

# OTHER VIEWS

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## GUEST COLUMNNS

# Technology takes folklore into future

By Robert Glenn Howard

In a hyper-mediated and ultra-commercialized age, where can we find just plain old "folk?" UW-Madison will explore that question starting Thursday with a 10-day series of music performances, museum exhibits and public lectures called "The Future of Folk."

For some people, "folk" is a style of pop music that emerged in the mid-1960s. For others, "folklore" conjures up childhood stories of fairies and goblins. But for scholars who study the "folk" and their "lore," the term describes human behaviors that exhibit traditional qualities.

Some researchers study crafts, such as chair-making or quilting. Others study music, such as blues or polka, or the things people say, such as proverbs or jokes. Folklorists can even study our beliefs about everything from gardening to religion. All of these diverse things are "folk" when they emerge in everyday personal expression and are based on things learned from other "folk."

What is folk comes from all of us. In the best of times, it is freely taken, innovated on, and then given back to the communities from where it came; changed, but still free to be taken again.

But at the dawn of the 21st century, it might seem our everyday communities, our "folk," are being eroded by a global culture serving multinational corporate interests through new communication media. Our jobs begin and end at the workplace. At home, our friends and family seem to be spreading farther apart. In this new age of globalism, it might seem that "the folk" have left the farm for good.

But this is just not the case.

With technologies that enable global communication and travel, we are generating new kinds of communities. If the "folk" are us, then the

## If you go

- ◆ **What:** "The Future of Folk"
- ◆ **When:** Begins Thursday and runs through April 23.
- ◆ **Where:** On and around the UW-Madison campus.
- ◆ **More information:** Go to: [www.humanities.wisc.edu](http://www.humanities.wisc.edu) or call (608) 263-3409.



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technologies that enable us to communicate are the means through which our community emerges.

Online or face-to-face, and with windmills or tattoos, in hip-hop or in yodeling, from New York City to rural Korean villages, individuals are still expressing themselves by, to, and for their communities. With today's technologies, it is clearer than ever that "folklore" is everywhere.

Even in the most placeless of technological spaces, the "folk" generate their "lore." Traditional discourse has emerged on the Internet in forms as diverse as jokes, contemporary legends, and local rumors. But the Internet is more than just another medium for folklore. It has also forged its own expressive forms and behaviors such as "blogs," the "home page," or even "photoshopping," the folk art of ironically manipulating digital images.

Unlike the unidirectional media of recorded music, commercial radio, television, or movies, the Internet offers individuals the opportunity to express themselves to, in, and for small communities. Even on the Internet, among those of us who choose to participate, the "folk" are thriving through the characteristically folkloric mechanisms of transmission, innovation, and expression.

As long as we keep sharing and innovating, we will continue to enrich our vibrant communities. When we are "the folk," the "lore" belongs to all of us. As we express it, we give it away.

Howard is an assistant professor in the UW-Madison Communication Arts Department where he teaches courses on folklore, rhetoric, communication technologies and religion.