

Contemporary Folklore, Internet and Communities at the beginning of the 21st Century

Mare Kõiva, Liisa Vesik

Estonian folklorists first became interested in folklore online and archiving that material in the period 1996–2002. On the one hand, internet studies were a logical continuation of working with bringing folklore materials online, on the other hand these people were personally interested in following the fast onslaught of internet in Estonia. In the late 1990s, many of the researchers as well as assistants working in the department of folkloristics were actively creators of web interfaces for publishing, learning and teaching folklore (cf Kõiva 2000, 2002, 2003, 2005; Kõiva & Vesik 2002, 2005; Kõiva & Kuperjanov & Vesik 2007). They were aware of what was happening in the web in Estonia. Some of us belonged to an internet community, participated in a chatroom, moderated or posted to a mailing list, was a recognised contributor. For some, work and personal interest coincided.¹

The internet has been, from the start, the ideal fieldwork location for folklorists because of the multitude of heritage genres that it carries. Cyberspace was simply an instrument for transmitting the traditions as they stand and it created a lot of new genres or mutations of the old genres. Collective Intelligence-oriented Semantic Web, based on a universal ontology, expressed by an ideographic language, as dreamed P. Levy (2007) was a distant future as well as term like Collective Intelligence Oriented Cyberspace.

¹ What Estonian folklorists have achieved with bringing material online and studying online material is thanks to financing from the Open Estonia Foundation, Estonian Cultural Endowment and the Estonian Science Foundation. In recent years, internet studies have been carried out within the ESF grants no 5117, 6284.

For closer study, the internet web communities or virtual communities membership and their heritage seemed a good starting ground. The crucial question was how much of the existing folklore will change mediums and continue to spread in the internet; what would internet-specific folklore turn out to be like; the internet as an archive of folklore; which new customs and rituals are introduced by the internet and globalisation? But also the questions of what will be process whereby folklore with a practical value, for example knowledge of calendar customs and vernacular medicine, or entertainment value like jokes, caricatures, etc. will move online? What kinds of changes are brought into folklore consumption and folkloristic communication by the new means of communication?

During this first period of internet studies, in computer mediated communication there was a clear distinction between indirect and direct communication. Indirect communication, characterised by mediated and written communication, guaranteed the distribution of traditional and novel heritage via e-mail and static web pages. Textual direct means of communication pointed to the blending of the oral and the written and, in turn, the blending of folklore genres. Direct written communication in Estonia included talk, IRC, chatrooms (both textual and with audio-visual add-ons), MUD etc.

The second period of in internet studies, in 2003–2009, concentrated on topical pages, databases (the contribution of folklorists in the WWW), observation of groups gathered into specific communities or around certain interests.

For a folklorist, the chance to observe directly communication in the internet was and is equal to the opportunity to observe folklore in an authentic situation of use. What makes the internet valuable, is the fact that new folklore phenomena come fourth, their function and area of application changes while observed. As a classic of the new media, Lev Manovich, says: “all culture, past and present, is being filtered through a computer, with its particular human-computer interface. Human-computer interface comes to act as a new form through which all older forms of cultural production are being mediated” (Manovich 2002).

ARCHIVING AND RESEARCH

Although the branch of psychology – cyberpsychology – concentrates on the connection between people and the cyber world, the topic has also been discussed by a wider range of experts: anthropologists, computer scientists, sociologists, communicational and behavioural psychologists, etc. The pioneers of establishing, furnishing and studying of the Estonian cyberspace were computer scientists. They are the compilers of the largest computer folklore archives of the 1990s, they established and maintained channels of communication.

Tartu University has taught internet skills and promoted the use of internet in teaching since 1993, and there have been numerous theses on the topic. Naturally, in addition to the general issues, they paid attention to the phenomena developing in the local web and this turned into an interdisciplinary research field. For example, students of the TU sociology department analysed in the late 1990s different web sites around the world in how they segmented information, how easily accessible it is and whether the site is user-friendly. Linguist Liina Lindström's thesis on narrative analysis, part of which was based on humour spread by the internet was one of the first thesis. Leen Rahnü defended in 1997 her thesis on application of computer-mediated communication in cross-cultural communication considered the CCED (Cross Cultural Exploration and Dialogue) projects carried out by TU professor Anne Villems and the so-called Babel team.

