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Tangled in the Web:
Storytelling, Communication, and Controversy

D o you have time for adventure, have an interest in storytelling, and have access to a computer equipped with a modem, Web browser, phone line, and an ISP (Internet Service Provider)? If you have answered "yes," then adventure awaits: exploring storytelling in cyberspace.

Let me give you a feel for the possibilities of cyberspace exploration by introducing three quite different cyberspace adventurers, all of whom share a love of storytelling.

We'll begin with an octogenarian from a retirement community in Arizona, who used to count among his favorite activities both mountain climbing and accompanying his wife to storytelling festivals. Today his mobility is severely limited, but he still enjoys traveling to storytelling festivals through festival Web sites as he sits in front of his bedroom computer. Four years ago, he told his son he'd never have use for a "fancy" computer and modem; now he's found new ways to communicate and to explore the world from home. He even gets his youngest grandchild involved in Web browsing. They rank highly the Web site of the *Smithsonian Magazine,* which features an article on the National Storytelling Festival (Watson) and includes colorful graphics, photos of tellers, and a recording of Don Davis telling a story. Web site visitors can either listen to Davis' entire (30-minute) story or to shorter audio clips. (A visitor who has never previously explored audio on the Web will find complete instructions on free downloading of the RealPlayer for audio.)

Next let's travel to south Texas, where an energetic young teacher involves her fifth-grade class in a unit on storytelling by having them pose questions to the subscribers of STORYTELL, the Internet listserv (a discussion group carried by electronic mail) dedicated to dialogue about storytelling. The students get caught up in the excitement of the Internet's interactivity and the involvement of people, not just from the United States

but from around the world. These potential future tellers engage with their elders in the sharing of information and advice. The listserv members who become involved with this topic (or thread, in the language of the Internet) are strong storytelling advocates who appear eager to mentor the youngsters. Their teacher's enthusiasm for storytelling keeps her open to postings on the listserv of new activities and new stories for the students. In the summer of 1997, several of this teacher's fifth graders were invited to tell at a state-wide, educational conference on storytelling and impressed conference attendees with their story selections and skill in telling.

My final cyberspace adventurer is a busy Californian, a part-time youth services librarian and part-time teller, whose morning fix involves drinking the day's first cup of coffee while reading recent postings on Internet listservs and newsgroups. She often clicks her Web browser to the homepages of other tellers to see updates on their sites. Participating in forums devoted to storytelling renews her connections with others who care as much as she does for this ancient art form. It matters to her that she contributes to the ongoing dialogue about storytelling in cyber-space, and she has found herself particularly drawn to the controversies of censorship and story ownership. Told more than once that she could not tell stories that included mention of witches, spirits, or devils, this woman may click to the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom Web page or follow ALAOIF, the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom listserv.

For storytellers, story listeners, and lovers of stories, becoming tangled in the Web involves as many opportunities and ensnarements as there are interested individuals. The Internet has locations which provide recommended stories for specific occasions or projects, traditional story openings and closings, articles on and about diverse storytelling topics, and a variety of full-text versions of stories, legends, tall tales, and even story jokes, riddles, and tongue twisters. The information may be provided directly in the archives of an Internet listserv, at a particular Web site or through hypertext links (highlighted text or graphics) to many other Web pages.

Threads on listservs—such as STORYTELL or FOLKLORE—or on Usenet newsgroups (open electronic discussion forums)—such as alt.arts.storytelling, alt.folklore.info, or alt.folklore.urban—may provide stories and information not readily available elsewhere. Since STORYTELL's announced purpose, from its creation in January of 1995, was to be a tool for sustaining and supporting the interests and needs of lovers of the oral tradition and of storytellers around the world at all levels of interests and abilities, it has never been used as a vehicle by individuals who want feedback on their writing skills as alt.arts.storytelling often is. More than other listservs or groups, STORYTELL has become the "home"

on the Internet for storytellers. In my informal survey of the STORYTELL archives, I encountered numerous contributions to a wide variety of discussion threads, including discussions of STORYTELL itself. In May of 1997, one listserv subscriber stated, "STORYTELL is an international association" (Miller). It is a popular and active list, often with 50 or more messages a day, and has been active since it was established by the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman's University. It had over 270 subscribers five months after its creation and today maintains a consistent list of about 400. This number includes individuals as well as library and other institutional subscribers.

