

Grappling with digitality— some reflections

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Step by step, ethnologists, folklorists and culture anthropologists are making sense of digital technologies. Questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology have been stated, addressed and continue to be discussed. Does the internet change our ways of being? Are these potential changes something for our disciplines to deal with? If so, how should we proceed?

The articles in this volume propose different ways of ethnographic exploration and thus contributes to our repertoire of research practices. Reading them triggered some speculations for me about possible tracks of continued research. Some are already present and articulated in the articles, others emerged from my impression of the collection of research. As a way to present my ideas, I start from what I think are the strong sides of our disciplines, the fields we have authority in, and the aspects that can make a difference in the gold rush-like expansion of “digital humanities”.

The greatest achievement of folklore studies has perhaps not been the identification of certain kinds of texts, but rather the study of the *circulation of “texts”*. Arguments for folkloric qualities in digital media have already been strongly put forward (Blank 2009, 2012); the differences are more to be found in terms of “tradition velocity”, that is, the speed of transmission from one link to another has increased with digital media, which

not only enhances the rapidness of the spread but also the possibilities of fast reaction and feedback. Here, Howard’s study gives testimony to how our understanding of folklore processes can be enhanced by studies of digital media—and vice versa.

The study of digital media also opens up the possibility of revisions of our previous research pre-internet and pre-social media. The image of the authentic folk culture, orally conceived and transmitted and existing on its own outside any practices of writing, was one of the discipline-shaping determinants that both made studies possible and at the same time restricted the range of what could be seen and what insights could be put into words. Although no longer a scientific prerequisite, it has loomed in the background as a model of what constitutes a research topic. Now, an interesting aspect of the studies at hand is how they point to how new media make way for new usages of the alphabet as a communication technology. In social media, many messages are sent in the form of text—and this reminds us to reflect on how writing and reading has been an intrinsic part of everyday life for centuries, in forms varying from graffiti and shopping lists to printed announcements and the (in some places) standard domestic inventory of bible, hymnal and almanacs (cf. for instance Kuismin & Driscoll 2013 on the practices of literacy). Digital media are not just yet another field to study, they also have significance insofar they can make us reconsider how and what we already have studied.

We have a strong tradition of studying various aspects of *everyday life*, including how it is structured by people and how it structures people’s space of acting. Not the

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least important aspect of this structuring, the handling of social relations (occasional, fluid, or permanent) by means of social media maintains, as well as defines and re-defines the character of the relations. Studying this phenomenon is a vast field. One question that is visible in most of the papers is how authority is constructed on the internet. Cocq gives examples of how vernacular authority is shaped from filling a functional space where institutional authority is absent or not sufficient. Peck's paper deals with how the possibilities that are inherit in the media make possible reflective processes that feed back into the transmission, and points to the meaning of vernacular criticism as a technology of establishing authority. Howard's study of interaction patterns points to the uneven distribution of vernacular authority. Eriksson and Johansson points to another mechanism that is intrinsic to the technology; the power of algorithms to prescribe choices for you, and to preclude you from the making choices yourself, all the while the authority is said to supposedly lie in your own habits. You get what you deserve.

The continuous technical improvement has hitherto provided sufficient room for action to maintain field dynamics and counter stagnation, on a general level. Thus the optimism about the potential for democracy and empowerment that is a strong internet discourse. But what about the communities of digital practices that are limited to a selected few? There is a myth about communication technologies that seems to be revitalized with every innovation—the promises of openness, reaching out, a public space available for all on equal terms; but every new social formation is open for forming of hierarchies and uneven distribution of

access to information. Gelfgren's paper deals with how the existing hierarchies of religious communities are reproduced, reinforced, or negotiated and perhaps even challenged, but always already there to be taken into consideration. The everyday use of intranet and social media in workplaces parallels the communities discussed here, in making the handling of information a means of maintaining the insider-outsider divide as well as the internal hierarchies visible.

The possibilities both promised and imagined that have become distorted or never realized are a source of disappointment about the internet. For example, the rising demands of intimacy in order to keep up the presence in social media sometimes lead individuals to expose themselves emotionally in ways they later regret. What reactions arise from these disappointments? Deliberate removal of one's social media presence? Strategies for a-digital living? The launching of some kind of *off-line cool* as a new attitude of sophisticated exclusivity? (Which to be practiced would need some other communication technology in order to get public recognition.) Or just feelings of and processes of exclusion? On a micro-level, the use of internet as a means of harassing or controlling people speaks of the individual vulnerability that is a consequence of the combination of the media's technical possibilities and the cultural expectations of self-presentation, communication, honesty and authenticity. Digital trust is a fragile social practice re-enacted and reproduced every day; just like digital authority, it is a relational quality never to be taken for granted, a basis for interaction not to be neglected in a cultural analysis.

There is finally our competence in the study of *how people make sense of the world*—and in this context, how they use digital media, and how to make sense of a digitalized world. Several of the contributions, especially the papers of Buccitelli and Ritter, deal with how we imagine, perform and experience space. Where just some ten years ago a digital grid was something that could be applied to physical space, today the experience and understanding of space is more and more becoming questions of an always already digitized reality. Ritter makes an interesting point of how digital media as a ‘polymedia experience’ are used for turning a diaspora into an interplay of local involvement and virtual togetherness. Buccitelli’s study focus the complex interactions between individual contributors, IRL sites, and institutions. His observations also point to the existence of alternative arenas for the reproduction and appointment of heritage sites, to be noted by all scholars of vernacular culture. The steady increase of university programs for “experience-oriented tourism” and “event management” also points to the strong presence of “the digital” as something to handle in “real life”.

The other examples can seem more abstract when it comes to space and place, but here it is important to remember that the uses of digital media in an everyday environment can transform every space into an individualized locality. And just as a reminder and a twist, digital media also contribute to making senses, and to localize sensual experiences. Whereas Eriksson and Johansson study the construction of individual soundscapes that can overcome geography, Ritter’s study points to food tastes being mapped, localized and inserted into human networks

(or establish them). The embodied knowledge of how to transfer your thoughts onto the qwerty keyboard, or the numeric keyboard of the cellphone, is a sensual prerequisite for taking part in the digital interaction.

Making sense of the world—the concept of “web 2.0” was a promise of democratization, with greater access and interactivity made possible by technical improvements. But the same improvements have also made possible the processing of masses of data, which has changed the character of the internet. “Big Data” is no longer a technical/scholarly by-product but a mechanism that affects the way individuals experience the world they live in, indeed shapes the world they live in. In a historical perspective, the introduction of demographic statistics in the 18th century represents a similar introduction of aggregated data as a social force, although with huge differences in velocity and efficiency. Indeed, the social sciences are claimed to have been producing populations by the handling of data (Ticineto Clough et al. 2015)—Howard’s contribution here instead points to unfolding ways that populations are shaping themselves on the internet by tracing and analyzing the contacts that are the product of the networks forming. Other contributions point to the corrective processes and institutionalized restraints framing the seemingly individual choices. Again, the question of authority comes to mind, and there is every reason to repeat Buccitelli’s final statement that “the encoding of institutional power [into digital technology that increasingly shoot through everyday life] will become an ever more central point of study for scholars of vernacular culture.”

Works Cited

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