Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 7
Dr. Lynne S. McNeill – PART 2

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[Intro]

Perry Carpenter:

Hi, I'm Perry Carpenter, one of the hosts of the Digital Folklore Podcast, and welcome to another Digital Folklore unplugged edition.

Unplugged episodes are where we get to ditch all the fancy production, all the story elements, and bring you the raw or only slightly edited interviews with our folklore experts. Today's episode is part two of our interview with Dr. Lynne McNeill. If you've not yet listened to part one, I would encourage you to go back and give that a listen. But if you don't want to, that's okay, it's really not necessary to appreciate today's discussion.

Lynne McNeill's name is nearly synonymous with the study of digital folklore. Her work and her voice has been instrumental in helping people understand that our online world is really just an extension of our lives. It's a place not only where folklore can be created and arise, but thrive at a speed and scale previously unimaginable.

In this episode, Lynne shares her thoughts about the value of studying folklore academically, how digital platforms influence the types of folklore created on them, the concept of Poe's law, examples of digital legend tripping. Some of her favorite urban legends and more. As you can tell, this is an action-packed episode that you really do not want to miss. There were a few internet glitches during the recording. We tried to smooth those out as much as possible in the edit. But if you hear a couple of areas that sound maybe a little bit disjointed, you may have just found out where some of those internet gremlins got us.

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Okay, let's get unplugged…

[Transition to Interview}

If somebody were to say to you, "I really like folklore, but what is the value of studying folklore academically? What does that do for the world, for the next generation?" What's your response there?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

I would say to that person that folklore opens our eyes to what we really care about, and we being that collective society, we can look to the great thinkers among us for insight, for importance, for value, but we can also look to the creative, artistic, cultural expressions of everybody to see what rises to the top. In many ways, the transmission process of folklore is a survival of the fittest evolutionary process. If an idea, an element, a component, really speaks to a lot of people, it's staying in. It's one of the conservative elements, the traditional elements. If there's details that are specific to that person, specific to this group over here, but not this group, they tend to fall out, right?

By the time any piece of folklore has been rolled through enough transmissive chains, it is pretty reflective those conservative elements of what matters to people. Looking at that is like being given a crystal ball into the worldview of everyday people. Now, we have to be careful to not generalize. Does that collectively shaped pattern tell us anything about any one given individual? No, no more than apple pie and baseball is what all Americans do every day. We don't understand any given American through its broadest stereotypes, but folklore is a bit more specific than that. In fact, folklore is weakest at the national level. I mean, how many of us feel that we are personally defined by the story of little George Washington not being able to tell a lie?

Not really, but I guarantee that most of us have a story within our family, perhaps a story of how our family as immigrants came here, a story about how our family perhaps made it from the East coast to the West coast, a story about how our grandparents started a business or how our parents found the home that we live in, those stories that are just as traditional, but just for a smaller folk group stand to tell us a lot about ourselves. So, the more specific we can get in that view of what group is this folklore speaking for and to, the more accurate our crystal ball divining can be to say, "I need to understand

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these people. I need to understand the collective worldview of this group so that I know how to move forward."

I can maybe even advise, I mean, perhaps in what will someday be an interventionist turn so that I can say, "Maybe try s singing this song instead," something like that. It's a strange thought that we might use folklore to manipulate. I mean, Antonio Gramsci wrote about it. People have done this in the past. The Nazis did it, putting spins on traditional songs and stories to make it seem as though it were supporting their cause. That's always been happening, and it seems that it's mostly that the good guys won't go there, but the fact is that there already are good guys who already have gone there. We do have folklore that supports the better sides of our nature as well as the folklore that supports the worst side.

It's just that we don't draw it out. We don't show it. We don't focus on it. It's not problematic, so we let it go. Folklore is defined in a lot of arenas by its triviality, its commonality. Everyone knows it. Why would you go to college to learn it? Well, we don't go to college to learn the folklore. We go to a folklore program to learn how to think about the folklore, how to identify it, how to process it, how to analyze it. That work stands to take the trivial and unproblematic things, and show us how they can be truly beneficial. A lot of the discipline's identity crisis stems from the fact that folklore is identified as the trivial elements of culture, the stuff that's super common and familiar, and so that everyone knows about it, so why would you go to school to study it that it makes sense for us to look at the trivial when it has negative societal implications.

We really ignore the trivial when we think of it as benign, but the truth is we don't need to necessarily manipulate folklore to have positive outcomes of it. We might just need to do the exact same work we do, and focus on the positive stuff, what's already there that is better for us. We see this in a variety of situations where institutions haven't caught up with us yet. So, we have sort of a... New media scholars have talked about this a ton, this constant moral panic of technology. Each time we get a new communications technology, we freak out and think it's ruining the world, cell phones being the latest, turning us all into rude people who ignore the person sitting across from us, and look at our phone instead, and yet we have the phone stacking game.

