

Folklore Research and its New Challenges: From the Ethnography to Netography

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Abstract: Folklorists use the ethnographic method enriching it with anthropological background information. Ethnography is a method that describes a culture and its "wisdom". Ethnography is interested in the reasons of change of a specific culture and/or the ways of breaching and restoring the dominant cultural class and to understand the fragile and fluid processes of social control and the rules laid down by the members (of the culture) in order to maintain their cultural characteristics. In recent years the Internet became a cultural environment without boundaries, which confirms the claim of Dundes and Pagter (1992) that the urban folklore allows the coexistence of individuality within the collective identity of each folk group. In online communities multipurpose virtual environments are developed (Economou, 2006) creating virtual locations (places) and developing social interactions and cooperation. In these environments, ethnographic research produces new terms such as netography, cyberethnography, cyber-nations, digital indigenes, digital settlers, digital immigrants, etc. Virtual communities and networks pose particular challenges and opportunities for ethnographic research, as they represent a huge archive of human activity and unprecedented volatility (Jones, 1999, Lindlif and Shatzer, 1998). Virtual, field research studies, with increasing interest, a social world which is characterized both as global and digital, which was previously ignored by conventional ethnography (Hine, 2005). This makes the ethnography of digital life an important aspect of contemporary social research, as we will try to demonstrate with this paper.

1. Introduction

It is purposeful, in these modern times, to study the Internet as a social and cultural phenomenon (apart from a technological one) with an aim to balance out humane studies and technology. This study can be performed within the framework of Folklore providing answers to the questions raised about its future (Howard 1997; Roush 1997).

The Internet, apart from being a huge warehouse of any kind of digital data and information, is also a new reproduction technology that converts folklore material into a digital idiom thus enhancing and strengthening folklore in the same way that printed studies and collection of cultural artifacts and items strengthened oral tradition. Thus, the Internet does not negate the activity of popular culture but acts as a folklore conductor and it has been embedded into everyday practice of folklorists as a tool for cultural production (Grimes, 1992). Popular culture and its expressions are on the Internet whether folklorists choose to study them or not and thus making it appropriate for them to research folklore within the framework of the Internet.

The use of the ethnographical methodology has specific meaning in modern cultural studies and folklorists apply it while enriching it with the appropriate anthropological background. Ethnography is the appropriate methodology to describe a culture and its wisdom. The methodology takes interest in the reasons for change in the studied culture and/or the ways of disrupting and restoring the dominant cultural order. It also tries to understand the fragile and fluid processes of social control. It takes interest in the rules that the members of a culture set in order to preserve their cultural characteristics (Oren, Nachmias, Mioduser, & Lahav, 1998).

During the last years, the Internet has transformed into a cultural environment without boundaries and thus confirming the claim of Dundes and Pagter (1992) that urban folklore allows the study of the co-existence of the atomic and collective identity within each specific cultural group.

Within the Internet Communities many virtual environments are developed and virtual places are setup within which social interaction and cooperation take place (Economou, 2006). In these new environments, the conduction of folklore research demand the establishment of new rules and terminology like Netography, Digital Natives, Digital Settlers and Digital Immigrants. The virtual communities and their networks are new challenges and opportunities for folklore research since they provide a huge archive of human activities which is highly volatile (Jones, 1997a; Milton & Lindlof, 1998). Research in virtual environments studies a social world which is digital and global, completely overlooked by conventional folklore and thus establishing the folklore of digital life as a very important aspect of modern social research.

In this paper we will refer to the worries about the future of folklore and the ways out via the use of the Internet in folklore research. We will study the most important types of folklore culture found in the Internet. Finally, we will go over the questions raised regarding the methodology and the conduction of folklore research via the Internet by examining the meanings of "virtual informants" and the internet folklore groups and communities as well as the educational capabilities of the Internet in the domain of folklore.

