Introduction

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FOLKLORE IS OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH NINETEENTH-CENTURY peasant cultures during western Europe's transition from oral to print traditions but, in fact, folklore is ongoing and ubiquitous. Every human being belongs simultaneously to varied folk groups—circles of family, religion, work, and play—that sometimes overlap and sometimes do not. A well socialized human learns the lore of each circle and learns not to mix the lore of various circles inappropriately. For the researcher and archivist, folklore breaks down into a challenging array of forms—narrative (stories, songs, jokes, cyberhoaxes, etc.), material (crafts, vernacular buildings, photocopy art), and customary (superstitions, games, dances, herb remedies), among others—that combine to reveal the values and conflicts of a society and its deepest wells of knowledge. This kind of information is no less a part of the landscape for being "underground," i.e., disseminated informally rather than formally. Gary Nabhan (1985), a southwestern ethnobotanist, discovered that collecting and categorizing seeds was just a first step toward exploring environmental science; he needed the stories of how Native Americans used the seeds to understand their medicinal and nutritional value. Science and stories enrich each other. The information we need is often coded and interpretively embedded in folklore.

Library and information science (LIS) has always played a role in folklore because of its emphasis on collection, preservation, organization, and access of information in varied formats. But vernacular information is often as elusive as it is crucial. An enormous amount of information that is communicated informally through verbal, customary, and material lore
is lost or loses meaning when taken out of context. How does the field of library and information science deal with this kind of information? Where does folklore fit into theoretical constructs such as Michael Buckland’s (1991) “Information as Thing,” which seems to extend collections to material lore but does not quite include performance of oral lore? Has the area of children’s librarianship pioneered the inclusion of oral lore in action through a century-old commitment to storytelling programs? How do folklore and popular culture qualify as information? How does technology incorporate, affect, mediate, format, and redefine folklore?

In addressing such questions about the nature of knowledge, we see that, not only does LIS play a role in folklore (through traditional areas such as archival preservation of tape and video recordings), but folklore can also play a role in LIS, where so far it has had little impact except in the form of reference tools such as the Tale Type and Motif indexes—the practical use of which, to retrieve information for patrons, does not involve librarians in the exploration and application of folkloristic theory itself. Yet folklorists are experienced in collecting, categorizing, analyzing, and interpreting informal knowledge. While “information systems” might not be a favorite folkloristic term, most folklorists are in fact investigating them.

With this idea in mind, I submitted a proposal in 1996 to the Advanced Studies Committee of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois for a doctoral seminar entitled “Folklore: From Fireplace to Cyberspace.” By 1998, when I began to teach the course, the bibliography had grown to a thicket of single-spaced pages, the packet of readings had increased by inches, and a dozen brave students had signed up for the course. On the first day, when each introduced his or her area of specialization, the range of interests crossed disciplinary boundaries of science, social science, and the humanities. Cutting-edge technologists and children’s librarians (not a mutually exclusive category, by the way) and others with contrasting backgrounds were hoping to share common ground here. Such is the nature of LIS (and folklore, as well), and such is the challenge of educating library and information scientists of the future. How to create an intellectual community among students and faculty of disparate research bases is an issue that has sundered and even sunk schools of library and information science over two decades.

Fortunately this course did not sink, but neither did it become as tightly knit a community during the semester as it did afterward when the students opted to revise their innovative papers over a six-month period for a Library Trends issue on folkloristic approaches to library and information science. While the class itself had been cordial and stimulating, the long-term joint project added a cohesion lacking in the development of individual term projects with broadly varied, if mutually enlightening, foci.
Gathering for food, wine, and stories of trauma or triumph in the course of common work creates traditions. It is not just theories that draw an intellectual community together, but experience as well—as any folklorist could tell us. Folk groups take time to form, but this course did prove that a mutual focus can integrate disciplines effectively enough to create a rich learning environment even within the confines of a classroom semester. Apart from the research value of the contributions, this Library Trends issue demonstrates the challenges of pedagogy among doctoral students in a field that is not only interdisciplinary but also changing at a meteoric pace.

The goals of the issue, then, are twofold: first, the application of one body of scholarship to another for the enrichment of both; and second, a better understanding of how to “hold the center” while mentoring students of an LIS discipline that is at the crossroads of tradition and technology. These goals lead to an issue of Library Trends that is rather different from the usual. The experimental nature of the course has dictated that this will be an experimental issue, not a systematic exploration of all the important areas of a subject but, rather, a cross-section of LIS researchers looking at an old subject in new ways.