The ongoing and sometimes heated discussions, as well as the exchange of stories, on STORYTELL and other cybergroups may redefine what it means to be a storyteller today and could possibly be responsible for reshaping storytelling organizations tomorrow. The open and wide-ranging discussions that have been on-going in cyberspace for the past three years chart a different course from the past. First, the conversations have been free and open to everyone able to access cyberspace. Next, all participants have equal voice and equal opportunity to participate in discussions, raising issues as they see fit, not according to a large organization's agenda. Because there is no structured hierarchy in cyberspace dialogue, more voices are heard and more issues continue to be raised and debated in an open forum than ever before. Finally, the communication and collaboration among diverse people concerned with storytelling from around the world have raised the awareness and consciousness of all on a variety of issues.

Some of the debates on STORYTELL have featured "...intriguing ideas and sometimes tedious hair-splitting" (Schmidt). Discussions have covered such complex issues as censorship of stories by others and by deliberate omission, story ownership, copyright, and the ethics of storytelling. Participants have weighed in on such diverse topics as storytellers' health concerns, which include dehydration, exhaustion, and voice protection; stage presence, who has it, and how it can be developed; and the business of storytelling, such as establishing fees, using microphones, and writing mission statements, brochures, and contracts. Questions, comments, suggestions, and criticisms are raised about techniques, style, and story attributions of nationally famous tellers. Additionally, criticism has been leveled at local organizations and national associations which exist to support storytelling. Sacred cows have been discussed, poked, prodded, and sometimes butchered and barbecued. Activity in the real world has followed that in the virtual world: two years after subscribers to STORYTELL spent many months debating definitions of storytelling and what it means to be a storyteller, a committee of the National Storytelling Association took up the issue. This committee is now attempting to come up with some nationally accepted definitions. Conversations in cyberspace may

stimulate and provoke in multiple directions, even providing inspiration for some to create stories or tell differently or simply to keep telling stories. (All messages posted to STORYTELL can be found in its archives, housed on the Texas Woman's University Web site, and can be searched from remote sites by keywords or downloaded in bundles organized chronologically).

Part of STORYTELL's success lies in its sustained focus on the subject of storytelling with continuous conversations in cyberspace among regular contributors and virtual passers-by. Participants say that the structured conversations have enriched their lives and acted as a powerful professional development tool. The importance of listservs like STORYTELL can be best expressed by participants. Sharon Johnson said, "Personally, I feel that it is a wonderful means of communication for kindred spirits, a way to learn more about various aspects of storytelling, a method for helping others, and a discussion mechanism for issues and ideas of major and minor importance." Elizabeth Gibson added that, for herself, STORYTELL had brought "joy in the ease of real-time communication with a number of people," and, she continued, "I can read and take part in some very interesting discussions on storytelling issues. The discussions do not always agree, but they give air to some of the concerns, ideas, and diverse points of view. . . . it is just nice to know that there are others out there facing the same lions you are." Said Lois Sprengnether, "STORYTELL and FOLKLORE both give access to source material and resource people I need, whether it's finding a lost story, or exercises to use with a group of student storytellers, or just that great on-going feeling of camaraderie that says I'm not alone." Another aspect of participation in STORYTELL is revealed in Chuck Larkin's comments: "I have been performing now for 25 years. I have a responsibility to pass on knowledge to the next generation of tellers. The Internet allows me to read current issues and to both pass on my experience and pick up new nuggets of knowledge. This provides for a rapid exchange of information with more people and for less expense then any other form of communication covering the same number of participants" (Johnson).