If you're familiar with this, this is a game is what people call it that they've come up with where when you go out to lunch or dinner with a group of friends, everyone takes their phone, and puts it upside

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down in the middle of the table, and no one can touch it. The first person who touches their phone buys dinner for everyone else.

Perry Carpenter:

Nice.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

So, it's this folk policing of politeness. It's like, "No, hey, you want to go look on your phone, distract yourself with other stuff. You're going to pay the price, which is buying us all dinner." So, tradition is guiding us in this like, "Oh no, it's becoming normalized to be on our phones at the dinner table," but tradition comes in, folk custom, and says, "Here's a remedy for that. Here's a way to not do that." Then when we look historically, and see that, "Oh, we've always had this image of the stern 1940s father at the breakfast table with the wall of the newspaper up between him and his kids, ignoring his family, technology isn't making us rude. We're just rude." That's not on the medium. That's on us. In the same way that people can overcome that back then, we overcome it now.

Perry Carpenter:

I've got one question or maybe an observation on the interventionist piece, and then I've got a fairly serious question to ask. So on the intervention piece, I'm wondering what is the folklore's best path to do that? Because any of the terms that you start to use for intervention have negative connotations. The times where we have done that before, it's things like propaganda, influence campaigns. You end up with words like, "How do I shape or manipulate public opinion?" All of that sounds very, very nefarious. At the same time though, we do have influenced campaigns as you've said, that have been done for very positive reasons, like things like see something, say something or stop, think, connect, or click it or tickets. All of these things, they're not really folk, but they're pushed out from an authoritarian type of source, but how do we get to the midpoint of that?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

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My most honest answer is I don't know. I don't know necessarily that it's going to be the job of folklorists. It's going to be somebody's job, and I hope that that somebody will have studied folklore. It almost seems to be a perhaps not yet extant field that I might call something like public mental health, that there is a public health campaign that actually folklorists have weighed in on a lot. A lot of public health campaigns fail based on a misunderstanding of the vernacular understanding of disease or of risk or of contagion. So, there are folklore working with public health professionals, and I'm sure there are public mental health professionals, but I think folklorists can probably weigh in there as well.

If we had a public mental health campaign that similarly took into account the way folklore is altering people's assumptions or perspectives on this, we might stand to make a difference in some of these things. I hope completely that folklorists play a role in that. I don't know exactly what it looks like. It looks now, as I think is already happening, like folklore's setting aside that firm agnostic stance, maybe not in the realm of the supernatural or the metaphysical so much, but in the realm of the political and the societal. Maybe we pick and choose where we maintain and don't maintain those boundaries, but it's definitely a big part of the future of the discipline.

What I hope is if folklore studies as a discipline can reach a bigger audience, there will be more people, say, double majoring in public health and folklore who will be poised to do that sort of work.

Perry Carpenter:

There's actually an interesting intersection that may happen. So I know in the field of behavior science and things like nudging and all of that, there's been a lot of study to what we would call folk groups that they're not calling it that, but it's like what is the population that if I'm trying to get people to be more receptive to this type of behavior, vaccination, taking certain kind of medicines or something like that, how do I understand that folk group, the message and the communication, and the huddling of that group? One example was school vaccinations. It was really hard to get certain communities to vaccinate their children on schedule, but then they realized if they held free vaccine clinics right after church in those community pockets, that all of a sudden, their vaccine rates went up greatly.

So, it wasn't just getting the right message out there, but it was understanding the fundamental behaviors of that group, and then putting the right information at the right time at the right place.

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Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes. Yes. Absolutely. There's a really great book, and this is what I was going to say, is Diane Goldstein's Once Upon a Virus. It is about the AIDS epidemic in relation to folklore about aids. Her main case study is a community in Newfoundland where she was living at the time in a town called Conception Bay North, CBN. It was one of the rare pockets in North America where AIDS was just rampant. So of course, the assumption is there's not enough education. People need public health. They need to know how this virus is spread so that they don't get it. What it turned out when people went there was that everyone there knows how AIDS is spread. They all know, so what's the disconnect? Why are they still getting this illness if they know how to get it?

What Diane did that was just so groundbreaking was she went to the folklore, and said, "What folklore, what legends, what jokes, what stories are people telling about AIDS in this community that can tell us the unconscious stances that they have?" It was a lot of the legends that we had in the '80s and the rest of the United States and Canada, North America, which were stories of bad actors hiding needles. If you had needles in the coin return slot of a payphone, which dates that story, needles on the gas pump handle at a gas station, needles in movie theaters, people who are infected with HIV, who will cut themselves and throw their blood at you, the welcome to the world of AIDS urban legend. What all of these stories Diane observed had in common was this claim to pointlessness, like it's not about using protection and having safe sex.

