

The Folklore Society



Folklore and the Digital: One-day Online Conference

Saturday 29 March 2025

Programme and Abstracts

09:50 Introduction

10:00-11:30: **Session 1: The Pros and Cons of Digitising Folklore** Chair: Richard Jenkins

Stuart Dunn: 'Fairy Tales and Fake News: The Varied Intertwinements of Folklore and Digital Humanities'

In his introduction to his landmark edited collection, *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, Trevor J. Blank expresses an ambition 'to use a folkloristic perspective to critically examine and contribute to the literature on the sociocultural and performative nature of the Internet'.

This statement must have seemed ambitious in 2009, when *Folklore and the Internet* was published. Sixteen years later, given the multiplicities which have emerged in the sociology, culture and performativity of the Internet in the intervening period, it would appear brave to the point of foolhardiness. However, in the same period, scholars working in other fields of the humanities and the social sciences have been grappling with similar issues. Once the domain of software experts and engineers building databases and websites for historians and classicists, 'Digital Humanities' is now a distinct field, querying and critiquing 'the digital', using the frameworks and theories of the humanities. What links might we draw between this broad context and the specific one of 'vernacular expression', and the other manifestations of folklore online? And what lessons might these two fields, with the shared roots in the study of the human record, have for each other, as they continue to evolve in the digital age?

Biographical Note: *Stuart Dunn is Head of Humanities and Professor of Spatial Humanities at King's College London. He is currently working on a new book, to be published by Routledge, entitled Spatial Narrative and the Technologies of Placemaking, which will build on his earlier A History of Place in the Digital Age (2019, also Routledge), with a more applied, and less methodological, analysis of how 'technology' shapes our sense of place (more details at <https://stuardunn.blog/>). He is a member of The Folklore Society's Council.*

Ioana Baskerville: 'The New Life of Archival Objects. Between Digitized Folklore and Digital Living Heritage.'

The paper will address the possibilities that archived folklore databases have for creating the background of revitalization projects and programs within what it is called under the UNESCO 2003 Convention 'living heritage' or 'intangible cultural heritage'. Many digital tools and solutions that are being created and used to preserve folklore information are 'object-centric' and are especially devoted to administering the material-based knowledge bases, and not enough devoted to the preservation of the dynamic nature of living heritage. When the source of information for the new living heritage projects is drawn from digital folklore archives, old documents have the chance to acquire a 'new life' within dissemination and educational settings, communication projects,

museum exhibitions. As such, digitized folklore collections would prove they can be more than silent record-keeping, passive products of remote culture, but instead engaging and powerful tools of communication and creativity, artistic reconfigurations of collections to engage new audiences to the world enclosed in folklore archives. The author will offer examples of such initiatives in Romania and beyond.

Biographical Note: *Ioana Baskerville is a senior researcher and head of the Department of Ethnology at the Alexandru Philippide Institute of Romanian Philology of the Romanian Academy, Iasi Branch (Romania). She teaches Cultural Anthropology at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi. In her PhD thesis (defended in 2010), she explored Romanian magic texts as verbal and pragmatic tools of traditional culture. She is the leading expert for the implementation of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Romania, working closely with Romanian the Ministry of Culture and other government institutions. In her research, she studies the connection between traditional cultures and contemporary lifestyles, including issues in anthropology of religiosity, social anthropology of migration, heritage education, digital intangible cultural heritage. She has extensive expertise in lecturing and contributing to international academic conferences, UNESCO meetings, and multinational working groups, and she was an associate researcher at universities in the UK, USA, Germany and Poland.*

Stephen Miller: “Print is much safer than MS.” A.W. Moore (1893): The Fate of the Internet 1.0 Researcher and their Remains.’

‘I feel that if anything were to happen to me, print is much safer than MS.’ So wrote A.W. Moore to Karl Roeder in 1893, one Manx folklorist to another.* It was ink on paper then, now bits and bytes. ‘My Papers: What shall I do with them?’ This was W.H. Gill in 1915, a folk song collector in the Isle of Man. As a folklorist of ‘a certain age’ who started on an ICL mainframe (in the days when the UK built computers...) and who now sits before a MacBook Air, what will be the fate of the ‘Papers’ of those who came of age in the Internet and whose remains will now be digital? This talk will be my own personal thoughts on what awaits the files and folders of myself (and others) when the hard drives finally spin down.... Further, see Stephen Miller, “Print is Much Safer than MS”: The Fate of Folklore and Folk Song Collections in the Isle of Man,’ *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 2 (2018).

