New Media & Society

http://nms.sagepub.com

Email forwardables: folklore in the age of the internet

Marjorie D. Kibby

New Media Society 2005; 7; 770
DOI: 10.1177/1461444805058161

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/7/6/770

Published by:
SAGE Publications
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *New Media & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

new media & society

Copyright © 2005 SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi
Vol7(6):770–790 [DOI: 10.1177/1461444805058161]

ARTICLE

Email forwardables: folklore in the age of the internet

MARJORIE D. KIBBY
University of Newcastle, Australia

Abstract

Email communication fosters an environment where messages have an inherent 'truth value' while at the same time senders have reduced inhibitions about the types of messages sent. When this is combined with a convenience and ease of communication and an ability to contact huge numbers of people simultaneously, email becomes a rapid and effective distribution mechanism for gossip, rumour and urban legends. Email has enabled not only the birth of new folklore, but also the revival of older stories with contemporary relevance and has facilitated their distribution on an unprecedented scale.

Key words

chain letters • electronic mail • email • folklore

INTRODUCTION

Email has become one of the dominant ways in which the internet is used by most people. It is an integral part of everyday lives and is changing the way that people communicate both at work and in their personal lives. 'The weekly email is the staple for most internet users, as about 50 percent of all internet users email family and friends once a week' (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2002: 3). However unwanted email is the element of internet use that people complain of the most, with 44 percent of internet users reporting it as a problem (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2002). Users report annoyance with the volume of mail and the

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

large and increasing number of unwanted email (Burton and Nesbitt, 2001). After commercial mass mailings the most resented type of email is the electronic chain mail that comes with a 'please forward' directive (Whitty, 2002).

The reason that these chains of messages continue to circulate, despite considerable annoyance on the part of recipients, was the focus of this study. A review of existing research into the features of email and the nature of folklore; an analysis of the text of 73 unsolicited 'please forward' emails sent to me from 1999 to 2001; and a survey of around 200 email users, suggest that continued circulation can be explained by the nature of computer mediated communication (CMC) and the content and context of the messages. Senders exhibit reduced constraints about the type of messages sent electronically and are inclined to post more frequently, to more people and on a wider variety of topics via email than via print or phone. In addition, email forwardables have come to occupy the place of folklore in the electronic environment, as they are transmitted amongst fairly homogeneous groups. They have a persuasive appeal and allow for the possibility of belief; and they fill cultural functions such as carrying social warnings, maintaining group cohesion and providing a safety valve for social discontent.

THE NATURE OF EMAIL

The development of email has allowed for the rapid and effortless dissemination of information. Email can be as fast as is required: it is not delayed by geographic distance or differences in time zones; it does not require coordination between sender and receiver; as an electronic document it is amenable to the full range of computer-based tools and applications and can be easily filed, modified, updated and edited; it is archived by default and can be retrieved at any time; and it is ostensibly economical. These characteristics have made email one of the dominant methods of communication, not only within organizations such as business, government and education, but as a primary means of communicating among families and friends.

In *Orality and Literacy* Walter Ong briefly described a stage of consciousness which he called 'secondary orality'. He described this new orality as having a

> striking resemblance to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a community sense, its concentration on the present moment and even its use of formulas . . . But it is . . . based permanently on the use of writing and print. (1982: 136)

Email communication is a form of secondary orality. Although based on writing, it privileges orality, in that the dynamics of an exchange reflect a

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

participatory event that heightens a feeling of community. And it is firmly based in the present moment. 'Apart from the socio-linguistic consideration of the ways in which people write *as if they were speaking*, what heightens the orality of such communications is undoubtedly the tacit belief in a shared present' (Tofts, 1996: 266; emphasis in original). The immediacy and informality of writing 'that mimes the speech act' (Tofts, 1996: 270) works to inhibit codes of written communication such as spelling and punctuation, but also ethical or moral codes including pertinence and propriety.

Communication in cyberspace occurs without markers of context based in physical appearance, time, place or position. The reduced situational context cues in email communication can lead to a relaxing of established conventions of social contact, and without such cues email users become less constrained in their communications (Sipior and Ward, 1999). A study of email within an organization found that the content of email is more likely to be 'irresponsible' than written or spoken communication in the workplace and 40 percent of email communication in the workplace is totally unrelated to work (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986). Email communication has been described as 'fostering detachment and diminished ethical awareness' (Sipior and Ward, 1999: 91), in that email provides a communication environment where messages are distanced from the recipient and appear ephemeral, in that they disappear from the sender's screen. This results in reduced 'ownership' of what is communicated and lessened inhibitions as to what is appropriate. The effect of this distancing is seen in employees using email for unethical or immoral purposes (see Russel et al., 2002) and in 'flaming' (extreme personal insults and invective in online discussions; see Millard, 1995).

Forwarding a message seems to give the e-mailer an even greater sense of distance from the content. Forwarding creates an exact duplicate of a message that remains in the mailbox, so the message is in effect not 'passed on'. The information is simply transferred unaltered by any human intervention. This effect also works to negate any feeling of accountability for content. While the forwarder may click 'send to everyone in my address book' they are in no practical sense the author of the message. While this detachment lessens accountability, at the same time it increases authenticity. Just as our belief that 'if it is in print, it must be true' was shored up by the physical permanence of the print form separated from its author, the existence of online texts independent of their originators makes them somehow more believable than spoken forms.