The reading of listserv messages goes on at all hours of the day and night: one person in front of his/her own computer screen, accessing messages, one at a time, all over the world. Normally this is a solitary act, yet paradoxically it is also a public one. The act of reading these messages deepens connections with others concerned about storytelling in the larger world. Jaye McLaughlin, a public librarian for the city of Fort Worth, Texas, explains that she particularly appreciates STORYTELL because of the "international input and questions which keep our limited outlook from here in the U.S. expanding" (Conversation). Surprising to some, especially in light of contentious debates on the list, a spirit of coopera-

tion, collaboration, and community has developed among users of STORYTELL. Some subscribers frequently post to the list, others "lurk" and never post public messages. Yet all seem to carry on "side conversations"; subscribers send e-mail messages off-list to continue discussions begun on the list, to congratulate someone on a comment or entire message well-phrased, to ask a question privately, and much more. An interesting phenomenon has occurred among subscribers to STORYTELL: some frequently post announcements of upcoming events, others announce intentions to attend, and later meetings at events are arranged. People who have only known each other through e-mail begin to meet face-to-face; networking begun in cyberspace continues in person. STORYTELLers (as list members call themselves) regularly make arrangements to meet at festivals and workshops. Since most don't know one another by sight but only through their participation on the storytelling listserv, they wear neon-colored pins or badges that say "STORYTELL-er" for purposes of identification.

Tactics to Untangle the Web

When you get tangled in the Web, is it difficult to unearth available storytelling sites, activities, and resources? How do you keep on top of changes? Although, as professionals, we know we need to stay abreast of new developments, we also know that change is constant and remains an integral component of the Internet/Web world. Knowing how to search rather than exact places to search is of key importance. This necessitates experimenting with different ways to search, which means coming to know and even love search engines. These devices enable us to deal with the nearly 100 million pages that are on the Web today (Cuvelier 59). The sheer volume of information can be staggering. Creating "bookmarks" or keeping a list of URLs (Universal Resource Locators) of Web pages and Internet resources may help, but familiar locations may suddenly move, disappear, or become temporarily inaccessible. If the secret of success is how well we deal with "Plan B" after "Plan A" fails, we better have such contingency plans available when our "search-strands" become tangled. Since there exists no centralized catalog of Internet/Web resources available and no one single place to find what you need, searchers need to remain flexible. Search engines such as Yahoo!, Lycos, Excite, Alta Vista and Infoseek help organize the chaos. All the search engines operate somewhat differently, so spending time becoming familiar with each can be considered time well spent. Respect their differences and use various ones according to your purposes and your students' needs. Yahoo!, for example, provides results in matches divided by categories, such as arts, entertainment, and science, and includes Web pages, listservs and their archives, Usenet newsgroups, events, and more. All the search engines

can be accessed for free while exploring the Web. Purchasing one or more of the various published guides to Web sites may help student searching. Copyright date is of tremendous importance; buy the most current edition of such guides as *Most Popular Web Sites: The Best of the Net from A2Z.*

Searching the archives of major universities and folklore collections can result in grand adventures of discovery for Internet/Web explorers. Let's say you want to tell a story which comes from your deepest Southern roots. Unifying the story with a song of which you only have a fragmentary memory may be a challenge that you want to take up. Your information is sketchy with regard to the song, yet you feel it would add an important dimension to your story. You know only that the song involves "riding the rails." You also remember that your mama's second cousin used to sing it, and he was a hobo during the Great Depression. You ask yourself if you can find the song, fit it with your story, and make all the components work. Can exploring in cyberspace help? Maybe. There may be an exact fit or just an adventure in the search. Try going to the Web pages of the Southern Folklife Collection, where you'll find information about gospel and spiritual songs, Southeastern blues traditions, or links to Doc Watson's page to hear him perform "Blue Railroad Train." This may work, or there may be other answers for you still to be drawn from the tangled Web of Internet sources. This approach may work in building story repertoire or creating curriculum tie-ins at all grade levels. Imagine interested students carrying out assignments involving history, literature, and music as they search the Web, constructing meaning through the text and multimedia to be found there.

There are large numbers of locations from which to start cyberspace adventuring. Harvard University, for example, maintains an extensive list of links to folklore archives, folklore journals, folklore societies (both paper and electronic), folklore publishers, information guides, and other web sites. One link from the Harvard site of particular interest to anyone working with students from kindergarten through high school is the *AskEric InfoGuide: Folk and Fairy Tales.*

Another valuable source for stories on the Web is *The Children's Literature Web Guide.* Look at its Folklore, Myth, and Legend page. With its many links to other locations on the Web, this impressive site facilitates ongoing searches. From here you can connect to folklore reference sources such as the *Encyclopedia Mythica* for information on legendary creatures, monsters, and the gods and goddesses of world mythology. Anyone interested in working on comparative studies of Cinderella variants can find links to variants of tale type 510A on *The Children's Literature Web Guide,* as well as other links to a text and image archive of English-language Cinderellas, published between 1729 and 1912. Kay Vandergrift's fine

Web site on Snow White has its own link here. Other links connect to traditional stories from Sioux to Sufi traditions, to Aesop's fables, and to the literary tales of Hans Christian Andersen.