All the condoms have holes poked in them. It's not about carefully choosing a partner, "I'm going to get this at the gas station or in a movie theater. People are out to get me. What can I really do about it?" Then when she began talking to people, she found that they were incorporating those legends and rumors into their personal lives in a really interesting way. There were people who said, "I know my partner's sleeping around on me. I know that AIDS is rampant in this community, but if I tell him out of the blue to use protection, he is going to beat me. He'll be so offended. He'll hurt me. I know he's going to hurt me. I know that even if I tell them to use protection, all the condoms have holes in them, and I'm going to get AIDS from the movie theater anyway, so why guarantee that I'm going to get beaten tonight?"

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She used this term vernacular risk perception to talk about what that decision-making process is. It's that personal experience combined with the authority of tradition, what the legends are saying, what the stories are saying. You put those two things together, and you get someone who needs way different AIDS education than you thought they did. I think that's a really great case study for this way of thinking, if we can transplant some of that. People don't just need media literacy. They need something else. There are some other combo of the traditional and the personal happening that's going to pull people out of these problematic behaviors.

Mason Amaedus:

I wonder... Obviously, I don't know how anyone would make this happen, but I wonder then if the interventionist stance looks a bit more like a broader acceptance of people who study folklore being brought in consulting roles to all of these other agencies responsible for disseminating information. A weird parallel that crossed my mind actually comes from advertising, particularly because there is a TikTok ad that I saw recently. I don't know if you've happened to come across. It's a 10-minute TikTok ad about Hilton hotels, but it was created by a bunch of people on the platform who fundamentally understand the communication and folk groups of the folklore of that platform and how to communicate on it, and it went viral like all other really good ads do, because they understand the context and everything that they exist within.

I mean, go turbo capitalism, I guess, for making advertising the place that did that kind of thing, but maybe that's what it looks like in a public health or a political standpoint is folklorists as advisors in those things.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes, I think absolutely, folklorists as advisors. I think step one in that is people, one, knowing that the discipline of folklore studies exists. Step two, I think, is knowing what folklore is. When people hear folklore, they do not think of any of the things that we have been discussing for this past hour and 20 minutes. That I think is one of our biggest obstacles is that there is a fundamental misunderstanding of what folklore means when really it's speaking to this much more abstract symbolic interactionism level

of societal examination while also being the discipline that studies fairytales and urban legends and jump rope rhymes.

Mason Amaedus:

Right.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

It's both of those things together, and that unfortunately, that sometimes pulls down the standing of the discipline when what it really should be doing is pulling up our understanding of the importance of fairytales and jump rope rhymes.

Mason Amaedus:

Right, which I've always thought was funny because people are like, "What's the importance of fairytales?" It's like, "You mean the stories we tell our kids as they're growing up?"

Perry Carpenter:

Right. Obviously to shape belief, right?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

I mean, pick the... What story does everyone know? Maybe that's the important one. Rather than the story that the 12 intellectuals among us have read, let's go with the ones that inform all of us. That's probably the ones we should take seriously.

Mason Amaedus:

That fundamental misunderstanding is what broke my brain wide open in the past year of working on this show, because I had no idea at all.

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Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Oh good.

Mason Amaedus:

It's so fascinating,

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Students have that experience all the time. I end up with students who are graduating seniors who need to take a depth humanities class, and they end up in my digital folklore class. They're just like, "If I had known, I would've studied this all along." It's like, "Yeah, I know." I got lucky. I didn't know it was a thing either until I stumbled into it as an undergrad, and happened to be at a school where I could study it. I was just lucky. Folklorists are actually working on this. The American Folklore Society has an entire PR subcommittee that's sort of like, "Okay, how do we do this? How do we make sure people know?"

A huge portion of that is people doing what you guys are doing. So thank you. It's finding folklore, and saying, "Hey, I've got this platform. I've got this skillset. I've got this reach, and I can tell people about this." We do need more online programs. That's a huge thing is that right now, unless you're in one of five states, you don't get to study folklore.

Perry Carpenter:

More of our interview with Dr. Lynne McNeill after this. Welcome back. I think you were getting into one of the things I really want to touch on, which is how do we make folklore programs accessible to people who have just now had this epiphany of, "Oh, this is important. It's a real field."

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes.

Perry Carpenter:

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I'll tell you my story is about a year ago, I started to realize how significant folklore was, and I'm in the second stage of my life where I have enough discretionary income, and can potentially find time. You want to throw yourself at this cause. But to do so in today's world, even though we're digitally connected, almost requires you to physically go somewhere, and be a resident, and not take advantage of the digital lifestyle that we can have. So, how do we evolve our programs to be more encompassing of propelling this discipline forward without being stuck in the traditions of our past?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

This is the key question. Perry, you may have been lost in a bad connection land, but I was just saying that folklorists are so lucky to have people like you two who have this reach and this platform and, as you say, time and ability to be able to help promote this discipline, because we are small, and we are easily trivialized, and we are often misunderstood. I think that for a long time... This has been an ongoing... What's the word I'm looking for? An ongoing fight, an ongoing dichotomy through the history of the discipline is that the risk of additional trivialization through popularity could be worse than it is beneficial. We can look at this discipline in the 1940s, and see folklorists getting angry at things like Benjamin Botkin's Treasury of American Folklore going, "That is making folklore seem childlike and trivial and unacademic, and we are serious scholars, and we need to push that away."

