Under the Weather: The Folk Culture of Digital Life

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The field of digital folklore is well established, with its own already prosperous literature. In the form of what is known as online ethnography, virtual ethnography, or digital ethnography, it consists in the study of collective actions constituted through digital communication. Where communication has been seen for centuries as a leading feature of the formation of communities, many virtual communities are constituted wholly in communication. Not surprisingly, the attention of digital ethnographers has been drawn to phenomena like the spread of rumours and jokes, along with the large field of what has been known since Charles Mackay's study of 1841 as 'extraordinary popular delusions'. Late nineteenth-century anthropologists who relied wholly on written reports of the people who were their subjects were dismissed by the new generation of fieldworkers as 'armchair anthropologists'. Digital ethnography not only can be conducted largely through what we now call the 'data', it can only be so conducted.

This is a very broad field, which needs no further assistance from me for its survival or growth. What I have it in mind to discuss is not digitally mediated folklore, or folk culture in digital life, but the folk culture *of* digital life, not what digital life consists of, or makes possible, but what we take it to be. If this seems like a lot to make turn on a simple swivel of prepositions, from *in* to *of*, then I am minded to respond with Michel Serres, following his teacher Gaston Bachelard, that cultures, disciplines and epochs are largely constituted by their organisation around dominant prepositions. If ethnography is the writing into being of an ethnos, or culture, one might reach for a bit of mystificatory faux-precision like meta-ethnography to describe this. If digital ethnography is the way in which folk culture constitutes itself through acts of specifically digital communication, the folk culture of digital life is communication about that computationally mediated mode of communication.

Folklore in my sense is the living out, or 'existing' of technology. Before they can be said to exist in use, technologies must be transitively 'existed' as being apt for particular kinds of use. The spread of technology is like the spread of illness, and not merely because they can both exhibit patterns of contagion. Being ill involves more than just contracting an infection or developing a disorder, if by such terms we mean simply having them happen to you. Illnesses certainly do just happen to you, but they never only happen to you. Being ill is always a kind of decision, often made collectively rather than individually, to move from a state of health to one of illness. Illness is a mode of conduct as well as a state of affairs. To be ill is to enter, temporarily, and never wholly involuntarily, a new form or phase of life, with its own conventions, responsibilities and privileges. One does not in fact enter it so much

as undertake it. No infection, so to speak, without inflection; no malady without its more-or-less catchy melody. In fact the two gerunds I have just used to gloss the process of getting or becoming ill, *contracting* and *developing*, suggest exactly the kind of compounding of the active and the passive that I am attempting here to dramatise. When you enter into a contract, you willingly constrain your will; when you develop an idea or a block of flats, you actively cultivate or oversee its development.

Nobody knows what technologies are for: or, more precisely, if they do, nobody knows at their inception, or even during their infancy, exactly what technologies will turn out to have been for. Jean-Francois Lyotard once remarked that avant-garde artists and writers can be seen as 'working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*' (Lyotard 1984, 81). There is no mystery about what a plough does, but what does what a plough does *do*, socially and historically? It was quite plain what telephones were thought to be for, during the years of their rapid expansion after 1876. As its English and German names – *telephone* and *Fernsprecher* – indicate, telephones were thought of as a projective apparatus, a distant voicing, or *sotto voce* megaphone. Telephones were installed in mines, and police stations, as well as in Ormond House, Queen Victoria's residence on the Isle of Wight, in order primarily to transmit instructions. Telephonic soirees allowed concert orchestras to increase the size of their audiences who listened live to the performance via telephone. *The Times* predicted that the telephone would make it possible to broadcast the sound of battles in real time (why?). It was not at all that nobody knew that telephones could be used for having conversations with people who were not currently in the room: it was that it took some time for this affordance to be actualised or inhabited as meaningful possibility – *existed*.

The story has been told many times of the origin of the text message in the SMS or short message service, which was envisaged initially as a way for networks to send service-related information to their subscribers (Hillebrand et. al. 2010). Users quickly saw the social uses of the medium – in folklore, especially among stand-offish peoples like the Japanese, Finns and British, who found it more comfortable to propose marriage and announce divorce through such means. The rise and domination of social media depend upon the habituation of and to the SMS, which expands from being an adjunct to social life to being its venue. What is surprising is how surprising this should have been, given that electronically-transmitted short messages had been at the heart of the huge telegraphic network of more than a century previously, leading to the possibilities of the kind of telegraphic romance envisaged in Henry James's story 'In the Cage' (Standage 1998). Text messages were automatic telegrams.

