatinxGradCaps and address-es how the aesthetic and narrative framing of immigrant identities in these online displays work to problematize and reframe prevalent cultural nar-ratives about Latinx immigrants in the United States. Bock highlights how cultural forms of expression take on heightened significance and become powerful modes of communication as Latinx individuals and communities navigate the discursive terrain of belonging and exclusion in the United States. Social media, Bock argues, is a powerful tool for reorienting dom-inant discourses of belonging and exclusion and for creating emergent publics that recognize the value of a more inclusive vision of the Ameri-can Dream.

Chapter 2 looks at how networks create visibility for a very different type of narrative. In "Bridges, Sex Slaves, Tweets, and Guns: A Multi-Domain Model of Conspiracy Theory," Timothy R. Tangherlini, Vwani Roychowdhury, and Peter M. Broadwell outline a method for determining the structural features of conspiracy theories as well as distinguishing those theories from actual conspiracies. To do this, the authors show how con-spiracy theories, from early legend complexes about witchcraft to modern-day narratives circulating on and across social media, often rely on hidden knowledge to align otherwise unlinked domains of human interaction. The authors apply this method to a variety of cases, including the Pizzagate conspiracy theory that thrived on sites like 4chan and Reddit and proposed that Democratic Party politicians were running a child sex-trafficking ring out of a Washington, DC, pizza parlor. The affordances of social media, they conclude, are uniquely situated to aid the emergence, circulation, and persistence of conspiracy theories, especially those that align with and con-firm existing group biases.

Chapter 3, "The Vernacular Vortex: Analyzing the Endless Churn of Donald Trump's Twitter Orbit," by Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, builds on the previous chapters by looking at the increasingly blurry rela-tionship between vernacular expression and institutional agents. Phillips and Milner focus on the Twitter account of the president of the United States to demonstrate how social media frustrates how we think about not only vernacular hybridity online but also the inter-relationship between the complex systems that enable it. Phillips and Milner suggest that Trump's prolific and prominent tweets are a multifaceted fusion of vernacular and institutional expression that tie together state, corporate, and folk entities as well as the affordances of social media and its users. The result, they argue,

is that scholars must account more completely for these complex systems; focusing on just one element gives an incomplete picture and forestalls any discussion of what should be done in response.

In chapter 4, "The Death of Doge: Institutional Appropriations of Internet Memes," Andrew Peck examines a different way that institutional agents have tried to co-opt digital vernacular practices by looking at how institutions attempt to construct a sense of vernacular authority by integrating internet memes into their strategic communication on social media. Peck argues that the problem for institutions is that their attempts to leverage memetic practice frequently express a contradictory sense of hybridity—neither fully institutional nor fully vernacular but trying to be both. As these conflicting qualities emerge, they create a breach in expectations for vernacular memetic practice, which hails users to respond in order to reconcile the vernacular/institutional contradiction with which they are presented. The result, Peck argues, is that successful attempts by institutions to appropriate meme culture tend to be referential and concerned with affect, whereas contentious attempts try to exert too much singular control over memetic practice.

In chapter 5, "'Zero Is Our Quota': Folkloric Narratives of the Other in Online Forum Comments," Liisi Laineste looks at the role of digital humor and play in acts of Othering on Estonian social media. Laineste's chapter focuses on reactions to a sketch in a televised Estonian comedy show whose authors rewrote a popular patriotic song from the 1990s to parody xenophobic ideas regarding refugees in contemporary Estonian culture. By looking at the responses to this sketch on social media, Laineste describes how online forums simultaneously communicate approval of and opposition to such humor, sometimes within the same post. The result, Laineste argues, is that investigating humorous texts and their public reception on social media offers an entry point into describing the practices of Othering and the role of folklore, figurative speech, and grand narratives in the process.

Chapter 6, Jeana Jorgensen and Linda J. Lee's "Trickster Remakes This White House: Booby Traps and Bawdy/Body Humor in Post-Election Prankster Biden Memes" builds on the previous chapters' focus on humor, memes, politics, and play. Jorgensen and Lee look at how users transformed outgoing Vice President Joe Biden into a memetic trickster figure in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election. These memes, they argue, draw on users' cultural inventories to make critiques of President-elect Donald Trump, often by using language and imagery of the body to suggest that Trump is unsuitable for the presidency. Although these memetic critiques can be seen as

problematically reinforcing hegemonic ideas of gender and power, Jorgensen and Lee suggest that these memes might also offer a resistive space to present alternative interpretations of male relationships and caring.

Chapter 7, Kristiana Willsey's "Dear David: Affect and Belief in Twitter Horror," considers vernacular hybridity through the relationship between social media and the commercialization of digital folklore. Willsey argues that it is the folkloric (collaboratively created, open-ended, and "free") quality of the web that makes a story believable, and paradoxically also what must be discarded for a story to be commercially viable (single-authored, closed, copyrighted). To make this argument Willsey examines the viral life of a Twitter ghost story through the emotional engagement of its audience. The story's creator treads a difficult line, she argues, orchestrating a dialogic and collaborative viral ghost story that thrives on uncertainty, while still holding the reins on what eventually becomes a commercial project.