Of course, what brings people to the table of folklore is that as a kid, they had that book, and they read stories of Paul Bunyan and John Henry. Then you have academic folklorists going, "Paul Bunyan is fake lore. That's not real folklore." It's just makes people sad. People are thinking, "But that's what brought me here, and now I'm being told that it's not appropriate, or it's not worth studying." So, what folklore has had to do, and it has not been easy, is open the door to that idea that folklore can be fun and engaging without completely undermining its own viability as an academic subjective study. So, I am a folklorist on TV at times.

This, possibly still now but certainly in the past, has been a position that is roundly derided by academic folklorists of, "Oh my goodness, you go on TV. You talk about ghosts. This makes our discipline seem silly and unimportant and frivolous," but it's going on national television with the title of folklorist and PhD and a university affiliation. The value of that is that I hear from people saying, "Hey, can I come to your

master's program?" Who wouldn't otherwise have ever known that we have one, and if ghosts bring them to the table, that's great. If Ben Botkin's Treasury of American Folklore brought someone to the table, that's great. It should. Folklore is fun and entertaining.

Folklorists now are even leaning into this very, very new idea that we call the folkloresque, which is, "Hey, there's a lot of stuff in the world that it isn't folklore. It is what old-fashioned folklorists might have called fake lore, but it's still resonating with people." The more it resonates with them, and the more they pick up that mantle and begin adapting and evolving and transmitting it themselves, the more like actual folklore it becomes. So, we should lean into that stuff. We should be studying that. That is something worth paying attention to. A lot of the ambiguously folkloric stuff that constitutes digital folklore, Creepypasta, that blending of literature and legend of authorship and communal anonymity, that is touching on this idea of the folkloresque, right?

Television shows about fairytales, is that folklore? No, but it's folkloresque, and we want to talk about it. I think that's helping folklorists branch out a little bit more. I think that universities are so strapped right now that most that don't have a folklore program are unlikely to be like, "What we need is a folklore program," but I do think that getting quality online opportunities for education in folklore studies is possibly the next big step in this, so reputable universities, people trained in folklore studies being the ones to say, "Hey, come earn a degree. Earn a certificate. Come... You don't have to live here. You don't have to travel."

I mean, but still rigorous, still viable and leaning into, "And here's what you can do with it." There's a great recent book out called What Folklorists Do, and each chapter is a personal narrative written by a folklorist who does something totally unexpected. It's really... I think that sense of we are going to partner with other disciplines to add this unique perspective is really one of the biggest things we can contribute right now.

Mason Amaedus:

Just something not necessarily important for the episode, but something I think you just might like to hear is that one of the people we interviewed, Betty Aquino, who's a graduate student studying folklore, literally got into it, because she saw someone on TV with the title folklorist. It was like, "Wait a second."

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Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes. According to Betty at least, that was me, so that was very exciting.

Perry Carpenter:

I believe her.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

I got a sweet letter from Betty that said, "I saw you on Paranormal Caught on camera, and it made me think that I could do this too, which is incredibly, incredibly validating." I also love Betty.

Mason Amaedus:

Oh, no way. I don't think she named that it was you when we talked to her. That's awesome.

Perry Carpenter:

That is so cool.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

There may have been others also. There are a handful of us who spend time on television, but I do know Betty, and I've talked with her about it. I mean, that's really the ideal outcome in my mind is that... I think also it's important. As a legend scholar, I've been talking with other legend scholars, and we're saying, "We can be spooky and serious academics at the same time. There has to be a way to that atmospheric feeling, the texture of legends that draw people in." We like spooky stuff. We want to go on ghost tours. We want to tell scary stories. That's not wrong.

It has a place in people's appreciation and understanding of folklore. We don't always have to be the dry debunkers. We can still be serious scholars and also be the people who are like, "Yeah, I get it. That's what made me want to be a part of this field too."

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Mason Amaedus:

It's a pipeline, right?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yeah.

Mason Amaedus:

It's like the presentation of the show we make. There's a raccoon that now is talking, and it's silly, but it's just fun to trick you into learning.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

It's awesome. Yes, exactly. That's the thing is... I'm agreeing. Yes is a short version. Yes, I agree completely, the getting more avenues. So, it's not either nothing or the most dry theoretical academic treatise that you've ever heard somewhere in the middle is fun, engaging, enjoyable. This material is really cool, huh? Now look, here's what people say about it, that stuff. So, you guys are doing the real heavy lifting here, so thank you.

Perry Carpenter:

Well, and I think that maybe there's a parallel here in, well, probably in a lot of studies, but one that immediately jumps to mind is literature studies and creative writing is there is a very high class version of that that some people associate with. I'm going into Shakespeare studies, but then there's also different levels that draw people into the discipline, and those aren't necessarily bad. They're really good horror writers, and they're really good period drama writers and so on. None of those really pulls against each other when you think about the academic value of that.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yeah, there's space. There's space for those different levels and types of engagement.