2. Worries about the future of folklore and ways to get out of the crisis

Folklorists claim that the future of their science is bleak (Oring, 1986) while Alan Dundes, during his speech at the American Folklore Society in 2004, said that the "state of folkloristics at the beginning of the twenty-first century is depressing worrisome" (Dundes, 2005:385). Dorson provided an answer to the problem by looking elsewhere and finding the folklore of the information media and urban folklore (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). Thus modern folklorists must also search elsewhere and specifically on the Internet. Despite the depression, folklore continues to be alive which is a fact attributed also to the Internet (Dundes, 2005). Folklorists must turn to the Internet and move their science to the digital age (Blank, 2009).

From the first public use of the Internet back in 1992, folklore developed to become a basic component of it just like it is in the "real" world. It studies the interaction between the Internet's experts, their slang and the reproduction and transmission of stories, pranks and anecdotes (Jennings, 1990).

2.1. Folklorists' stance and possible causes

Despite the fact that folklore made its appearance on the Internet, few folklorists like Robert Glenn Howard, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jan Roush followed it. This is a true paradox for a science that fears for its disappearance while at the same time the Internet can provide it with an abundance of abilities and possibilities especially as a communication conduit. The scientific study of the Internet must be supported because it functions as a mirror of the social and cultural values of the "real" world (Blank, 2009)

The observed inactivity regarding the study of folklore expression on the Internet maybe a remnant of the ideas and training of folklorists before the days of the Internet. These people remained tied to the study of extinct civilizations or the study of civilizations on the brink of extinction. Another possible explanation is the fact that many folklorists believe that communication must always be face-to-face (Ben-Amos, 1971). This idea may lead to confusion when folklore research is moved from the "real" world to the Internet where the lack of such tangible interaction leads to an almost instinctive reaction (Blank, 2009). Contrary to that, the great folklorist, Alan Dundes, believes that technology is a friend of the folklorist and not an enemy. (Blank, 2009)

3. The need to extend folklore to the Internet

The Internet is a huge warehouse of interconnected data. In reality it is much more than that. It provides new ways of searching, discovering and presenting information. This supports folklore research and folklorists who still are reluctant to

use it loose to much since the Internet is literally flooded with cultural aspects (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002).

For instance, the digitization of a manuscript or of a photographic archive and its publication on the Internet prevents it from being destroyed and makes it more accessible to a huge number of researchers and other people. Some people say that this may lead to the disappearance of the archives themselves and even of the scientific personnel that tend to them. Despite the above, an "eternal" digital life is secured for them. The Internet provides more informative services and sources for the researchers of culture than any article or magazine. Websites, databases, blogs, e-zines, forums and other electronic meeting places have been developed and now provide fast access to a huge amount of data regarding culture and folklore such as urban legends, anecdotes etc (Lourdi, Papatheodorou, & Nikolaidou, 2007).

University departments, museums, national and local archive services even independent folklorists can "upload" their material to inform anyone who wishes to be informed (Ashton & Thorns, 2007). The Internet apart from being a massive storage place for folklore knowledge, is also a culture of its own (Bronner, 2002).

Folklorists must revisit problematics that had occupied them in the past and find a way to introduce or study them by using the Internet. The Internet cannot fully replace the "old" research methods but it will overthrow the current correlations with unknown consequences (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). The ability to anonymously participate in a variety of activities on the Internet as well as the ease and speed of communication gives the Internet a tremendous advantage against oral communication and reproduction of folklore texts (Blank, 2009).

3.1. Dominant themes and kinds of popular culture met on the Internet

The Internet's popular culture has its roots in the habits of the first users along with the other cultural elements that are communicated through it (Jordan, 2007). The subjects "discussed" over the Internet are of a huge variety, ranging from purely academic to simple hobbies and myths, legends, humoristic texts, cunundrums, chain mails etc (Laineste, 2003). A most notable difference between oral and on-line anecdotes is the complete lack of sense and understanding of the writer for the psychological condition of the reader since he/she (the writer) is not and cannot be aware of this or of the possible reaction while he/she (the reader) reads it (Blank, 2009).

