Legends on the net: an examination of computer-mediated communication as a locus of oral culture

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Abstract
Building upon work that suggests an oral cultural dimension to cyberspace within real-time chat modes, this article supports that contention by examining traditional oral folklore as it exists within the textual context of the online environment. Specifically, this study is a formal analysis of online discussion groups devoted to the perpetuation and analysis of a particular type of oral folklore – urban legends – and the cultural significance of their existence in the online realm. As mediated human communication becomes more and more non-linear, decentralized, and rooted in multimedia, the distinction between orality and literacy becomes less evident and less important. The proliferation of urban legends online demonstrates the idea that cyberspace can serve as a locus for a primary oral culture and its attendant humanity and sociability in a simultaneously textual environment.

Key words
cyberspace • folklore • orality • urban legends

‘Warning! Congress is about to legalize long-distance charges for Internet access.’ ‘A Texas woman contracted HIV from a hypodermic needle planted in her movie theater seat.’ ‘A businessman awoke to find
himself packed in ice in the bathtub of his New Orleans hotel room. On the mirror someone had written ‘Call 911.’ Whoever had written the message had also stolen his kidneys.’ These familiar anecdotes adorn TechTV’s column (Urban Legends on the Net, 1999) on internet urban legends, a website dedicated to the documentation of a phenomenon of oral culture known as the urban legend. The presence of these legends online is evidence of the growth of internet culture; terms such as flaming, spamming, and dot com have become part of our cultural lexicon. In the wake of this burgeoning cultural product, the potential of the internet as an medium of orality is worthy of scholarly reflection. In an era when the threat of computer viruses routinely scares members of the technoculture, the power of this oral culture is experienced by anyone noticing the proliferation of false virus alerts through email.

Claims that the advent of new technologies fosters profound social change are once again resurfacing as the hype surrounding computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology grips the public imagination. Theorists from Ong (1982) and McLuhan (1962, 1964) to Postman (1985) have claimed that the widespread use of print (and later electronic media) technologies has vastly altered human thought and interaction. Some of these same claims are being resurrected in light of the increasing popularity of online technology. But assessing the communicative impact of CMC requires more nuance than simply typifying online discourse in terms of either oral or literate culture. Clearly, CMC displays elements of oral as well as textual communication.

Building upon work that suggests an oral cultural dimension to cyberspace within real-time chat modes (see Reid, 1994 and Ross, 1994), this article supports that contention by examining traditional oral folklore as it exists within the textual context of the online environment. Specifically, this study is a formal analysis of CMC discussion groups devoted to the perpetuation and analysis of a particular type of oral folklore – urban legends – and the cultural significance of their existence in the online realm. Stories of UFO abductions, drug companies incorporating satanic symbols into their corporate logos, alligators living and breeding in sewers, escaped maniacs terrorizing lovers parked in wooded areas, and razor blades in Halloween apples are examples of the American folklore known as urban legends. These legends develop and circulate orally as part of a cultural tradition of entertainment and myth-making through popular narrative. The oral tradition has provided Western culture with aphorisms for community living, religious instruction, philosophical quandaries, and historical lore. Urban folklore, in particular, provides a revealing popular cultural text from which to examine oral culture as it exists within mass media-saturated society.
This study examines urban legends as they are told and analyzed within cyberspace. While the contemporary press overflows with speculation regarding the use of CMC as a powerful force for the promotion of democracy, education, and the global economy, the urban legends newsgroups on the internet appropriate the wired world into a vehicle for popular culture transmission. Here, oral culture retains its symbolic salience within American culture. The dimensions of orality online, evident in communal interaction in chatrooms, bulletin boards, and text-based virtual environments, can promote the exchange of oral folklore through feelings of ‘being there’ among participants (Langham, 1994). Tales are exchanged with the immediacy suggested by oral transmission, and computer technology itself often becomes the subject of these tales. As Levine (1992) contends in his polemic that popular culture cannot be separated from folk culture in industrial society, ‘[W]e need to break through the rigid compartmentalization that automatically and rigorously separates popular culture from the oral tradition, which has played a crucial role in the generation and transmission of folk culture’ (1992: 1378).