Biographical Note: *Stephen Miller formerly worked at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and taught at the University of Vienna and now drives along in the lane of independent researcher. Research interests are Manx folklore and folk song, the Rev. Walter Gregor, Edward Lovett, and the institutional history of The Folk-Lore Society.*

12:00-13:00: Session 2: Digitising Folklore of, and for, Children

Julia Bishop: ‘The Lore and Longitudinality of Schoolchildren: Managing Rights and Personal Data in the Online Iona and Peter Opie Archive.’

In the period c.1950-65, around 250 primary and secondary schools in Britain encouraged their pupils to contribute to a nationwide survey focusing on the oral lore and games of school-aged children. It was organised by folklorists Iona and Peter Opie who used the information as the basis of their pioneering books, beginning with *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* in 1959 (Opie & Opie 1959, 1969, 1985, 1997), which continue to be foundational reference works today. The majority of the schoolchildren's contributions, together with the associated teacher correspondence, are preserved at the Bodleian Libraries. Under the aegis of the ongoing ‘Childhoods and Play’ research project, a British Academy-kitemarked project led by researchers at the University of Sheffield, digital copies are gradually being made publicly accessible as part of the online Opie Archive (www.opiearchive.org).

The Opies had no ethical approval for their work in the sense that we would recognize it today. Many of the submissions contain the name, age and school of the contributor, who also holds the rights in their submission. The Opies' youthful contributors are now adults aged approximately 65-85 years, and the possibility of tracing them while they are still living is rapidly diminishing. This paper explores the dilemmas we face in making these materials available online – and the potential opportunities.

Biographical Note: *Julia Bishop is a research associate in the School of Education, University of Sheffield, where she is currently working on the ESRC-funded 'School Meals Service: Past, Present—and Future?' project. Julia specialises in children's play and expressive culture, past and present. Her research has involved ethnographic work with children and archival research, especially with the Iona and Peter Opie Archive (www.opiearchive.org), in order to gain insights into children's experiences, cultural worlds and creativity. Her recent publications include "'Tag, You've Got Coronavirus!'" Chase Games in a Covid Frame' in Play in a Covid Frame (ed. Beresin and Bishop, 2023) and chapters in Playing the Archive: From the Opies to the Digital Playground (edited by Burn, Potter, Cowan and Bishop, 2025).*

Archita Banerjee: 'Folktales On The Digital Platform: Means To Subversion Through Digitization.'

Over the years, digital folklore has gained enormous importance in communicating life experiences of individuals and groups from across the globe. More recently, the fact that folklore could survive the challenges of the 'pandemic' world is mostly because of its dissemination through digitization enabling it to get world-wide access and recognition. However, the digital space also creates scope for re-evaluation and appropriation of tradition. The present study deals with one such genre of folklore, that is the 'folktale', which though being part of the oral tradition still suffers restricted movement as compared to other folklore forms. Once folktales are written down as 'folk texts', they tend to lose their natural fluidity and thus become 'frozen tradition' sharing the same social messages time and again. Reflecting on the same, this paper attempts to argue that while traditional folktales are still cared for, their digital rendition allows a breaking-away from the fetters of traditional thought. Digital adaptations of folktales create space for deconstruction of ideas on the one hand and re-construction of new paradigms on the other. With the aid of some well-known fairy tales like 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'The Princess and the Pea', 'Goldilocks' and few others, the paper tries to explore the ways in which a YouTube channel 'HISHE Kids' has re-worked on such traditional tales. The channel has cleverly depicted these tales as 'Fixed Fairy Tales' wherein they have treated the classic tales in their own silly ways but with a twist in the end. The paper further tries to take a deeper look at the modified digital versions to find out how they deviate from the originals by making use of narrative devices adopted for re-telling, thereby trying to understand the role of digital media in subverting the entrenched narratives to make way for a more flexible narration.

