

# **Folklore and the Internet**

## Vernacular Expression in a Digital World

Edited by  
Trevor J. Blank

### *Teaching Guide*

by  
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# Discussion Materials

## Introduction

### Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet, by Trevor J. Blank

#### From the author:

One of my earliest interests in folklore developed out of observations of urban legend transmission on the Internet. They were ubiquitous, and I found an assortment of interesting narratives that ranged from folk wisdom on the explosive dangers of mixing *Mentos* and *Coca Cola* (much like the old analog “Pop Rocks and Soda” cautionary folk narratives) to re-imagined tales with updated lingo and venues. As a graduate student at Indiana University, one of the major hubs of folklore research in the United States, I was surprised to find very little folkloristic literature on the Internet and was even more surprised to learn of the general dislike for (and mistrust of) cyberethnography in folklore research by my teachers, colleagues, and numerous other scholars in the field.

Fortunately, I was involved with the graduate student-run publication, *Folklore Forum*, which ran a special issue (Vol. 37, no. 1; 2007) on folklore and the Internet which I helped to edit and to which I contributed an article. Taking a step back, I realized that this special issue was one of the only specialized treatments of Internet folklore to be found in a single publication, and one that only included two new essays. A few folkloristic articles could be found in scholarly journals or book chapters with some arduous searching, but nothing truly substantive existed. What was more curious was the fact that an increasing amount of papers were being presented about the Internet at annual meetings of the American Folklore Society. Clearly, there was a need for a publication to emerge that would give folklore and the Internet a proper treatment, and so became the project to create the book. Utah State University Press graciously offered to host this new compilation in an effort to expand the scope of the folklore discipline and address the glaring need for a work of this nature.

Since I served as the book’s editor my introductory chapter to the book is not surprisingly a historically-contextual piece to frame the place of the Internet in folkloristics. It is meant to provide a brief history of the Internet medium while incorporating some of the major debates on what constitutes folklore and what folklorists should study, and offer some possible rationales for why folklorists have largely neglected cyberspace as a venue of scholastic inquiry. More importantly, in addition to introducing the book and its authors, the chapter seeks to underscore the main thesis of the book, that is: the Internet is a viable, important, and relevant area of

folkloristic inquiry and as such should be given serious attention by folklore scholars.

### Discussion questions:

1. Why have folklorists taken so long to study the Internet?
2. How have folklorists defined “folklore”? How does Blank’s definition deviate from previous attempts to define folklore? Do you agree with his suggestions on redefining what constitutes folklore?
3. According to Blank, why is the Internet “an ideal channel for the transmission of folk narratives”?
4. How does cyberspace challenge or complicate notions of “the field” for ethnographers? What constraints or benefits are available to folklorists interested in cyberethnography?

### Recommended readings:

Dorst, John. 1990. “Tags and Burners, Cycles and Networks: Folklore in the Telectronic Age,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 27: 179–90.

Ellis, Bill. 2001. “A Model for Collecting and Interpreting World Trade Center Disaster Jokes,” *New Directions in Folklore*, October 5.  
<http://astro.temple.edu/~camille/wtchumor.html>.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2002. “Making a Big Apple Crumble: The Role of Humor in Constructing a Global Response to Disaster,” in Peter Narváez, ed., *Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture*, 2003: 35-82. Earlier version published in *New Directions in Folklore*, June 6..  
<http://astro.temple.edu/~camille/bigapple/bigapple1.html>.

Fernback, Jan. 2003. “Legends on the Net: An Examination of Computer-Mediated Communication as a Locus of Oral Culture,” *New Media & Society* 5: 29–45.

Howard, Robert Glenn. 2005. “Toward a Theory of the World Wide Web: The Case for Pet Cloning,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 42: 323–60.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2008. “Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web,” *Journal of American Folklore* 121: 192–218.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2008. “The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25: 490–512.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1996. "The Electronic Vernacular," In *Connected: Engagements with Media*, ed. George E. Marcus, 21-66. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Laineste, Liisi. 2003. "Researching Humor on the Internet," *Folklore: An Electronic Journal of Folklore* 25. <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol25/humor.pdf>.

