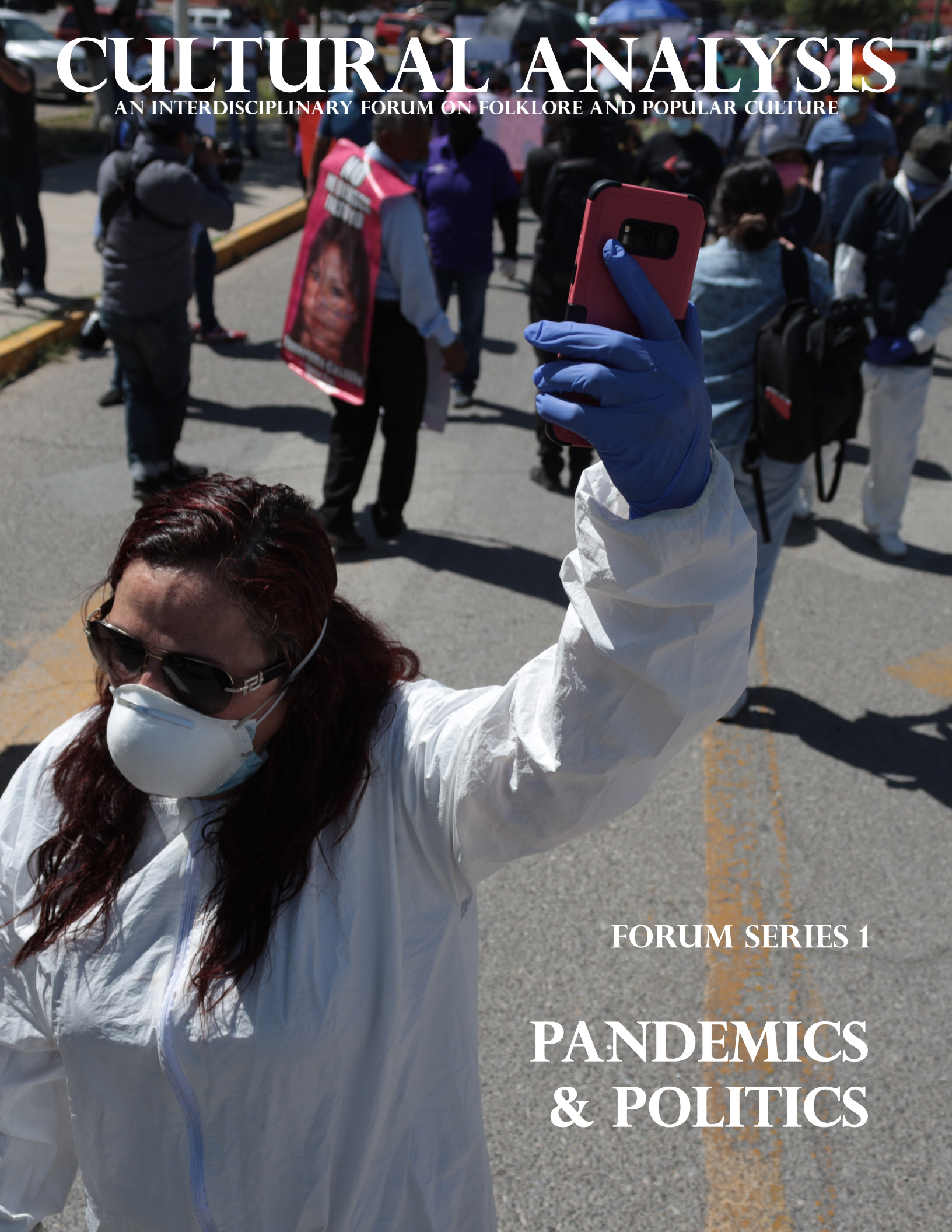


CULTURAL ANALYSIS

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FORUM ON FOLKLORE AND POPULAR CULTURE



FORUM SERIES 1

PANDEMICS
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CULTURAL ANALYSIS

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FORUM ON FOLKLORE AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Essay

Becoming *Folkwise*: Sustaining Digital Community While Socially Distant¹

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Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused Americans to adapt health-related practices into their daily lives to prevent the spread and contraction of this air-borne pathogen. As institutions and events were relocated to the digital realm, we, as a group of early-career folklorists,² found ourselves even more socially distant than before. Scattered across the United States, literally ranging from Oregon's Pacific coast to Maryland's Atlantic seaboard, we reconnected via the social media communication system, Facebook Messenger. Sharing memes, stories about our highs and lows throughout a given day, and Coronavirus anecdotes, casual conversation gelled into serious discussions about creating a social media brand around our shared interest in folklore. The goal of this brand would be to draw upon our diverse interests, passions,

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and research projects to celebrate the study of everyday, expressive culture through digital, multiplatform outreach projects. With the release of Taylor Swift's (2020) eighth album, *Folklore*, and witnessing scholars reacting in real-time to the discipline's entanglement with the work of a country music-turned-pop star, the timing felt fitting to launch *Folkwise*, which eventually evolved into WiseFolk Productions, LLC.