The change in the way of transmission of funny or fantasy stories from an oral to a written or online form has no effect to their form since the Internet does not create these stories. People create them and this new technological medium inserts new dimensions. The users comprehend the Internet as an equivalent to the real world thus mixing together the "real" and the "virtual" world (Toelken, 1996).

Traditional folklore, before the coming of the Internet, considered humor as a local phenomenon since it was related with facts that took place at a certain location and thus acknowledging the relevant stories as anonymous and orally transmitted. The Internet quickly became the main transmission conduit and today everybody recognizes and accepts it as a natural way of exchanging information (Laineste, 2003). The comparison between the traditional and the online form of anecdotes shows the ways with which the Internet can mutate this form of popular culture (Ellis, 2001).

The Internet provides new aspects to the study of urban legends, chain mails and email pranks. The oral forms of popular culture of the above items transferred prejudices and collective fears in a covert form. The online forms of these items present the author's feelings more abrasively and freely since anonymity provides cover (Blank, 2007). Thus, folklorists can, with more ease, analyze cultural behaviors hidden in such texts.

4. Methodology problems during the conduct of folklore research over the Internet.

Some folklorists worry about the possibility that their research findings may be questioned due to their research being performed over the Internet. Some of these basic issues are considered by Roush (1997) who enquires if folklore research should be performed on a face-to-face basis in order for it to be considered an on-site study or if the same rules can apply for a study performed via email or in a chat-room. Given the fact of total anonymity, Roush enquires about the consequences this would have on a gender research where people may lie about their sex. She is also troubled about the legality of the whole process especially when the written consent is provided via email (Roush, 1997).

Due to the above, the terminology used by folklorists needs to be re-established, especially for research performed over the Internet. Terminology such as folklore tradition, cultural group, folklore group, virtual community and field of survey need to be addressed accordingly. Blank (2009) believes that there is no difference between field survey and observation in a chat-room. Thus, the meaning of the field of survey remains the same since the folklorist is interested in the interaction of people. An Internet based field of survey can be anywhere and at many places at the same time (Blank, 2009).

4.1. Cyberspace and Time

Cyberspace allows for the conduct of research overthrowing the traditional sense of the field of survey since it does not require the folklorist to travel to a remote region in order to meet with people and conduct the research (Kuntsman, 2004). The boundaries of the virtual field of survey cannot be set from the beginning. They are observed and enlarged accordingly during the conduct of the research or survey. Folklore research has to study the boundaries between the real and the virtual field of survey, identify and establish the connections between them.

4.2. Virtual Informants and Researchers

In research over the Internet, it is impossible to fully describe all the informants as well as the researchers, or their location and cultural background. These people and aspects are not predefined but are correlated during the research. It is also possible for both the informant and the researcher to be present and absent at the same time since the nature of the technology used allows for their digital traces to be there and this is the reason why the relation between them is continuous but in the same time ephemeral inside the atopic and achronic Internet (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002). Within these frameworks it is possible that people interact by adopting fake identities and in many cases multiple ones. The lack of a face-to-face contact makes it hard to verify the collected data. Weight must be given on how this condition affects the people being studied or the group they form (Eichhorn, 2001).

For instance, a researcher of folklore art will find many websites with images and detailed descriptions of the creators as well as the artifacts. He/she will also find an abundance of blogs as well as e-commerce sites of such artifacts. The research can converse with the informants without them being aware that a study is being performed since the researcher does not "break" the boundaries of the community and only reveals as much personal information as he/she wishes to. If the researcher will not reveal his/her identity and his/her role then this researcher is just an ephemeral part of the online community. The anonymity provided by the Internet gives the researcher the advantage of distance from the informant while being a member of the community and thus performing an optimal observation (Blank, 2009).