# Chapter 1

## Digitizing and Virtualizing Folklore, by Simon J. Bronner

### From the author:

This chapter grew from my having been a participant in the dawn of the computer age, a time in which folklore about "wired" individuals as a special interest group began to arise. Witnessing the change from those early days to our present age, when the computer is considered a familiar "appliance" of everyday communication for a broad range of users, led me to a contemplation of the meaning of the Internet as a folk system.

### Discussion questions:

1. What is the difference between an "analog" and "digital" definition of folklore?
2. What is different between folk humorous responses to Budd Dwyer's suicide in oral tradition during the 1980s and folk Internet responses during the early twenty-first century?
3. What are the cultural implications of the learning process on the Internet described as "handing up" rather than "handing down"?
4. Bronner finds similarities between the communication patterns of latrinalia and the Internet. What are they and how does he interpret their significance for communication on the Internet?

### Recommended reading:

Ben-Amos, Dan. 1971. "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context." *Journal of American Folklore* 84: 3-15.

Bronner, Simon J. 2002. "Introduction." *Folk Nation*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources.

Dorst, John. 1990. "Tags and Burners, Cycles and Networks: Folklore in the Telectronic Age." *Journal of Folklore Research* 27(3): 179-190.

Dundes, Alan. 1975/1992. "Introduction." *Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Ellis, Bill. 2003. "Making a Big Apple Crumble: The Role of Humor in Constructing a Global Response to Disaster." *New Directions in Folklore* 6.

## Chapter 2

### Guardians of the Living: Characterization of Missing Women on the Internet, by Elizabeth Tucker

#### From the author:

I began this research project after the disappearance of eighteen-year-old Natalee Holloway in Aruba in the spring of 2005. This disappearance received an enormous amount of attention on television, in print journalism, and on the Internet. Knowing that other women had also disappeared mysteriously but had not gotten so much attention, I wanted to find out what made this case different. As I read stories about the circumstances of Natalee's disappearance, I realized that the Internet provided a forum for lively interaction and that much of this interaction took place among women.

Because I was working on a book about ghost stories, I knew that ghost stories about women's deaths often warn listeners and readers to be careful. Chapter six of my book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (2007) analyzes legends about female college students who died tragically as a result of unhappy relationships, abandonment at the altar, or assault. Some of these legends are based on actual deaths, while others are not. Legends in which a deceased student becomes the guardian of living students seemed especially significant to me. After examining websites about the disappearance of Natalee Holloway and other women, I discovered that warnings and guidelines for young women's behavior had become prominent topics of conversation. While ghost stories and Internet conversations about missing women have different conventions, their purposes intersect in intriguing ways.

#### Discussion questions:

1. Why do young, attractive women who have disappeared receive much more media attention than older women who have vanished? What does this difference tell us about American society's attitudes toward younger and older women?
2. How do stories about missing men differ from those about missing women? Do such stories about men include warnings for men who are still living?
3. Some television shows, such as Nancy Grace's evening news report, focus sharply on disappearances of women and efforts to find them. How does the

content and style of such shows compare to what we find on websites about missing women?

**Recommended readings:**

*Blogs for Natalee*. 2005. <http://blogsfor Natalee.com>.

Greenberg, Andrea. 1973. "Drugged and Seduced: A Contemporary Legend." *New York Folklore Quarterly* 29: 131-58.

Holloway, Beth. 2007. *Loving Natalee*. New York: Harper Collins.

Lanham, Richard. 1993. *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tucker, Elizabeth. 2007. *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Turkle, Sherry. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

## Chapter 3

### The End of the Internet: A Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice, By Lynne S. McNeill

#### From the author:

I have a confession: I love the Internet. The first time I searched the (early and mostly text-based) Web and found an entire forum dedicated to an obscure hobby of mine, it was like the world suddenly fell into place. The benefits and possibilities seemed obvious and intuitive. It simply made sense that this technology should exist; we'd all just been waiting around for it to arrive and slot seamlessly into our lives. For as much as the Internet exponentially expanded my ability to gather and share information, it didn't seem so much revolutionary as familiar and self-evident. It wasn't a paradigm shift; it was more like being handed the key to the paradigm I was already in. That's not to say I knew (or currently know) anything about the nuts and bolts of communications technology; it was the *culture* of the Internet that was so readily accessible and intuitive.