The team at WiseFolk Productions, LLC combines our collective skills as digital natives and internet-literature folklorists in the early stages of building wide-reaching, accessible, educational, and entertaining content across multiple platforms to discuss the field of folklore. The organizations' primary project is *Folkwise*, a social media and video-based brand that provides a digital touchstone for folklorists to share their research interests to new audiences, expand the field's visibility, and present an alternative academic outlet for discussions surrounding folklore. Our goal as an organization is to provide a concrete example of what we call digital public humanities: a subfield of digital humanities (Burdick 2012) that focuses on how folklorists and other public humanities scholars can draw attention to applications of humanities scholarship in real-time through digital literacy. WiseFolk Productions seeks to demonstrate a framework for folklorists and other community-centered scholars to utilize digital platforms for applied learning opportunities and mutually beneficial networking. Folklorists themselves have also begun experimenting with how they can engage in more public-facing pedagogies.

The discussion and sharing of folklore, the "folkloresque" (see Foster & Tolbert 2015), and folklore-adjacent topics aimed at general audiences are increasing in popularity among lay audiences. For example, podcaster Aaron Mahnke's "Lore" is currently approaching almost 200 episodes and reaching approximately 300-million individuals (lorepodcast.com 2021). PBS's *Storied*'s monster-focused series, "Monstrum," hosted by Emily Zarka (Storied 2021), produces videos featuring both high-quality animation and thorough scholarship citing folkloric sources many of us would place on our syllabi.

Meanwhile, professional folklore organizations, like the American Folklore Society and Arkansas Folk and Traditional Life, engage in social media to promote folklife and their events. Additionally, the crowd-sourced #FolkloreThursday and the community of folklorists who monitor the tag regularly publish essays and blogs engaging the wide variety of topics covered under the umbrella of folklore and folklife. Old Norse specialist Jackson Crawford produces casual lectures about Norse mythology, linguistics, culture, and more for his 195k followers on YouTube. At Patheos, folklorist Jeana Jorgenson promotes her scholarship in an accessible, blog-post style.

Digital folklore content is all around us and serves as some of the inspiration behind *Folkwise*. Folklore is a discipline that focuses on everyday culture and the communities that form it, but people outside the academic discipline of the field often do not understand what it is the field of folklore does. Universities, non-profits, and individual folklorists have an opportunity to shape the conversations surrounding the genres of folklore we love through enhancing our communication and digital public humanities skills by meeting our communities where they already spend time, which is increasingly online. The *Folkwise* network includes folklorists from various back-

grounds and seeks to expand upon and engage with existing digital folklore content through a unique approach to utilizing multimedia platforms. However, we do not limit ourselves to folklore occurring in the digital realm; instead, we utilize it as a vehicle to engage audiences in the vast and wonderful topics addressed by the discipline.

We hope *Folkwise* and the related projects cited throughout this text can serve as a collection of inspiration and concrete examples for engaging with digital platforms as educators and fellow folklorists. This essay is structured around our fledgling organization's core guiding principles: Visibility, Accessibility, Community, and Public Education. Case studies demonstrate within this essay how *Folkwise*, other individuals, and organizations can navigate unprecedented changes and engage with different modalities by incorporating these goals into digital content.

Visibility

How do folklorists raise the visibility of the discipline? What steps should folklorists be taking to accomplish this? These questions have been echoed throughout the American Folklore Society's Annual Meetings and are subject to deep considerations on best practices (Kitta & Siegel 2020). *Folkwise* addresses this issue regarding folklore's visibility by expanding our digital literacy to meet audiences where they are by applying our folklorist skill-sets towards multimedia platforms, such as Instagram³, Facebook⁴, Twitter⁵, TikTok⁶, YouTube⁷, Discord⁸, and Twitch⁹, to create content geared specifically towards all audiences. Additionally, *Folkwise* promotes other folklore organizations and projects through these accounts, helping existing projects shine online.

Analyzing how visibility and digital engagement are uniquely intertwined to expand our digital literacy in utilizing these multimedia platforms is essential to making the goals of *Folkwise* actionable. *Folkwise* conceptualizes the intertwinement of visibility, and digital engagement into four primary aspects: Branding, Research, Outreach, and Networking.

Branding is a natural facet of digital engagement for culture workers like ourselves to pull from our folkloristics training. We learn to think deeply about our positionality regarding the communities we interact within our ethnographic work, and folklorists need to apply this knowledge when building brands for ourselves as educators, researchers, and individuals or as organizations and institutions.



Figure 1.¹⁰

So, how do we utilize social media sites to develop a brand and create strategies to make the brand successful? Similar to our ethnographic research and community work, folklorists need to develop an ethical plan for entering and working within these digital communities and platforms. In conceptualizing *Folkwise*, we asked ourselves several key questions when building our brand to raise visibility of the field of folklore (see Figure 2).

Branding Questions

1. What is your individual and/or organizations' mission/purpose?
2. What benefits and services can you potentially provide?
3. What do your audiences already think of folklore?
4. What qualities do you want to be associated with your brand?

Figure 2.

Answering these questions explicitly in the formation of a digital brand tells people who may come across our content what they can expect from *Folkwise* as a *brand* and *community*, what content our internal network might be able to provide, and differentiates *Folkwise* from other educators online engaging in folkloresque content, but are not academically aligned. Educational organizations producing creative digital content related to folklore should also ask themselves these questions as they begin to formulate their organization and what they would like to achieve through a digital brand.