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Perry Carpenter:

So, I think folklore studies could have the same if the discipline would allow itself to. I don't know if there's gatekeeping or just tradition involved, but I do think that you do have... I think you have a ready funnel, because when you look at all of the stuff that you mentioned on TV and the podcasting community, some of us are out there doing our best, and we're getting it wrong every now and then. When we build that funnel, you have to correct a misunderstanding of what folklore is and what the value is. I think if there were more online programs and other...

If you were able to make the entry point for that funnel to where you can, to use the wrong word for it, capitalize on it from an academic perspective, it would be easier to really refresh what the next generation of folklorists is.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes, absolutely. There was for a long time disciplinary gatekeeping. There was an effort to actively push away the popularizer, the public sector folklorists, the people who put on folk festivals who brought culture to communities. That was seen as a little too celebratory, and therefore it was assumed inherently uncritical. We wanted to be taken seriously, so we don't want to be celebratory, and now we've realized, but folklore in its folk manifestations is often quite celebratory. That's denying the nature of the thing to pretend that we need to make it unenjoyable in order to have it be academic.

Now, I think the point we're at is less one of gatekeeping and more one of a really dire reality of funding and access, which is that people don't always know that the expert they need on whatever the topic is, be it creepy pasta or fairytales, they don't know they need a folklorist, and then there isn't a broad enough base of funding to really promote the creation of new folklore programs. So, we are now with the restrictions we are under our... We might be past the gatekeeping, and now have a different set of obstacles ahead of us.

Perry Carpenter:

We talked about the criticality for bringing folklore into even greater popularity and the academic side of that. Part of that is because we live in an increasingly digital world as well. So, why don't we talk for a

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little bit about folk groups on platforms, memes. We talked a little bit about disinformation and the dark side of that, but anything you want to do about the increasing digital presence of folklore would be great.

Mason Amaedus:

One of the main things we are kicking around for the season two is diving into looking at individual subsections or individual folk groups on platforms and how their culture differs and how the platform itself affects the creation of folklore within it and stuff like that if that flavors your response.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Oh, absolutely. I often consider my entrance into digital folklore studies to be a really lucky accident of when I was born, which is in that self-satisfied little sub generation of Xennilas right in between Gen X and the millennials, there's five years people have written articles about it. It often comes across as a very self-congratulatory generational identity, but what I will say is it really stood me in good stead just chronologically to learn what folklore was and then turn to the internet and go, "Oh, is that it? Am I seeing folklore here?" Because I think that certainly from my perspective, what internet memes in a broad sense image macros like lolcat, sort of the original what we think of as internet meme and image with text over it, but also in the more generalized sense of internet meme, they are one of the best easiest to see manifestations of those joint qualities of dynamism and conservatism, variation and multiple existence in formality and tradition.

Like we see, "Oh, there's a meme. It's a particular type of meme." We understand that. It has conservative elements. There's always this picture, but then it's dynamic. It's variable. It has different words. Here are the words. Here, they are changing, and we see commentary. I mean, memes, image macro style memes become almost proverbs. That's one of the offline genres to which they're most easily compared, these short, succinct statements of wisdom or of advice, and being able to bring up a Google search that literally does our ethnological comparative work for us. Here's 20 iterations of that meme. I can see what stays the same. I can see what changes across versions.

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The internet becomes almost a proving ground for our sometimes hundreds of year old theories about how folklore works. Some of our oldest concepts, the idea that all of us, whether we think we are or not, are tradition bearers. Some of us are active bearers of tradition. Some of us are passive bearers of tradition. One of the fun things I've done in my research is say, "What does that look like in a web forum? What does that look like on social media? What is an active bearer versus a passive bearer?" We get someone who's making new memes versus someone who's just sharing them or upvoting them or liking them.

We see these core concepts at work in ways that as the internet is done with so many things, it is made visible what was previously invisible or behind the scenes, or made traceable what was previously harder to trace. That's actually something that we say about folklore. Folklore makes the invisible visible. You can graduate without putting on a silly hat and gown, and flipping a tassel from one side of your head to the other, but it really helps you believe in that societal transition when you make it visible with that special clothing and those ritual actions. In a really similar way, the internet is making visual these processes that we believed we were right about for a really long time, and now we're sort of like, "Oh, hey, we're really right. That's cool."

So, the study of digital folklore for me has not been this huge deviation from traditional offline folklore studies. It's really been this confirmation and challenge in a lot of ways to the traditional understandings that we have. Things move faster. They reach farther. We have this concept of amplification in digital spaces that we have in smaller scales offline, but not remotely in the way we do online. Our concepts of the role time plays in the process of transmission, and tradition is super collapsed. Something can become traditional, be transmitted halfway around the world in four hours now, and accrue variation as it goes. A lot of folklorists thought that going online would render folklore unexpressive.