So it was only a matter of time before I found a way to study it professionally. I first became aware of the similarities between Internet memes and folklore because of the type of website this chapter examines, the End of the Internet meme (EOTI). When I saw my first EOTI page I likely smiled a bit at the joke, but when I saw my second one, and then my third and fourth and so on, I found myself making immediate connections to all that I had learned about the transmission of folklore.

The process by which Internet memes replicate themselves with small adjustments for expressive purpose, refined social commentary, and continued group relevance—what mimeticists call meme evolution, and what folklorists call dynamic variation—was immediately evident in these sites. This then became my gateway to the realization that much of the informal expressive communication taking place on the Web counted as folklore.

As an undergraduate student of Alan Dundes, I had the simple definition of folklore as, “anything that exhibits multiple existence and variation” ingrained in me at an early age. It may have taken ten years and two graduate degrees for the elegance of that definition to slip into place beside the complexity of the idea, but once it did, it simply highlighted for me that Internet memes, far from having a merely tangential tie to the subject of folklore, are one of the best contemporary examples of that definition. Folklore, like a meme, *evolves*, retaining a core component that identifies a new version as “the same thing” as a previous one, but gaining new qualities and forms that allow for it to be utilized for new individuals' and groups' cultural and expressive purposes.

Application to folklore studies aside, I've always been intrigued by the way that the EOTI sites make analog analogues (I know—sorry) to the Internet, viewing it as a book with a finite number of pages, for example. The point in history to which this expressive negotiation is most applicable is likely behind us, but the basic human motivations behind the process are still fascinating to consider. I recently downloaded an old fashioned rotary-dial application to my smartphone, so I can recreate the frustration of painstakingly cranking out phone numbers one slow digit at a time. What does this say about my perception of, and relationship to, advances in technology and digital culture?

### **Discussion questions:**

1. What other Internet memes are you familiar with, and where in them do you see evidence of dynamic variation? What might an analysis of the conservative and dynamic elements of these memes (what stays the same and what changes in each iteration) tell us about their cultural significance?
2. Have you ever encountered other instances of analog life being replicated in a digital setting? What are some examples?
3. Have you ever experienced a situation in which too many options made, making a choice difficult or impossible? What do you think are some of the cultural and social benefits or repercussions of growing comfortable with “infinite” choices?

### **Recommended readings:**

Dawkins, Richard. 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Foote, Monica. 2007. “Userpicks: Cyber Folk Art in the Early 21st Century.” *Folklore Forum* 37: 27-38.

Frand, Jason. 2000. “The Information-Age Mindset: Changes in Students and Implications for Higher Education.” *EDUCAUSE Review* 35: 14–24.

*Know Your Meme*. 2010. <http://knowyourmeme.com>.

Prensky, Marc. 2001a. “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.” *On the Horizon* 9(5): 1–6.

———. 2001b. “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Part II: Do They Really Think Differently?” *On the Horizon* 9(6): 1–6.

## Chapter 4

### The *Forward* as Folklore: Studying E-mailed Humor, by Russell Frank

#### From the author:

What prompted me to study e-mailed folklore was the realization that I was *hearing* very few jokes in daily life, but *seeing* lots and lots of them in the bodies of e-mail messages sent by friends and colleagues. Though I share most folklorists' preference for studying face-to-face communication, I felt like e-mailed humor simply could not be ignored. But how to study it?

A problem was data collection. It would have been easiest to limit the data to material that poured into my own in-box. I could even make the case that my in-box was probably typical and that the material it contained might therefore be representative of the material that was most widely circulated during the period when I was doing the study. But I felt obliged to see what else was out there, a daunting task given the number of humor websites.

The second problem was interpretation. Electronic folklore is largely devoid of the sort of contextual information folklorists have become so attached to: instead of being part of some larger conversation, as is usually the case when people are telling jokes in person, e-mailed jokes are usually forwarded with very little comment. Since so many of these jokes were topical, I took the liberty of explicating them with reference to the news stories they referred to.

