



Relating folklore and internet: Concerns, reservations and objections

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Abstract

This paper presents the Relation between Folklore and Internet, especially considering whether the latter is or should be a subject of study by folklorists or not. Many folklorists in the 20th Century had been opposed to the massive media, like television, cinema, radio, Internet and others, since such media use oral communication in a way that is opposed to face-to-face communication. In their reasoning, face-to-face oral communication constitutes a key-feature of folk culture. Some of them also thought that electronic technologies would help to replace traditional creation by the advanced consumer culture or loose folk culture, eliminating the traditional way of dealing with things or failing to fully present all the social functions of the traditional way. On the other hand, modern folklorists argue that Folklore can neither be associated solely with the culture of illiterate social groups of older times, like farmers or poor bourgeois, nor with particular older ways of communication. In this respect, Internet has become a communication tool that has replaced face-to-face communication with person-to-person one, has helped to preserve and disseminate older forms of folk culture and even create new ones. Therefore, Internet is worthy of being a proper subject of study for Folklore Science.

Keywords: digital humanities, folklore, folk culture, folklore science

Introduction

In the past within cultural studies, several researchers had generally rated Media as a minor issue in relation to culture or they had faced technology in general as a framework/element of culture, but not as a central point of it (Aronowitz, 1996) ^[3]. In the 20th century, the folklorists had been opposed to television, cinema, radio and other media, since such media use oral communication, but in a way that is opposed to face-to-face oral communication, as it will be shown in a next chapter. In addition, they argued that these media do not have their roots in the life of the community, but whatever is displayed by them is commercialized and imposed by others outside the community. They have also indicated that their function is not participatory, but their goal is the consumption of a mass product and that, as with the operation of printing, whatever is displayed does not change, but is fully determined by these media themselves (Bauman, 1992) ^[4].

In particular, until recently many modern folklorists largely ignored the folklore patterns of online expression (Blank, 2009) ^[7], while others have taken a negative attitude towards technology and Internet, since “anti-modernism” dominates all the folklore (Ivey, 2011) ^[23]. They expressed their concerns because, in their view, technology could prevent the propagation of the “real” content of folklore, but also eliminate the folk culture and its manifestations (Roush, 1997) ^[38]. Especially Dorst (1990) ^[13] considered that electronic technologies with infinite texts, as well as the uninterrupted reproduction of images, would help to replace traditional creation by advanced consumer culture. Dorson (1972) ^[12] also spoke of the risk of losing folk culture, relentlessly crushed by the roller of industrial culture; in a few years there will be no Folklore, and therefore no need for folklorists. Another question is whether technology contributes to

eliminating the traditional way of dealing with things and fails to fully present all the social functions of the traditional way. At the same time, the fear of cultural shrinking is spreading, because of the prevalence of mass culture, which certainly is not new. As early as 1961, the historian Boorstin (see Blank, 2013) ^[8, 9], distinguishing the decline of the “folk” and the rise of the “mass”, pointed out that while folk culture created heroes, the mass could only see and hear about them; Folk culture has had a universe of its own creations; the mass lives in a very different world of fantasy. In addition, Walter (see Blank, 2009: 25) ^[7], Ronnell (2001) ^[37] confirms that Internet alters and destroys the last aspects of the community and art that exist. On the other hand, Newsom (2013) ^[34] agrees with the above-mentioned risks, reminding however that Folklore was created in the late 19th century to cope with them. It had to be institutionalized as a science, as soon as it became clear that old songs, old stories, old jokes, old poems and old traditions were shrinking and disappearing, because of the rapid technological development, as well as the dissemination and spread of the customs that existed in the “civilized” cities to rural areas.

At the same time, other scholars began to note the impact of technological development on human relations. They focus, for example, in the continuous virtual experience, as it is presented in the context of the imaginary and not the real world, being an experience that is likely to lead to further alienation (Anderson, 2000) ^[2], lawlessness, antisocial behaviour, but also to “homogenization” in the postmodern society. In a few words, they consider that computer communication simply provides a simulation of the community or enhances the development of narrow specific interest groups. Under no circumstances, in their view, persons unknown to each other, in front of computer

terminal, in different regions of the world and typing messages between them constitute a group or community. Finally, according to specific folklorists, virtual communities will contribute to isolation, to the reduction of human interdependence, to the limitation of local communities in the natural world and to the commercialization of social behaviour. They also question the honesty of the features of on-line identities. Along with the above, Kirchenblatt-Gimblett (1998)^[30] raises the question of what the terms “group” or “community” mean, when unknown persons in front of computers in different parts of the earth send their messages.