The new media transmits, in addition to classical folklore, also folklore that has adapted to the media as well as that which has come to life and lives only therein. Folklorists strived to collect and archive some of the folklore online. One of the largest collections is the ca 30,000 anecdotes from the Estonian-language internet (Laineste 2003a, Lainesteb, Krikmann 2004). Material was also collected from a few Estonian-language chatrooms, mailing lists (Kuperjanov 1998; Vesik 2003), Delfi.ee family life discussion boards, pet portals (Vesik 2008). Some of the single phenomena considered were classical internet folklore items like ASCII-art, chain letters, computer-related folk-

lore, smilies, chatroom aliases (Vesik 1996, Kuperjanov 1998).² There was a mushrooming of popular pages about customs and religion (folk calendar customs, vernacular medicine, death and birth customs presented on personal pages, later teaching materials and institutional web pages). Some attention was also paid to the late 1990s popular portal message boards with their discussions and comments, with thorough studies conducted in the field of postsocialist humour, especially concerning ethnic and political humour, anger speech and identity (Krikmann 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2007, 2006, 2004; Laineste 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, Laineste 2009a, 2009 b).³

Internet folklore is well suited to characterise tradition as a means of social self-realisation wherein traditions are viewed as a chain of phenomena, a constant process created by the person and whereby the person influences his life. Therein the task of the observer and tradition-determinator is not the finding and naming of single objects, rites and beliefs but following their progression.

According to this point of view, everyone and every group tries to become traditional. In other words – will try to generalise some aspects of their experience and actions, to present them so that other people would adapt that generalised form. People realise themselves not only through their physical children and creative work, but also through what of their lifestyle and mentality they can make carry on. The urge to create and establish traditions is universal in its nature. Individuals as well as groups differ in how successful they are in turning their experience into tradition. In the case of internet folklore, we often see the need to make oneself seen and heard, to add one's voice to the general flood of information, to share personal experiences with other and to establish oneself. Observation of home pages indicates that they often display opinions, stereotypes and trends which their author does not demonstrate elsewhere online, or even those which the author does not knowingly harbour but can be

² We are planning a collection of articles on internet studies, with a more in-depth discussion of these topics.

³ From the point of view of ethnology and communication theory, the most intriguing were P. Runnel's discussion of the internet as an archive and identity as broadcasted on personal web pages (Runnel 2001a-d).

“read between the lines.” Since the internet has been so far more the domain of men than women,⁴ this is a golden opportunity to study men’s misconceptions, prejudices and superstitions as well as attitudes. Personal and family web pages are also ideal to keep tabs on changes in family lore (cf Luks 2002).

International folkloristics took to the topic of internet slowly – in 1996, *Fabula* published the first longer study of narratives (Schneider 1996). The next treatises on new phenomena were by Gudrun Schwibbe and Ira Spieker (2001) and considered virtual graveyards and memorial sites, a thorough article that clearly outlined the globalisation and opportunities for disregarding long distances that the internet offered. But it also affirmed that traditionally very personal feelings and tragic events can be shared and alleviated in virtual reality. Larisa Fialkova and Maria Yelenevskaya (2001) discussed ghost stories in the news group alt.folklore.ghost and highlighted the issues of narratives, performers, moderators, believing and scepticism, truly one of the first interesting characterisations of an internet community in folkloristics.

At the beginning of the 21st century, it was easy to foresee an increase in the number of studies on internet folklore – it is, after all, a blend between mediated and direct communication, an irreplaceable open forum and the ideal source archive for many many topics.

Estonian web as analogy for phenomena appearing elsewhere

Although the wider spread of internet started in Estonia in 1993 (see also Sein 1998, Vesik 1996), the Estonian web is in the case of many phenomena a backwater or periphery where innovations arrive with a delay or where the initial leading position is quickly lost since the material-creating community is so much smaller that it can not compete with, for example, the English-

⁴ According to many researchers during the 1990s the majority of internet users are men with higher education. A similar trend is noticeable in Estonian news groups and mailing lists. Consequential communicating styles have been discussed by, e.g. S. Herring 1996, 1999; Savicki, *et al.* 1996.

language communities. The spread of several phenomena has been stunted because the in the establishing and maintaining of private, closed, anonymous communities, a community with a potential membership of 1 million (and of these, one third were internet users in 2002) acts like a village community. Lev Manovich juxtaposes cyberculture as the study of various social phenomena and a new forms of network communication. Examples of what falls under cyberculture studies are online communities, online multi-player gaming, the issue of online identity, the sociology and the ethnography of email usage, cell phone usage in various communities; the issues of gender and ethnicity in Internet usage (Manovich 2002).

The identity of web networks, the behaviour and heritage therein was a most rewarding object of observation. Networks control the behaviour of a computer user just as much as real-life social groups do. A created-for-web role and description is in Estonia fairly easily connected with a real person, which means that any kind of self-presentation requires conscious need for exposing and courage. Also, the generative basis is limited – active communications are also active as experts and creators in several fields (cf Vesik 2008 – pet portals have an increasing number of users posting under their own name and identity; while people with chronic or incurable afflictions prefer aliases or only present their first name in forums, Kõiva 2008a, 2009).