Resources on the Web can help enrich students' assigned work. Often, school writing assignments are orally presented when they are in their final form; this presents opportunities for us to suggest storytelling techniques as a method of story creation or the use of storytelling skills in the actual oral presentation. Today more (wise) teachers are collaborating with each other and with their librarians. They instruct students in the use of storytelling techniques to select, learn, frame, and tell stories better. Not surprisingly, teachers find they are receiving better "final products" after this exposure and perhaps some storytelling coaching. Why not take this one or two steps further? Try persuading social studies and English teachers to work with students on developing and telling family stories that are infused with history-based details. Some of these family stories may be set against the backdrop of larger historical events. Focus on these stories adds value to the individual's and family's experiential circumstances. Librarians could help in the crafting of stories and serve as adviser to Web searching for the purpose of adding accurate period details. Information can be pulled from such Web sites as *The Sixties* or *The Vietnam War History Page* to become part of the students' stories. Students who want to tell of their grandparents' (or great-grandparents') Holocaust experiences during World War II should find the Web site of the *United States Holocaust Museum* invaluable. A museum that uses story exquisitely, its site includes annotated videos, transcripts of the Nuremberg Trials, photographic archives, and much more. Also effective for use with students may be an article on "Telling Family Stories," which can be downloaded from the Web site of storyteller Miriam Nadel. For the adults working with student storytellers, some of the articles on storyteller and coach Doug Lipman's Web pages may be of service.

Some teachers and librarians may want to explore connections between storytelling, readers' theater, or drama with their students. The Web can link students to theater sites as well as provide readers' theater scripts. Teachers may find useful *ERIC InfoGuides* and lesson plans for creative dramatics. Barry McWilliam's *Elderbarry's Storytelling Home Page* has links to all this, plus links to a detailed definition of storytelling by Chuck Larkin and connections to many professional organizations and to other storytellers' Web sites, which leads to more entangled links. Similarly generous in the amount of information made available is Doug Lipman's Web site, which includes Janice Del Negro's "Recent Storytelling Titles," other bibliographies, and articles on performing, stimulating student story creation, telling to children, and the coaching of storytellers. Put the phrase "storytelling ring" into a search engine like Alta Vista and

get an electronic version of that old library standby, the pathfinder, an annotated list of books (in this case, Web sites) linked by theme and topic (in this case, storytelling and storytellers).

The Internet and the Web have grown exponentially in the past few years. Much of this growth is a result of word of mouth. (Storytellers, in particular, should easily be able to relate to this type of growth.) People become involved and committed to Internet use. It becomes an integral part of their lives just as it has with the three cyberspace explorers at the beginning of this piece. There is no doubt about the positive correlation of optimistic opinions among those who love storytelling and use the Internet and the Web. Their advice would be simple for storytellers, for lovers of storytelling, and for devotees of the oral tradition contemplating entangling themselves in the web of cyberspace. E-mail, you gotta have it! A storytelling listserv, you gotta have it! Access to storytelling Web sites, you gotta have it! As youth services professionals, even if you've been put off by the hype, frustrated by the constant change, challenged by the censors, troubled by the lack of access and financial strain, and distressed by the misinformation or the lack of documentation, you need to utilize the Internet and the Web to communicate, to defend your views, to make a difference, and to shape storytelling as we enter the twenty-first century. Ken Nickerson, in charge of Microsoft Network Canada, recently stated in an interview that "the content teams for the Internet. . . have programmers and artists, and now we've added the storyteller. . . [I]n the interactive world, storytelling is fundamentally critical, and we find ourselves with very few storytellers on the planet. And that's a shame, because storytelling is the future" (Randall 331).

Editor's Note: Texas Woman's University's STORYTELL archives can be accessed by the URL http://www.twu.edu/lists/ and then selecting STORYTELL from the lists and searching by keyword. STORYTELL quotes are used by permission; all efforts were made to contact participants.

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