It would stop that dynamism. It would stop that variability in a technology where we can copy and paste directly. We can just forward. We don't. We actually bother to retell, recreate, redesign, represent in that way that we always have orally that injects that dynamism. We reshape things for our new context, our communicative purposes, our rhetorical stance, and the fact that we do it in an environment where it would be so much easier not to tells us how important it is to all of us to evolve, actively vary the folklore in which we engage.

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Perry Carpenter:

As you were talking through that, some of that dynamism that comes in, I think we see expressed differently on different platforms.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes.

Perry Carpenter:

So, one of the interesting things that we're hoping to look at is how does TikTok differ from Tumblr, and how does Tumblr differ from Facebook versus 4chan or something else, and that what groups form there, but then also what is viral or what enables virility on each of those?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes.

Perry Carpenter:

Like TikTok, somebody can upload a video, and then there's a stitch feature, or you can take the soundtrack of it easily. They've built this folklore machine essentially into the way that TikTok works, which is why I think it's so prevalent versus some of the others that tends to be more announcement-based type of activity and more one to many, rather than many to many.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes.

Perry Carpenter:

What do you think about those different platforms, and have you done any study about the differences in how they enable or minimize the ability to participate?

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Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

The different platforms that we have available to us 100% develop their own folk cultures, their own sets of expectations, norms, lore, folk speech, customs, all of that stuff. Even, it's more granular than the platform level. You can tell the difference, and not just visually even in just the way people anticipate communicating between something like 4chan and Reddit. But even on Reddit, there are different folk groups for different communities. Different subreddits have their own folkloric nature and traditions, their own vernacular culture. So, there's almost no limit to the granularity of it.

In order for folklore to arise, there has to be a level of interaction that is required, the defining difference between something that goes viral and something that is a meme. In this sense, a meme is inherently folkloric in a way that something that goes viral isn't. Something that goes viral is an individual thing that a lot of people see, that idea of a single entity broadcasting to many, and the thing that is broadcast is the same. That is something going viral. It becomes mimetic or folkloric when it begins to evolve. When I get it, and instead of just forwarding on what I got, I make my own version of it. Different platforms have different affordances for doing that, and TikTok is one of the best, because TikTok lets me take the pieces I want.

I can take the soundtrack. I can take the original video, and I can do a duet with it. I can take a comment. Comments are one of the places that we so easily forget about. We think of the main content of a piece of social media like a TikTok, and we forget how much folkloric work is happening in the comments. Then we get responses, and we get whole trains of people communicating through this, so different technologies allowing these different affordances for us to engage and recreate. So, the folkloric process is one of recreation. If I watch a great episode of TV, and I want my friend to watch it, I don't act it out for them. I just say, "Hey, let's get on Hulu, and watch it together," and the version they see is identical to the one I saw.

Whereas if I do want my friends to hear a creepy story that I heard, I absolutely recreate it for them. I tell it to them. I redo it, and that is them hearing the real thing. That really gets at the nature of what we mean when we say there is no authoritative original of a piece of folklore. We might be able to find the first, but that doesn't make it the most authoritative. The most authoritative is the one that is at the other end of that evolutionary process where we have started to see which elements are really the ones

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that speak to the largest number of people. So, a platform that enables that is going to produce a lot of folkloric content, because it's handing people their abilities to engage with that dynamic recreation.

Perry Carpenter:

After the break, the conclusion of our interview with Dr. Lynne McNeill.

Welcome back. As people are able to more and more quickly modify or move around ideas on those platforms, one of the negative side effects that comes, I think, is the potential weaponization of some of that. Can you talk a little bit about mimetic warfare and the way that memes can be... the dark side of memes?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yeah. What's interesting is that when we think of the weaponization of this, mimetic warfare and things like this, what we're talking about again is not necessarily a new process, but thanks to the affordances of this medium, the internet. It's a process that goes faster, and reaches farther than it has before. So, we see a real leaning into this opportunity to indulge some of our worst instincts, and this is where the nature of the medium really comes into play. I don't know if you're both familiar or not with a concept called Poe's law. Is this something that's familiar to you, the internet law that is Poe's law?

Perry Carpenter:

I'm going to claim ignorance.

Mason Amaedus:

It's floated by my understanding at one point, and I cannot remember it now, but those words are familiar.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

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The basic idea of Poe's law on the internet is that there is no opinion expressed on the internet that is not so extreme in some version of itself that it can't be distinguished from satire. It's basically this idea that anything on the internet is potentially both 100% sincere, and completely satirical at the same time. Because since we can't tell, we can't actually determine. There is no level of ridiculousness that tells us, "Oh, yeah, no, this is absolutely satire." It is always possible that no, that's someone's true and heartfelt opinion. We have to allow for that true ambivalence in any interaction we find. What this does, of course, is it complicates the nature of something like trolling, right?