Biographical Note: *Dr Archita Banerjee is a PhD degree holder from Banaras Hindu University. She previously worked as a language and content editor for the NITI-Aayog Project at the Anthropological Survey of India, Head Office, Kolkata, under the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India. Earlier she had taught as part-time faculty at the Mahila Mahavidyalaya, BHU and Bangabasi Morning College, University of Calcutta. She is an ethnographer and carries out extensive work in the field of folklore. She is an Executive Member of Centre for Folklore Studies and Research and is actively associated with the same. She has taught translation skills to Undergraduate students for UGC Programme in Banaras Hindu University, and has, on several occasions, assisted poets in translating their works. She also translates works from Hindi into English. Her research and teaching interests include folklore studies, postcolonial studies, Shakespearean literature, 20th century British literature, genre fiction, and Bengal cultural studies.*

13:30-14:30: Session 3: Digital Communities: Politics and Religion (Chair: Owen Davies)**Gabriel Tamaş: 'Building a Religion. The Role of Digital Communities in the Revival of Religious Beliefs.'**

Amid times of uncertainty and in the context of a world marked by polycrises, religion seems to become a growing aspect of day-to-day life. It is not just the main religions that witness a steady growth, but one can also observe a tendency of reviving pre-Christian beliefs, as well as so-called 'new-age' religious practices. These revival efforts often imply the reconstruction of pre-Christian religious systems, despite the lack of abundant historical and theological sources. On the other hand, given their marginal status, such revival efforts often imply an international collaboration between people who share similar ideals.

This paper aims to observe and analyse the role of digital communities in the construction and consolidation of religious beliefs, with a focus on pre-Christian revivalism, but not limited to it. This will be achieved through a series of semi-structured interviews with members of such on-line groups. The focus of these interviews will be on the importance of 'bridging and bonding' activities (Ponzanesi, 2020), based on religious identity.

A secondary aim of this paper is to understand the dynamic between major religions (i.e. Christianity and Islam) and these marginal *pagan* groups, as well as the social aspects of such theological schisms.

Biographical Note: *Dr Gabriel Tamaş is an Assistant Lecturer at the Department of Cultural Studies-Ethnology, at the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest. He recently defended his PhD thesis, with a topic dealing with the heroification process and reinterpretation of classical mythology in comics and visual novels. His main areas of interests are mythology, folk literature and pop-culture. In the upcoming year he hopes to publish his thesis and continue researching and deepening his understanding of the field of Anthropology.*

Henrik Olinder: 'When Politicians Comment on Rumours in Social Media: A Crisis Communication Aspect.'

The study is to investigate why politicians and authorities comment on rumours and other related phenomena when they have not done so before to the same extent. What background mechanisms have brought rumours and other phenomena into the spotlight? In this study, it should be possible to give answers to why the focus is on rumours and related phenomena and not just on the main problems during a crisis. One aspect that should be investigated is whether it is the media that controls the questions and publishes the answers, which may lead to the main question decreasing in importance. Can it lead to citizens receiving poorer news reporting when the focus is on other issues? Have rumours become a natural part of media dramaturgy in crises where politicians and officials feel compelled to comment on them? Can politicians and authorities gain anything from commenting on rumours?

The aim is to produce increased knowledge about rumours, trust and crisis communication. The project will be based on relevant and scientific sources. Ultimately, this aims to improve the authorities' crisis communication and change their behaviour in connection with emerging concerns during crises.

Biographical Note: *Henrik Olinder, Senior Expert Crisis Communication and Editor at the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB). At MSB he implements Crisis Communication training for communication officers and executives at local and national levels of government. It includes advising government agencies in crisis. He is responsible for editing research reports, methodology and funding of research. Member of the Editor board at the Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research (JICRCR). He is a former member of the board for the Swedish Association of Communication Professionals. He is Co-author to a book about Rhetorical Images in Journalism.*

15:00-16:30: Session 4: Large Language Models, Computational Analysis and Folktales

(Chair: Stuart Dunn)

Will Lamb: 'Generating Gaelic Traditional Narrative Type Texts Using Large Language Models.'

Advances in large language modelling have disproportionately benefited high-resource languages due to their vastly greater training data reserves. This paper proposes a novel crosslingual text expansion (XLTE) technique using multilingual large language models (MLLMs) to mitigate data sparsity in low-resource languages. We apply XLTE to the domain of traditional Scottish Gaelic storytelling to generate a training corpus suitable for language modelling, for example as part of an automatic speech recognition system. The effectiveness of this technique is demonstrated using OpenAI's GPT-4o, with supervised fine-tuning (SFT) providing decreased neologism rates and a 57.2% reduction in perplexity over the baseline model. Despite these promising results, qualitative analyses reveal important stylistic divergences between synthesised and genuine data. Nevertheless, XLTE offers a promising, scalable method for synthesising training sets in other languages and domains, opening avenues for further improvements in low-resource language modelling.

