Examining the Transmission of Urban Legends: Making the Case for Folklore Fieldwork on the Internet

***Folklore Forum* 37.1 (2007).**

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Click. In the fraction of a second it takes for the human brain to transmit the command to the index finger, a single transmission of text can be distributed to potentially thousands, even millions of people. The *click* is always the same: the ominous, irreversible send button relays a series of words, audio files, or images across cyberspace and into the life of a new receiver, who may then choose to pass the message on to others or tempt fate by disregarding the warnings bestowed upon the reader.

I am referring, of course, to the phenomenon known as chain letters. For the purpose of this article I define chain letters as any form of communication that demands recirculation of its contents and threatens the possibility of missed opportunities, injury, or ill-fate for loved ones or the receiver if they refuse to comply.1 Hoaxbusters, a hoax database maintained by a division of the United States Department of Energy, notes that the three key ingredients of a chain letter are "the hook, the threat, and the request" (Hoaxbusters 2006, 4). Usually these letters have a long, emotional story that ultimately ends with the instruction to resend the message to a certain number of people within a set time frame or face the consequences of a potential disaster or forfeiture of promised goods.2 One such chain letter that has been widely circulated on the Internet tells of a devious criminal (usually male) that dupes women into sniffing his "perfume," which really turns out to be ether:

> "I was approached yesterday afternoon… in the Wal-Mart parking lot, by two males, asking what kind of perfume I was wearing. Then they asked if I'd like to sample some fabulous scent they were willing to sell me… I probably would have agreed had I not received an email some weeks ago, warning of a 'wanna smell this neat perfume?' scam…

Here, the chain letter begins with the emotional story, or "hook." The sender personalizes the content by placing herself as the protagonist, hence inserting a personal twist to legitimize the remainder of the e-mail's contents. Secondly, the sender uses a ubiquitous location, in this case *Wal-Mart*, to both further hook the audience and also cast suspicion as

to whether the story took place at a Wal-Mart near the reader. Lastly, the sender foreshadows the warning or threat by announcing that their life may have been saved from an e-mail very similar to the one they are sending. This then leads to the warning:

> "THIS IS NOT PERFUME - IT IS ETHER!
>
> When you sniff it, you'll pass out. And they'll take your wallet, your valuables, and heaven knows what else. If it were not for this e-mail, I probably would have sniffed the 'perfume' But thanks to the generosity of an emailing friend, I was spared whatever might have happened to me. I wanted to do the same for you.

The sender reaffirms that bad things will potentially happen to the reader if they don't take the advice bestowed upon them. The sender also reminds the reader that they could have been harmed had the forwarded e-mail not reach them and generously, they wanted to return the favor. This leads to the request:

> "PLEASE PASS THIS ALONG TO ALL YOUR WOMEN FRIENDS, AND PLEASE BE ALERT, AND AWARE!! IF YOU ARE A MAN AND RECEIVE THIS PASS IT ON TO YOUR WOMEN FRIENDS!" (FastBytes.com 2006, 2)

This last piece of the e-mail relies on the impact of the hook and threat to urge the reader to continue sending the message. The hook heightens the reader's emotional awareness to the message's content after which the message attempts to influence the recipients' behavior by evoking their greed, sympathy, or fear. Once this is achieved, a request to resend the transmission is implemented and the recipient is faced with the decision to continue the transmission or ignore it. Fernback articulates some of the other motivations for sending and resending these chain letters:

> "Those responding to email requests to help dying children may gain a sense of power to affect change for the good through the use of computer technology. Thus, these legends…are often debated seriously, forwarded again and again, and responded to overwhelmingly. Moreover, the people who receive these legends on email… relate to the legend as a form of oral culture. They may retell the story to sound an alarm, because they believe the story, to entertain others, to confirm their own world views, or to illustrate their own skepticism" (Fernback 2003, 34).