Nevertheless, many scholars argue that technology not only does not contribute to the limitation of Folklore, but it is a vital factor in spreading folk culture and an inexhaustible source of new folklore data (Dundes, 1980)^[15].

For example, Bronner (see Dundes, 1980: 17)^[15] insists that technology does not limit folk culture; it contributes more to its transmission, as it is an exciting source of inspiration for the production of new works. In 1990, Bausinger (1990)^[5] argued that technology does not destroy folk culture, but instead adds new dimensions to it and that technology and folk culture are not mutually exclusive concepts. Technology plays a natural role in modern folk culture, because industrialization does not necessarily implies the end of a particular folk culture, but rather tries to identify the changes and mutations that folk culture is experiencing, in the industrialized and urbanized world (Bausinger, 1990)^[5].

He has timidly challenged the conceptual distinction between mechanized and simple rural folk culture, accepting that technology is naturalized or becomes an element of folk culture, also used as a means of spreading it, spatially and temporally. With the democratization of societies, more and more people have access to the knowledge of history, the people of one country or another take part in the revival of their tradition, even so with the rules of the market (Bausinger, 1990)^[5].

This happens by recognizing that in the past there were also collective elements of life and order, displaying selected elements, but also to some extent adapted to the present. In any case, modern societies are creating representations for themselves (Katsadoros, 2013)^[26].

Dundes (2004)^[26] states that Folklore continues to be alive and robust in the modern world, partly due to the increasing transmission of elements of folk culture, through e-mail and Internet. At the same time, Dorst (1990)^[13] highlights the new ways of expressing the innovative World Wide Web. Jennings (1990, in Blank, 2009)^[7] emphasizes that since the early moments of the existence of modern Internet, Folklore was a key component of it, because computer professionals and the best hackers worked along with those who use peculiar linguistic idioms and those who spread stories, jokes and legends. Anderson (1991)^[1] accepts that technology can highlight the folk element. Jordan (1997)^[24] argues that the emergence of the types of folk culture on the internet is due to folk groups of computer users and, more generally, to elements of folk culture that propagate simultaneously with computer networking, which has begun to appear by the end of the 1960s. Finally, Fox (2007, in Katsadoros, 2013)^[26]: 108) adopts for the folklore of Internet the innovative term “Applelore”, a composite word with its first compound (Apple-) referring to the leading computer company and the second one to the word -lore.

The Internet as a Research Field for Folklore

In the definition of folk culture the predominant elements are: the “spontaneous”, the “collective” and the “traditional”, according to Kyriakidis (1946)^[31]. Considering the first aforementioned prerequisite (the “spontaneous”), the association is not considered absolutely necessary, according to modern folk theory, since it always coexisted with different proportions in the various cases, with the rational element in the human society. Besides, it does not apply to all categories (Katsadoros, 2013)^[26]. Considering the last two prerequisites (the “collective” and the “traditional”), Kaplanoglou emphasizes that Folklore studies cultural phenomena that are both collective and traditional (Kaplanoglou, 2008)^[25]. The content of Internet unquestionably fulfills these two last prerequisites, as it will be demonstrated in the next subsections.

The “Collective”