The third problem was simply that I didn't like spending so much time online. When I was a newspaper columnist, a reader wrote a harsh letter to the editor in which he said, "Russell Frank needs to get out more often." After working on this project, I agreed. I missed doing old-fashioned fieldwork.

#### Discussion questions:

1. The folklorists Frank cites in his essay that the dispersed nature of online communities makes virtual ethnography difficult. How might you go about obtaining "folk" interpretations of e-mailed folklore?
2. The retention of e-mail addresses through multiple generations of forwarded e-mails offers the possibility of mapping the distribution of jokes and even tracing a

joke back to its originator. How would you design such a study? What would its value be?

3. Frank's essay briefly discusses the problem of jokes that turn out to have originated with professional gag writers. Is the distinction between folk humor and professional humor a meaningful one in the world of the Internet? Why or why not?
4. The chapter is a snapshot of the jokes that were circulating at the time it was written. What topical jokes are circulating now? Which public figures are most joked about? Which advertising campaigns are most parodied? Are any of the current jokes recycled versions of older jokes?
5. How do photoshops subvert photojournalism?

### **Recommended readings:**

Brunvand, Jan. 2001. "Folklore in the news (and on the Net)." *Western Folklore* 60: 47-76.

Dorst, John. 1990. Tags and Burners, Cycles and Networks: Folklore in the Telectronic Age." *Journal of Folklore Research* 27: 180.

Dundes, Alan and Carl Pagter. 1975/1992. "Introduction." *Work Hard and You Shall be Rewarded*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Ellis, Bill. 2002. "Making a Big Apple Crumble: The Role of Humor in Constructing a Global response to Disaster." *New Directions in Folklore* 6.

Fernback, Jan. 2003. "Legends on the Net: An Examination of Computer-Mediated Communication as a Locus of Oral Culture." *New Media and Society* 5: 29-46.

## Chapter 5

### Epistemology, the Sociology of Knowledge, and the *Wikipedia* Userbox Controversy, by William Westerman

#### From the author:

I became aware of *Wikipedia* in the first two weeks of April 2005. Pope John Paul II had just died and I was reading online about his possible successors and about previous popes, amazed that there was such detailed information out there that seemed so up to date. But it still took me two months to make the realization that the site, *Wikipedia*, was something that anyone—including myself—could edit, and then just a few days more before I realized the implications that could have for the field of folkloristics.

The archived record of Wikipedia shows that on the first day I started making edits, I added the names of Albert Lord, Alan Dundes, and Alan Jabbour to the list of folklorists; the next day I went back and added the names Zora Neale Hurston, John Lomax, Richard M. Dorson, Don Yoder, Jan Harold Brunvand, Ralph Rinzler, and Archie Green. I added ten more names 23 minutes later and an eleventh name an hour after that.

Within the first couple of hours on my first day, I contacted another editor for the first time, showing that I immediately made the cognitive connection between knowledge production and the community of Wikipedians. The next day, I had edited the article on Morphology to add the use of the term in folkloristics, as prior to that it had only described the meaning in biology, astronomy, and linguistics. That was the moment that I realized the potential for *Wikipedia* to shape a sociology of knowledge, because there was no official supreme editor who would say, "Sorry, biology, astronomy, and linguistics are major disciplines; folkloristics is not." Suddenly, we could level the disciplinary playing field somewhat, because the Internet and the wiki model made that kind of access possible, where it might not be when costs or academic positions are involved.

I have not been able to keep up my initial pace (almost 100 edits in my first three days!) or remain the watchdog for folkloristics to make sure that the changes we made, adding our discipline to the encyclopedia, are not undone. At one point I added the line in the opening of the Literature article that literature can be oral or written, a major paradigmatic shift—but have not been able to police that entry to make sure it didn't revert to being writing-centric. Not all folklorists who meet the official notability guidelines have articles yet, and there are many topics in our field that remain to be written. This community of folklore scholars remains overworked and underpaid. And yet as Gandhi said, in a different context, we need to be the change we wish to see in

the world. *Wikipedia* affords us or any folk the chance to make changes in the world of knowledge and that, like folklore, is performed in the context of community.