These stories' lifespan is contingent upon their ability to have readers believe that there is a real threat; that a real person was affected by the message's contents and therefore sent the e-mail; and that they, the reader, can in fact have an impact in preventing, or helping (if positive) the event manifest as described in the message.

So why am I paying so much attention to these chain letters, e-mail hoaxes, and other urban legends? E-mail hoaxes cannot exist without the Internet. These narratives are exclusive to the Internet. The Internet is the premier forum for studying urban legends, chain letters, hoaxes, and jokes. As Ellis notes, "While previous collections from before 1987 stressed oral tradition, the anonymity of frequently-forwarded messages has quickly made this the preferred mode of circulating topical humor," further adding, that "[t]he increased internationalism of email conduits now makes it normal, even commonplace, to exchange impressions and reactions across continental and even linguistic barriers" (Ellis 2001, 6). As such, it is our responsibility as folklorists to closely examine the importance of these communications as they have become ubiquitous in Internet culture and are consequently representative of cultural attitudes in a venue often ignored by reluctant scholars in the folklore discipline.

In the pre-Internet age, one may have seen chain letters in the form of pyramid scheme-like letters sent to random addresses. They may also be picked up in other media such as radio, television, or film. The Internet provides an anonymous soapbox for web-users to quickly disseminate information. Chain letters are often forwarded, which, as Kibby notes, "seems to give the e-mailer an even greater sense of distance from the content…[and]…[w]hile this detachment lessens accountability, at the same time it increases authenticity" (Kibby 2005, 772). The authoritative and anonymous nature of the author instills in the reader a false sense of validity of the message's content. Trusting in the authoritative message, compliant readers obey the commands of the chain letter.

Like chain letters, e-mail hoaxes prey upon the sensibilities of their recipients. As the name suggests, e-mail hoaxes are limited to electronic transmission. They follow the format of chain letters in that they begin under the guise of sincerity, describing an event of alleged urgency. The e-mail recipients are usually urged to believe the contents of the e-mail through the sender's use of supposed personal attachment to the e-mail's subject, such as claiming to know the benefactor involved in the story or claiming to actually be the benefactor. As the second half of the term suggests, the claims of the e-mail are invalid. Nevertheless, these hoaxes have made great headway across cyberspace, flooding inboxes with fake tales about free money, community safety concerns, and false reports of celebrity deaths. An example, collected from my own personal email account, is one of the longest-running e-mail hoaxes ever—the promise that Bill Gates is giving away his fortune to compliant forwarders:

> "Dear Friends: Please do not take this for a junk letter.
> Bill Gates sharing his fortune. If you ignore this, You will repent later.
>
> Microsoft and AOL are now the largest Internet companies and in an effort to make sure that Internet Explorer remains the most widely used program, Microsoft and AOL are running an e-mail beta test.
>
> When you forward this e-mail to friends, Microsoft can and will track it (If you are a Microsoft Windows user) For a two weeks time period.
>
> For every person that you forward this e-mail to, Microsoft will pay you $245.00 For every person that you sent it to that forwards it on, Microsoft will pay you $243.00 and for every third person that receives it, You will be paid $241.00. Within two weeks, Microsoft will contact you for your address and then send you a check.
>
> Regards. Charles S Bailey General Manager Field Operations
> 1-800-842-2332 Ext. 1085 or 904-1085 or RNX 292-1085"

The original message was supposedly sent by Bill Gates himself, but instead this hoax has morphed into a Microsoft executive as the bearer of good news. To enhance the believability factor, e-mail forwarders have added a personal twist to the hoax, both enhancing its believability and its circulation. Again, it follows the format of an emotional story, followed by the threat of missing out on something important, in this case big money, for not resending the message:

> "Ladies and gentlemen,
>
> THIS TOOK TWO PAGES OF THE TUESDAY USA TODAY - IT IS FOR REAL
>
> SORRY EVERYBODY.. JUST HAD TO TAKE THE CHANCE!!! I'm an attorney, And I know the law. This thing is for real…