Establishing our *Folkwise* content creators as authorities within our audiences, however, does not mean that folklorists, in general, should be utilizing their brands to exclude inquiring minds by positioning themselves as experts. *Folkwise* works to set an example of a digital public humanities project that includes all individuals interested in folklore with unique knowledge and ideas of what the subject and research inquiries can look like. Like when doing fieldwork, folklorists must also be open to learning through our engagements with the audiences we interact with online. Research, transparency, and conscious engagement through the *Folkwise* brand are required to raise the field's visibility on digital multimedia platforms. These core elements extend beyond identifying the intended audiences of our digital communications. It is a continuous process that we must constantly reevaluate so the brand can adapt and grow over time. Research for engaging on multimedia platforms needs also to be conducted regarding trends, hashtags, and metadata. We explore some methods for utilizing this data in the following section.



Figure 3.¹¹

Digital trends and platforms often “become viral” on the internet for shortened periods of time and just as quickly subside as part of the digital amplification process (Peck 2020). One example of this from the start of 2021 is the sea shanty fad which originally bloomed through TikTok (Know Your Meme 2021). Suddenly, folklorists and non-folklorists were engaging not only with folk songs but also with a digital trend that directly demonstrated the processes of dynamism through the range of per-

formance distributed online. Eventually, the sea shanty TikTok-trend trickled its way into other platforms, like Instagram, and even shifted to other mediums, most notable through the visually-based sea shanty memes in circulation. The general public began discussing the role of sea shanties as occupational folk culture, and some even began making their own versions of the folk tunes in relation to their own occupations. This example is precisely something that folklorists have studied at length since the early days of the discipline in a variety of ways and illustrates how the amplification of digital trends becomes an important part of a digital expressive repertoire. These trends create a unique marketing opportunity for folklorists to engage with the public in educational capacities *outside* traditions of scholarly inquiry.

Lowell Brower's TikTok account in particular demonstrates a clever case study of folklorists utilizing digital trends for marketing purposes. For his Spring 2021 course, Brower experimented with the platform TikTok to promote his Internet Folklore class. While he has created several TikTok videos on the topic, one, in particular, stood out to the *Folkwise* team in his usage of the platform. This video utilizes the "OnMyWayTo" TikTok trend that, as of this writing, is a staple of the expressive culture that exists on the cellphone app. To participate in this trend, individuals "hop" towards a goal set to the tune of "Where is the Love?" by the Black-Eyed Peas (2003). In the background of his dance, Brower has strategically arranged stacks of folklore texts, showing *Folklore and Social Media* (2020) edited by Andrew Peck and Trevor Blank.

Folklorists viewing this video can see exactly how much preparation and consideration Brower put into the short film's production. While he originally produced his videos to promote his course to the Harvard University undergraduate population, they did much more than that. TikTok as a platform enables casual viewers to see the number of times users watched a video has. Utilizing this, *Folkwise* members have ascertained that Brower has raised folklore's visibility as a discipline through these videos beyond his intended population by the observable digital engagement with his content.

Hashtags are another area of research that requires a more robust exploration to perform successful digital engagement as folklorists and educators. Appropriate usage of hashtags has endless possibilities for raising the visibility of folklore and adjacent communities through their similarity in function to subject headings of online library catalogs. By utilizing a particular hashtag, folklorists heighten visibility and actively contribute to a digital repository where audiences can follow or click a hashtag to view any content that is shared with it. Therefore, creating individual hashtags are a great way to market folklore and contribute towards building digital brands because of the semi-archival function of hashtags.¹² However, if one uses a clever hashtag, it is important to pair the hashtag phrase with a more generic hashtag. For example, the social media team of *Folkwise* posts content that is easily accessible for a general audience to associate with the phrase "folklore." When we post about foodways, we research hashtags with the highest use related to the subject (such as #food, #snacks, #FoodStudies, etc.). We employ these hashtags with our other more standard and brand-based hashtags to ensure the largest possible amount of digital engagement with a given post. Using generic hashtags means that folklorists can reach even wider

audiences beyond their personal or intended communities.

Digital platform analytics provide insight into how well individuals engage with online communities and are available on most platforms. Tracking this information allows brands to adjust to their digital communications to achieve the most visibility. The figures below contain data from the *Folkwise* Instagram Insights that inform our social media team about our most active times of digital engagement throughout the day, allowing us to choose the best times to post in the future to reach the widest audience. *Folkwise* receives the most digital engagement on Mondays between 9 am-6 pm, which directly correlates to the average time of our weekly “Meme Monday” posts, making it one of the most popular features on the account (see Figure 4).

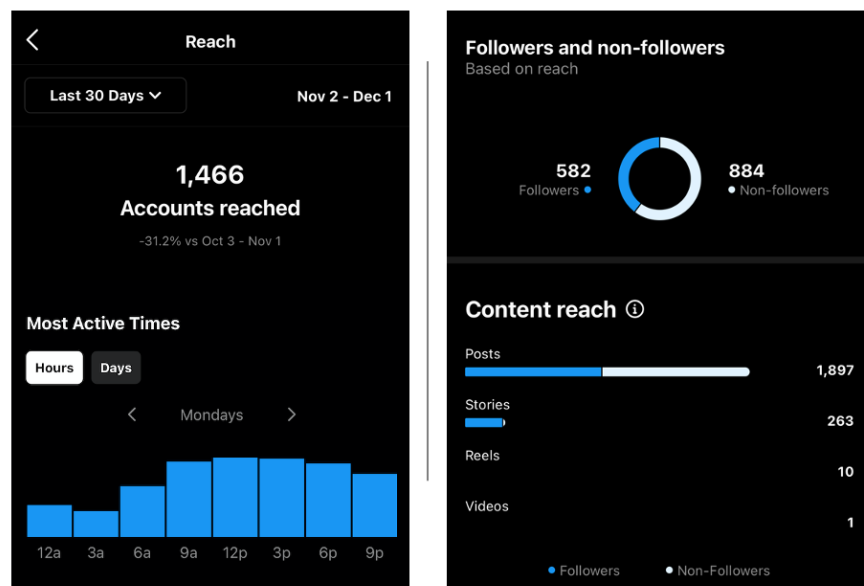


Figure 4 (Left) and Figure 5 (Right).