The “collective”, which is characterized as the most important of the features and very intense in the internet (Katsadoros, 2013)^[26], is related to the countless and varied folk groups formed on the internet. Originally, Dundes (1980)^[15] gives a very broad definition of what constitutes a folk group, arguing that it is any group of people, as long as they shared a common factor and developed the traditions that gave their communities the individual identity. In this definition, the conventional link between culture and place is replaced by an innovative connotation of social interaction and the “conjunctural” context that leads to the expression of traditions. It is possible for traditions to be created in a group as small as two persons or as large as a nation. It does not matter what the connecting factor is (it could be a common possession, language or religion), but what is important is that a group, formed for whatever reason, has some traditions that call it its own (Dundes, 1965)^[14]. This sense of identity was created based on key social factors, such as nationality, profession, affinity, religious beliefs, gender (Paredes and Bauman, 1972, in Gasouka, 2008: 130)^[4, 21], age or an almost unlimited number of other factors, such as health (e.g., persons with heart disease), spatial proximity (e.g., neighbours) or a personal habit (e.g., cigar smokers) (Oring, 1986)^[35]. Instead of forming distinct groups, easily delineated (based on home, city, work or organizations), people move between different and sparsely delimited networks. Staple (2010)^[40] confirms that folklorists have long realized that groups are neither homogeneous entities, delineated and linked to geography, nor static. At the same time, the viewpoint is contradicted of those who argued that folklore can only be the culture of certain social groups and classes (e.g., farmers or poor bourgeois; i.e., the illiterate ones), since these groups and classes were distinguished because they contributed to maintaining traditional knowledge and preserving traditional practices. The change of importance in the concept of group was already noted by Dundes (in Newsom, 2013: 85)^[34], when arguing that there could be a reduction in the number of rural groups, but the specialization introduced by industrialization has created new communities, within which the new folklore is formed.

In the context of the previous approaches, it is worth noting that the internet is not just a technological tool but also a means of communication. Unlike other types of media, it not only allows for passive reception of information, but also for active participation of users in social activities, forming a multitude of

folk-groups. So nowadays, social life and social values exist in countless forms, with their basic characteristic being the interactions. Folk culture can be produced and transmitted among folk-groups, created by the development of the latest pioneering technology. Therefore, Folklore cannot continue to ignore people who constantly use technology and Internet, people and groups formed by communicating only and continually with email, with bulletin boards, instant messaging, IRC (inter-relay chat), chat rooms, Skype or Viber and personal blogs. Moreover, it cannot ignore the groups of people being formed as they are connected daily and for long hours with social networking sites (such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter) and they sign in instant messaging programs (such as Windows Live Messenger) or groups of people who exchange views in forums, with instant messages, text messages or video messaging. Also, Folklore cannot continue to ignore the people and groups that are formed, as they are involved with the MUDs and MOOs that are entertained by the massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). It cannot ignore people who send messages to their favourite forums, create videos (for uploading them on YouTube) and participate in hundreds of virtual worlds all over cyberspace, as well as on world-class video game platforms, even using their mobile phones, to live a bit in the virtual worlds. These new ways of communication do not replace the more traditional forms of offline contacts, but rather complement them, by increasing the total volume of contacts (Wellman, 2004) [28]. Folklore cannot ignore all those people using their tablets, i-pads, smartphones, hands-free or Bluetooth to be constantly connected to the internet; Internet enlarges the real-world communities (Wellman, 2004) [28]. Our society fully accepts the technology that has fundamentally changed the world we live today and technology needs to be integrated into everyday life of folklorists of all generations. Blank (2009) [7] is right when saying that folk culture should be considered as the external expression of creativity, in myriad forms and interactions of individuals and their communities. Consequently, these folk-groups have all the features described by Dundes and Pagter (1992) [18], as suitable for the development and expression of forms of folk culture and, regardless of the intentions of some folklorists to examine them or not, will continue to exist on the internet, making it the “avenue” for shaping new partnerships and friendships.

The “Traditional”

The “traditional” is related to the life of web, digital or e-folk-groups. Folklore deals traditionally with words or actions, being manifestations of the people’s psychological and social life (Politis, 1909) [36]. Expressions, behaviours, ideas and objects become a folk culture because they are the result of a process (Sims and Stephens, 2011) [39]. “Tradition” is everyday reality; it is ways of life, behaviours, practices, habits and beliefs and all this is now impossible to think of without life on the internet. Consequently, the “traditional” element simply exists wherever people exist, and people increasingly exist online. Internet is approached as a socially dominant area, with continuous interactions, in which rich folklore material is produced. It is mainly emerging in a “virtual” field, where there are millions of people, who have access to it and “live digitally”, namely live online. It is not just a giant “warehouse” of directly linked information. The modern state-of-the-art digital information systems allow communication with the same range of

expressiveness that existed when communication was made face-to-face. Besides, what makes something “traditional” is not the origin of people or the influence of time, as mentioned in the previous section, but rather the sequences and convergences, which allow an individual or a group to perceive the traditional local expressions that are derived traditionally and locally, or new expressions of the community being created (Georges and Jones, 1995) [22].