Again, validity is established by the sender mentioning that this beta test was covered by a national publication, USA TODAY. This is compounded by the sender's assertion that they are a lawyer and that they know the law, ensuring that the forwarding readers will be rewarded monetarily. Continuing on, the sender attempts to normalize their situation by acknowledging that they, too, doubted the e-mail's validity, but overcame their doubt and were rewarded:

> "Thought this was a scam myself, But two weeks after receiving this e-mail and forwarding it on. Microsoft contacted me for my address and within days, I received a check for $24,800.00. You need to respond before the beta testing is over…

This paragraph ends by mentioning a timetable, implying that there isn't much time left before the reader loses a chance at making money. Expectedly, the request for resending is then asked, also adding one last personal touch to the message:

> "Please forward this to as many people as possible. You are bound to get at least $10,000… My brother's girlfriend got in on this a few months ago. When I went to visit him for the Baylor/UT game, she showed me her check. It was for the sum of $4,324.44 and was stamped 'Paid In Full.'"

The ending location may vary, but the formula is the same as with chain letters: hook (coverage in a periodical), threat (the reader may miss out on money), and request to forward. Chain letters tend to cover negative events and sometimes (but not always) lure readers into sending mass e-mails by stating something like "send this e-mail to twenty people in five minutes or you will be cursed with bad luck for seven years!"[3] While it may be preposterous to believe such a claim, it does act as a catalyst. E-mail hoaxes, on the other hand, attempt to trick the reader into believing the e-mail's contents to solicit forwarding, rather than demanding a particular amount of forwards by a set deadline. Instead, the reader's greed, emotions, or sense of duty are called upon in resending messages. Clearly, both chain letters and e-mail hoaxes follow the conventions of the urban legend genre, which underscores the rationale for studying urban legends and other folk narratives on the Internet.

Urban legends emerge in patterns and folklorists are able to categorize these patterns into a meaningful summary of the available text. In their oral context, they are richly evocative of society's fears, hopes, anxieties, and prejudices. As folklorists, we decode the narratives of urban legends to reveal and analyze the cultural attitudes expressed within. The Internet provides a new opportunity for us to study urban legends and their subsidiaries such as chain letters and e-mail hoaxes. While orally transmitted urban legends express societal fears and prejudices in coded language, electronically transmitted urban legends express societal fears and prejudices more abrasively due to the sender's anonymity.

The Internet is an ideal conduit for the transmission of folk narratives due to its anonymity and efficiency in the speedy dissemination of ideas. Folk groups are readily identifiable on the internet as evidenced by chat forums, blogs, online political activity, fan web pages, and a plethora of other interrelated concepts. If we are to continue to accept Dundes' longstanding definition of folk groups as "*any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor," then we must recognize the Internet as a viable, important *field* to conduct research (Dundes 1980, 6). Folklorists must become more

actively engaged in Internet research and I hope to shed more light on the benefits of conducting fieldwork on the Internet in an effort to convince more folklorists to become leaders, rather than followers, in the budding field of cyberethnography.

Carter argues that relationships forged online are "often sustainable offline, suggesting that cyberspace is becoming increasingly embedded in everyday lives" (Carter 2005, 150). The Internet is facilitating relationships—real relationships in the physical world! Surely, folklorists are interested in human interactions, so what is difference between studying a group of teenagers at a park and participating in a teen chat room online? In terms of "the field," there is no difference. Ethical and methodological considerations differ for both situations, but "the field" is still outside of the researcher's home. In the context of the Internet, "the field" can be numerous places at once—a man from Singapore can be conversing with someone in the United Kingdom, and though the researcher observes their interaction without the benefit of visual cues, the subjects are still influenced by their environment—their socioeconomic status, gender, race, country of origin, age, language, knowledge of Internet lingo, and rapport all contribute to the online identity that they present to the ethnographer.