The metadata track reveals a striking point about our visibility and engagement (as demonstrated in Figures 4 and 5). While *Folkwise* has around 930 followers,¹³ the social media team can observe that the total accounts Instagram reached in the past 30 days totals over 1,466 (see Figure 4). Just because followers are not interacting with the content by liking or sharing an individual post does not mean that the organization is not raising the visibility of the discipline. Returning to Brower’s TikTok account, thousands of passive and active engagements from users interact with his content. *Folkwise*’s own Instagram Insights document similar types of interactions (Figures 4 and 5). Folklorists should consciously track their digital footprints because the transmission of intentionally educational content can further aid in raising the visibility of the work of folklorists across sectors online.

This research on trends, hashtags and metadata demonstrates the potential power

of digital brands to spread educational materials and the value of folklore to wider audiences. Outreach is more than just content and message you convey to an audience. Consistent and themed content can keep audiences engaged with your research. *Folkwise* has addressed this by dedicating certain days for posting specific content, such as #MemeMondays, or #FolkwiseWonders, the latter of which is typically posted on Friday. *Folkwise* also highlights our team’s intellectual and creative labor through the #MeetFolkwise series posted on #FolkloreThursdays to increase the visibility of our own team and the diverse collection of genres we study under the folklore umbrella.

The final piece of utilizing brand and digital engagement on social media to raise the visibility of folklore research lies in networking. There are several simple ways to maximize the networking of folklore content. The easiest method is to follow other folklorists and culture workers on existing online accounts. Following these current efforts of other folklorists allows for greater amplification of folklore’s visibility is two-fold: it allows individuals to stay current with recent folklore initiatives and directly *supports* these projects through interaction with their content. The *Folkwise* network also makes an effort to follow popular meme accounts, podcasts, and other accounts that engage with folkloric elements to build other online engagement via their audiences and to create working relationships with these organizations and expand the greater view and understanding of folklore.



Figure 6.¹⁴

Folklorists and scholars of communities consciously create opportunities for connections between our networked communities and researchers seems a natural fit. Tagging other scholars who write on similar topics to the post, linking their scholarship with yours, or creating conversations about research in comments enhance engagement with the field of folklore and support the work of our colleagues. 2020 has proved without a doubt that digital platforms are opportunities for collaboration with one another across great distances. A strategic approach to digital engagement is one step towards navigating networks and those outside of the discipline with relatively little effort. Understanding how these multimedia platforms can benefit folklorists and other culture workers is the next step in raising the visibility of folklore and the communities we work with.

Accessibility

The key to increasing *Folkwise's* visibility, and the visibility of folklore, is expanding its accessibility. *Folkwise* actively seeks to make folklore scholarship more accessible to a general audience. Not only do we create content in spaces with audiences not traditionally reached by academia, but we do so with the intent to disrupt academic gatekeeping, break down financial barriers, and create a culture of access within our programs and publications. By creating accessible spaces, our team welcomes everyone into *Folkwise*, as long as they follow community guidelines that promote respectful interaction for all. In these efforts, we seek to build community across and beyond institutions, bringing folklorists in contact with new audiences and new audiences in contact with folklore as a discipline.

A guiding principle of our efforts toward accessibility is that we do not allow gatekeeping.¹⁵ We actively recognize and challenge systemic inequalities that keep certain groups from academic or folkloric spaces. *Folkwise* invites guests and audiences to participate regardless of their academic or professional credentials; the only prerequisite for participation is an interest in folklore. To invite participation on all levels, we explain the context and meanings behind the content we share with a general audience in mind. For instance, our “Meme Monday” posts come with explanations of the history behind both the meme and any meanings we intend to convey, unpacking not only the meme’s form but also the meme’s cultural relevance. In this way, we also encourage curious users to ask questions—an invitation echoed throughout our programming across all of *Folkwise*.

Along these same lines, we make all of our content free. We operate on a public access model that combines multiple engagement methods to reach as many people as possible. As digital natives, the *Folkwise* team recognizes that various levels of digital literacy exist among our audiences, and not everyone is comfortable with or interested in engaging with platforms like Twitch and Discord. We specifically build our programming to engage beyond one single channel. Twitch videos, for example, get edited and reposted to YouTube in “highlight reels,” which feature the best content of the show. Social media posts are shared between Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook to reach audiences on all three sites.

Our forthcoming website will soon host additional content to deepen our online presence through traditional web media.¹⁶ We provide all these sites free of financial barriers on whatever platform audience members utilize. At the same time, we invite community members to financially support *Folkwise* through paid Twitch subscriptions, a tier-based Patreon subscription that provides viewers benefits like content decision-making and sales of merchandise in the future. We do *not* expect members to pay to access the bulk of our content.