4.3. Folk groups and Internet Communities

In every forum, chat-room or blog one can find groups discussing about a specific subject that provides a common interest at least for that time. Thus, these people form a folk group. Within these e-communities new web dialects and traditions are formed and established. Through this variety of online discussions, the new folk wisdom and knowledge is being created establishing the Internet as a unique medium of expression. What interests folklorists is the developing codes of conduct and behavior between the members of each group and not the observation and recording of the real identities of the creators of knowledge (Blank, 2009).

Roush (1997) points out that these people (unknown to each other) form a folk group. The online communities are accessible only via a computer's keyboard but the communication conducted through the Internet is completely real as it would be in any "real", physical community. Almost always, online communications are much more open and democratic since any person on earth can participate if he/she can be online.

A very well known and vibrant online community is the Second Life game community which members strictly follow the rules and play their part in the game / community (An example of such an online (Tseloudi & Ioannidis, 2008). Life in this virtual world is a chance for a different, parallel life. It is a complete life and not some caricature of the "real" life that completes the identity of the "Homo Internectus" (Maragakis, 2009).

The basic characteristics of online communities are: 1. They are comprised of people who interact with each other in order to satisfy some of their needs and act on specific roles. 2. They apply and abide by rules and regulations in order to be accepted as members of a community or a group. 3. They serve a common purpose which is the community's reason d'etre. Based on their purpose, these communities are divided in practice communities and education communities (Wilson & Ryder, 1996).

Young people go online and connect to their community viewing it as a place where they will meet and hang-out with their friends. Friendships are formed which often continue to exist and flourish offline which concludes to the fact that the values of true friendship are the same whether online or offline (Carter, 2005).

The Internet has changed the social infrastructure upon which a community is built. It is based on the purpose and the members which form it thus acquiring specific characteristics and unique ways of expression. The members of an online community have access to a very powerful communication channel, the Internet, where the specific language they use

expresses their diversity (Howard, 1997). The members of each online community exchange folklore elements based on their common or different identity (Bauman, 1972).

Folklore research over the Internet can study the flow of information between information producers and information consumers while trying to interpret the different ways of commitment. It also tries to analyze how Internet websites are socially structured and how they play their social role (Hine, 2009). For instance, the "urbandictionary" website presents the slang and linguistic perks of the Internet "speech" and makes the connection between it and the "real" world. Editing and updating is performed by members all over the world thus combining knowledge and narratives from around the world and from various cultural centers. This particularly interests folklorists, and researchers of anecdotes, language games and humor (Blank, 2009).

5. The Internet and folklore education

The Internet is being used by many folklore museums for educational purposes. These museums use digital technology to digitize their collections and create 3D reconstructions of them and then publish them at their websites making the collections available to every Internet user. These websites are continuously enhanced with new educational activities that refer to people of various ages and educational backgrounds. This way they try to attract people and groups of people that do not usually visit museums opening up new approaches (Lenhart, Simon, & Graziano, 2001).

6. Conclusions

Folklore research via the Internet sets questions and limitations regarding the validity and authenticity of the informants to be used during the research and study. It is the responsibility of the folklorists, especially those that are reluctant or cautious, to evaluate the significance of the abovementioned limitations as well as the ease of communication provided by the Internet. Those that wish to continue to research the everyday reality of cultures must use the Internet since this reality is equally important in digital life. Luckily there is a very big number of folklorists that have acknowledged the Internet as a field of production and communication of a variety of folk culture and they are willing to perform online studies.

The mass globalization culture privatizes folk culture and they are mutated because of technology. The new technologies that now contain oral traditions provide a way for them to be maintained and secured as well as communicated without limitations, The Internet obliges the folklorists to change their way of thinking as it has changed modern civilization.

The Internet has radically changed the form of the modern world and is now becoming an everyday practice for folklorists. Folklorists around the world acknowledge its capacity for mixing the traditional and the digital forms of communication. It is possible that until today answers have not been given to the abovementioned questions and that folklorists are still in the phase of collective thinking and discussion but folklore research through the use of the Internet is required and needed. Nonetheless, folklore has found a modern way out.

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