Adding to the fun is the fact that folklore itself is an interdisciplinary field involving anthropology, ethnography, archeology, history, biology, psychology, linguistics, literature, art, architecture, and religion—among others. Even deciding what to study and how to study it becomes a sociopolitical decision. And because humans are by nature chaotic as well as patterned, trying to organize their lore to fit neatly into systems is essentially impossible (someone has compared it to herding cats) though we can learn much by trying.

There is also in the field of folklore a healthy tension between academic theory, practical field work, and creativity. This “spread” sometimes counters academic expectations, which tend to segregate scholarly research and artistic expression. Many folklorists, however, have a streak of storyteller, musician, or artist that allows them not only to appreciate such activities but also to participate in them to the benefit of their research work. Folklore is a river. We can dip into it for samples and analyze them, but chemical content does not tell us the aesthetic/sensuous experience of the river. Thus social scientists have to muster their aesthetic/artistic sensibilities to get the whole picture in addition to examining contextual riverbanks, rocks, islands, and the surrounding landscape to understand the flow of water. Naturally, they would be fools not to consult and incorporate those who live on the river and know all its ways. The days of collecting stories in the mode of netting exotic specimens, for instance, are long gone. This kind of collecting not only humiliated the “subjects” but also subjected the collectors to their victims’ frequently humorous methods of escape, including stories that told nothing about
the cultural context that was getting raided or stories that led collectors to run in the opposite direction of any true insight.

The rather atypical nature of the content of this issue of *Library Trends* also necessitates a somewhat different style of presentation. In the interest of furthering the idea of folklore research as a cultural exchange in which the researcher is just another human being loaded with socio-personal baggage, I have encouraged students to use the academically precarious word "I" rather than relying on awkward passive constructions or hiding behind pseudo-objective anonymous terminology. Every piece of qualitative research (and more quantitative research than we can guess) involves biases that we would do better to acknowledge than to ignore, biases based on background. Many folklorists, in fact, have turned their attention to home contexts for a better understanding of verbal, material, and customary "texts."

Given a newer emphasis on looking at one's own lore, it is interesting that each of the students chose home ground for her or his investigation. Elizabeth Gremore Figa, who is a public health and medical informatics specialist, combines oral history with field work observations to collect stories from a pioneering medical librarian circuit rider. Her analysis is deeply enriched by an insider's perspective on the subject. Linnea Martin gathers stories from one of her own professors, whose informal narratives reveal the life of libraries in a way that differs from his many valuable but formal publications. Bernie Sloan assembles stories about his family, published in newspaper format, and examines their function not only as verbal lore but also as material lore.

Cece Merkel considers the material lore of classrooms with and without walls—a folklore of virtual space—while Laura Neumann reviews research on material and customary lore of workplaces. In the area of technolore, Kevin Powell, director of the Interspace development project in the CANIS lab (Community Architectures of Network Information Systems, Graduate School of Library and Information Science), applies folkloristic concepts of structuralism versus contextualism to the design and use of computer tools. Tonyia Tidline reflects on a common complaint in identifying information overload as a kind of contemporary myth *au courrant* but unexamined even within a group of information specialists.

I extend a career-long interest in the transmission of folk and fairy tales through the multicultural maze of U.S. children's literature. Sarai Lastra returns to her Puerto Rican roots to explore socio-political implications of the representation of Puerto Rican folklore, especially Juan Bobo stories, in children's books. Melanie Kimball traces the orphan motif from folklore to juvenile classics. And Janice Del Negro, a veteran storyteller and children's librarian, looks at changing views of folktales and storytelling in a classic children's literature textbook. It seems important in this issue, as it surely is in LIS generally, to incorporate children and adults into one
world even if they are segregated into sections. Specialists in adult and youth information cultures need to hear each other.

None of these articles is strictly a folkloristic study, nor do any of the authors claim to be focusing on folklore in a strictly defined sense. They are drawing on folkloristic processes and ideas to illuminate their respective fields of interest in library and information science. To overlook the valuable work that has already been done in exploring one kind of information would be a mistake in examining other kinds of information that contain some of the same elements. Folklore, as readers will learn, yields a rich harvest for specialists in library and information science.

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References