So when we have people who are looking to stir up anger, to get people's emotions running high, to be offensive, to be challenging, to be dangerous in the way they approach people, we cannot just say, "Oh, this person is a troll." We want to. We do sometimes. We dismiss people that way, but we often find that we then are driven to these increasingly greater heights to respond in a manner. We get these situations that early internet scholars talked about, where the anonymity of the internet causes us to behave badly in ways we wouldn't face to face with people. I think we've almost hit this unfortunate turn where now it's like, "Oh, nope. Some of us will do that in person as well."

It seems that as we spend more and more of our time, and more and more of our social engagement in these digital spaces, we normalize these weaponized modes of communication. I mean, when we think about communicating through memes, and we think about the heightened antagonism of them, this has happened in the past. This has happened with traditional wisdom like Proverbs. People would have debates that pitted things like, "Look before you leap," against, "He who hesitates is lost." Here are two opposing forms of traditional wisdom. We have that model pre-internet in our society, and now, we have this way of memeing ourselves into debates about meaning, debates about value, and we see some of the most extreme opinions that we can have coming out in this way.

I mean, Pepe the Frog is a really excellent example of this. Is Pepe a hate symbol? Yes and no. Was Pepe originally a hate symbol? No. Did he become one? Yes. Did he also exist in ways where he wasn't? Yes. Does a benign use of Pepe as, say, just a reaction on Twitch, does that constitute a hate crime? No. How do we know? I don't know. Context. It becomes... We have these Twitch being a very specific platform that has a very specific means of using emotes to communicate with people. Pepe the frog means something different there than in other places like on 4chan. 4chan wear a concept known as green text,

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one of the early versions of what would later become copy pasta, which would then become Creepypasta etymologically.

Different platforms use the same content in different ways, and then mainstream media comes along and tries to say, "This image means this. This image says this." That's really hard to say, because we are allowed to exist in these siloed communities in a way that we haven't been able to do before. There was an early assumption that has also borne out that the internet would help people by helping them find like-minded others so that if you grew up with a non-mainstream identity in a very small town, and you felt out of place, you would be able to find companionship, empathy, other like-minded people in online spaces. That was true, and that was so important to so many people living physically in small towns, where they felt they were not understood or appreciated.

But similarly, it turns out there were people living in diverse metropolitan areas who hated that, and used the internet to shrink their world rather than expand it, and find people who are similarly closed-minded as themselves in online spaces, who could then largely limit their social interaction to those more closed-minded people. That, I think, was something that maybe only a handful of people really anticipated. A lot of the early negative assumptions of the internet were that it would become a tool of institutions. It would be run by tyrants, a small handful of people in control. I don't know how many people really anticipated that it would be the darkest nature of just everyday people collectively that might become the tyrant.

Mason Amaedus:

Yeah, and the act of choosing to do that plus the algorithmic encouragement of it on top of it.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes. That is another element too that I think is at the... We are on the doorstep of it in folklore studies is the role of algorithm in all its broad connotations in the transmission of folklore. One of the... I'm sorry to make this tangent, but it brings us back to TikTok a little bit. One of the key factors in that dynamic transmission process of folklore is audience feedback. This is an entire subcategory of folklore studies that deals with performance, the performance approach to folklore that sees folklore not as texts, but as

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emergent performative moments that respond to their immediate context as well as to their larger traditional societal context.

That has played a huge role in how we understand that evolutionary process of folklore to take place. It is unclear right now. The TikTok algorithm is not made public. We don't actually know who is seeing the TikToks we create. It's not the straightforward I perform. I get feedback. I adapt my performance. I perform. Other people witness the feedback. They adapt their next performance. It's not that clear who is seeing people's content, who is reacting to it. So, there's absolutely an evolutionary process. I liked that. I'm going to duet it. I like that. I'm going to stitch it.

But it's not that what is shaping, what larger things are shaping, what are becoming traditional communicative modes on TikTok is not always clear to us. That's fascinating to me that what we are allowed to apprehend and therefore recreate traditionally is being guided by machines in ways we can't see. I think that's fascinating.

Mason Amaedus:

That is. I didn't think of that, but I didn't really think about the algorithmic hand that is tipping the scale here. That's really cool.

Perry Carpenter:

There's one other facet to that, and then I know you got to go.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Sure.

Perry Carpenter:

The other thing with something like TikTok and why there's all the hesitation around that at certain national levels is that there's a curative aspect. There's a curation of some of that as well. So, it's what are the trends? What are the messages that I want to boost as an organization so that maybe I can start

to shape a national mindset or a national distraction? I think that when you start to look at audience participation, that's one way, but then also the curation and intentional distribution and boosting is another thing that comes along with that.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Absolutely. That curation, we might feel that we are determining the TikToks we see. We are, "Well, it's what I've liked. It's what I've commented on. It's what I've watched the most times." That's what's shaping it, and that's not a guarantee, right? That's our perception often is that we create our own algorithm through our tastes, through our interests, but the truth is we don't know what behind the scenes manipulation is taking place.

Perry Carpenter:

I think that's probably true for any of these platforms. So one other question, and maybe it's just for you to give us an indication on where we can do a little bit more study. If we were wanting to look at the online variance of legend tripping, what manifestations of that have you seen, and then where would you point us for some further research?