This analysis of the folkloric attributes of the textual exchanges within urban legends-oriented virtual groups stems from the observation of three discussion groups: alt.folklore.urban on Usenet, Urban Legends on the OneNet conference board (now defunct), and H-FILM, a humanities listserv (now defunct). These groups exist to retransmit, analyze and discuss folkloric tales, as well as to debate their credulity. This analysis also considers the transmission of urban legends via email. Methodologically, this analysis follows the tradition of ethnomethodology in that it attempts to discover how the members of these groups construct and interpret their sense of cultural reality (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). It follows the tradition of ethnography in that it observes the cultural practices of members in these groups. However, I did not act as a participant observer in the public discussion groups; I merely ‘lurked’. I monitored the discussion groups for several months and downloaded dozens of pages of conversations.1

URBAN LEGENDS AS POPULAR CULTURAL TEXTS
Ben-Amos (1992), in describing legends and folktales, claims that they reflect the culture and history of a given people because they are stories that ‘people tell to themselves about themselves’ (1992: 114). The tales resonate with people when they illustrate familiar cultural mores, values, and ethos. In this regard, folktales authenticate a culture’s self-identity. Urban legends scholar Brunvand (1981) posits that urban legends are a type of folktale in that they are orally transmitted, anonymous, and varying in specific detail from one recounting to another. Yet they maintain core themes and elements which make them recognizable.
Unlike historical folklore, however, urban legends are usually false in the sense that the same events depicted in the tale do not occur with such persistence. Brunvand does claim that, like traditional folklore, urban legends do tell a type of truth: ‘They are a unique, unselfconscious reflection of major concerns of individuals in the societies in which the legends circulate’ (1981: xii). Thus, many urban legends focus on escaped murderers, supernatural or bizarre phenomena, funny or absurd situations, and tainted manufactured products. Often, these legends have a moralistic component and are symbolic of our almost morbid cultural fascination with the ugliness that lies just beneath the surface of the normalcy and peacefulness of everyday existence. They reinforce social norms by emphasizing traditional morality in the face of these underlying social pathologies. Whether the legend’s events actually happen, Llewellyn (1996–7) claims that they could happen and, in some cases, should happen. Wyckoff (1993) argues that urban legends travel through communities as reflections of a collective response to some form of community crisis, ‘even as they symbolically encode the social ambiguities that underlie that concern’ (1993: 2). Thus, they serve as admonitions against violating community standards:

[D]on’t drive alone on highways or park in dark places; don’t buy foreign products; don’t put something in your mouth if you don’t know where it came from; don’t neglect basic hygiene; and don’t dabble with forces (supernatural, sexual, technological, social) you might not be able to control. The more subtle message of the legend is ‘be traditional’: don’t stray beyond any of the established limits – behavioral or ideological; mind set and behavior are intricately interrelated. But such legends arise specifically because boundaries have been transgressed. (1993: 6)

Urban legends, then, can function as ritual responses to forms of social chaos in an attempt to reduce social anxiety and subcultural interstitiality (a threat to a community’s ideological and social boundaries). Many legends attempt to restore cultural identity in the face of the anonymity of industrialized culture. For example, Brunvand (1981) conveys the story of the ‘Red Velvet Cake’, in which a woman requests a cake recipe from a chef at New York’s Waldorf Astoria hotel. Upon receiving the recipe and a bill for US$350 from the chef, the woman decides to avenge the chef’s clearly capitalistic and selfish act by duplicating the recipe and giving it to as many people as possible. The woman sought kindness and fellowship in a world of greed and anonymity.

Bronner (1986) contends that urban legends and folklore studies illustrate visions of our national heritage, and are therefore influences on the public imagination. Studying folktales allows us to see our culture in all its depth and palpability by reminding us of the diversity of cultural expression that surrounds us. The mass media perform this expressive cultural function as well. The media can perpetuate the circulation of urban legends, according
to Dorson (1968) and Brunvand (1981), who argue that, whether or not the media discredit or authenticate these stories, they flourish with widespread media attention. The more the legends circulate, the more they are discussed, until ‘the unverified oral report of a supposed published news story may itself become an element of folklore’ (Brunvand, 1981: 153).

Indeed, Dégh (1994) claims that the media can ‘liberate’ folktales from their confinement to low culture. She argues that the mediated transmission of oral folklore and legend lends it an authoritative character as the authentic voice of all humankind. Witness the seriousness with which email alerts of computer viruses are taken, despite their continued recirculation and their potential debunking in numerous online forums.