Finally, we design all of our content by applying Universal Design elements. We include captions on our videos, write alternative text for all images, using screen-reader compatible hashtags, and center visibility in our visual design (Universal Design Center 2021). Universal Design is meant to preemptively accommodate the access needs of our community members, anticipating how we can make their lives easier, so they can more easily advocate for their needs. By openly engaging in universal design practices, we seek to normalize these processes and make them more ubiquitous on the web and in person. Most importantly, we invite input on improving in these areas, recognizing that we might not be perfect at anticipating everyone's needs, but demonstrating our openness to improve. In this sense, we ally ourselves with our disabled community members to break down access barriers everywhere.

Our choices to design our digital spaces to break through academic gatekeeping and dismantle financial and accessibility barriers is one of the key ways we seek to move across and beyond institutions. Digital spaces allow access to anyone with internet access—our audience becomes a community by their choice to participate. Digital spaces also allow intersection between existing and new communities. Our community forms both around its intellectual interests and because of its connections to *Folkwise* team members or other members of the *Folkwise* community. Thus intermingled, our community has become its distinct folk group, with folklore of its own to share.

Folkwise holds that these digital relationships are meaningful and *real* connections. Much has been said, especially prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, about “online relationships” being lesser than “real” relationships made in person. While there has always been a generational divide in this derision for online connections, *Folkwise* is one of many communities that seek to bridge even that generational divide to welcome real connections in our digital spaces. Past folklore studies have demonstrated how online communities build strong relationships around affinity (such as interest-based communities or fan groups.) (Blank 2017), solidarity and identification (uniting marginalized groups, raising social movements, etc.) (Bock 2013) Other studies note the online relationships which form around the distribution of knowledge, beliefs, values, and worldview (sharing conspiracy theories, legends, political beliefs, religion, etc.) (Kitta 2012). Online relationships are meaningful, even if they do not translate offline. During the pandemic, *Folkwise* spaces became vital hubs for interaction while we were all required to socially distance. Because we value accessibility, *Folkwise* was able to fill a needed gap in the social lives of our community members, creating vital and meaningful relationships online.

Community

As mentioned previously, the *Folkwise* team seeks to provide a platform to highlight the work of our folklore colleagues and community members, supporting them through their journey engaging with folklore. We share non-traditional opportunities for professional development in folklore beyond conferences and classroom guest lectures. While these continue to be popular, in this section, we will create a narrative that links *Folkwise's* success to two online platforms which incentivize open dialogue and emergent vernacular culture: Discord and Twitch.

Discord is a text and video chat platform roughly a hybrid of a vintage chat room server and Skype or Zoom. Each user joins Discord *servers* as per their interests, and each server has multiple *channels* that participants communicate in. While *Folkwise* has had a Discord server since fall 2020, our first heavily trafficked channel was the “AFS 2020 Virtual Chat Rooms,” where participants from the virtual conference could converse about their papers, presentations viewed, network, or hop in a video call and chat. In total, the *Folkwise* Discord server has upwards of thirty channels dedicated to public discussion, mostly organized by genres of folklore, such as legend, fairy tales, foodways, music, or memes. Anyone who joins the server can take a topic from a video they watched, or a post we made, or a conversation from a live stream and discuss it further with other folklore enthusiasts. Through Discord, we can have in-depth discussions about genres of folklore study or get updates on research and programming in the professional folklore community.

The other significant development under the *Folkwise* brand is a Twitch channel. Twitch is a streaming website that is mainly integrated for video game livestreams with a real-time viewer chat that scrolls in a sidebar next to livestreamed footage. Every Tuesday, we host a show through the site in which we live-stream a video game that relates to folklore, often meaning that the game either interpolates folkloric themes or has folkloric elements in its transmission and vitality, which led to its popularity. For example, we play Supergiant Games’ popular 2020 “roguelike”¹⁷ *Hades* and discusses how it adapts and reinterprets ancient Greek mythology to create an action game.

Alternatively, we play a group session of the murder-mystery party game *Among Us* and contextualize the dictionaries full of folk speech that streamers and players alike have created as a shorthand to crack the game’s “whodunnit” mechanic. Most weeks, *Folkwise* brings on a guest folklorist (who is broadcasted simultaneously from the *Folkwise* Discord server) to provide commentary on the folkloric aspects of the game as the hosts play it. Next is an interview with the special guest, affording them an hour to answer questions regarding their work and experience with the world of folklore, while we source additional questions live from the chat.

The real appeal of Twitch as a live-streaming platform to the *Folkwise* team is how it connects people through instant emergent culture between folklorists and the public. Firstly, Twitch’s live streaming provides accessible professional commentary on folklore in video games. For example, Jeana Jorgensen joined the stream to play the Brothers Grimm-inspired visual novel *The Wolf Among Us*. Viewers in chat listened to her commenting on how the game recontextualizes “The Big Bad Wolf” and “Snow

White” as film noir detectives, but also would have noted her excited exclamation when one of the central figures in the game’s mystery turns out to be the motif of “Donkey Skin” (Folkwise 2021 a).

