



Folklore and Social Media

Edited by Andrew Peck and Trevor J. Blank. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2020. 256 pp. \$30.95 (pbk). ISBN 978-1-64642-058-2. Also available as an e-book.

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Book Review

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In the decade since Trevor J. Blank's celebrated edited volume *Folklore and the Internet*, we have seen many excellent books and papers exploring the numerous facets of digital folklore, reinforcing the growth and importance of the study of this particular form of vernacular culture. The focus of this volume is on social media, covering diverse platforms and topics. As Andrew Peck's engaging Introduction points out, social media complicates many folkloric concepts such as location and transmission, owing to the unusual intersection of diverse actors, and, importantly, by the intervention of algorithms (6). *Folklore and Social Media* therefore serves as a way of rethinking folklore and approaches to it more broadly, as well as providing fascinating case studies of contemporary folklore on social media.

Classic studies of digital folklore include how 'analogue' folklore is transferred and adapted online, and Sheila Bock's contribution examines how the tradition of decorating graduation mortarboards has made the transition to social media due to their 'Instagrammable' nature and messaging. Focusing on mortarboards of Latinx graduands in the United States and associated hashtag #LatinxGradCaps, Bock considers how this practice challenges ideas of the 'American Dream'. The extension and intensification of traditional folklore by social media is also seen in John Laudun's tracking of the 'creepy clown' legend, which neatly demonstrates how separate, unrelated incidents can become conflated on social media and feed moral panics. Taking ATU 425C (Beauty and the Beast) as its focal point, Tok Thompson puts storytelling into its technological, as well as social, development and looks at how digital storytelling, here represented by online fan fiction, challenges earlier and established conceptions of authorship and copyright. Bill Ellis examines forms of play that have emerged online, particularly those games that appear to be 'unproductive' or 'just for fun' but which often have hidden functions to gather data about users and their contacts. We also see how mainstream media and popular culture are brought into folkloric narratives through online discussion boards: Liisi Laineste explores the use of humour and 'unlaughter' in these boards in Estonia in response to political satire and the broader context of the recent European refugee crisis.

The 'analogue to digital' perspective may be flipped to consider how digital practices are enacted in the non-digital world. Contextualizing within broader moral panics, Elizabeth Tucker's examination of the 'Blue Whale Suicide Challenge' on YouTube considers the ostensive nature of suicides and self-harm contemporaneous with the Challenge but not necessarily a result of it. Tim Tangherlini et al.'s thorough chapter on online conspiracy theories notes how digital folklore moves into analogue domains through a form of legend-tripping to substantiate online narratives.

Previous publications on digital folklore can often lack explicitly described methods of how data are collected, tending to present specific analyses and interpretations of a particular phenomenon but without detailed insight into the practical workings of investigating such folklore, which can often be novel for folklore studies and sometimes highly technical. Happily, this volume features a number of articles detailing the practicalities of identifying, collecting, and analysing, which is very useful to those working in, or who are new to, digital folklore. Lynn McNeill presents the tracking, categorization, and archiving methods of the hugely successful Digital Folklore Project, employing the example of #BlackLivesMatter to consider how hashtags are classified as a form of folklore and how digital trends are

determined within the project. Tangherlini et al.'s contribution gives us a detailed method for modelling online conspiracy theories, which assists in identifying and differentiating such narratives, while Laudun also details his use of topic modelling and word co-occurrence. Both chapters lay out visualization techniques, further highlighting the new and exciting ways we can study and present folklore.

We are thus treated to much more than interpretations of contemporary digital folklore; some chapters further illustrate how digital folklore studies can help us understand ongoing questions about folklore and folkloristics more broadly. Kristiana Willsey's chapter explores the relationship between affect and belief through an examination of the 'viral life' of the 'Dear David' ghost story on Twitter. The relationship between folklore and political institutions is also explored, as in Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner's analysis of Donald Trump's use of Twitter representing a breakdown of vernacular and institutional communication. Andrew Peck examines institutional appropriations of memes in light of the decline in popularity of the 'doge' meme after it was mimicked by a Republican state representative, while Jeana Jorgensen and Linda J. Lee explore how the 'Prankster Biden' meme circulated after the 2016 presidential election helped those disappointed by Trump's victory deal with feelings of grief.

This collection of diverse and interesting case studies by leading folklorists in the field is highly absorbing and immensely useful. *Folklore and Social Media* is essential reading for those interested in digital folklore or the development of folklore more broadly and will undoubtedly be a key text in the discipline going into the future.

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