Estonian web often get additional material when something is adapted from the English language web. It was only when connection speeds and hosting spaces increased that visually attractive material like video clips became massive online and induced discussion. A good example is e-cards which developed with the advance of technical possibilities from the simple drawn pictures in 1997 to animated cartoons with sound effects. However, in Estonian web they have remained marginal and the local selection includes only a few providers⁵ and single photographers or artists. Adding a text in Estonian is what makes the

⁵ The Estonian National Library cardsender <http://www.nlib.ee/vKaart/>, the art centre: http://www.kunstikeskus.ee/galerii/galerii_e_kaart.php; there is also a collection of cards provided by portals that are either with a nationalistic theme or have been adapted for that purpose: <http://www.ee/ekaart/>, <http://www.eestifoto.ee/ekaart/index.shtml>, <http://www.top.ee/ekaart/index.php>, <http://www.delfi.ee/kaart/>

card part of the Estonian cultural space. Locally produced animated cards are practically non-existent.

In the 1990s, computer folklore was extensively archived on personal computers. However, precisely because they were personal archives, most of these were lost with time and failure of hard drives. Some of those kept on web pages were lost when hosts disappeared or accounts were closed. ASCII-art, for example, was distributed mainly through news groups and personal e-mails: topically suitable pictures and cards were forwarded. Even today, some of the old pictures from the early 1990s are still circling.

Internet also played a role in the influx of worldwide joke types into Estonia. Earliest records of personal e-mail communications including anecdotes come from the year 1993, e.g. series of blond jokes.

Simulations and conferences in virtual reality

One of the most noteworthy among the early phenomena of Estonian computer mediated communication studies are simulation games organised by Anne Villemis and her team. Already the first simulations joined distance learning and learning through playing. In addition to creatively taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the internet, it paid attention to the opportunity to develop group work skills, to imitate intercultural communication situations, to make young people discuss social and cultural problems in various fields and via an international project. With the initiation of simulation games, a dialogue developed between people engaged in the humanities and in the IT. The first simulation, called Simuveri took place "within" Estonia. The population of the virtual city was made up of Estonian pupils who played social and ethnic groups. They communicated through e-mails and acted the daily problems of citizens of various social groups. The third game, named Babel, targeted cross-cultural communication. This game was participated by a few dozen student groups from all over the world. Problems leading to voicing national prejudices, dealing with stereotypes and questions of identity made the participants genuinely react. Representatives of large nations could feel like a cultural periphery does and contemplate the misconception they have of their

neighbours (Kõiva 2008b; for more on cross-cultural communication issues see Rahnu 2000). The answers to 90 questions about traditions revealed stereotypical attitudes and prejudices as well as general values towards heritage. Later projects have tackled problems of nature preservation, the European Union, etc.

A basis for further actions in folkloristics was the 2001 e-conference and distance learning programme prepared within ESF grant project 5117. Before that, in 1999 and 2000, there had already been some experiments with installing and using internet conference programmes (CVW – Collaborative Virtual Workspace). The environment was tested during the annual young researcher's conference to discuss an article by M. Mikkor. The first actual virtual conference was held in the Tartu University WebCT environment (Jaago & Kõiva & Vesik 2002; Jaago 2008; Vesik 2004, 2008). The aim of the conference *Dialogue between private and public lives* was to initiate discussion on attitudes towards pets, migration, home, death, birthday and other events of the life arc. The e-conference attracted quite a bit of attention and was participated by 80 people from all over Estonia and Finland. Activities in the chatroom were interspersed with online discussion group work, written individual and group work. In all topics, there appeared to be distinctive points of views taken by urban versus rural people, with the rural population being more conservative in their views as well as being less open to change.

Folklore distributed in direct communication networks

Virtual reality encompasses a range of interactive computer environments, from text-oriented on-line forums and multiplayer games to complex simulations that combine audio; video, animation, or three-dimensional graphics; and scent. The emergence and reign of chatrooms fell to the 1990s. The chatrooms were typically translated into Estonian and established by first students and later professors of the mathematics faculty of Tartu University. They became also the first moderators. One of the reasons chatrooms bloomed was the opportunity for social interaction and exchange of information it provided. At that time, cell phones were not ubiquitous and long-distance calls between towns were expensive. Personal computers and dial-up internet



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Kuidas liituda?
Galeria
Reeglid
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moomin.ee 2010 on õppäevaringselt töötav jutukas, mis baseerub EW-Too koodil. Alates 1995. aastast on seda koodi pidevalt ümber ja juurde kirjutatud.