Secondly, Twitch allows folklorists to use video games to effectively explain the work of folklorists to the broader public. Twenty million people have played *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017), but we would venture that considerably fewer people know what a public folklorist specializing in foodways does professionally. As we traveled the forests of Hyrule foraging for rare fruits in *Zelda*, TJ Smith used our quest to contextualize his work with food sustainability in Appalachia (Folkwise 2021b & c). Twitch allows everyday people to view academic content.

We run various running promotions on the *Folkwise* channel where enough subscribers will unlock a special perk to our community for increasing viewership and more personalized levels of engagement. For example, one of our team members may write a conference paper from a series of prompts curated by the chat and present it on the stream. These are quality-sourced and researched presentations that would hold up at a professional conference with the added perk that the fans chose the topics and are directly relevant to their folklore interests (Folkwise 2021d).

In a way, Twitch is the online space folklorists have been asking for because of how it facilitates a robust digital community. Twitch’s chat function creates emergent culture. Each channel brands itself with custom “emotes,” visual markers of a chatter’s affiliation to a specific streamer. These specific emotes, and folk speech cross over to other chat sections on a user-by-user basis. We, as folklorists, feel it is our job to point out how this Twitch feature is artistic communication in small groups.

The way *Folkwise* utilizes Twitch, in the words of John Miles Foley, is as an *agora*: “a public space and nexus where ideas and knowledge are shared via whatever medium the community has adopted as the default technology” (Foley 2012 40-41). More specifically, *Folkwise*’s Twitch channel operates as an “eAgora” (2012, 263) where academics and everyday people can have instant dialogue online about vernacular culture. The only barrier for entry is that video games are the *lingua franca* for Twitch as a website. Nevertheless, the team at *Folkwise* is looking to leverage our interest in video games to enter this new space on behalf of folkloristics. Just as politics, live music, and board games have made the jump to Twitch, *Folkwise* wants to use the platform to lead academia into its own online public education niche.

Public Education

The *Folkwise* project is creating a *knowledge commons* of perspectives, methods, connections, and diverse generic representations of the study of folklore to share folklore to the broadest possible audiences online (Hess & Ostrom 2007). We see knowledge as a shared resource and want to decenter the conversations circulating the world of folklore studies from academia into the spaces where we find folklore in our everyday lives. Many folklorists have not learned how to extend their work and work with collaborators out to the world of public education. Public education does not have to happen through institutions—an individual utilizing personally branded social me-

dia accounts can reach wide audiences and even profit from their shared intellectual labor financially, socially, and pedagogically.

Using *Folkwise* as an example of this formation of public knowledge has required us to ask the questions: What counts as “knowledge”? Whose knowledge are we sharing and representing as folklore? How are we demonstrating our personal authority, and what effect does this have on the audience? These are ongoing questions at *Folkwise* and impact our thinking for each subject and individual we showcase in our content. Our organization’s emphasis on decentering the academy, in turn, provides the basis of knowledge we work to share.

According to de Certeau (1988), creative and subversive play can foster connections and solidarity between the subjects or the powerless. He defines one such tactic as “la perruque,” or the wig. La perruque “is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer,” which may include a “secretary’s writing a love letter on ‘company time’ or a cabinetmaker ‘borrowing’ a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room” (25), de Certeau explains that la perruque is often an affront to institutions because subjects are not using their time for profit, but for expression and the forging of connections. Our use of Twitch as an educational platform that both highlights original content and the work of public and academic folklorists is subversive. Sharing academic knowledge outside of institutions and away from the formal language we are trained to use has a more considerable impact on our communities. De Certeau argues that “la perruque” should be considered a form in which researchers, academics, educators, and other people within institutions can take action. To undo the rules and hierarchies of economic systems which institutions repeat, we can use the “institution’s machines and make use of its scraps” and “play the game of free exchange.” The free exchange would be, according to de Certeau, “a return of the ethical, of pleasure and of invention within the institution” (Ibid.). When we consider the personal and professional goals of *Folkwise* as a way to deconstruct barriers between scholarship and the public actively, it makes sense that we share the content as a form of creative and intellectual play.

In order to bridge the divide between the academy and intellectually curious communities, the members of the *Folkwise* team share folkloric knowledge on the *Folkwise* social media channels which is directly requested from our viewing audience and community. As noted previously, the Twitch live-stream chat inspired our “Mini-Lecture” series—fans would make a relevant joke during a livestream about, say, vampires and garlic, which led to the creation of Jared L. Schmidt’s lecture on the origins of this association as requested directly by the community (Folkwise 2021d). Our process of community attention is an ongoing process that Twitch provides as a live streaming. The aspects of folklore discussed online pique our interests alongside those of our larger community, resulting in the co-creation and sharing of relevant educational content.

Another key to creating a “knowledge commons” through digital communication is networking with and supporting existing knowledge online. Sharing existing posts from other creators, commenting on posts, financially supporting the work of folklorists of all kinds online, and coordinating advertisements and collaborations across networks are ways *Folkwise* seeks to strengthen our community of folklorists across

time and space. In our “*Folkwise Live*” series, our hosts have interviewed folklorists at public and academic institutions worldwide and people who are just generally interested in folklore and work towards sharing their love through various digital and professional projects. The format of the show results in showcase interdisciplinary conversations between folklore and other fields such as philanthropy, food studies, mythology, and graphic design. We also share the work of other folklorists across our social media platforms, working towards similar goals. Notable examples include Lamont Jack Pearley, who runs the African American Folklorist social media brand (Pearley 2020), Andrea Kitta, Jeana Jorgensen. Additionally, several other folklorists do wonderful academic self-promotion on Twitter, Lynne McNeill, who represents the field of folklore on many cable television shows, and the Carterhaugh School run by Brittney Warman and Sarah Cleto (2020), an online school of folklore for all. Other organizations and individuals we have connected with through the formation of Folkwise are The Fairy Tellers Podcast run by hosts Katrina Reinhart and Geoff Insch (2021), a range of regional culture museums and community organizations, Afro Tales Podcast hosted by Amon Mazingo (2021), The Folklore Friday Podcast hosted by Megan Erickson (2021), and many more individual artists and folklorists. Our world is vast if you know where to look.