### Discussion questions:

1. Before reading this chapter, how familiar were you with the process by which *Wikipedia* entries are created and updated? In what ways do you feel that *Wikipedia* is better or worse (or more or less useful) as a reference source than a formally edited and published encyclopedia?
2. Westerman states that folklore is “all about belief and trust” (153). In what other examples of folklore—both digital and analog—do we see this illustrated? In what other forms of folklore does what we know about our source inform how we receive the information?
3. One of the issues in the userbox controversy is that of the proximity of bias. Westerman uses the example of an author of a *Wikipedia* entry not being judged for his or her opinion-bearing bumper stickers (which readers will likely never see nor know about), but being highly judged for similar proclamations in the userbox that appears with their entry. Do you feel that removing the close proximity of an author’s opinions to that author’s entries effectively alters the potential impact of those opinions on the content of the entry? Why or why not?

### Recommended readings:

Hufford, David. 1983. “The Supernatural and the Sociology of Knowledge: Explaining Academic Belief.” *New York Folklore* 9: 21–30.

———. 1998. “Folklore Studies Applied To Health.” *Journal of Folklore Research* 35: 295–313.

Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1996. “The Electronic Vernacular.” In *Connected: Engagements with Media*, ed. George E. Marcus, 21-66. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McCarl, Robert McCarl. 1986. “Occupational Folklore.” In *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*, ed. Elliott Oring, 71–89. Logan: Utah State University Press.

“*Wikipedia: Userboxes.*” *Wikipedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Userboxes&oldid=28698767>.

## Chapter 6

### **Crusading on the Vernacular Web: The Folk Beliefs and Practices of Online Spiritual Warfare, by Robert Glenn Howard**

#### **From the author:**

This chapter came into being from the ongoing ethnographic research I have conducted with conservative evangelical Christians since the early 1990s. I got started with this research because I was raised with conservative Christianity and have struggled to understand the intense compassion and faith I have come to associate with many believers I have known since my childhood. My primary professional interest in religion is motivated by a desire to understand how and why everyday people today maintain such radically different conceptions of the world. In the field of Communication, my work has been on how individuals use network communication technologies to build new kinds of communities. In this research in particular, I have learned that people who choose to limit the contact with differing ideas can do themselves a great disservice because it alienates them from the larger social structures in which they have a stake: churches, schools, and governments, for example.

While I do not broadly reject the possibility that beings which are not well known to science act against (and maybe on behalf) of humans, I feel that terming them "demons" places them into a symbolic framework which is not so much about spirits at all. Instead, it's about creating a personal sense of authority in and over the world that we humans just don't have. If we can imagine demonic forces as the reasons why we are prone to addictions, violence, or accidents, it might be possible for us to entreat those forces to leave us alone. But, in all those cases, there are other symbolic systems that place the responsibility on us as humans.

Pursing understanding through those symbolic resources instead gives us more direct avenues to effect change--not because we are righteous or because other people are evil, but because we take responsibility for our own human frailty. The particular issue of spiritual warfare resonates with me because while I do not claim to know the truth about spirits, I do feel that I can say when such beliefs are fueling prejudices and fears that allow people to place blame for their own failings on others. In those cases, those folk beliefs deserve criticism. When an otherwise empowering technology like the Internet is enabling people to maintain those prejudices, so too can we criticize aspects or specific deployments of it. As a critical ethnographer, that is the basic kind of writing I do--and the basic kind of skill I teach at both graduate and undergraduate universities.

### Discussion questions:

1. Have you ever had a direct personal experience with something you thought might be a "spirit"? What about a "UFO" or "space alien"? What happened? How did you feel about it? Did you do anything as a result of it?
2. If a recurring "sense of presence" was keeping you awake at night. What might be different if you imagined that your bedroom was being visited by a "ghost" or a "demon"? Would it be easier to sleep if it were one or the other?
3. If a person believes that all beliefs with which they disagree are the result of an ancient evil force, how might that person treat the people that grew up with other beliefs? How might they imagine themselves? How would it be different if they believed that they were "probably right"? On what sorts of issues do we as a society need to generally agree? What about "marriage"? What about "murder"?
4. Who do you communicate with the most when you use network communication technologies? When you look for information online, how do you know when it's "good"? If you really needed to know something for sure, what qualities would you look for in online communication?
5. If network communication technologies are empowering everyday people to find information and use it without the help of teachers, government officials, or religious leaders, what sorts of things does everybody need to do to make sure the information they are getting will benefit them? What stake does the larger society have in people being able to find and judge information?