And what should we make of authenticity? I believe that the authenticity of the data collected online is as valid as data collected in person. Of course, the question remains as to whether the Internet increases a person's likelihood to interact as a non-authentic self. However, as Hine so precisely stated: "The point for the ethnographer is not to bring some external criterion for judging whether it is safe to believe what informants say, but rather to come to understand how it is that informants judge authenticity" (Hine 2000, 49).

There are ethical and practical concerns raised by scholars in questioning the validity of the Internet for conducting fieldwork. Shatzer and Lindlof note that the lack of face-to-face fieldwork may place an ethnographer in an ambiguous situation, having to "contend…with the distinctions between active players and those who take on a more passive stance, and the difference these make in defining community" (Shatzer & Lindlof 2000, 176). Indeed, the existence of "lurkers," or those that only visit, but do not contribute to an online community, "raises the issue of…the extent to which non-involvement riding on the efforts of others detracts from or dissipates the well-being of the community" (176). Shatzer and Lindlof contest that ethnographic researchers "cannot make adequate sense out of communication" without the ability to observe nonverbal behavior cues, citing that e-mail and other online communications bypass the social pecking orders imposed in group

interaction, such as eye contact, seating arrangements, and characteristics such as "gender, race, expertise, or organizational position" (178).

This presents the dilemma faced by scholars using the Internet to conduct fieldwork: do we require cues that can only be accomplished in person to conduct valid research? Acknowledging Shatzer and Lindlof's contention that the Internet's masking of nonverbal cues inhibits ethnography, Eichhorn argues that "the lack of face-to-face contact may trouble a researcher's attempts to verify facts, [but] it is also important to consider how such a situation may affect the people or community under study" (Eichhorn 2001, 575). Eichhorn challenges: "How might participants come to know and trust a researcher who remains unseen? Might the researcher in a textual or virtual community be better positioned to take advantage of participants, and to remain even less accountable and attentive to their needs?" (575). These are valid questions to ponder, even more so for their ethical implications in terms of data integrity and more importantly the protection of informants.

Roush synthesizes some of the main ethical and practical considerations folklorists face in utilizing the Internet for conducting fieldwork:

> "Does fieldwork… have to be conducted in face-to-face interviews in order to be defined as fieldwork, or is any medium sufficient?...How does an effaced interview conducted through electronic mail or real-time Chat groups alter the performance, the context of the collecting? Further, since Internet access is for now limited to a privileged few participants, how representative of vernacular culture is this type of fieldwork?... what assurances does the collector have that the informants are actually who they say they are, an issue particularly crucial in collecting certain types of lore like gender lore?... How does the collector obtain valid consent forms? Further, if consent forms are transmitted through say, the medium of e-mail, can this collected information legally be archived?" (Roush 1997, 45).

Roush raises some important considerations for folklorists. Carter mentions that ethically, "cyberethnography is similar to conventional ethnography because the four main moral obligations of dealing with human subject research are the same: the principle of non-malificence, the protection of anonymity, the confidentiality of data, and the obtaining of informed consent" (Carter 2005, 152). Clifford poses the question: "What remains of fieldwork? What, if anything, is left of the injunction to travel, to get out of the house, to 'enter the field,' to dwell, interact intensively in a (relatively) unfamiliar context?" (Clifford 1997, 88). The lure of the foreignness of the field may be the greatest catalyst in resisting the Internet as an appropriate place to conduct fieldwork. After all, folklorists study tradition and conducting fieldwork "in the field" is a tradition of the folklore

discipline itself. However, as times change, our profession must progress accordingly. Online research does have its limitations—questions on the ethics, reliability, and authenticity of Internet informants cannot be ignored.