Drawing on Rheingold, Kollock (1999) describes the high level of sharing and cooperation in online interaction as constituting a gift economy, saying that the 'radically different environment' online facilitates contributions of 'public goods'. First, it is a 'world of information rather than physical objects' (Kollock, 1999: 223); second, it is digital information

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

so that 'it is possible to produce an infinite number of perfect copies' (Kollock, 1999: 223) and 'one person's use of the information in no way diminishes what is available for someone else' (Kollock, 1999: 225); and third, the production of information occurs 'not in isolation, but in a deeply interwoven network' (Kollock, 1999: 224). These factors create 'powerful incentives' for contributing to the production of public goods, that is, for sharing information. Kollock outlines three reasons for the willingness to share information online, none of which, as he points out, 'require any assumptions about altruism or group attachment' (Kollock, 1999: 227). 'Anticipated reciprocity' ensures that people provide information in the expectation of receiving useful information when needed. 'Reputation' motivates people to share information in the hope of increasing their prestige in the online community. A 'sense of efficacy' leads people to share information in the belief that they are having an effect on their environment, they are making a difference. Just as costs of contributing to the production of public goods are decreased online, so is the likelihood of receiving benefits are increased, leading to an apparent heightened willingness in online communities to share information.

If email's perceived ease of communication is combined with a willingness to share information, a diminished ownership of messages; built-in address book extensions to email programs that encourage mass mailings; and the existence of mailing lists that facilitate anonymous widespread distribution; then pre-conditions exist for the establishment of immense information chains. Not all of this information is of value and most email users report receiving forwarded messages that could be described as stories, gossip, rumours or hoaxes. With fewer inhibitions about this type of communication than if it were received face-to-face or in the post, as well as with the greater ease of sending it on, the recipient continues the chain and the story circulates widely and endlessly to become folklore. Email folklore is often perceived as true, but even when the recipient is sceptical, there is a belief that others would want to see the message and so it is forwarded again.

EMAIL FOLKLORE

'Folklore' is a collective term for 'those traditional items of knowledge that arise in recurring performances' (Abrahams, 1976: 195), that is, they are items of wisdom or lore that are communicated through repeated oral transmissions. Different genres of folklore can be identified, including myths, legends, fables, rumour and jokes. However, there has been no universal agreement on the boundaries of particular genres. While a thematic approach classifies folklore genres by content (legends are about saints and the supernatural, fables about plants and animals), the holistic approach looks for discursive unity within a genre through morphological analysis (such as

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

Vladimir Propp's [1968]); an archetypal approach divides genres according to their intellectual or psychological concerns (the legend is concerned with the choice between moral principles), while a functional approach looks at the relationships between different forms and specific cultural and social needs. The functional approach is concerned not with what folklore genres are, but with how different types of folklore are used in a society (Ben-Amos, 1976). The social functions of folklore have been identified as:

- education, where they carry morals or warnings about the likely consequences of particular actions or inactions;
- maintaining group identity, in that they reflect and confirm the self-perceptions of a social grouping;
- amusement, entertainment or diversion; and
- a safety valve function, where they frequently criticize, ridicule or otherwise undercut the attitudes, institutions, practices and regulations of a society (Seal, 1989).

As a contemporary urban phenomenon, urban legend is less contentious than some traditional forms and defined by what it is not:

> Urban legends belong to the subclass of folk narratives, legends, that – unlike fairy tales – are believed or at least believable and that – unlike myths – are set in the recent past and involve human beings. (Brunvand, 1981: 16)

They depend on continued oral dissemination, retaining core characteristics but constantly changing as they are transmitted among fairly homogeneous groups. Brunvand explains that, 'groups of age-mates, especially adolescents, are one important urban legend channel, but other paths of transmission are among office workers and club members, as well as among religious, recreational and regional groups' (1981: 17). To survive in our culture as living narrative folklore, stories need only a strong basic story appeal, a foundation in actual belief, a meaningful message and a channel to new communal audiences (Brunvand, 1981).

Email forwardables consist primarily of virus alerts, chain letters and various stories couched as warnings, petitions or requests for help, all with a directive to 'Please forward'. Virus alerts are specific to CMCs, but chain letters and the forwarded stories, petitions and pleas have their corollary in print and oral communications. While these forms do differ from each other in significant aspects, in their online version they exhibit sufficient similarities to be grouped as 'contemporary folklore'. They are believable, set in the present or recent past and offer a comment on human behaviour or social conditions.

Some of these forms have such different characteristics in other modes of distribution as to constitute quite separate categories; however, the online

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

distribution produces similarities of content, form and function that allow them to be discussed as a group. For example, while a face-to-face petition asks individuals to identify themselves as supporters of an action and has the purpose of bringing about that action, an online petition does not require the same identification and has no 'useful' function. Generally, online petitions are forwarded to others but never delivered to a decision-maker. The Afghan women petition (see below) was an online version of a print petition, but it was never able to be delivered and later versions made no claim to having an endpoint. The Brazilian rainforest petition is still being distributed years after the proposed legislation discussed was defeated. They circulate as a kind of storytelling, a repetitive performance of contemporary folk wisdom, rather than as a petition in the usual sense. Similarly, requests for assistance are not requests for actual constructive help, but usually a believable story that somehow forwarding an email message will assist someone in need. An example is the email that says that the Make a Wish Foundation will donate seven cents to terminally ill Amy Bruce for every person that receives the email. It is more a comment on a social condition than an actual appeal for help.

Jokes or humour could form part of this grouping, as they meet the criteria of potential believability, currency and concern with the human condition and are also widely circulated via email. However, unlike the other categories they rarely come with the directive to 'Forward to everyone you know' – the sole criteria determining whether or not a humorous message is forwarded is possibly whether or not the recipient thinks that it is funny. The reasons why email users forward other types of forwardables are more complex and arise out of the characteristics of email, the content of messages and the context in which it is received.