Mason Amaedus:

Is there a parallel to legend tripping that exists in an online context, which ostensibly doesn't mean you're leaving anywhere physically, but...

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yeah. Well, and so... Oh man, we're going to need another hour at some other time.

Perry Carpenter:

We can book some more time whenever you have time.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

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No, I would be happy to. I love talking about this stuff, but yeah. So, there have always been opportunities for what we might call legend tripping without ever leaving your house. Bloody Mary, right? Performing Bloody Mary in your own bathroom, playing with a Ouija board, or even a more folk form of divination if you remember the Charlie Charlie Challenge that came out a while ago.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh, wow.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

I mean, that is... Considering that you can sit at home, and cross two pencils and write yes or no on a piece of paper and do Charlie Charlie, you were a little bit meant to social media. You were meant to film it. You were meant to photograph it. You were meant to use the hashtag Charlie Charlie, and put that out online. That was a big digital trend that came up, and we absolutely see that, right? We see those opportunities for ostension, what we might call legend tripping, maybe minus the trip. We've always seen it in these enclosed ways, and it happens online in a variety of different ways that people have talked about. One of which is that we can now go along with people.

Someone can post a YouTube video of themselves go to a haunted house, and I can be watching, and I can catch, "Hey, there's a shadow at four minutes and 17 seconds that you didn't seem to notice." I'm going to put that in the comments. Then everyone else is going to go in the comments and say if they saw it too. Then someone else is going to screen cap it and blow it up and up the contrast, and, "Hey, it's shaped like a little boy." That is legend tripping. That is ostension. That is us engaging in that legend trip. Even though we're not there on site, we're not going anywhere. We're adding to the story. We're going to tell about it. We're adding to the story.

They're going to tell about it, and if our comments catch on, the next time someone actually goes to that actual geographic location, they're going to be looking for that little boy shadow in that hallway, because of how we shaped that narrative by our online engagement with it. So, we have that. We also have this sort of, "I have a grad student working on this right now, sort of the vernacular cinematography of TikTok." How do I take someone on a legend trip with me? How do I do audio? Do I

get the sound of my footsteps clumping across the bridge as I walk over the river? What do I include? Do I put a soundtrack? Do I not put a soundtrack? Is it more believable if I don't have a soundtrack?

So again, we bring people into these offline spaces online, and now there's even this greater level of artistry to it that we can have, but we also have just digital spaces, Googling Lobe, right? I don't need to go anywhere. It's not a video of an offline space. It's this entire concept of just a digital legend context. Lobe exists in artificial intelligence. The entire concept of the back rooms, if you're familiar with that, that there is a place you can get to that is just liminal, the in-between. It's the, If you will, staging grounds. I firmly believe that the TV show Severance was so evocative and so compelling to so many people, because that office space resembled the back rooms so clearly. That speaks to us in such a contemporary, corporate freaky way of...

I mean, any of us who've been in a school at night, not even a condemned school or an abandoned school, just a school at night, a space meant for a lot of people with no people in it, where everything is too echoey, and it almost amplifies its own lifelessness by so clearly architecturally anticipating life, that when there isn't any there, it's like a vacuum. I mean, we can have that in online spaces as well, purely online. So, legend tripping and digital spaces really can be its own thing. There's a book that Michael Kinsella wrote called Legend Tripping Online early in the internet. He's talking a lot more about the processes by which he talks about a particular instance of I guess we would call it culture jamming. It was a legend we would say about Ong's Hat, The Incunabula.

Are you guys familiar with this? You have to read the book. It's very confusing, but it was almost an alternate reality game, an early alternate reality game that allowed people to legend trip in digital spaces, which is really an interesting idea. Now, we get even a mysterious role that fanfiction plays in legend tripping. Oh yeah, that's it. Legend tripping online, Michael Kinsella. But because we have sort of this opportunity to exist in a fictional world, we can insert ourselves into the plot of twilight if we want to, and exist in that space. There's a trend that happens a lot on TikTok. Often, people will film it.

I'm going to get the name wrong. I can't remember now what it's called. It's like presencing or something. It's basically like you put yourself in a trance, and hang out at Hogwarts for two hours, and then come back and tell people about it. It's, "What is that if not legend tripping?" I'm embodying a

narrative in a way that lets me go beyond simple telling or hearing or reading of something. So, there are just massive implications for all of these concepts in digital spaces as we move forward.

[Transition to Outro]

Perry Carpenter:

Thanks so much for listening, and thank you to Dr. Lynne McNeill for spending time with us.

Be sure to check out the show notes for more information about Lynne and her work. And if you haven't yet, please go ahead and go over to Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Give us a five star rating and leave us a review. Then, also, be sure to tell a friend about the show. If you have any questions, feedback, or ideas for a future episode, you can reach us at hello@eighthlayermedia.com.

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That's all for now. Thanks for listening.