Chapter 8 looks at the relationship between commercial media and folk practice from the other direction, considering the power of social media to appropriate and reimagine meaning in mass media texts. In "The Beauty, the Beast, and the Fanon: The Vernacularization of the Literary Canon and an Epilogue to Modernity," Tok Thompson historicizes the concept of the "fan-canon," or *fanon*, explaining how the aggregate volition of fans poaching elements of mass media texts creates something analogous to a canon, yet without the canon's singular (and often copyrighted) status. The fanon, Thompson argues, emerges from the idea of literary canons in order to invert the process of authorial control and institute a vernacular authority in shaping guidelines for creative copying and further storytelling. The result of this process, Thompson suggests, can be seen as a bookend to the "Gutenberg parenthesis" or as an epilogue to modernity.

Chapter 9 is a short commentary chapter by Lynne S. McNeill based on her work with the Digital Folklore Project. In "Classifying #BlackLivesMatter: Genre and Form in Digital Folklore," McNeill argues for the value of looking at a hashtag as a form of folklore, rather than (or at least as well as) seeing it as a word or phrase. Although the classification of emergent forms of vernacular digital practice represents an ongoing challenge for scholars and archivists, McNeill observes that folkloristics is uniquely suited to handle this challenge. Ultimately, McNeill argues that understanding a hashtag as folklore—that is, as culture that is both repeated and variable—is important because it offers a more holistic perspective on digital trends that other disciplines lack. Adopting a folkloric perspective, McNeill suggests, highlights how the diverse forms of related trends, both online and off, are a central, inextricable part of the phenomenon itself.

In chapter 10, "The Clown Legend Cascade of 2016," John Laudun considers the relationship between social and mass media in spreading a legend-based panic centered around sightings of creepy clowns across the United States. As Laudun observes, legend cascades have long occurred across multiple media, often leaping from one speech community to the next via either oral or media conduits. This suggests that social media not only extends familiar communities and conduits in new ways but also opens up new opportunities for data collection and analysis. By combining computational methods with close textual analysis, Laudun demonstrates how mass media reports and social media discussions fed into each other, developing and propagating the 2016 version of this perennial Halloween legend in novel ways. The result of this analysis, Laudun suggests, shows an extraordinary spike in activity that occurred far earlier than in previous years, revealing social media as not only a vehicle for legend transmission but also as a topic of contemporary concern.

Chapter 11, Elizabeth Tucker's "The Blue Whale Suicide Challenge: Hypermodern Ostension on a Global Scale," also considers how the internet can spread misinformation, especially when ostensibly "real" social media trends are picked up and disseminated by mass media. Tucker explores adolescents' interpretation of the "Blue Whale Suicide Challenge," in which evil adult curators allegedly gave vulnerable adolescents fifty tasks culminating in suicide. On YouTube many adolescents responded to rumors of this challenge with outrageous "Blue Whale" prank videos, which victimized their peers and irritated adults. Tucker notes the similarities between this social media trend and the "Satanic panic" of the 1980s and suggests that many of these pranks are based on ostension, which brought legends of the "Blue Whale Suicide Challenge" to life. While adolescents' pranks usually do not get much attention from adults, Tucker argues, their study can offer significant insights into youth culture and social problems.

Finally, in chapter 12, "Overt and Covert Aspects of Virtual Play," Bill Ellis explores one of the overarching themes of this volume—the value and significance of play on social media. Building on the work of scholars like Brian Sutton-Smith, Ellis argues that seemingly trivial forms of virtual play offer important insight not only into individuals' personalities and cultural roles but also regarding how institutions cultivate user information. Surveying examples from email, forums, and Facebook, Ellis proposes that play on social media is most engaging when enabled by six aspects, three overt (or plainly visible to observers) and three covert (subjectively sensed by the person playing). This type of virtual play results in communal processes that encourage users to share their personal information and agree to abstruse permissions

in third-party applications. Such sharing and authorizing—while seemingly trivial—are invaluable to corporations that data-mine or sell the information generated by virtual play to help manipulate the public's choices.

Ellis's conclusion regarding virtual play echoes the overall conclusion of this volume. "If we choose not to study such a 'trivial' pursuit," he writes, "there are many other interest groups that already understand its value to individuals and are ready to observe and covertly exploit it for their own purposes." Everyday communication on social media may look straightforward or, at times, even trivial. But there are many stakeholders paying attention and seeking to exploit these new media environments in increasingly hidden or subtle ways.

Our authors differ in their methods, their perspectives, and even in their answers to many of the questions raised in this introduction. Which elements of the folklorist's tool kit are best suited for the study of social media? How should we update those tools? What cases necessitate the development of new tools? As our authors' varied answers to these questions (and others) suggest, this book is not meant as the final word on folklore and social media; instead, we hope to guide a rapidly growing conversation about the changing nature of vernacular communication that is taking place both inside and outside the field of folklore. Returning to Ellis's conclusion, other disciplines and interest groups already understand the value of folklore and social media (even if they do not use those terms directly), so if we choose not to participate in this conversation, then we only disempower ourselves.

Actively contributing to this conversation is crucial because while our authors may differ on many points, they all agree on one fundamental idea: that folklore is one of the best-suited disciplines for understanding how new forms of media are extending traditional dynamics like orality, vernacular expression, and the informal circulation of culture in new ways. As editors, Trevor and I hope that the ideas contained in this volume will spark a multitude of cross-disciplinary conversations and mark the beginning of another decade of insightful and incisive scholarship on folklore and the internet.

NOTES

1. In a piece fact-checking the panic for *Rolling Stone*, writer E. J. Dickson (2019) asked the Johnstown Police Department why the post implied these candies might be given to trick-or-treaters. The police department denied this was the intention of the post, though it is difficult to deny that many journalists took this unintended meaning seriously.

2. This list of digital folklore scholarship is meant to be representative and not comprehensive.

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