Researchers have conducted fieldwork on the Internet that has not been inhibited by the observation of nonverbal behaviors or muddled by the preponderance of lurkers as warned by Shatzer and Lindlof. Eichhorn claims that "understanding [her] participants was not contingent on witnessing their everyday activities, but instead [by] participating in their lives as they do," that is, through their network of textual and technological practices (Eichhorn 2001, 577). Citing over three years of her ethnographic research, Carter reported that her informants found their online community "just another place to meet friends" and that "many of the friendships formed…are routinely being moved offline" (Carter 2005, 164). Consequently, Carter concludes, "the basic tenets of online friendship appear to be impossible to separate from the traditional everyday concept of friendship itself…" (164). The Internet's emergent field cannot be separated from the traditional field. While there are fundamental differences between the two, specifically that they are virtual and physical, respectively, they are bound by common themes. Both have folk groups, customs, lingo and dialects, neighborhoods, crimes, relationships, games, discussion groups, emotions, banking, commerce, and various other forms of communication. However, the Internet is a new and exciting venue for folklore research. Despite its similarities to the physical world, the Internet approaches everything differently through its inherent marketing to the individual and the individual's needs. The anonymity of the users online, coupled with seemingly infinite accessibility provides an opportunity for users to explore a new frontier—a place uncluttered, or as the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines it: "an outer limit in a field of endeavor, [especially] one in which the opportunities for research and development have not been exploited."

Indeed, a new frontier has emerged for folklore scholars as well. In my experience, many folklorists like to identify themselves as specialists in "material culture" or "narratives" or "performance theory," among other things. While I agree that self-categorization is prudent to finding enjoyment in one's research, I see the Internet as a non-discriminate field for folkloristic research. If a scholar has a passion for pottery or other folk arts, there will not only be informative websites with information and pictures, sometimes created by the artists themselves, but there will also be discussion groups, blogs, personal websites, and e-commerce that actually sell the products of study. Folklorists will be able to engage freely with their subjects without the presupposition from some of their

informants that they have an ulterior motive in their research. They can engage in the community by brandishing as much or as little personal information as they would like. Without an in-person first impression, the Internet levels the playing field for folklorists. To the online communities of study, we are all simply the folk until we reveal ourselves as otherwise. Thus, the Internet is an ideal arena for folklorists to study human interaction. The anonymity of online interactions allows folklorists the luxury of maintaining professional distance from their subjects while simultaneously participating in an online community.

Through the 1980s, many folklorists struggled to rectify the boundaries of the discipline of folklore with the ever increasing advances in technology, which yielded interesting literature on the folklore of computers. The Internet is still a relatively new concept, one which is changing constantly. This presents an interesting dilemma to folklorists. As Dundes noted, "technology isn't stamping out folklore; rather it is becoming a vital factor in the transmission of folklore and it is providing an exciting source of inspiration for the generation of new folklore" (Dundes 1980, 17). It is a good thing, asserts Dundes, that we are able to transmit ideas faster than before. Indeed, this speed has enhanced the ways in which we can retrieve and disperse information.

I do not wish to suggest that folklorists abandon the holistic study of oral tradition in favor of a seemingly more progressive format. Kuntsman argues that emergent redefinitions of the "field" propose that "cyberspace enables (and even forces) us to re-examine and reframe old concepts of fieldwork" (Kuntsman 2004, 3). The Internet should not be deemed as an inappropriate place to conduct fieldwork. Does the "field" aspect of fieldwork have to possess a physical sense of place? The term "fieldwork" itself denotes the presence of a "field" to work in. However, scholars in related disciplines (such as anthropology) are beginning to challenge traditional notions of "the field." Cyberethnography has been gaining steam amongst anthropologists and sociologists as a valid "field" in its own right. Markham (2004) promotes the concept of discursive, rather than geographical, boundaries of the field. As Kuntsman points out, the "notion of travel and distance has traditionally constituted the anthropological idea of the 'field'…[appearing] in the disciplinary imagination as located 'out there' and inhabited by people whose culture is different from that of the researcher" (Kuntsman 2004, 2). Kuntsman contests that this epistemology has been deconstructed by the work of feminist and post-colonial anthropologists who have "theorized their experience as the simultaneous 'selves' and 'others'… and disrupted the distinction between 'here'… and 'there'" (2).