VIRUS ALERTS

The idea of a hoax virus is reported (Ferbrache, 1992) to have originated with a satirical post to a bulletin board in October 1988. With the subject heading 'Really Nasty Virus', a poster signing themselves 'Mike RoChenle' humorously described problems experienced in downloading files, attributing the difficulties to a virus. This bogus virus description spawned a parody alert:

> Date: 11–31–88 (24: 60) Number: 32769
>
> To: ALL Refer#: NONE
> From: ROBERT MORRIS III Read: (N/A)
> Subj: VIRUS ALERT Status: PUBLIC MESSAGE
> Warning: There's a new virus on the loose that's worse than anything I've seen before! It gets in through the power line, riding on the powerline 60 Hz subcarrier. It works by changing the serial port pinouts and by reversing the direction one's disks spin. Over 300,000 systems have been hit by it here in

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

> Murphy, West Dakota alone! And that's just in the last 12 minutes. It attacks DOS, Unix, TOPS-20, Apple-II, VMS, MVS, Multics, Mac, RSX-11, ITS, TRS-80 and VHS systems.
>
> To prevent the spread of the worm:
>
> 1) Don't use the powerline.
>
> 2) Don't use batteries either, since there are rumors that this virus has invaded most major battery plants and is infecting the positive poles of the batteries. (You might try hooking up just the negative pole.)
>
> 3) Don't upload or download files.
>
> 4) Don't store files on floppy disks or hard disks.
>
> 5) Don't read messages. Not even this one!
>
> 6) Don't use serial ports, modems or phone lines.
>
> 7) Don't use keyboards, screens or printers.
>
> 8) Don't use switches, CPUs, memories, microprocessors or mainframes.
>
> 9) Don't use electric lights, electric or gas heat or airconditioning, running water, writing, fire, clothing or the wheel.
>
> I'm sure if we are all careful to follow these 9 easy steps, this virus can be eradicated and the precious electronic fluids of our computers can be kept pure.
>
> RTM III

The warning meshed with an underlying paranoia of new internet users and was kindled by journalists who reported on the virus as a genuine example of the dangers involved in connecting to the internet. The hoax virus was born. Genuine warnings of real computer viruses are distributed frequently enough to fuel the fear and suspend disbelief in the face of a hoax.

Virus hoaxes became widespread with the 'Good Times' 'virus' in 1994:

> Here is some important information. Beware of a file called Goodtimes.
>
> Happy Chanukah everyone and be careful out there. There is a virus on America Online being sent by E-Mail. If you get anything called "Good Times", DON'T read it or download it. It is a virus that will erase your hard drive. Forward this to all your friends. It may help them a lot.

The original message ended with instructions to 'Forward this to all your friends' and many people did just that. Warnings about 'Good Times' have been distributed widely on mailing lists, Usenet newsgroups and message boards. The hoax resurfaces every few years, occasionally with a name change such as the 'Deeyenda' virus message, but with the same misinformation. The 'Irina' version of this hoax was deliberately circulated by the former head of an electronic publishing company to create publicity for a new interactive book by the same name, in a stunt that backfired and panicked internet users worldwide. 'It Takes Guts to Say Jesus' was another version of the same hoax that circulated in 1999 and 2000. Most hoaxes since have been variations on these earlier warnings and also prey on a combined fear of, and dependence on, technology.

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

The sulfnbk.exe virus alert which surfaced in April and May 2001 was not so much a hoax as a mass hysteria-inducing story. The file referred to in the message is a normal Windows operating file.

> Date: 22nd April, 2001
> Subject: IMPORTANT – VIRUS ALERT
> It was brought to my attention yesterday that a virus is in circulation via email. I looked for it and to my surprise I found it on mine . . . please follow the directions and remove it from yours TODAY!!!!!!!
> I do not know how long it has been on my computer, but no virus software can detect it. It will become active on June 1, 2001. It might be too late by then. It wipes out all files and folders on the hard drive. This virus travels thru E-mail and migrates to the 'C:\windows\command' folder. To find it and get rid of it off of your computer, do the following.
> Go to the "START" button.
> Go to "FIND" or "SEARCH".
> Go to "FILES and FOLDERS".
> Make sure the find box is searching the "C:" drive.
> Type in; SULFNBK.EXE
> Begin search.
> If it finds it, highlight it.
> Go to 'File' and delete it.
> Close the find Dialog box.
> Open the Recycle Bin.
> Find the file and delete it from the Recycle Bin.
> You should be safe.
> The bad part is: You need to contact everyone you have sent ANY E-mail to in the past few months. Many major companies have found this virus on their computers. Please help your friends !!!!!!!!
> DO NOT RELY ON YOUR ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE. McAFEE and NORTON CANNOT DETECT IT BECAUSE IT DOES NOT BECOME A VIRUS UNTIL JUNE 1ST. WHATEVER YOU DO, DO NOT OPEN THE FILE!!!

This warning probably did not originate as a hoax, but as an effort to notify others of a potential threat. There were reports of copies of sulfnbk.exe infected with the 'Magistr' worm being distributed as email attachments and warnings of this infection were circulated in Brazil. This initial warning turned into worldwide mass hysteria for a number of reasons: it identifies an obscure file found in Windows operating systems and describes how to find it; it gives an activation date to heighten a sense of urgency; and it taps into consumer fears that antivirus software regularly fails to detect newly discovered viruses.