Moreover, mediated legends exhibit the characteristics associated with oral folklore – they are traditional, socially relevant, and applicable to current social norms and situations. Legends that develop in contemporary literate society are narratively conceived according to not only the structures of the literate mind, but also to the storytelling qualities of the mass media, notes Dégh (1994). Urban legends in the news are ephemeral – they serve their purpose until they are old news, and they are dredged up during anniversaries or slow news days. We often hear of the razor blade in the trick-or-treat apple around Halloween. Yet, this story continues to perpetuate with the aid of the media, including the internet. And, with the immediacy of online communication, urban legends can gain new and long lives through repeated email forwarding.

Conversely, it could be concluded that the ubiquity of mass-mediated sources of communication would lessen the desire for both the performance and reception of legends if, as Jansen (1976) claims, ‘we construe the oral narrative tradition to be a situation of desirable esthetic experience’ (1976: 266). He continues by arguing that the appearance of an urban legend in the popular media tends to elicit sparks of excited recognition in audience members, who recognize the oral legend and feel its decontextualized presence in the media. He asserts that these appearances are relatively rare and that ‘there seems to be in literature or the popular media no complete counterpart to the legend’ (1976: 268). He speculates that perhaps this is due to the localized nature of urban legend and the impression of its insignificance. Clearly, this is not the case with the presence of urban legends within the CMC environment. Legends of dying children whose spirits are lifted by cards sent by legions of well-wishers are spread via email. In perhaps the most circulated version, Craig Shergold, a real boy with a brain tumor, made a dying request for get-well cards so he could appear in the Guinness Book of World Records with the most cards. This myth has been circulating since 1989, and, it has tapped into humanity’s deepest impulses of generosity. Although Craig really did have a brain tumor
and did appear in the Guinness Book with millions of cards (http://www.snopes2.com), the myth has been recirculated incessantly with new names and new afflictions. Innocent children stricken with terrible diseases are emblematic of chaos in the contemporary world, and the legend of Craig Shergold provokes our sense of fear, injustice, and pity. The tenacity of this urban legend demonstrates the capability of an enduring unfairness – an ill child – to resonate across cultures and through time. 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 (which are occasionally true) are often debated seriously, forwarded again and again, and responded to overwhelmingly. Moreover, the people who receive these legends on email, respond to them, and forward them, 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. But the informality, repetitive structure, concrete detail, quotidian content, and empathetic nature of urban legends in cyberspace illustrates the connection that people feel to them as stories of the human condition.

In another example, the following exchange from alt.folklore.urban about an international conversation about tainted Halloween candy takes on a somewhat serious and analytical tone.

**Newsgroups: alt.folklore.urban**
**Subject: Poisoned Halloween candy: urban legend?**
**From: Tommy** (19 March, 1994)
The stories of significant random poisonings of candy on Halloween is an urban legend. In the alt.folklore.urban FAQ, the relevant lines are:
False: Halloween sadists randomly give poisoned candy to children.
True: A Texas child was poisoned by his father on Halloween in 1974.
[Jan Harold] Brunvand . . . reports that the FDA 'studied 270 potential candy-adulteration cases and found only 5 percent indicated any actual tampering. An FDA official described the fear of Halloween sadists as ‘psychosomatic mass hysteria.’
– Tommy ‘MMMMM . . . candy’ Carpenter, Berkeley, California

**Subject: Poisoned Halloween candy: urban legend?**
**From: Don Thomas** (19 March, 1994)
[T]here have also been occasions where food has been poisoned for the purpose of blackmail. I can remember ‘mercury in oranges’, where a very few oranges from a certain country were injected with mercury. This caused major panic throughout the UK even though very few oranges had in fact been injected. So few that I think the only ones found were the ones planted to prove that it could be done.
– Don ‘only use from a sealed bottle’ Thomas, Fujitsu, New Zealand
Subject: Poisoned Halloween candy: urban legend?  
From: Renee (21 March, 1994)  
I know of a case in Framingham, MA, around 1974, [where] a girl sitting across from me in the cafeteria at school broke open a Reese’s peanut butter cup she had received for Halloween and found a pin inside.

