

Open Folklore: Maintaining Momentum, Assuring a Future

During a two-day summit on July 8 and 9, 2013, at Indiana University, Bloomington, we participated in intensive discussions about the past, present, and future of Open Folklore (OF), a web portal to folklore studies work that also functions as an advocate for forward-thinking approaches to access and scholarly communication. We were impressed by the thoughtfulness and dedication of the OF team and by the work already completed on the project. Together with the project team members, we reviewed their efforts, and identified a set of questions and suggestions about future directions OF might take.

Current State of Open Folklore

The group was struck by the smart and resourceful work undertaken by the OF team. OF already represents an important and positive intervention both in the field of folklore studies and in the scholarly communication landscape more broadly. In the realm of intellectual property, past and current work to make existing publications in the field more accessible by working with rightsholders and other interested parties demonstrates a thoughtful, practical, and respectful approach to complex rights issues.

The OF team has also evinced a forward-thinking approach to harvesting collections. Rather than attempting to ingest all folklore-related material into one repository, Open Folklore draws from existing repositories and collections. This approach helps to ensure that work is distributed among a number of organizations, that collections reflect and recognize the holdings of diverse institutions, and that Open Folklore grows organically as associated collections grow. It also means that there are comparatively fewer rights concerns related to hosted content.

Open Folklore benefits enormously from the support and direct involvement of the American Folklore Society (AFS), the field's key scholarly society. AFS, due in part to the particular priorities and history of folklore studies as a discipline, understands the importance of open access and has been a leading voice in promoting the accessibility of scholarly material in the field. Because of AFS's involvement, OF can claim an authoritative voice, immediate access to members, and the ability to tap directly into a network of professionals. Moreover, AFS acknowledges that it has benefited strongly from its participation in Open Folklore, having been pushed to confront and respond to changes in scholarly communication to which some peer societies have been slower to respond. For their part, AFS members have responded enthusiastically to OF, lauding the work as evidence of a forward-thinking and member-focused professional society.

Open folklore has also benefitted enormously from its partnership with Indiana University (IU). IU is known widely as a center for scholarly folklore studies. Similarly to their relationship with AFS, the partnership with IU has allowed OF to claim an authoritative voice within the larger community of folklore scholars and practitioners. This partnership has also benefitted the project from a technical

perspective, allowing OF to take advantage of the Indiana University Libraries' robust technical expertise and infrastructure.

The project has made excellent use of available infrastructure, resources, and technologies. Resolution of technical challenges related to Open Folklore has produced spillover benefits to other users of the same infrastructures; for example, the Open Journal Systems implementation at IU.

Even with the limited resources available, the project has been committed to substantive advances in services and resources throughout its development. The launch of the new OF website is a good example of ongoing progress, with significant improvements to both functionality and design. Use of open-source software has kept costs limited while providing robust tools that support flexibility and innovation.

In terms of governance, collaborative and ad-hoc work and decisionmaking structures have been fairly effective for the work accomplished so far.

Future Directions

In our discussions of where OF might go in the future, we were repeatedly encouraged to find that team members had already anticipated many of our recommendations and had a clear grasp of the current shape and future direction of scholarly communication, digital libraries and repositories, and the state of digital humanities and heritage in general. Thus, many of our suggestions for how the project might move forward represent ideas already articulated by the OF staff members.

Open Folklore represents an opportunity to experiment with professional practices of reviewing and credentialing scholarly communication. Team members might think creatively about rewards and incentive structures for materials that members publish on OF, such as datasets and gray literature (e.g., museum exhibition catalogs). For example, AFS members might be able to contribute datasets to OF, which could be contextualized, reviewed, and added to a professional portfolio. OF could also be a chance to experiment with peer review, along the lines suggested by the work of MediaCommons and other experiments in open and distributed peer review.

If the ultimate goal of the project (or one of the key goals) is to mould OF into a repository of folklore materials, the team needs to develop methods, software, and best practices (a toolkit) to make it easy and frictionless for non-technically inclined folklorists to contribute materials to OF. To this end, the OF team might develop a set of tools and best practices for people (larger projects, departments, heritage and memory institutions, etc) who have some technical infrastructure, but not enough to install and manage a preservation archive. These "nodes" would become part of the overall OF ecosystem, pushing metadata (and perhaps actual digital objects) into the main OF trunk. It is very important that the OF team continue to maintain a more

distributed, ecosystem approach — as opposed to OF becoming the “one repository to rule them all.”

We also recommend sophisticated and formal user and usability testing for the website. Usability analysts should ensure that the users are drawn from all sectors of the folklore world, including university researchers, public folklorists, independent folklorists, and students.

At least theoretically, technologies, structures and practices developed by Open Folklore could be generalizable to other research and practice communities. Lessons learned here could be applied elsewhere. A continued commitment to use and development of open source resources will also allow efforts invested in the Open Folklore project to be applied and built on elsewhere.

The Path Forward

In order to accomplish these goals, Open Folklore could benefit from a number of measures that would consolidate past successes and assure a stable future.

OF needs a more substantive buy-in from Indiana University: an explicit and ongoing commitment to maintaining this important resource, either financially or through in-kind support. The American Folklore Society has already committed to being a monetary partner, and the team has extended it thinking about funding beyond federal agencies. We discussed a number of options for future funding streams, including the consortium model, in which the OF team obtains buy-in from universities that have prominent graduate Folklore programs and collections; and crowdfunding, in which many stakeholders donate small amounts to maintain the resource.

We recommend a more formal governance structure, including a director, and we suggest that the team examine how the governance structure of OF intersects with and compares to AFS. Similarly, the team should think through the relationship of OF with the National Folklore Archives Initiative. That relationship needs to be made clear to funders, members, and institutional partners, and OF should clarify the workflow between the two and how they relate to each other.

This juncture could prove an excellent opportunity for the OF team to think about how they might push OF’s advocacy of “openness” beyond accessibility and toward reusability. The governance should more fully articulate what they mean by “open,” and commit to Budapest-level accessibility where possible. There may not always be someone who can grant these permissions, and there may be times when insisting on reusability may prevent accessibility, but the aspiration should be for open licensing of content accessible through Open Folklore.

We are encouraged by the fact that the Open Folklore team is committed to ensuring that its platform is not a silo. We suggest the team consider providing an API and/or

a SPARQL endpoint by which OF could begin exposing its own data to the wider LOD ecosystem, through OAI-PMH or RDFa (or both).

For several of the possible future projects and directions, rights issues may get more complex. Providing access to existing materials when rightsholders are not clearly identifiable, or hosting materials that are submitted by third parties, will both be valuable services. Previous successful “liberating” projects demonstrate that providing access to existing and/or historical materials in the field appears to present relatively low risks of rightsholder objections. A commitment from IU to support flexible and forward-thinking rights-management approaches (as has already been demonstrated in the journal liberation projects) will provide the project with solid footing from which they will be able to move in several directions.

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