Folklorists exist across fields, sectors, and industries. *Folkwise* intends to bring in folklorists from these various backgrounds and explore their applications of folklore in their lives and work. For example, Megan Hillier-Guisler is a Ph.D. student of folklore and philanthropy, appeared as a special guest on our show and allowed us to explore a medical non-profit created game, *That Dragon, Cancer*, which details the story of a family’s experience when their child was diagnosed with cancer (Folkwise 2021e). Many of us ended up crying together during the live-streamed gameplay because of how powerful the game was and allowed us to have a powerful conversation about the role of folklore in the non-profit industrial complex.

We also are working towards highlighting more musicians and makers on the show through our up-and-coming special, “*Folkwise Mix-Tape*.” *Folkwise*’s Discord server brings together members of the *Folkwise* community from across time and space. The international reach of this platform allows for the participation and collaboration with folklorists we do not usually get to interact with due to distance and mismatched time zones regularly. *Folkwise* was able to coordinate interviews with folklorists Ruth Hazleton, from Australia (Folkwise 2021f), Daniel Peretti from Canada (2021g), and have cross-promoted and connected with Llinos Pritchard (2021), a casual folklorist and Twitch streamer from Wales. *Folkwise* aims to provide the most significant representation of both folklorists and subjects possible, which is a goal only obtainable with consistency through the range of platforms we connect.

Digital public humanities can bring people together from across networks when attention is given to meeting audiences where they are already meeting and eliminating as many participation barriers as possible. Public education at *Folkwise* takes the form of creating our content, sharing and promoting existing content of our wider folklore community through our social media platforms, and making our content as accessible as possible for inquiring minds who come across our digital network. *Folk-*

wise de-centers academic and other established institutions as a central realm for these conversations.

Moving Forward with Folkwise

We view our *Folkwise* Twitch channel and more prominent brand as an homage to a public-access style folklore network where we can feature many new projects. It is like TV, but the programming consists of friends and colleagues talking about folklore. As of this writing, several other projects which will expand our public outreach and community commons are in development. One of *Folkwise's* live-streamed video projects on the horizon is "*Folkwise Mixtape*," where we present a variety show type series featuring a range of folklore, including arts and crafts, foodways, music, and films and projects created by folklorists. We are also forming a book club, tentatively titled "*Folk Cited*." The *Folkwise* team and audience read a book together and then discuss the elements of the text and subsequent folklore together during a livestream.¹⁸

One of our more successful ongoing projects is "*Rolling with Folkwise*," the second Twitch project created under our brand. This series began as a run of livestreamed "one-shot" games of *Call of Cthulhu* centered on encounters with cryptids. *Call of Cthulhu* is a tabletop role-playing game (or TTRPG) based on the 1926 H. P. Lovecraft short-story and the surrounding "Cthulhu mythos" (Petersen 2016). It is similar to other TTRPGs, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, but has distinctive game mechanics emphasizing horror storytelling and noir settings over high fantasy. The games played on *Folkwise* center on a rotating cast of cryptids, and the player's characters feature investigators and locals who encounter the cryptid.¹⁹ The decision to incorporate cryptids into the game offered us a way to discuss folklorists' perspectives on local legends with our audience. It also allowed us to explore new avenues for collaborative storytelling within a TTRPG framework.

Live-streaming allows for visual media and video formats to expand on storytelling in the games in interesting ways. When we stream TTRPGs, *Folkwise* translates material-rich games into virtual spaces, which allow for play with the "theater of the mind."²⁰ There is a sense of placelessness in virtual spaces, which many view as something to be overcome. However, in the context of imaginative TTRPGs, this is a potential advantage. For example, in our Mothman-themed game, our Gamemaster produced maps for everyone to see and interact with on their computers, and a note with unique information that was shared secretly with the audience without the players seeing. The players later encounter the note in the game, allowing the audience to be involved in the plot along with the Gamemaster.

One theme that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic which shaped *Folkwise* was the creative, "off-label" use of technology. We use social media and "professional" tools to forge connections across academic and professional boundaries, blurring the lines between personal entertainment, community engagement, and creative work, which echoes the conception of "tactics" that Michel de Certeau puts forth in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Certeau uses the term tactics to describe how subjects artfully "use, manipulate, and divert" the cultural products and spaces imposed on them by

external power (1988, 30). Tactics are the strategies of the powerless and socially precarious that use the socially strong (like workplaces or institutions) by carving out an independent domain within the circumstances imposed from above. As early-career folklorists, we are often mindful of appearing in an unfinished, improvised fashion, and institutions often discourage the simple integration of academia with the public. All of the various *Folkwise* undertakings work in tandem with the tactics we rely on to form connections with those in our communities and public spheres.