Thus, the sanctity of fieldwork existing outside the researcher's home has already been forfeited. How else could a scholar like Henry Glassie be so effective in his ethnography of Ballymenone in North Ireland? He became a member of the community and in doing so was able to interweave his own place in the community with the stories and histories of the people that inhabited the region.4

The transition from oral and written traditions, such as jokes (as well as similar narratives), to online communication has been unproblematic, as Barre Toelken notes, the "computer isn't the source of these jokes—we are," adding, "as a medium it naturally introduces new dimensions into the discussion" (Toelken 1998, 92). Again, there is a merging between the physical field and virtual field—users see the Internet and the communications online as interchangeable with the real world.5

Fernback notes that orality and literacy are not dichotomous, but instead are entwined "in ways that the reader/ hearer [constructs] meaning personally and effectively." Elaborating, Fernback notes:

> "The reader/ hearer can use spoken and written storytelling to connect him/ herself to the culture at large. Thus, while these urban legends do originate in literate culture, and are hence bound by the structures of mind that exist as a result of literacy, nevertheless they exhibit many of the characteristics of composition attributed to thought in oral cultures. We relate to urban legends passed along in online environments in this same way" (Fernback 2003, 39).

This is important to note in making the case for utilizing the Internet as the next step in the development of studying urban legends, chain letters, and hoaxes. The Internet may never become a dominate place to conduct fieldwork. While I wholeheartedly approve of "in the field" fieldwork, so to speak, I urge folklorists to reconsider the Internet as an appropriate forum for fieldwork and take charge in studying Internet folk culture.

If we, as folklorists, are to remain responsible researchers of the meaningful processes of everyday life, we must include the Internet in our focus. The Internet disseminates information through folklore—Internet lingo is learned through online interaction with other web-surfers; recipes are shared amongst friends in a cooking forum; "netiquette" is taught to members of an online community. These processes that grasp folklorists' attention so fervently in the real world are every bit as real and important in the virtual world. Despite this, anthropologists and sociologists tend to dominate the dialogue on Internet culture, a venue that should be a natural stage for folklore scholarship. In the field of folklore, which is all too often muddled by misinterpretations of our discipline's

scope, we stand competent and perhaps more qualified to dissect the offerings that Internet has presented than a great deal of the non-folkloric work that has been published to date.

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NOTES

1 For a more thorough analysis and report of chain letters, e-mail hoaxes, and urban legends, see Jan Harold Brunvand's *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (NY: Norton Press, 2001).

2 This article cites two examples of chain letters, one collected from an online database and another from my own personal email address from a recipient that I was not familiar with. Readers interested in more examples of chain letters, e-mail hoaxes, and urban legends should visit: www.snopes.com, which has a fine database of legends that are partitioned by category and their validity. Furthermore, Hoaxbusters (http://hoaxbusters.ciac.org) and Fast Bytes (www.fastbytes.com) overview a wide variety of different chain letters, motifs, and their frequency of distribution and validity.

3 Myspace.com has become a breeding ground for several examples of the "make a wish" chain letter format or the type of chain letter that demands a certain amount of people receive the letter via a forward. For an example of this type of chain letters, see: http://www.grab.com/boards/b/home/topic/41596/2. This public Internet message board (grab.com), like so many others, hosts this chain letter in a discussion forum. This format has become so widespread that some have taken measures to satirize its predictability. For an example, see: http://www.encyclopediadramatica.com/index.php/Chain_letter.

4 See Henry Glassie's *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (1995, reprint, Indiana University Press) and *Stars of Ballymenone* (2006, Indiana University Press).

5 Take, for example, the recent influx of "Chuck Norris" jokes on the Internet. This phenomenon largely began on the Internet amongst teenagers that distributed jokes of Chuck Norris' supposed super-human and Paul Bunyan-esque qualities in a humorous way. These jokes naturally flowed into oral traditions, whereupon they were re-circulated onto the Internet again. A website dedicated to Chuck Norris jokes can be found at: www.thechucknorrisfacts.com.