Subject: Poisoned Halloween candy: urban legend?  
From: Aaron (22 March, 1994)  
‘According to Joel Best, a sociologist at California State University at Fresno, the poisoned candy at Halloween scare stories are hokum. After an exhaustive search of newspaper clips from 1958 through 1987, Best found no evidence that Halloween treats had killed or seriously harmed children. Of 77 reported cases of tampering, 10 involved minor injuries, and Best suspects that most were hoaxes by youngsters who wanted attention. Accounts of Halloween sadism, Best said, are largely ‘urban folklore.’ Source: U.S. News & World Report, Oct. 31, 1988

Subject: Poisoned Halloween candy: urban legend?  
From: Marc White (23 March, 1994)  
A 15-year-old boy was arrested by Ottawa police for spiking Halloween candy with toilet bowl cleaner, apparently inspired by the Tylenol poisonings. So note carefully: the false urban legend is that Halloween poisonings are a significant part of the urban landscape. It HAS happened at least once or twice. Nevertheless, your chance of encountering it is negligible, and the basic premise IS false.  
– Marc ‘incoherent from lack of sleep, not from poisoned candy’ White

This exchange was fostered by a concern over the safety of home-baked goods being offered for sale, which developed into an educated discussion of tainted candy urban legends as well as a display of ‘real life’ cases. Media sources are cited in many of the posts in this exchange and, despite the silly puns in some participants’ signature files, the discussion seems fraught with significance – not only in the debate about the veracity of this particular ‘urban legend’, but also in the caveat inherent in the discussion that we should be cautious consumers since documented candy-adulteration cases were cited. Food adulteration legends are often spread throughout these discussion groups and through email forwards because they are captivating stories. Tales of narrowly avoiding the consumption of dangerous or disgusting food (including the myth of the Kentucky-fried rat or chicken head found in a box of take-out chicken) resonate across cultures and across community boundaries. These legends are extraordinary yet plausible; they are often told in an authoritative voice, with sufficient detail to arouse the element of truth. To the extent that these legends address deep fears about acts of evil being disguised as kindness (whether stories of candy adulteration or the Big Bad Wolf), they function as a way for us to examine issues of trust in our culture. We explore the boundaries and limitations of our humanity through the negotiation of the meaning of urban legends. The
stories are conveyed and reconveyed as true events, and thus may have an impact that goes beyond conceptions of cultural identity. For example, Llewellyn (1996–7) warns public relations personnel that urban legends can contribute to the public’s opinion about an institution or company, potentially influencing business profits. Since urban legends can spread rapidly in cyberspace, tales of fried rats could affect fast food sales or expensive biscuit or cake recipes could create negative associations with the department stores that sell them.

Wyckoff (1993) contends that:

> how any item of folklore functions within a society or community can only be inferred from observation of textual content, performance situation, and the item’s apparent but less readily definable relationship to the worldview of the society which generates and employs it. (1993: 24)

Arguably, we tend to think of legends as developing from illiterate, pre-industrial folk society that die out in literate, industrial society; but these tales survive in the media and in cyberspace. They thrive because their messages are universal, and they speak to the fragility of human existence, using an unconstrained style reminiscent of rumor, anecdote, or even autobiography (Dég, 1994). The retelling of American urban legends within cyberspace can be an entertaining popular cultural statement among online users. In the above example, the alt.folklore.urban members inject some humor into the serious discussion about human vulnerabilities (death or illness from tainted candy provided by deviant individuals), and they use rumors and anecdotes about cases of candy adulteration as well as an eyewitness account (the pin in the schoolmate’s candy). However, these urban legends can also offer a critique of consumer culture. As tales of food adulteration are told and analyzed in online discussion groups, email messages, and websites, they become a part of the public sphere of debate. Thus, the perpetuation and analysis of these legends may indicate the empowerment that some users feel, resulting from the use of the internet as a device to enter that sphere on an equal footing. The telling and retelling of the Red Velvet Cake legend (which has morphed into the Neiman-Marcus cookie recipe tale) is a repetition of a narrative of corporate greed/social deviance which may serve as a form of resistance to the capitalist paradigm. Whether these legends are a form of social critique, enculturation, or pop entertainment, some of the functions of oral folklore cited by Ben-Amos (1992) and Dég (1994) are clearly occurring within cyberspace.

