New Beginnings: An Introduction

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When the editors of Folklore Forum first came to me with the notion of an exclusively online journal, my response was decidedly negative. The Internet, I believed (and still believe), is a venue for the dissemination of information which must constantly be probed and questioned, and which, even then, maintains an air of unreliability. For many, the question of reliability revolves around the newness of the medium. The Internet is still an unknown quantity in many ways, especially when the truth of hackers, crackers, and malicious viruses is so far shrouded in their self-made legend. If hackers tell us that they are capable of doing anything—capable of complete control over a medium about which they have a great deal of knowledge while the general public has very little—who can contradict them? And what is more, if the most common experience of the Internet for the general public is SPAM, unsolicited email most often bearing false advertisements, what business does any person or organization have telling this public that they should disregard their wariness—the caution taught by the legends and the tall tales—and trust a group of graduate students running a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants scholarly journal? I certainly would not trust us.

As with the case of SPAM, after all, anybody with a computer and a few minutes to spare can throw together a website and publicly proclaim whatever crackpot theory captures their fancy at any given moment, true or false. One of the defining characteristics of the internet as a medium for the dissemination of information is anonymity—not the absence of identity, but the ability to invent an identity removed from that which one possesses in so-called "real life." And one effect of such anonymity is the freedom to choose not to take responsibility for one's own words. Not only can anybody say anything, but they can say it from behind the perfect mask: one that not only obscures "real world" identity, but which obscures it so well that it is nearly impossible to undo. The Internet then, and particularly the World Wide Web, becomes a venue for a true and malicious freedom of information—a freedom not only from oppression by outside institutions like government and capital, but a freedom from the inner oppression

of common sense and good judgment. Without personal responsibility, why not say anything at all?

Such freedom, however, is not without its positive aspects. What one might characterize as irresponsibility, another might characterize as true democracy. Without the fetters of an identity with a reputation that can be irreversibly sullied, individuals become free to take risks—to make statements that might otherwise compromise their respectability—in the name of academic freedom and the open discussion of new ideas. Individuals may be openly critical online in a way that they cannot in print or in person, questioning ideas that may be beyond question in serious scholarship due to the constraints of fashion or popular politics. They may open new avenues for the discussion of the patently unfashionable, and invite participation by others who, for various reasons, may not be able to participate in any other venue. In the case of *Folklore Forum,* this means inviting discussion between individuals from every walk of life, academic and otherwise. Professors, graduate students, undergraduates, and non-students are able come together online—in a virtual space with virtual identities—and coexist for a moment on equal footing, participating in an exchange of ideas, some good and some not so good, that is the primordial stuff of innovation.

And this, ultimately, is the mission of *Folklore Forum*. Years of playing at professionalism—of publishing a biannual, bound journal in an attempt to gain the illusive respect of the professional academic community—have led both publication and editorial staff away from this mission. But if we hearken back to Elliott Oring and James Durham's vision for the journal, we find that it "is not meant to be a journal for scholarly publication" at all, but rather an organ for communication between individuals, meant "to make people aware of the total range of ideas being entertained by students of Folklore." It is not meant as a venue to profess, in other words, but rather a venue to discuss.

This does not mean, of course, that *Folklore Forum* will cease to be a peer-reviewed journal, or that the editorial staff will be less stringent about the quality of material published. We will continue, as we always have, to fill each issue with the best quality material available to us. What it does mean, though, is that individuals reading our publication will have the opportunity to make themselves known—make their voices heard. The interactive quality of the World Wide Web allows *Folklore Forum* to live up to its name in a way undreamed of by Oring and Durham. It allows for a true forum, in which readers can provide instant feedback on articles in the form of comments.

Appended to every article is a venue in which the reader may respond to the data and ideas presented within, and in which other readers may respond to those comments, generating the sort of interactivity that the original editors of the journal so coveted. Without surrendering the professional integrity of the journal, we can approach the ideal laid out in the original mission statement of *Folklore Forum*: that of an interactive virtual space that is nearly as good as sitting "over a cup of coffee" and exchanging ideas, questions, and suggestions.

The remainder of this issue, then, will strive to accomplish two goals. First, in the form of reprints of the original mission statement and some early publications of the journal, we will attempt to demonstrate the manner in which the move online has brought *Folklore Forum* full circle, back to its roots as a radical antidote to other, more conservative print journals. We will attempt to show that as in the early days of the journal, it does not matter whether you are a venerable professor like Richard M. Dorson or a lowly graduate student like Elliott Oring; all ideas will be treated equally. And second, in the publication of a number of new articles we will attempt to demonstrate that the move online is not only a return, but a new beginning for *Folklore Forum*. Even as we return to the spirit of the first days of the publication, we retain the progressive outlook that is necessary for *Folklore Forum* to fulfill its mission—we retain our emphasis on new ideas.