Biographical Note: *Professor William Lamb holds a Personal Chair in Gaelic Ethnology and Linguistics in the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Since joining Edinburgh in 2010, Prof. Lamb has made pioneering contributions to research in Gaelic linguistics, oral tradition, and language technology. He has published widely on these subjects in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes and is the author of the recent book, Scottish Gaelic: A Comprehensive Grammar (Routledge, 2024). His current research includes the AHRC/IRC-funded project, 'Decoding Hidden Heritages', which utilises computational folkloristics methodologies to explore convergence and divergence within the narrative traditions of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland.*

Monica Marion, et al.: 'Traditional Genres in Digital Space: Exploring Folktale Variation with Computational Methods in the "Decoding Hidden Heritages" Project.'

Digital folklore and digitized folklore changes the way scholars and the public understand folklore genres. Along with machine readable online folklore, digitized archives of traditional oral storytelling open the door to computational methods and digital analytic tools. Our work within the AHRC / IRC grant 'Decoding Hidden Heritages in Gaelic Traditional Narrative' (funded under the 'UK-Ireland Collaboration in the Digital Humanities Research Grants Call', grant numbers AH/W001934/1 and IRC/W001934/1) focuses on computational analysis of digital story material. We fuse qualitative and quantitative methods to examine folktales from the archives of the School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh, and the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin.

This paper utilizes the scale afforded by digital material and computational methods to examine regional variation in a particular folktale (ATU 503: The Gifts of the Little People). Phylogenetic motif analysis allows us to examine historic relationships between tale variants across countries and languages. Other statistical approaches to story structure and metadata help visualize the complexity of variation. These methods offer a more nuanced approach to identifying and comparing story differences. We explore the impact of the digital archive, and demonstrate folklore applications of computational tools, useful for both traditional and born-digital folklore.

Biographical Note: *Monica Marion is a PhD Candidate in Folklore and in Informatics at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her interdisciplinary work applies computational methods to narrative, particularly folktales, in offline and online communities.*

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Julie-Anne Meaney: ‘Large Language Models in Low-Resource Settings: Applications for Gaelic and Irish Folklore.’

Large Language Models (LLMs), such as GPT, have revolutionised technologies for highly-resourced languages like English and Mandarin, on tasks such as classification and language generation. Given this swift progress, we ask, are these models useful for under-resourced languages, and can they help us to make similar advances on digital folklore tasks?

We present work on the Decoding Hidden Heritages project, a trove of handwritten folktales in Scottish Gaelic and Irish, which have been digitised for computational analysis. Although several LLMs have been trained to understand Gaelic and Irish, we explore how well these models represent such under-resourced languages, and how accurately they can predict characteristics like the genre of the folktale or the gender of the teller. We contrast these approaches with more rudimentary machine learning approaches to determine how much of an advancement the newer models offer for the low-resource, digital folklore setting. We examine other downstream tasks, such as clustering analyses of folktales and event labelling using both cutting-edge and classical machine learning approaches.

Biographical Note: Julie-Anne Meaney is a post-doctoral research fellow in text mining at the University of Edinburgh. She completed her PhD in natural language processing (NLP) in the School of Informatics at Edinburgh, where she worked on methods for computational humour detection.

16:30-17:00: Doc Rowe: ‘Fifty Years of Filmed Footage—Finally Digitised!’

Over sixty years of visits to the May Day celebrations in Padstow by Doc Rowe has resulted in a vast body of field work; of annual documentation using film, video, photography and oral testimony with local people. An innovative and dedicated project with them and funded by National Lottery is in its final stages. *Padstow People’s Autobiography* a 3-year project has created, in collaboration with local people and mutual participation, an interactive, public facing on-line repository using the contemporary genius of digital technology. Additionally, a Crowdfunding project by Fifth Column Films in 2023, has resulted in successfully digitising all Rowe’s analogue moving image material particularly on cultural tradition dating from the late 1960s. He’ll reflect on the preparation, the processing and the current results leading to access of material largely unseen until now. He’ll also consider plans and considerations for future work.

Biographical Note: *Dr Doc Rowe has been documenting British Cultural tradition for nearly sixty years using video, film and photography as well as audio. His unique collection of contemporary and historical material on the traditional culture of the British Isles and Ireland is now housed in Whitby. The strength of the collection lies in its ongoing ‘serial’ fieldwork and regular contact with communities where individual events flourish - hence the material is at once wide-ranging, firsthand and constantly updated. A long-term council member of the Folklore Society and Oral History Society, he regularly broadcasts on aspects of folklore and tradition. As well as a number of one-man exhibitions, he has written a number of books and his photographs are regularly published.*

17:00-17:30: Concluding remarks and discussion