CONTEMPORARY ORAL CULTURE
The development of new technologies does not demand, or even necessarily contribute, to the obsolescence of existing ones. Writing cannot supplant oral communication, although it has replaced it in certain communicative
contexts and has even helped to create new ones. Similarly, the electronic media ‘are only substitutes for oral and written communication in certain contexts and are always dependent on them, just as writing is dependent on the oral use of language, which remains the primary means of human communication’ (Goody, 1992: 12). Today the oral tradition evident in songs, poems, stories, and tales in literate societies is exemplified by the Grimm Brothers’ 19th century German fairytales – a popular folk tradition that emanated from the written tradition of high culture. Thus, while the oral tradition remains vibrant, it is nonetheless subordinate to the literate tradition. The ultimate intellectual or truthful authority in contemporary literate societies is the printed word (Goody, 1992; Havelock, 1991; Postman, 1985).

Indeed, the printed word is a permanent record; the oral performance is not. Ong (1982) refers to the ‘evanescence’ of orality – oral utterances are ephemeral and continually disappearing. Their veracity is questioned, their legitimacy is doubted, and their reproduction is fraught with inaccuracy. Each of these characteristics can be noted in the discussions of urban legends in cyberspace bulletin boards and in websites focusing on urban legends. But the orality of the urban legends (and their online retransmission and analysis) transcends a text-based orality; that is, the text is not the only element central to a formal analysis of these legends as they exist in cyberspace. Their performance and reception in space and time are elements crucial to the constitution of computer-mediated urban legends as a form of orality within cyberspace. These legends are oral in original composition, yet their transmission and performance have written characteristics within the medium and cultural environment of CMC. Therefore, the mediated nature of these oral tales within cyberspace can lend them the air of legitimacy and authority that Dégh (1994) mentions. So many of these legends are sufficiently authoritative that there are a plethora of web sites created for users to check the veracity of an urban legend, such as snopes.com, urbanlegends.com, and the Urban Legends Resource Center at http://www.ulrc.com.au. The FAQ of alt.folklore.urban also indicates that its scope recently expanded to include the ‘confirming or disproving’ of urban legends. Some of these sites document the earliest known origins of an urban legend and discuss whether a particular legend has any basis in reality. Whereas the appearance of a particular urban legend in a newspaper article might convey authority on the substance of the myth itself, so might its analysis on these websites. The snopes site, for example, distinguishes between ‘true’ legends, ‘false’ legends, and ‘items of undetermined or ambiguous veracity.’

Further, electronic media technology has brought humankind into the age of what Ong (1982) calls ‘secondary orality’. It is a re-emergence of an oral character in communication that represents a blend of literate, oral, and
electronic cultures in contemporary discourse. This form of orality resembles traditional oral culture in its ‘participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas’ (Ong, 1982: 136), but it is more circumspect and self-conscious in its basis in the use of writing and print:

Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience, just as reading written or printed texts turns individuals in on themselves. But secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture – McLuhan’s ‘global village.’ Moreover, before writing, oral folk were group-minded because no feasible alternative had presented itself. In our age of secondary orality, we are group-minded self-consciously and programmatically. (1982: 136)

Ong senses an intense change in the character of orality in the time progression from pre-literate to literate society. He argues that the move from orality into print and electronic expression has deeply altered the course of the verbal arts, including plot development and characterization. This line of thinking is evident in the urban legend genre. The character of oral storytelling is prevalent in urban legends themselves. Consider this example from the Urban Legends discussion group on OneNet:

From: Francis Barrett
Subject: Car Legends
To: Urban Legends
There’s the $500 Ferrari story: Guy who’s always wanted a Ferrari sees one advertised in the paper for $500. Calls the number, and the woman who answers tells him no, it’s not a misprint, and no, it’s not a basket case, in fact it’s just a year old and in perfect shape and was detailed last month. He stops at the ATM and goes out there, gives here the cash and she signs over the pink slip. Then he asks why the car was only $500. She says her husband ran off to Bermuda with his secretary and told her to sell the Ferrari and send him the money.