### Recommended readings:

Benkler, Yochai. 2008. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<http://yupnet.org/benkler/archives/8>

Clark, Lynn Schofield. 2003. *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellis, Bill. 2000. *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky.

Howard, Robert Glenn. 2006. "Sustainability and Narrative Plasticity in Online Apocalyptic Discourse After September 11, 2001." *Journal of Media and Religion* 5: 25-47.

———. 2008. "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25 (5):490-513.

- . 2008. "Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web." *Journal of American Folklore* 121 (480): 192-218.
- . 2009 "The Vernacular Ideology of Christian Fundamentalism on the World Wide Web." In *Fundamentalisms and the Media*, ed. Stewart M. Hoover and Nadia Kaneva. New York: Continuum Publishing. 126-141
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Lessig, Lawrence. 2008. *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Primiano, Leonard Norman. 1995. "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife." *Western Folklore*. 54: 37-56.
- Sunstein, Cass. 2007. *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton, New Jersey Princeton University Press.

## Chapter 7

### Ghosts in the Machine: Mourning the MySpace Dead, by Robert Dobler

#### From the author:

As I wrote this chapter I was largely concerned with tracing out the connections to other forms of spontaneous memorials existing in the non-virtual world. Specifically I was guided by previous scholarship on roadside crosses, and there are a great many connections to be made—the sudden outpourings of grief, the potential extension of the mourning process to those outside the immediate family sphere of the deceased, the formation of a community of grievers that may or may not be linked by any other factors than a sense of connection to the memorial. I was also interested in exploring the differences, the qualities of MySpace memorials that are unique to the nature of the Internet. The lack of a physical connection to the site of death is perhaps the single biggest difference, and perhaps says something valuable about the idea of place as reconstituted in cyberspace.

The sensitive nature of this type of research was tough on me emotionally. It demanded a sustained focus on a topic that is often difficult to approach. Death is an uncomfortable subject to think about, especially when it affects the young, but I feel that it provides an important example of how traditional behaviors are carried on and adapted to the changing context of the modern world.

#### Discussion questions:

1. What is the nature of an online community? Do you think a collection of comments on a MySpace message board is evidence of a community of grievers? How would this community be defined in cases where the commenters seem to be posting independently of one another? What does this say about the boundaries of online communities and their relation to the “real world”?
2. How is this form of memorialization shaped by the concept of online identity? In an arena where every aspect of identity can be constructed and manipulated, what can online behavior really tell us about real world behavior? Is it even necessary to look for verification in real world activity, or is online behavior something that can be studied on its own?
3. In what ways are the communications of grieving teens on these MySpace pages different from carrying on internal conversations with a lost loved one or talking to

the dead at the gravesite? How might the public nature of a social networking site affect the types of comments or even the decision to leave a comment in the first place?

4. What importance should this phenomenon play in the creation by website administrators or policies governing the privacy and duration of inactive sites?

### **Recommended readings:**

Bennet, Gillian. 1987. "The Dead." In *Traditions of Belief*. London: Penguin. 36-81.

Everett, Holly. 2002. *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture*. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press.

Santino, Jack. 2006. "Spontaneous Shrines: Performative Commemoratives, and the Public Memorialization of Death." In *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 5-16.