CHAIN EMAIL

Chain email, like the print version chain letter, insists that the receiver forward copies to a number of other people to bring about positive consequences and avoid negative ones. The simplest forms of chain email

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

contain a list of names, provides instructions that the receiver is to remove the top person from the list, add their own name to the bottom of the list and forward the message to a number of people, and give illustrations of the good fortune that will follow re-posting and the bad luck that will ensue if the email is not forwarded on. Some chain letters ask that you post money or postcards or business cards to the names on the list before forwarding the message. Chain letters exploit the irrational wishes and fears of recipients, threatening calamity and promising rewards that seem credible.

When the recipient is in position number one on the list, they receive the promised rewards. But by that generation of the email it would have been forwarded to 10^{10} people or 10 million people, if everyone had forwarded the message as directed. With a chain email a large number of people do just that. And they do more, because forwarding the message to 10 people involves a dozen mouse clicks and sending the message to 'everyone in my address book' only two or three – and a couple of the addresses in the book are mailing lists with hundreds of subscribers. Before anyone receives any of the promised rewards, in-boxes are clogged, time and resources are squandered and mail servers crash.

Recent chain email acknowledge the ease of forwarding the message, no longer requesting that the receiver post it on to five or 10 people:

> DATE: September 10, 1999, 7:14am
> SUBJECT: Worth passing on.
> Ok, guys, please bear with me. I never pass things on, but i thought this worthy of sending on. i hope you appreciate it.
> PASS THIS ON TO ANYONE FOR WHOM YOU HAVE AN E-MAIL ADDRESS.
> Subject: Please forward!
> Date: Mon, 04 Oct 1999 15: 56: 43
> PLEASE COPY this email on to a new message, sign the bottom and forward it to everyone on your distribution lists.

The chain letters that request that the receiver send money to the person on the top of the list continue to exist in email form, promising that merely forwarding email will deliver cash.

> DATE: January 8, 1999, 7: 44am
> SUBJECT: Forward Bill Gates' mail
> Microsoft and AOL are now the largest internet company [sic] and in an effort [to] make sure that Internet Explorer remains the most widely used program, Microsoft and AOL are running an e-mail beta test.
> When you forward this e-mail to friends, Microsoft can and will track it (if you are a Microsoft Windows user) for a two-week time period.
> For every person that you forward this e-mail to, Microsoft will pay you $245.00, for every person that you sent it to that forwards it on, Microsoft will pay you $243.00 and for every third person that receives it, you will be paid $241.00.

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

Within two weeks, Microsoft will contact you for your address and then send you a check.

I thought this was a scam myself, but two weeks after receiving this e-mail and forwarding it on, Microsoft contacted me for my e-mail and within days, I received a check for $24,800.00.

You need to respond before the beta testing is over.

If anyone can afford this Bill Gates is the man. It's all marketing expense to him. Do Well!!!

Another popular type of chain email is the 'friends' chain. Some of these are tests to see how many friends the recipient has by forwarding the email to everyone they care about and seeing how many are sent to them in return, by people who supposedly care about them. Some of these friends chains contain 'inspirational' or 'comforting messages', personal quizzes or cute ASCII art that is animated by rapidly scrolling down the message. Most promise some reward for compliance and threaten unfulfilled wishes, loneliness or isolation for those who break the chain.

DATE: August 4, 1999
SUBJECT: Somebody. . ..
Right Now
~ Somebody is very proud of you.
~ Somebody is thinking of you.
~ Somebody is caring for you.
~ Somebody misses you.
~ Somebody wants to talk to you.
~ Somebody wants to be with you.
~ Somebody hopes you aren't in trouble.
[deleted]
~ Somebody wants to be your friend.
~ Somebody wants to get to know you better.
~ Somebody has faith in you.
~ Somebody trusts you.
~ Somebody needs your support.
~ Somebody needs you to have faith in them.
~ Somebody will cry when they read this.
SOMEBODY NEEDS YOU TO SEND THIS TO THEM

Now that you have read this you must send it to at least 10 people for your wish to come true. Send it to anyone and you'll feel much better.

OTHER FORWARDABLES

Stories, rumours, warnings and petitions circulate in the 'electronic town square' just as they do in the brick-paved forum, but with greater volume, rapidity and distribution. Online, as in face-to-face, this folklore generally contains a primary message that is quite clear and straightforward; 'often they take the form of explicit warnings or good examples of "poetic justice"' (Brunvand, 1981: 21) and usually a secondary message that 'may

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

provide deeper criticisms of human behaviour or social conditions' (Brunvand, 1981: 22).

Some petitions are forwarded in a genuine, if misguided, attempt to contribute a solution to a problem. An example of this is the petition regarding the treatment of women in Afghanistan. It appears that a student at Brandeis University – some versions are 'signed' by Melissa Buckheit, others are only identified by the email sarabande@brandeis.edu – came across the Amnesty International petition which asked people to sign with their full name and address if they agreed that the US government should take action in support of the women in Afghanistan. The student mass-mailed a version of the petition to UNet users at Brandeis, asking that it be forwarded and re-posted to her when there were 50 names attached. The flood of responses overwhelmed sarabande and the university. The email account was closed and in the first week or so after the initial mailing respondents received a message of explanation:

> Due to hundreds of thousands of messages in responses to an unauthorised chain letter, all mail to sarabande@brandeis.edu is being deleted unread. It will never be a valid email address again . . . sarabande@brandeis.edu was not an organisation, but a person who was totally unprepared for the inevitable consequences of telling thousands of people to tell fifty of their friends to tell fifty of their friends to send her email.