Inspirations and Futures for Digital Public Humanities

Folkwise might not have gotten off the ground if our team was not brought together virtually during a pandemic. Various intimate practices that are not as public-facing as our Twitch channel has facilitated our group's formation. We focus on supporting each other through dissertation-writing support and curriculum vitae makeover sessions. We are collaboratively writing documents and co-writing presentations. We have skill-sharing sessions where we teach one another skills. These practices help make our individual goals and group's vision become a reality.

Folkwise is opening the gates of opportunities for individuals interested in folklore to connect across time and space—decentering institutional knowledge to create a new model for sharing folklore content and scholarship online. Since we created our organization and our communication channels using existing and publicly accessible platforms, we can take risks, and act quickly (or take our time as needed). *Folkwise* is important because it demonstrates how we can use virtual tools to fill in the gaps left by institutions, to support each other, and bring folklore to the public, meeting our audiences where they are. The network we have created together through this project, strengthening our relationship with existing folklore-based content online and through the creation of our own, has had a powerful impact on our sense of an intellectual community. We hope our work with *Folkwise* can provide a scalable model for others in the folklore community and encourage folklorists to interact more with digital tools, experiment with new platforms for programming and communication, and think about how we can support each other beyond and alongside institutions.

You can find out more about our work at WiseFolk Productions, LLC, *Folkwise*, and keep updated on new programming through our website, WiseFolk.org. We would also encourage you to contact us via email with questions, comments, and suggestions at: folkwise13@gmail.com.

Notes

- 1 A version of this paper was presented as part of a roundtable discussion at the Western States Folklore Society's Conference. This conference, the 80th in the society's history, reflects the real-world effects of COVID-19 on academia itself as it was held digitally utilizing Zoom. This roundtable was held on April 16, 2021. The authors of this paper served as panelists. The panel was titled, "Texting, Zooming, and Memes: Sustaining Digital Community while Socially Distant."

- 2 Founding members of *Folkwise*: Daisy Ahlstone, Kerry Kaleba, Sam Kendrick, Kaitlyn Kinney, Caroline Miller, John Price, Jared L. Schmidt, Shirley Shields, Dom Tartaglia, David Tauber, Christine J. Widmayer
- 3 Instagram is a U.S. photo and video-sharing social media network that first launched in 2010 before being bought out by Facebook, Inc. It allows users to post, like, and share these posts via direct messaging and its 'Stories' function.
- 4 Facebook was founded in 2004 and is a popular social networking service that allows users to write text posts, share pictures and videos, and more.
- 5 Twitter was founded in 2006 as a microblogging, and social networking site that allows users to tweet, retweet, and allow for liking and sharing posts via direct messaging.
- 6 TikTok is a Chinese video-sharing social media platform initially created in 2016 that became popular in the United States during 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. It allows users to create short videos, like, and share with others.
- 7 YouTube is an American video-sharing social media platform first launched in 2005.
- 8 Discord is an instant messaging and digital distribution platform geared towards creating communities that first launched in 2015. Users communicate via video and voice calls, text messaging, posting in channels, sharing media and files through the private chat function or as part of communities termed "servers."
- 9 Twitch is a video live streaming service that launched in 2011 and is primarily utilized for video game live streaming but has since expanded the content users livestream on their channels. Each channel has a chat function that watchers can provide live commentary on what they are viewing.
- 10 This meme utilizes the 'Epic Handshake' format to illustrate how branding and positionality are interrelated in the act of digital engagement. Meme created by Kaitlyn Kinney.
- 11 Folkwise utilizes a variant of the 'Double Soda Pour' to demonstrate that trends, hashtags, and metadata are important aspects of the research process. Meme created by Kaitlyn Kinney.
- 12 Utah State University's Digital Folklore Project, headed by Jeannie Thomas and Lynne S. McNeill is an excellent example of utilizing hashtags for the benefit of digital archival research.
- 13 As of 28 November 2021.
- 14 The 'Galaxy/Expanding Brain' meme format lends itself for demonstrating how branding, research, outreach, and networking build off of one another in digital engagement work. Meme created by Kaitlyn Kinney.
- 15 Gatekeeping refers to controlling, and usually limiting, access to specific resources or spaces.
- 16 The official *Folkwise* website can be found at: <https://wisefolk.org/>
- 17 A roguelike is a role-playing video game subgenre that typically involves a dungeon crawl through incrementally complex levels and maps generated from the player's in-game choices. Typically, the character moves on a grid, uses turn-based gameplay, and involves the permanent death of the player's character.
- 18 The first book on the docket is "The Last Wish" (1993) by Andrzej Sapkowski, author of The Witcher series, set to launch later in 2021 to coincide with the release of the second season of the Netflix show.
- 19 We finished a Mothman series and a Jersey Devil-themed series in June 2021 and are beginning to conceptualize a Dungeons & Dragons campaign that will incorporate other aspects of folklore.
- 20 Folklorists have discussed other forms of RPGs (see Yvonne Milspaw and Wesley K. Ev-

ans, "Variations on Vampires: Live Action Role Playing, Fantasy and the Revival of Traditional Beliefs" (*Western Folklore* 69, no. 2, 2010) and Ben Gillis, "An Unexpected Font of Folklore: Online Gaming as Occupational Lore" (*Western Folklore* 70, no. 2, 2011).

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