Additionally in the above context, Folklore evolves and updates itself, as it happens with other sciences. Modern folklorists have long realized that Folklore is not just a study of the past. Folklore explores modern life as well, since it is not limited to the study of subjects that are just a historical object of a museum, but also studies the contemporary creation of folk culture through a living tradition (Katsadoros, 2013) [26]. Dundes and Pagter (1991) [19] argue that the idea that folk culture reflects only the past is wrong; indeed, some of it reflects the past, but there is also an evolution and the stream that reflects the present: the culture of today. As more and more people move from rural to urban areas, a trend is observed in many parts of the world: the folk civilization of offices and bureaucracy is bound to continue (Dundes and Pagter, 1991) [19]. This dynamic and evolving content is a separate way of communication; folk culture exists in every society. It is neither the exclusive property of anyone nor the archetype of farmers. Folk culture could be traditional or anonymous but it is not, either by definition or in essence. It is also argued (Sims and Stephens, 2011) [39] that folk culture is neither an old-fashioned faith nor the contemporary culture of those people from primitive or simpler groups, who are less educated, less fortunate or less sophisticated. Dundes (2005) [17], highlighting the elements of liveliness and creativity, emphasizes that folk culture continues to be alive and creative in the modern world, this being true partly due to its increasing transmission through e-mail and Internet. In this context, the understanding of “folk” and “folklore” remains largely intact, while the general consensus on what constitutes in fact “folk culture” requires constant updating, revision and re-interpretation.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the previous arguments, it is concluded that there is no obstacle for the science of Folklore to study a truly modern subject. Moreover, folk culture is not limited to oral transmission, which is one of the five criteria of “real” folk culture, as defined by Jan Brunvand (1978) [11]. The other four are:

- To be traditional in its form and transmission;
- To exist in different versions;
- To be usually anonymous;
- To can be put into form.

Although the oral transmission is a part of the definition, however as early as 1975, Dundes and Pagter (1991) [19] have shown that folk culture is not limited to it. They demonstrate, for example, that the photocopy is a valid source of study for Folklore and characterized it as “the most traditional element”, even compared to the oral one. Thus photocopied photographs, poems, or jokes circulated in photocopies, but not verbally, could be considered elements of folk culture, despite its wide dependence on oral transmission, as a defining feature of previous periods. The same scholars shortly added that the photocopier greatly facilitates the transmission of this kind of folk culture. For this reason, they

believe that it is up to the folklorists to document this new form of tradition as it is formatted (Dundes and Pagter, 1991) ^[19]. More broadly, Dundes argues that communication is not entirely oral and, thus, the folk culture can be transmitted by any other means that the group, studied by a folklorist, uses besides traditional communication. In addition, the versions and variations of the photocopied knowledge are similar to the forms of folk art that are spoken, both in terms of transmission and in terms of traditional variants. Therefore, Ben-Amos accepts that the oral dissemination of folk tradition can no longer be considered as dominant and points out that communication in the context of folk culture occurs not only when people face each other (face-to-face), but also when they are related directly (Ben-Amos, 1971) ^[6]. In recent years, several folklorists have argued that computer-based communication functions just like oral tradition. Blank (2009) ^[7], for example, considers the opinions about oral transmission to be out of date, since the new technological means have become part of worldly life, at least for the new generations. McNeill (2009) ^[32] also admits that many times with her students uses the person-to-person concept and not the face-to-face one, as the former continues to emphasize the personal communication properties of folk culture that differentiate it from massiveness, while allowing the mediation and interaction between the receiver and the transmitter. She notes that the folklorists must start to deal with new data, as computer communication, at least in its present form, is something between speech and writing. The first expressive space is not separate from the other. Of course, Finnegan (2003) ^[20] argues that by examining the actual practice and experience of oral communication, researchers now emphasize more on how words extend into a vast array of acoustic, motor, visual and scenting resources or materials that people have developed and used creatively to achieve their goals.