The response included advice to not forward chain letters, links to websites on chain letters and internet hoaxes and links to information on Afghanistan and Islamic law. But the email continued to pour in, unabated and now receive no response. Interestingly, the reaction to having the email bounce as 'unable to be delivered' seems to have resulted not in recipients losing faith, but in their adjusting the petition to overcome this obstacle. Having added their name in the number 50 spot and having tried to send the compilation to sarabande unsuccessfully, recipients alter the number of signatures required. A version received on 5 February 1999 asked for 50 names, one received on 22 October 1999 asked for 100 names and one received on 26 March 2000 requested that recipients who received the list with more than 200 names on it, email a copy to sarabande@brandeis.edu. Then another version received on 7 April 2001 omitted any instructions about sending collected names to anyone – the aim now was just to endlessly circulate the petition adding names ad infinitum.

The Craig Shergold email – a plea to send cards to help a boy with cancer which entered the Guinness Book of Records – continues to circulate despite the fact that Craig no longer has cancer and has not been a boy for many years. This chain began when a doctor commented that the nine-year-old was receiving so many get-well cards that he had probably set a record and stimulated friends and relatives to send out postal requests for

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

get-well cards. The advent of the internet gave the petition an extended scope and lifespan. It has transmuted into requests for postcards and business cards as well as greeting cards – at last count the family had received 250 million cards, despite media pleas for them to stop. It has inspired a large number of similar requests to 'save a dying child' by varied means.

Many contemporary email warnings depict business rip-offs – corporate capitalists cheating disadvantaged consumers. A persistent example of this is the story of the woman duped into paying an exorbitant price for a recipe and who extracts her revenge by distributing the recipe widely. The first version of this story recorded by Brunvand dates from 1961. A woman had been to dinner at the Waldorf Astoria and had eaten a Red Velvet Cake, was given the recipe on request, but then charged $300. The story's conclusion was that, 'Since the price of the recipe had been costly to her, she decided all her friends should enjoy baking and eating this luscious and extravagent [sic] RED VELVET CAKE' and the recipe was provided (Brunvand, 1981: 119). The recipe for the cake was distributed in handwritten or typed form or given in mimeographed sheets along with the story throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The story and recipe were published in a number of major newspapers and women's magazines, despite the chef at the Waldorf Astoria insisting that they had never served a cake by that name and that they always provided their recipes free of charge on request.

This story persisted through the 1980s as the Mrs Field's Cookie Recipe and resurfaced on the internet in the 1990s as the Nieman Marcus Chocolate Chip Cookie. This version is updated in that the charge for the recipe appears on a credit card statement and it contains small details that seem to authenticate the story, such as:

> It was so excellent that I asked if they would give me the recipe and they said with a small frown, 'I'm afraid not.' Well, I said, would you let me buy the recipe? With a cute smile, she said, 'Yes.'

A major category of forwardable folklore are 'scarelore', dire warnings that reflect the fears and obsessions of contemporary society. Forwarded email messages warn that:

- if you flash your headlights at a car driving without its lights on you will be shot as part of a gang initiation rite;
- if you try to retrieve your coins from a payphone you will be pricked by an HIV-infected hypodermic;
- shampooing your hair or using anti-perspirant will give you cancer;
- waterproof sunscreen will cause blindness in children;
- your social security number contains secret racial identifiers;

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

- dialling 90# will give a third party access to free phone calls at your expense;
- artificial sweeteners will kill you; and
- if you relax your guard for a moment someone will steal one of your kidneys.

Much long-lived folklore now circulating via email contains warnings about food contamination. A large number of these involve fast food chains or large soft drink companies, so combine a warning of 'watch what you eat' with a comment on the carelessness or greed of big business. Email messages forwarded to this author in recent years have included warnings that McDonald's burgers used worms as a high protein filler and that a woman's salivary glands became a de facto nest site for cockroach eggs ingested while eating a Taco Bell soft taco. From the early 1970s rumours surrounded Kentucky Fried Chicken, perhaps because the coating and seasoning of the chicken could be suspected of covering up contamination. Whereas the early versions suggested that rat rather than chicken was to be found beneath the special batter, the email version of the 1990s reflected hi-tech fears:

> DATE: August 07, 1999, 9:46am
> SUBJECT: KFC
> KFC has been part of our American traditions for many years. Many people, day in and day out, eat at KFC religiously. Do they really know what they are eating?
> During a recent study of KFC done at the University of New Hampshire, they found some very upsetting facts. First of all, has anybody noticed that just recently, the company has changed their name? Kentucky Fried Chicken has become KFC. Does anybody know why?
> We thought the real reason was because of the "FRIED" food issues. It's not. The reason they call it KFC is because the can not use the word chicken anymore. Why?
> KFC does not use real chickens. They actually use genetically manipulated organisms. These so called "chickens" are kept alive by tubes inserted into their bodies to pump blood and nutrients throughout their structure. They have no beaks, no feathers and no feet. Their bone structure is dramatically shrunk to get more meat out of them. This is great for KFC because they do not have to pay so much for their production costs. There is no plucking of the feathers or the removal of the beaks or feet.
> The government has told them to change all of their menus so they do not say chicken anywhere. If you look closely you will notice this. Listen to their commercials, I guarantee you will not see or hear the word chicken.