The rhetoric of urban legends, like oral storytelling, is generally meticulous and artful. Both thought and expression in oral cultures is highly organized, albeit according to principles of organization that can be alien to the mind shaped by literacy. This oral form of organization is aggregative, classificatory, reliant on proverb and meter, and is less abstract and distanced than forms of organization present in written culture. Redundancy, cliché, linearity, concrete references to what already exists, and empathy characterize tales in oral societies (Ong, 1982). We see these forms present in urban legends as well; the US$500 Ferrari story was repeated several times within the Urban Legends OneNet forum, and each variation mentioned a specific location of the story and exhibited the same tendencies.
toward linear narrative, the cliché, of ‘getting something for nothing’, and empathy toward the wife for the actions of her husband. This pattern is also evident in e-mail forwards of urban legends, including the Neiman-Marcus cookie recipe story. Tannen (1987) finds that orality and literacy are not dichotomous, but entwined in ways that allow the reader/hearer to construct meaning personally and effectively. 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.

CYBERSPACE AS A SITE FOR ORAL CULTURE

Urban legends in cyberspace are performed and transmitted in textual form via CMC. This leads us to develop questions about the culture of cyberspace – how it might differ, anthropologically, socially and literally from ‘physical’ culture, and how those differences shape the making of meaning. One of these questions is raised by Escobar (1994), who contemplates the changes in relationships between communication, language, social structures, and cultural identities as a result of the proliferation of CMC. As cyber-interactions are mediated by computer technology, group and individual communicative practices change, authenticity or legitimacy must be reassessed, and new symbolic strategies accommodate the form of cyber-literacy. Escobar speculates that the Information Age marks the discarding of writing as the ‘dominant intellectual technology’, if indeed literacy and its logic had replaced orality and its concomitant mode of thought. The Information Age, according to Escobar, makes information pre-eminent over forms of knowledge associated with writing (such as theoretical and hermeneutical knowledge); thus, electronic communication has transformed linguistic experiences and expression through language. Escobar’s argument is lodged in the macrosocial orientation cultural anthropology (and media history) toward culture; orality within cyberspace, then, can be regarded as a systemic phenomenon that illustrates the complexity of cultural forms within the CMC environment. CMC can also represent what Langham (1994) refers to as a ‘revolution’ in human cognition. Real-time writing in cyberspace allows us to communicate rapidly with one another in speeds commensurate with thought and with oral storytelling. Orality within cyberspace is somewhat ambiguous – as argued above, the performance and reception of urban legends are written while their original composition is oral. But their transmission and analysis within online bulletin boards and email has a dimension of orality about it. This section of dialogue (on H-
FILM, a moderated list) about the existence of ‘snuff’ films illustrates this oral dimension.

From: Justin Guilford (28 May, 1994)
To: H-FILM
Subject: Snuff Films
If by a ‘snuff film’ you mean a motion picture in which a woman is actually killed, presumably for the enjoyment of those viewing, I have seen or heard of no evidence that such a thing exists or has ever existed. Of course, with readily available video cameras these days, there’s no telling what one or more sick individuals may have done for their own ‘enjoyment,’ but if you’re referring to something that is commercially available, then I would say no.

From: Robert Williams (4 June, 1994)
To: H-FILM
Subject: Re: S’nuff
What is it that makes talking about and imagining snuff films so compelling? Does it have something to do with a visceral, pre-conscious sense we all have of the power of film to commit transgression against both the object of the camera’s gaze and against the viewer? The camera as production-tool that relentlessly exposes, denudes, reveals; and the screen that we must watch, and that can force its vision upon us, can compel us to see even that which we would rather not see. I’m reminded of Brakhage’s ‘The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes’ [was that the title?], a forty-minute silent color film of autopsies, shot fairly close. And the power of film to make something jump out at us, whether the beast or the horrific detail, and evoke a visceral response in a way that no other temporal art can quite equal.

From: Justin Guilford (6 June, 1994)
To: H-FILM
Subject: Re: S’nuff!
[Both sides agree that snuff has become the stuff of urban legend. As used by anthropologists and some others, the term refers to socially-constructed belief which exists in narrative form and is believed because it meets some need for the individual/community/society that believes it. A myth, from this perspective, may or may not have some basis in objective historical fact. From the view of the anthropologist, it doesn’t really matter. Maybe that’s the common ground. Even those who believe that snuff is real will also acknowledge that is has a mythic element, and, certainly, those of us who do not believe snuff exists are nonetheless able to deal with it on a mythic level. One can, after all, study ghost stories without believing in ghosts.

