

• *Book Reviews* •

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**Newslore: Contemporary Folklore on the Internet.** By Russell Frank. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2011. pp. ix + 268, preface, appendices, notes, references, index.)

In a world enveloped in a twenty-four hour news cycle, the news story is only the beginning. The centrality of the Internet in modern life has led to a new platform for the empowerment of the news consumer. Recast in honest and frank form, narratives circulate from inbox to inbox that demand knowledge of the day's headlines for complete comprehension. Grasping Americans' true sentiment on current events requires a thorough assessment of this ubiquitous digital form.

This book project came out of Russell Frank's desire to bridge the gap between his formal education (folkloristics) and his former occupation (journalism). Seeking to gain a deeper understanding at the intersection of "netlore" and "newslore," Frank challenges decades old notions about folklore's traits. Much of newslore flies in the face of popular, traditional definitions of folklore. Newslore is usually short-lived, often digitally transmitted, frequently (sub)urban, and prefers large groups with minimal connections between most members. Nonetheless, Frank argues newslore is an important form of folklore because it encompasses "artistic behavior that express[es] a group's values and worldview" (8).

Newslore is "folklore that comments on, and is therefore indecipherable without knowledge of, current events" (7). Frank's subversive claim is that we can learn more about ordinary Americans through newslore—people's commentary on the news—than the news itself. Frank submits to the long established claim that no

folklore is transmitted unless it means something; therefore, no newslore is forwarded unless it means something. As a corollary, we can learn a great deal about American mores by noting the disparity between what's fit to print in mainstream newspapers and what the folk circulate on the web.

Studying newslore is important for three reasons, Frank tells us. The phenomenon is "widespread," "revealing of widely held attitudes and widely shared preoccupations," and "largely ignored but shouldn't be, given the first two reasons" (10-15). In addition to its importance to folklorists, journalists also have something at stake: their credibility. Although big news stories frequently draw secondary reaction columns, the reactions displayed are only those deemed fit for family consumption, regardless of the true sentiment of the country. The newslore angle is rarely included. If journalists are seen as giving only part of the story, readers will turn to alternative, often questionable sources of information, which only perpetuates harmful newslore hoaxes and legends. Instead, Frank argues, journalists can accomplish part of their mission of empowering readers through covering newslore as an important element of the news.

No one grand theory guides the study. Frank prefers to ask Elliott Oring's question, "What does this joke communicate?" Subversion seems to be the underlying theme that ties all of the examples together. In a footnote Frank admits he is prepared for charges of being adverse to fieldwork. Referring to himself as a "deskchair traveler," he commits himself to tromping through the Internet world.

This does lead to a somewhat restricted study. Although Frank explains early on that “netlore” and “newslore” are not synonymous—lots of netlore doesn’t comment on the news, and some newslore still takes place in the analog world—he restricts himself solely to newslore on the Internet. A more precise title would have been *Newslore on the Net: The Golden Era*.

Frank’s area of focus is the “golden era of newslore that lasted from the 1990s to the early 2000s” (26). As he notes, he is primarily interested in forwarded texts and some photoshops. Audio and video, the primary sources of newslore today, are mostly excluded from this study. A breadth of topics are covered including Hillary Clinton, Democrats, Hurricane Katrina, George W. Bush, MasterCard, Bill Gates, and Princess Diana. The highlights of the book after the excellent introduction are “When the Going Gets Tough,” a look at September 11<sup>th</sup> newslore that is tightly tied in to a larger scholarly conversation, “Diana’s Halo”, where Frank most avidly dons both hats as a folklore and journalism professor to discuss “folk media criticism”, and Appendix B, which is partly a statement of methodology and partly a study of newslore forms that could have stood as its own chapter. The entire book—even the situating of newslore in the history of folklore scholarship—is written in the highly readable prose of journalism. Frank mentions he’s been criticized for his style of academic writing in the past, but I consider it a strength. On top of being readable, Frank’s placement of newslore in the history of folklore scholarship and its ramification for future definition and study is the most

important part of the book and will remain relevant even when, as Frank predicts, his case studies become dated.

Three main criticisms can be made on the grounds of interpretation, methodology, and contextualization. A number of chapters boast an abundance of examples with little analysis. Frank claims he is examining and interpreting newslore but does little in the way of interpretation. Some chapters feel more like compendiums of topical jokes with Frank drawing the connection to the news source—"what you need to know"—rather than delving in to deeper meaning. Secondly, his selection of materials is at times questionable. We can assume those pieces of newslore that are forwarded indeed had some meaning to them. Frank was able to use his newspaper column to request forwards be sent to him and encouraged friends to do the same. Although he elicited receiving the forward, we can at least assume someone else received it, making it living newslore; however, since Frank is more interested in the text than in the performance (14), he risks interpreting newslore that is not being actively circulated when he includes materials found on newslore repository websites in his study. Lastly, although I agree certain performance aspects are not as important in newslore (the conscious choice of forwarding being the most crucial), contextual information is still important. Although Frank makes a valid argument for the redefinition of "group" in the digital age, meaning cannot be fully assessed without understanding the context

in which the newslore was disseminated, an impossible task when looking only at the text.

Frank nicely explains the shift away from the “Golden Era” of forwarded newslore as parallel to the shift from computer as “dazzling new thing” to “purposeful tool.” Today’s newslore on the net comes in various forms of Web 2.0: photoshop memes, YouTube videos, and comment features. Future scholarship on newslore in the digital age should focus on these forms. Frank has penned an innovative work that challenges old models and definitions and leaves ample room for future work on the subject. *Newslore* takes its place in the third decade of continued folkloric inquiry into the Internet.

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