- telnet moomin.ee 2010
- java-telnet
- Ametlikuks kliendiks muumisse on TKTurf. Loe siit õpetust nr installimise kui muu kohta. Muumi jaoks tõmba alla järgmine fail: TKTurf. (Seda on modifitseeritud Unicode'st aru saama ning vaikimisi muumisse sisenema. Vali "Download to disk", mitte "Open".) Screenshot.

Kui oled päris algaja, siis enne litumist loe läbi help algus

Kui Sul on probleeme moomin.ee jutukaga litumisel, siis saad superitele saata oma probleemi kirjelduse aadressile moomin-w@lists.ut.ee

NB! Muumi toetab unicode'i. Dumbuserite keeles tähendab see lihtsalt seda, et Muumis saab sisestada praktiliselt kõigi maailma keelte tähti ja sümboleid. Loe siit õpetust selle kohta, kuidas Muumis unicode'i kasutada (kui oled Windowsikasutaja). Pikem abi on siin.

*Home page of one of the more advanced chatrooms Moominvalley.
<http://www.moomin.ee>*

connection were becoming more common. It helped if the users could divide their attention between several activities, either at work or at school. However, even if the environment and commands used therein were in Estonian, most of the adopted online aliases were borrowed from world literature, movies, etc. There was also a bias towards people with good (English) language skill.⁶

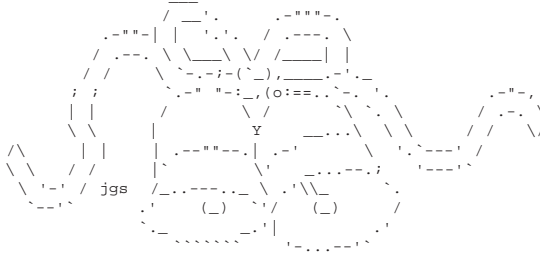
The most active members quite quickly formed subgroups and networks that met in real life. The real-life events helped establish acquaintance with people of various ages, fields of occupation and from all over Estonia. Get-togethers with so different people inevitably led to exchange of folklore from different regions. The chatroom was a place to meet people outside your home region and profession. But there were also those united by common occupation – those taking a night shift (medics, policemen, etc.). For time, it was very popular to add a small chatroom to your personal web page, but this was soon replaced by the interactivity afforded by blogs and comments.

⁶ For preliminary results see also Kuperjanov 2009.

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Some classic ASCII art objects. Before image files and attachments became widespread, holiday and celebratory wishes were regularly expressed with complicated ASCII art pictures. One-line ASCII art has, however, found a new lease on life in social networking applications like Twitter, Facebook, etc.



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News groups and mailing lists

Following the example of the rest of the world, mailing lists and newsgroups in Estonian soon sprouted. Some of these became central nodes for information exchange for the virtual community, perhaps even a manifestation of the grouping. For example, the mailing list SF2001 formed a culturally interesting web environment created by young people in 1996, uniting those interested in science fiction genres and leading to marking the genre in Estonian culture more than a literary phenomenon. Science fiction mailing lists developed into fandoms all over the world and thus what took place was wider than the trends in Estonian literature and cultural space, it was merely a local aspect of a global phenomenon and identity. The activities initiated by the Estonian mailing list quickly diverged: an additional mailing list for philosophical discussions, an online journal to publish original works of fiction, community members' book-exchange and web databases for book reviews. The social activity online is often connected with the creation or reinforcement of social bonds offline. The findings in religious communities suggest that the weak to moderate social relationships formed online are likely to become stronger if they migrate offline, for a time at least (Dawson & Cowan 2004: 35). The core part of the list members meet in real life at least once a month as well as an annual summer event where a literature prize is awarded for the best works of the last year. The list continued to actively attract new members for ten years, before more visual web environments became prevailing. Active members include more men than women and includes more people with university degree than not. In the time since the group was incepted, the fantasy genre has become widely popular and has brought more people with humanities background to the genre, making it also more interesting for folklorists (mythology, fairy tales and other themes closely related to fantasy literature).

Discussions between women on family-themed discussion boards were recorded in the 2000s. For analysis, some topics, like advice for sick babies, home delivery, etc. It was interesting to note that a plethora of irrational suggestions repeatedly crop up, suggested by omens and advice from a friend of a friend. This indicates that the advising voice of the wider society has

grown, when compared to earlier range of formal institutions, family and close friends. Since the forum is mostly participated by young mothers, the membership is in constant flux, leaders change and topics are repeated with short intervals. The field has received closer attention only recently, however (Reinaus 2008).