It is obvious that the original definitions of “folklore” were created based on face-to-face interaction. However, New Technologies nowadays allow people to communicate digitally online, in a variety of expressive ways, such as chatting, social networking and mobile phone. These ways are considered by McNeill (2009) ^[32] forms of face-to-face communication in the context of modern folk culture. McNeill (2009) ^[32] also accepts the definition of Georges and Jones (1995) ^[22], who consider that the term “folk culture” denotes expressive forms, processes and behaviors that:

- We usually learn, teach and present during the face-to-face interactions;
- We consider them to be traditional, because they serve as evidence of continuity and consistency, through time and space in human knowledge, thought, faith and feelings.

About this definition, she also states that communication technologies, especially Internet, provide the framework for such a presentation and dissemination (McNeill, 2009) ^[32]. Furthermore, Blank and Howard (2013) ^[8, 9] add the word “usually” to the term “face-to-face”, accepting that folk culture can be expressed in a person-to-person exchange, as in telephony, television or a mobile computing device. Consequently, Internet operates in a similar way to oral communication and seems to occupy its position, while contemporary folklorists are watching the cultural impact of new forms of communication, such as photocopiers and computers. This is how the traditional way of

storytelling in the twenty-first century changes, in a way that fits into digital culture (Bronner, 2012) ^[10]. Thus, the content of folk culture is redefined, as a form of traditional or not knowledge of a person and/or his/her community, acquired through oral or written speech or any other means of communication, especially through the mediation of new technologies. Accurately Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1996) ^[29] concludes that, through the mediation of new technologies, folk culture is formed not with words of the mouth but with words of a modem, therefore heading towards multimedia with the convergence of new technologies.

In the above context, Kibby (2005) ^[27] argues that forwardable emails have enabled not only the creation of folk culture but also contributed to its dissemination. To substantiate it, she considers that this way of dissemination functions just like the revival of older stories, yet with contemporary significance. To demonstrate that forwardable emails are elements of modern folk culture at the times of Internet, she utilizes the functional approach, by accepting that the relationships between different cultural forms and social needs are examined and interpreted in a spiritual and psychological perspective. So, we no longer study what kinds of folk culture exist, but how different types of folk culture are used in a society. The social functions of folk culture exist in education (among others), where they are related to morality or to warnings about the possible consequences of certain actions or omissions in maintaining group identity, in the sense that they reflect and confirm the self-perceptions of a social group, regarding entertainment, protection against criticism or ridicule of institutions, practical regulations of society, etc. Thus, Kibby (2005) ^[27] concludes that e-mails have become an effective means of spreading stories, warnings, humour, etc., which are kinds of modern folk culture, since they are not only a tool of many features of spoken tradition, but also create communities of thousands of people around the world, connected through their computers, in an environment that facilitates the exchange of information. They are transmitted among cohesive groups of friends or collaborators and perform cultural functions, such as providing information or maintaining group consistency. Still another argument, proving that Internet has been a subject studied by Folklore, is presented by McNeill (2009) ^[32]. She refers to the definition of Folklore by the historian John McDowell, who accepts that Folklore is the study of traditional ways of expression and thought, as they emerge and evolve during social interaction in human societies (McNeill, 2009) ^[32]. She believes that this definition fits perfectly in the case of Internet, since it is a virtual place of normal, informal and everyday interaction. Therefore, she concludes that it is the ability of a continuous interaction that allows folk culture to “blossom”, being a distinct culture that is developed in a digital environment.

A last argument for the necessity of having Internet approached by folklorists is presented by Michail (2009) ^[33], referring to the characteristics of Folklore Science. He is convinced that Folklore is the science of “between”, having (or should have) the ultimate goal of the harmonization (not the confusion, dissolution or overcoming) of opposing forces, between which the revelation of their essence moves at the same time. He clarifies that this “between” is dynamic, not static. Among the examples of the opposing pairs that are the subject of study of Folklore is present-past, national-transnational, local-global, real-virtual and limited-limitless. Among these opposing forces, Folklore moves

incessantly, with the movement of a pendulum that seeks neither the point of immobility nor the permanent placement in one or another area of oscillation, but the perpetuation of its movement and the increase (or at least maintaining) the oscillation range. He argues that Folklore cannot be stationary, only in the present or only in the past, only in the local or only in the global. As a science of “between”, it can only penetrate equally in the region of present and past, local and global, moving continuously from one to another. It is clear from the above reasoning, that Folklore is interested in the present, in the world and especially in the virtual one, by integrating into its subject of study the modern development of Internet, as well as the modern virtual communities that are formed through it.

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