As well as reflecting a social ambivalence toward eating fast food rather than home-cooked food, this new version of folklore also echoes a number of contemporary fears, including a fear of uncontrolled technological development, a perception of a dual threat of commercial greed and

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

uncontrolled consumerism and a fear of arbitrary disease and death. This particular story is easily confirmed as a hoax, as KFC menus and advertisements contain numerous mentions of 'chicken'. People forward it not because they believe it is true, but because of a dread of the consequences, should it just happen to be true and a belief that others would want to know of the possibility.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in the US fuelled a number of new chain warnings and alerts and the mutation of a number of earlier hoaxes. Amongst the forwarded email circulating at the end of 2001 was the advice that 4000 Jews did not report for work at the World Trade Center on September 11, proving that the attack was an Israeli conspiracy; that Osama bin Laden owned a major soft drink company and consumers were contributing to his terrorist activities; that people should conduct an outdoor candlelit vigil on a variety of dates to be photographed from outer space; and that shopping malls were to be attacked on Halloween.

In the wake of the circulation of anthrax spores in the mail, an old warning of poisoned perfume was updated and recirculated:

> Date: November 12, 2001, 8: 12am
> Subject: Important Information
> I feel that it is important to inform you of very important information that I was told.
> Seven women have died after smelling a free perfume sample that was mailed to them. The product was poisonous. If you receive free samples in the mail such as lotions, perfumes, diapers, etc. . . . throw it away.
> The government is afraid that this might be another terrorist act. They will not announce it on the news because they do not want to alarm us of any danger. Send this to all your friends and family members.
> Stay well!!!!!

COMMON ELEMENTS IN FORWARDABLE EMAIL

The forwardable email analysed were those sent to this author, unsolicited, from 1999 to 2001. A total of 73 messages were saved that came with the directive to 'Please forward'. The email consisted of 21 different messages, across a range of types from petitions, warnings and requests for help to friendship messages. The most repeated were a warning not to dial 90#, an exhortation not to buy petrol on Tuesdays, petitions for women in Afghanistan and the Brazilian rainforest and variations on the 'Good Times' virus alert. These topics reflect this author's attitudes and interests and are not a comprehensive sampling of current chain email, although a comparison with email discussed on websites such as *About.com* suggests that they are representative of the most widely circulated email forwardables of the period.

There are a number of factors relating to both the content of the message and the context surrounding the message, within the forwarded email that

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

might explain their widespread circulation. Folklore might not express 'the conviction of belief' but it does always state (or deny) something and thus express 'the intent of persuasion' (Dégh and Vázsony, 1976: 118). Forwarded email incorporates persuasive factors that accord with Aristotle's forms of rhetoric: ethos, logos and pathos, where ethos refers to the persuasive appeal of the sender, logos to an appeal based on the trustworthiness of the information and pathos to an appeal based on emotional response.

Credibility can be internal, provided by the cues in the text or external, attached to the source of the message. One aspect of credibility is consistency with personal beliefs and experience. Virus warnings have inbuilt credibility as people generally believe that there is something mysterious about their computers in that they are subject to arbitrary and inexplicable failures; however, they like to feel in control of their computers, so when an opportunity presents itself to take control by subverting a virus, it is taken. With forwarded email, most mail programs facilitate the addition of a new message at the beginning of the posting to be forwarded and many senders add a validation of their reasons for believing in the truth of the story or for posting it on. With computer transmitted stories, the computer screen itself lends instant credibility. There is a lingering perception of the computer's accuracy and a conviction that computers do not make mistakes. When this is coupled with a sense of the internet as a high-level information source, the pre-conditions are established for the acceptance of any information that appears on the screen (Gilster, 1997).

Email forwardables often accumulate markers of competent authority that encourage the suspension of disbelief. One of these is the first-hand experience of the sender. If people see a message with 'Good Times' in the header and delete the message without reading it, they believe that they have saved themselves from being attacked by a virus. Having opened a Good Times message, others run a virus check program for the first time or the first time in months and discover a virus, which they attribute to the email message. These experiences provide the sender with a false aura of competence. In addition, competence may be given off by the sender inadvertently through 'false authority syndrome' (Rosenberger, 1996). Messages are forwarded by people with authoritative job titles or with addresses that indicate connections with relevant authorities, but who do not necessarily have expertise in computer viruses. Senior managers, computer salesmen, college computer teachers, network administrators and junior employees in firms with names such as Data Technology Inc., lend credence to a virus hoax in forwarding it from their positions of competence.

Forwarded email often includes information to support the competence of the sender, such as these examples of the petition for women in Afghanistan:

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

> I received this from our daughter who is doing her graduate work in the area of domestic violence.
>
> I have received this from a friend of a friend that works for the World Health Organization – so it is not a spam. Please read and sign.

The petition was also circulated on and by mailing lists that seemed in themselves to project an ethos or credibility. It reached this author from women academics, feminist theologists and official University of Newcastle forums. Familiarity also suggests competence, as we are more likely to be persuaded by someone we know than a stranger. This petition was widely circulated amongst friends and peers and this author received it via departmental discussion lists, a list that usually just keeps people up-to-date with a favourite musician's tour schedule, and from a number of friends familiar with this author's interest in women's rights.

To be persuasive, an appeal must be based on objects of agreement that are shared by both sender and receiver. These are not necessarily truths, but shared beliefs or concerns. Some of these shared concerns evidenced in email forwardables are beliefs such as: opening your mail can be dangerous in the aftermath of the distribution of anthrax spores by post; fast food may be of dubious quality; and antivirus software is unreliable, particularly with new viruses. Often, trustworthiness is generated by the use of statistics and scientific terms and through references to authorities or to known facts or widely-held beliefs. For example, 'Forward Bill Gates' mail' is dependent upon new users' awe in the face of the new communication technology and naivety where its possibilities are concerned. It uses a combination of jargon (beta test, unique internet protocol (IP) address, log book, database) and popular mythology (Bill Gates' wealth) to provide trustworthiness. The '$250 Cookie Recipe' is consistent with our belief that corporate capitalism is ripping us off and it connects with widespread fears of an arbitrary relationship between our credit card purchases and bills. It appears true as the instructions have a quirky element that encourages the belief that this is no ordinary recipe – the recipient is asked to blend oatmeal to a flour-like consistency.