ADAPTATION OF CLASSIC FOLKLORE PHENOMENA TO THE INTERNET

Classic folklore genres that have well adapted to the internet include music, song culture, urban legends, anecdotes, chain letters, supernatural phenomena, medicine and calendar customs. Existential and religious issues always provoke massively participated discussions: the end of the world, life after death, Y2K, etc. problems.

Genres that became powerful and specific of the internet, include simple chain information types that involve painful social, political, religious and ethical topics. Many of these work by means of a mechanism similar to panic-inducing beliefs, rumours. A similar old genre that has well adapted is chain letters. While those in their twenties do not consider the classic chain letters prestigious enough to be forwarded, their subtypes (e.g. chain letters enriched with ascii or visual artwork, PowerPoint formatted chain letters or slide shows) are made an exception (for more on chain letters see Seljamaa 2004). A new wave of chain letters are political (pseudo)petitions, calls for help (to promote a political candidate or donate for a cause) where the receiver of the letter seems unable to discriminate between disinformation and actual information and forwards the letters based on a gut feeling. Some subtypes make people spread viruses or false notifications of viruses, causing them to harm their computers, to unwittingly take part in political manoeuvres, etc. – hoaxes have been the fastest growing portion of computer-specific folklore. Since people had such difficulties in discerning fact from folklore, in 2000 and 2001 several institutions started to actively campaign against chain letters and spreading truthful information. Nevertheless, there is no denying that internet folklore invokes in people the need to be socially active.



Screenshot from the oldest and biggest portal where patients can consult doctors. The material in these forums has given much cause to contemplate on the everlasting nature of disease myths. <http://www.kliinik.ee>

In conclusion, we have discussed here only a small portion of the processes, trends and currents active in the web communities and web folklore or heritage of cyberculture and the new media.

While in the 1990s it was not certain that internet folklore can create something that would be truly effective and which would work as well as oral folklore, this question is now moot. Internet folklore is an existing and actual independent heritage genre that has ties with tradition spread via other communication channels.

Lev Manovich's states that new media today can be understood as the mix between older cultural conventions for data representation, access and manipulation and newer conventions of data representation, access and manipulation. The "old" data are representations of visual reality and human experience, i.e., images, text-based and audio-visual narratives – what we normally understand by "culture." The "new" data is numerical data (Manovich 2002), but for the user the new media is still, first and foremost, an audio-visual and read-written mixture of all his contemporary identities.

More and more important is not just information and tradition regarding virtual communities, but also its wider sociocultural context. The process of identity-forming and categorization presumes collective cohesion, integration and separation from another group, all understandable in certain historical context and situation. Communicating via the internet, two people can be joined by interpersonal ties, or they can be members of two or more groups. Such participation forms intergroup ties connecting all members of different groups, helping the flow of information and heritage between groups. Similar intergroup bridging, improved by intragroup relations creates an important social capital and allows for study of actions and signs of symbolic value. These problems were studied on the example of diaspora communities (Kõiva 2008b), medical communities (Kõiva 2008a, 2009), geocaching (Kalda 2007), pet heritage (Vesik 2004, 2008). For example, in the case of medical heritage, information flow is controlled and manipulated by medics for the non-medics, first of all patients. The portal offers various e-medicine services, such as questions to specialists (psychologists, pharmacists). Communication groups created by medics offer medical advice to patients, give feedback, alternatives or a second opinion on a treatment scheme, while for the patient this is an opportunity to share their knowledge and personal experience and emotional support. Inter-patient group communication exhibits various communication styles and language usage, from informal remarks to narratives and emotional presentations. The general attitude is supportive of the official medical system but there is a number of narratives and threads that present personal reactions to social and situational events.

In conclusion, all observed groups were based on exchange of information, narrating or writing, emotional stability and the importance of belonging to a group with similar interests. Recently, there has been a significant reduction of anonymity towards registered and identifiable userdom, a sign of the widening reach of netiquette and intra-group control. Although forums are dedicated to information exchange, the amount of entertaining content has sharply risen.

A recent attention spot are the processes that guide the shaping of small corners of the internet. This involves servers (sites, blogs) that do not have very many visitors but the geographical locations of whose may be worldwide. Despite the public nature of the internet, the globality and wide opportunities of information exchange and other factors, there is obvious need for more intimate e-communication in smaller groups. We see here a novel kind of locality creation that often has a local counterpart offline. This kind of place creation process results in intriguing bonds between cyber and physical space, and their analysis requires attention to the characteristics of both types of space as well as their interaction a deep need for local stability.

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