Thomas, Jeannie B. 2006. "Communicative Commemoration and Graveside Shrines: Princess Diana, Jim Morrison, My 'Bro' Max, and Boogs the Cat." In *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wojcik, Daniel. 2007. "Pre's Rock: Pilgrimage, Ritual, and Runners' Traditions at the Roadside Shrine to Steve Prefontaine." In *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred*, ed. Peter Jan Margry. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

## Chapter 8

### Public Folklore in Cyberspace, by Gregory Hansen

#### From the author:

This article came out of my experience doing public folklore and developing content for websites supported by Traditional Arts Indiana and the Florida Folklife Program. I discovered that public folklorists have developed creative ways to use websites to bring their findings to non-academic audiences. After I had perused numerous websites, I looked for a way to unify the basic modes of presentation. I couldn't make them fit into an easy system of classification until I began to think differently about the style of presentation. When I realized that computer users are conditioned by ways they watch television, I began to see connections between documentary film & video and web design. Sharon Sherman's work on folkloric documentaries provided the key to thinking about these websites in relation to documentaries.

#### Discussion questions:

1. In what ways are these websites different from scholarly articles about folklore? What are advantages and disadvantages to using the Internet to present research on folklore in contrast to writing about folklore in a book or article?
2. Folklorists often make a distinction between academic folklore and public folklore. How useful is this dichotomy in thinking about the scope of websites discussed in Hansen's article?
3. How do the different characteristics of computer-based technology create different ways of thinking about the five modes of documentary filmmaking that are presented in Hansen's article?
4. Hansen adds additional modes of presentation to the five modes of documentary filmmaking. What might be some additional modes that also influence the design of websites? Why might some of these modes of presentation be useful for expanding new ways of learning about folklore on the Internet?

#### Recommended readings:

Davenport, Tom. 2006. *Folkstreams*. <http://www.folkstreams.net>.

Green, Archie. 1988. "Stitching Patchwork in Public." In *The Conservation of Culture*, Ed. Burt Feintuch. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

———. 1992. "Public Folklore's Name: A Partisan's Notes." In *Public Folklore*, ed. Robert Baron and Nicholas R. Spitzer. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

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# **Sample Syllabus**

This syllabus is an example of one possible way to organize a 15 week semester course around this book. The outline begins with a basic introduction to folklore studies (knowing that many courses will not have Introduction to Folklore as a prerequisite) and then follows the chapters of the text; while details are not included below, it is suggested that the additional readings recommended for each chapter in the discussion guide be incorporated into the weekly reading assignments for students. Several of the chapters also lend themselves to connections with more traditional forms of folklore study (folk belief, rites of passage), and additional reading assignments could easily be drawn from the usual collections. A virtual ethnography assignment is one of the most logical term projects to accompany a course of this nature; the various chapters of the text serve as models for students who are going to choose a virtual community in which to examine folk expression and communication.

## **Folklore and the Internet**

### **Required texts:**

- *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, edited by Trevor J. Blank
- *Virtual Ethnography*, by Christine Hine

### **Course outline:**

#### FOLKLORE: AN INTRODUCTION

WEEK 1

What is folklore?

WEEK 2

What is ethnography?

#### DIGITAL CULTURE: FOLKLORE AND THE INTERNET

WEEK 3

The history and culture of the Internet

Readings: *Folklore and the Internet*, Introduction and Chapter 1

WEEK 4

Online communities  
*Readings: Chapter 2*

WEEK 5  
Internet memes  
*Readings: Chapter 3*

WEEK 6  
Online humor  
*Readings: Chapter 4*

WEEK 7  
Open source and “authority”  
*Readings: Chapter 5*

WEEK 8  
Folk belief and religion  
*Readings: Chapter 6*

WEEK 9  
Rites of passage  
*Readings: Chapter 7*

WEEK 10  
Public folklore  
*Readings: Chapter 8*

FIELDWORK: VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

WEEK 11  
Introduce Virtual Ethnography assignment  
*Readings: Virtual Ethnography*

WEEK 12  
Working on Ethnography

WEEK 13  
Working on Ethnography

WEEK 14  
Working on Ethnography

WEEK 15

Ethnography assignment due

**Virtual Ethnography Assignment:**

Choose an online folk group (a social network, a forum, a blogging community, etc.) and conduct fieldwork in that folk culture, identifying the commonly shared patterns of behavior and communication (i.e. the *folklore*) of the group. Document and describe things like common folkspeech, traditional posts and replies, emoticons, avatar trends, and popular memes. Consider how group members successfully (or unsuccessfully) demonstrate their insider status, and how group identity is maintained and upheld through the use of shared traditional expressions.