Actually, I don’t believe that people on either side of the ‘snuff’ question are dealing with the reality (if there is one, which I doubt). Those who disbelieve in snuff can deal with it on a mythic level. Those who do believe in snuff could deal with it on a mythic level (and some do) but most prefer to deal with it on a rhetorical level—that is, the supposed existence of snuff is used as support for arguments, e.g. ‘Snuff exists, therefore we need greater controls on pornography, of which snuff is merely the most extreme form’ or ‘Snuff exists, which proves that men objectify women to the ultimate degree,’ etc. [If] snuff films existed, it would be possible to trace them back to the point of origin.
Even though they would be exhibited clandestinely, word still has to get around. It’s a bit like the situation with kiddie porn . . . The people who sell it can’t do so openly, but they have to get the word out somehow, or they can’t do business. And kiddie porn dealers (and producers) get busted all the time. But you never hear of someone getting busted, either here or abroad, for snuff.

The dialogic quality of this discourse is distinctly oral; it exhibits the character of a conversation rather than a written exchange. It meanders around subtopics and has a conversational tone. But the form of this discussion is only one aspect of orality present in this discourse – respondents raise questions about the origination and transmission of the snuff film urban legend, discuss its cultural and ontological significance, and participate in a type of exchange that is present only within cyberculture. Shank and Cunningham (1996) support this contention in their work on the uniqueness of communication on the internet. They argue that online communicative structures create a type of culture that differs from both oral and literate cultures by changing not only the mode of communication but also the way the writer and reader interact with it. The myth of the existence of snuff films is a persistent urban legend, and its continual retransmission and debate over its truth speak to the function of this story. Snuff films point to a darkness in human nature, and the myth is believable to those who perceive a world of the bizarre and extraordinary rather than the mundane. The respondents in this H-FILM forum perpetuate the myth through their analysis; they question its veracity, but are captivated by its possibilities. The believability of the snuff film urban legend is further enhanced for some of these participants by their relationship to the source conveying the myth. Hearing about snuff films from each other and from scholars increases the authenticity of the legend, giving it a semblance of truth.

Other scholars have explored this type of discourse that is conceived and composed textually, yet contains elements of orality. Ross (1994) and Reid (1994) both examined real-time virtual communities known as MUDs (multi-user domains), and found that oral competencies govern much of the textualized discourse found in cyberspace. MUD users converse with one another, play roles, engage in virtual sex, and ostracize one another, all through textual exchange. Emotions and other non-verbal cues are textualized in cyberspace through detailed description and through emoticons; the understandings of these conventions and of the conventions of etiquette that govern online communication are based on notions of polite face-to-face interaction. For example, messages on Usenet groups should not be overly profane or long-winded. Langham (1994) claims that the ‘reality’ of virtual systems is not based on their similarity to physical existence, but to their ability to structure an everyday experience of ordinary behaviors.
These characteristics of communication within cyberspace, coupled with interesting questions raised about the nature of online cultural constructions, indicate that the realm of CMC is a site of oral culture, albeit an oral culture with distinctly print characteristics. Among the urban legends discussion groups, both the form and content of the messages, as well as the structural elements that define the culture of the groups themselves, lend a dimension of orality to CMC as both an electronic communications medium and as an extended cultural environment. The participants in these discussions create a type of cultural exchange based in oral culture – its performative aspects, linear narrative structure, casual tone – and all the while they propagate the legends that they are analyzing.

Even without sufficient information to discredit a story, people often retell through email forwards urban legends that they suspect might be false to ‘cover the bases’ in case the story is true. The legend may not be credible enough to transmit to someone face-to-face, but the immediacy and ephemerality of CMC allows the user to distribute the legend and participate in the ritual of storytelling without much effort. For example, warnings about computer viruses are routinely transmitted via email. The ‘Good Times’ virus warning, one of the most widespread urban legends regarding computing, first circulated in 1994 (US Department of Energy, 1995) with the text:

Here is some important information. Beware of a file called Goodtimes. Happy Chanukah everyone, and be careful out there. There is a virus on America Online being sent by E-Mail. If you get anything called ‘Good Times’, DON’T read it or download it. It is a virus that will erase your hard drive. Forward this to all your friends. It may help them a lot.