Chain email, petitions, protests and pleas for help pivot on an appeal to a sense of identity and natural self-interest. They are formulated to trigger emotional responses and depend upon the reader's inclination to do what serves their interests or the interests of the groups to which they belong. Some forwarded messages first create these communities of interest (such as the traditional American KFC consumer), then appeal to individuals as a member of that community. Using combinations of flattery and intimidation, threat and promise, these email forwardables trigger innate emotional responses.

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

WHY USERS FORWARD EMAIL

The survey questions were placed on a website and the URL was publicized on a number of recreational mailing lists including dog training, gardening, family and motorcycle interest groups. Responses were returned anonymously via a CGI (common gateway interface) script and 212 were received. Of those who responded, 53 percent had used email for more than four years and 35 percent for two to four years, so most were experienced email users. The majority read and sent email from home (50%), with 28 percent accessing email at university or college and 20 percent from work. Most people used email to communicate with friends (70%) rather than work colleagues, although 14 percent indicated that most of their email correspondence was to or from people that they had not met face-to-face. So the typical respondent was a social or recreational email user who had been using email for some years. Because of the sampling technique used, the typical respondent cannot be seen as representative of the general population of email users. However, the number of respondents does allow for some tentative deductions to be made and practices within the respondents may be indicative of patterns of behaviour within similar email users.

Of the responses, 80 percent said that they would send an email to someone that they might not phone or write to and only 4 percent said that they would not do so. As to telling someone something via email that they would not tell them over the phone or in a letter, 41 percent said they would, 25 percent said perhaps they would and 34 percent said that they would not.

Of those responding, 52 percent indicated that they frequently received email that asked that they forward the message and 36 percent reported that they occasionally did so. No one indicated that they were invariably pleased to receive such a message, while 43 percent said that they were not pleased to receive such messages regardless of who sent it or what the message was about. The content of the message affected the way that 36 percent of respondents felt about receiving it, while 13 percent of respondents said that how they felt on receiving a 'Please forward' message depended on who had sent it to them.

When asked what factors influenced a decision to send on a 'Please forward' email, 19 percent said that nothing could induce them to forward the message. Some who checked this response expressed concerns that forwarded messages were used by third parties to gather lists of email addresses, in comments such as 'I think that the email forwarding scam is just to get email addresses to sell to mass marketers'. Most expressed their annoyance at their time being wasted with false or useless information, for example, 'I think the "please forward" message is second only to spam in being the most annoying thing about email'.

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

The factors that had the most influence in persuading the receiver to forward the message were:

- it was felt that my contacts would want to receive the message – 42 percent;
- it was a way of helping others – 33 percent;
- it came from a reliable source – 32 percent;
- it was an opportunity to make a difference – 26 percent; and
- it seemed to be true – 23 percent.

The factors that were given least often as reasons that influenced forwarding the message as requested were:

- it was a way of making contact with people – 6 percent; and
- there was a chance I could benefit – 7 percent.

The comments suggested that while the assessment that a contact would want to receive a message was consistent with the desire to contribute to the public good seen in internet forums, it may not always be accurate, with the majority of people commenting that they did not wish to receive this type of message from friends. Even those who admitted to forwarding these messages reported that generally they did not like to receive them, with respondents who indicated more than one factor that would influence them to forward messages saying:

> I really, really don't like the email forwards with poems and all sorts of corny writings on how loving best friends are . . . I hate stupid email forwards. If they really were my friend, they wouldn't send me stupid email forwards like that.
>
> I can't stand those freakin' angel/hug/kiss good luck things! . . . Blinking nightmares of moronic guilt-mongering sludge!!!
>
> I lose a little respect for the people who send them to me.
>
> I particularly hate the ones that say you will benefit by forwarding them and suffer if you don't. I got one of these yesterday from someone I like and it makes me angry.

The comments also gave the impression that many people receive forwardables from friends who make little other contact and that forwarded email act as a point of contact, suggesting that these messages play a role in maintaining social contact.

> Absolutely unnecessary; if one wants to say 'Hi', one can always find 2 minutes to do it, instead of using the address book to forward sht.
>
> Some people seem to rely solely on 'forwards' as the way they communicate. It's as if they think sending a forward once in a while constitutes a real relationship.

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

> I am very unwilling to forward such e-mails. I recently did so where the issue was one that seemed both urgent and one I felt deeply concerned about. In retrospect it did no good, except that it re-established contact with a couple of friends I hadn't heard from for a few months.
>
> One of my friends has sent me nothing but forwards as email. It is quite annoying.
>
> When I receive 'Please forward' emails from friends that are jokes, I find there is no personal message attached from the sender usually and just feel as though I am part of some large distribution list created by the sender. I am generally annoyed by such messages lacking interpersonal content and come to devalue the friendship.

This type of contact may be an online corollary to the collective Christmas letter or the greeting card without a personal signature. Both seem to be widely distributed and yet almost universally disliked. These contacts may be phatic communication, primarily for the purpose of keeping lines of communication open, but they invariable carry social meanings and may not always be interpreted in the light that the sender intended.

While there were insufficient responses from new users to conclude that 'newbies' were more likely to send forwardables than experienced users, there were indications that this might be the case. Of the 26 respondents who had used email for less than one year, three (11.5%) said that nothing would induce them to forward chain messages, while the majority (eight, 31%) gave four or five factors that would persuade them to forward the message as requested. Four new users (15%) gave seven or eight factors that would influence them to forward the message. In comparison, of the 112 respondents who had been using email for more than four years, 21 (19%) said that nothing would induce them to forward these types of messages, the majority (36, 34%) gave one or two factors and only eight (7%) gave seven or eight factors which might influence them to send the message on as requested. It could be anticipated that the more factors working to persuade an individual to forward the message, the more likely that individual would be to do so. If this is so, then it is reasonable to suggest that new users of email might be more likely to perpetuate these chains of messages than long-term users.

In all, the survey supported the findings of the textual analysis. Confidence in the sender, credibility of the message and an emotional response to the possibility of helping or of making a difference, were the primary reasons given for forwarding email as the message requested. While the reasons why respondents felt that their contacts would want to receive a chain email was not investigated, analysis of the most widely-circulated messages suggests that they contain all three means of persuasion: a credible source, a believable message and an appeal to emotion.

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

CONCLUSION

Email communication provides unprecedented movement of information between individuals and groups, 'but new communications technologies in no way change age-old human propensities to lie, gossip or simply repeat bad information' (Matzkin, 1996: 34). Email has become a productive medium for disseminating the stories, warnings, petitions and hoaxes that constitute contemporary folklore, as it provides not only a medium with many characteristics of an oral tradition, but also interwoven communities of thousands of people worldwide connected via their computers, within an environment that facilitates the sharing of information.

The inherent characteristics of email, including its ease and speed of use, its archiving and editing possibilities, its multiple addressability and its lessening of social contact inhibitions, create an environment where forwarded messages can circulate on an immense scale, but they would not continue to do so if they were not meshing in some way with social needs or individual desires. Email forwardables have come to occupy the place of folklore in the electronic environment, as they are transmitted amongst fairly cohesive groups of friends or associates: they have inbuilt persuasive factors that make them believable, they fill cultural functions such as giving information, maintaining group cohesion and contributing to the public good. These forwarded messages seem to function in contemporary society as a way of establishing or maintaining contact, as a process through which individuals can believe that they have some control over their world and the potential to make a difference in society, and as a mechanism for demonstrating that unfortunate, alarming or discomfiting events occur which validate contemporary fears and at the same time provide a resolution to those fears.

References

Abrahams, Roger D. (1976) 'The Complex Relations of Simple Forms' in Dan Ben-Amos (ed.) *Folklore Genres*, pp. 193–214. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Ben-Amos, Dan (1976) 'Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres', in Dan Ben-Amos (ed.) *Folklore Genres*, pp. 215–42. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Brunvand, Jan H. (1981) *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings.* London: Picador.

Burton, Suzan and Paul Nesbitt (2001) 'Managerial Use of Email and Implications for Policy: A Cross Cultural Comparison', *Maquarie University News,* August, URL (consulted February 2002): http://www.pr.mq.edu.au/macnews/august01/email.htm

Dégh, Linda and Andrew Vázsonyi (1976) 'Legend and Belief', in Dan Ben-Amos (ed.) *Folklore Genres*, pp. 93–123. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Ferbrache, David (1992) *A Pathology of Computer Viruses.* London: Springer.

Gilster, Paul (1997) *Digital Literacy.* New York: Wiley.

Kollock, Peter (1999) 'The Economies of Online Cooperation: Gifts and Public Goods in Cyberspace', in Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (eds) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 200–69. London and New York: Routledge.

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

Matzkin, Jonathan K. (1996) 'Do You Believe Everything You Download? Disinformation and Legends on the Net', *PC Magazine* 15(5), p. 34.

Millard, William B. (1995) '"A Great Flame Follows a Little Spark" Metaflaming and Functions of the "Dis" in the Rhetoric of a Discussion List', *Works and Days* 13(1–2): 137–49.

Ong, Walter J. (1982) *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word*. New York: Methuen.

Pew Internet and American Life Project (2002) 'Getting Serious Online: As Americans Gain Experience, They Use the Web More at Work, Write Emails with More Significant Content, Perform More Online Transactions and Pursue More Serious Activities', URL (consulted March 2002): http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/

Propp, Vladimir (1968) *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Russel, James, Aurelie Leonard and Martino Corbelli (2002) 'UK Workers Fail Email Ethics Test', *Surfcontrol.com*, URL (consulted March 2002): http://www.surfcontrol.com/company/news/

Seal, Graham (1989) *The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Sipior, Janice C. and Burke T. Ward (1999) 'The Dark Side of Employee Email', *Communications of the ACM* 42(7): 88–95.

Sproull, Lee and Sara Kiesler (1986) 'Reducing Social Context Cues: Email in Organisational Communication', *Management Science* 32(11): 1492–1512.

Tofts, Darren (1996) 'Cyberbabble: the Grammatology of On-line Communication', *Social Semiotics* 6(2): 263–71.

Whitty, Monica (2002) 'Privacy and Surveillance in the Australian Workplace', report for Surf Control Australia (available at: http://surfcontrol.com.au).

MARJORIE KIBBY is a senior lecturer in cultural studies at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research and teaching interests include both contemporary gender politics and the developing cultures of the internet and particularly the intersections of the two. Publications include articles on internet communities and aspects of gender and the web. *Address*: School of Social Sciences, University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan, NSW 2308, Australia. [email: marj.kibby@newcastle.edu.au]

Downloaded from http://nms.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on February 12, 2008
© 2005 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.