This urban legend capitalized on the ignorance of many computer users in its assertion that malicious code is somehow embedded into the body of an email message with powerful destructive capabilities that can obliterate a computer’s hard drive. The creation and circulation of ‘Good Times’ virus myth speak to our dependence on computers in our daily lives, as well as the mystique many of us feel toward them. Fear over losing the indispensable computer, desires to control the unpredictability of technology, and the impulse to assert our own strength by warning others of trouble all combine to craft a gripping story with which we can identify.

Computer virus urban legends include a moralistic component that makes certain urban legends persist. Warnings about computer viruses evoke themes of risk, peril, and trust. Bell (2001) associates the panic surrounding computer viruses with metaphors of vulnerability, illness, and contagion. The computer, like the body, is susceptible to viruses that weaken our abilities. The relationship of body and machine is an enduring subject of cyberpunk literature, philosophical discourse, medical quandary, and oral
folklore. Computer virus urban legends maintain their vitality because they address themes that are significant to individuals, businesses, and governments, and across cultures, in the global information age.

CONCLUSION
We tend to think of oral culture and literate culture as distinctly different, but as Finnegan (1988) contends, the dichotomy is often false because orality and literacy

take diverse forms in differing cultures and periods, are used differently in different social contexts and, insofar as they can be distinguished at all as separate modes rather than a continuum, they mutually interact and affect each other and the relations between them are problematic rather than self-evident. (1988: 175)

Thus, the impact of orality and literacy as technologies is still amorphous. The online environment is still being shaped in terms of its use as an oral and print medium. Finnegan’s caveat continues, as she claims that the advent of new communication technologies defy us to rethink our notions about the interplay between communicating and representing information. She urges us to move beyond the ‘oral’ and ‘written’ dichotomy, because it confines our ability to discern the true character of human experience and expression.

Urban legends have found their way into the media for years, and this form of retelling the stories is a means for oral popular culture to survive and prosper in an increasingly media-saturated society. It is a way of holding onto a culturally-relevant oral tradition. The existence of urban legends in cyberspace is indicative of our attempts to ensure the continuity of tradition while embracing change. We are reminding ourselves who we are in the midst of social, cultural, economic, and political changes fostered by rapid developments in global communications. This function may not be conscious, but it is a way of balancing the entertainment of oral storytelling and the legends themselves against the seriousness of the computer communications revolution. According to Jansen:

The legend experience is a fairly intimate, private part of living. It is something available to everyone. It is the most vital part of that folk culture, of that oral tradition which enables the individual to feel he [sic] is a living part of an organic community whose life blood is humanity and sociability instead of gears and computer numbers. (1976: 272)

This statement is interesting in light of rampant claims that cyberspace contains its own form of community – a means for the disconnected to become connected in communities that transcend time and space. All communities need elements of the oral tradition, and the presence of urban
legends within the CMC environment adds a colorful dimension to orality in cyberspace. But, while the oral tradition continues to proliferate in cyberspace, it goes beyond Ong’s (1982) description of ‘secondary orality’ in which the audience is absent or unseen. Participants in the online oral tradition can antagonize one another, vehemently assert their positions in a debate, and converse in a rhetorical style consistent with Ong’s notions of primary orality. At the same time, however, the textual interface and lack of face-to-face interaction in cyberspace demands that we recognize the limitations of CMC as a medium of orality. Whether we regard CMC as just another communication technology or as its own cultural environment, we must recognize that questions about new social constructions of reality – how they are negotiated, how they are constituted and bounded – are being raised. Perhaps the vast impact of communication technologies on human consciousness asserted by Ong, McLuhan, Havelock, and Postman need to be reconsidered in less teleological terms. As mediated human communication becomes more and more non-linear, decentralized, and rooted in multimedia, the distinction between orality and literacy becomes less evident and less important. The proliferation of urban legends online demonstrates the idea that cyberspace can serve as a locus for a primary oral culture and its attendant ‘humanity and sociability’ in a simultaneously textual environment.

Notes
1 Participants’ names have been changed but the text is unedited.

References


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