Technology certainly makes and changes history, but in something of the way in which Marx concedes that men make their own history, 'not all of a piece, and out of circumstances not of their own choosing, but proximately found, given and handed

down' (Marx 1869, 1; my translation.) This means that technologies are always eroded and evolved in and by the history of their use and abuse.

What is the difference between law and lore? Both are codes, with law being consciously and authoritatively formulated, while lore has the authority of the spontaneous, in which everybody knows without knowing how they know, and even without knowing that they know. Lore tends to take the form of stories, enactments of the workings of law, rather than abstract formulations of legal principles. Law derives from root conceptions of placing, or sometimes of gathering. Law is from knowing – *lex* is an offshoot of *logos*. *Lore* is from *lehre*, learning. Law is to knowing, as lore is to learning, thus encoding a difference between knowing that and knowing how, the latter formulated as the informal tacit knowledge, the things that we know without being able to say, like the syntactic rules of our native language, of Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (1958) and *The Tacit Dimension* (1966).

To boot

Once, in a cross-Atlantic flight, I heard an announcement from the duty manager apologising that the in-flight entertainment system was not working, but promising that it should be restored once the system had been restarted. There must have been at least some other passengers to whom it occurred that such an option was probably not available for the systems that were actually keeping us aloft at 35000 feet, as opposed to keeping us amused, or, if it was possible to reboot the engines and navigation systems of a Boeing 747 in mid-air, we really did not want to know about it. But we knew in essence why it was a funny idea. The trail runs through the word *boot*.

Tacit understandings are usually carried for English speakers by words of Germanic origin, as a result of a far-reaching accident of military-political history of the mid-11th century. The accident of the Norman conquest, which effected a convergence of Germanic Old English and the Latinate French spoken by the Germanic Northmen (hence 'Normans') who had populated Northern France, brought into communication two semantic streams. One of them was the Germanic *bót*, having the meaning of good or advantage. Old English *beet* meant to amend or make better, the latter word deriving from it. This was replaced after the 14th century by *bot*, and the associated word *boten*, to be of use, from which derives the archaic expression 'what boots it', and the word bootless, meaning useless or futile. It is difficult to rule out the possibility of some collusion between *booting* and *boding*, in the sense of foreboding, though the official lineage of the latter is from Old English *boda*, a messenger.

But there are other likely influences. The word *bet*, in the sense of wager, has no phonological relationship with *boten* to be of use (this means that there is no evidence of a phonological transition from one word to another). Also in the vicinity

is the word *bid*, which evolved from a sense of asking, entreating or offering (I bid you farewell) to the sense of demanding or commanding.

The *bet*, *bot* words for good scattered across the Germanic languages of which we have evidence, Old Frisian, Gothic and so on, derive from an Aryan root **bhad-* 'good, useful'. Where, you would be right to wonder, does the evidence come from for these roots? The answer is, from a process of backward extrapolation from what, following the researches of mostly German philologists from the early nineteenth century onwards, had been accepted as the universal and invariable rules of phonological change. When language itself seems to turn back to its beginnings, as sometimes happens, it is given the stylish name of back-formation, but it is itself the process whereby words are traced to their origins. When Freud thought he had come upon evidence that traumatic memories were not merely recalled in the present of a neurotic, but projected back from that present into a past, as a putative origin for their sufferings, he called it *Nachträglichkeit* – pulled-after-ness, or, in a folkier kind of rendering, cart-before-the-horsery.

I began using a word-processor in writing my first book on Charles Dickens, in the early 1980s. I say 'a word-processor', but actually, it was *the* word-processor, the only one possessed by the Faculty of Arts in Birkbeck College, which none of my colleagues had any interest in using. (Only a year or so before, the long-standing secretary of the History department threatened to resign if she were required to use a golfball typewriter.) I remember well the morning routine it enjoined, which was to turn the computer on, insert what was called a 'smart disk', very likely at the time spelled with a 'c', containing the operating system (though, this being a dedicated word-processor, word-processing was actually the only operation it could perform, rather like generative AI), hit Execute, of which more in a moment, and head off to Pâtisserie Valerie for a coffee and croissant while it booted up. I might mention that this was in an era in which transistors were still widely in use, so it was taken for granted that electrical machinery, radios, record players, engines and so forth needed to 'warm up' before you could expect it to function properly. Similarly, new cars, or more precisely their engines, needed in those days to be 'run in'.

One might see this as a reaction to the drama, and trauma of instantaneity (and perhaps instantaneity is the essential feature of all trauma) which entered the world with the electrical on-off switches of the late nineteenth century, which were quickly refined into the instantaneity of the push-button. Pressing buttons has compacted in it the history of prestidigitation, a word formed from Italian *presto*, ready, from Latin *prae* + *stare,* standing before, still used in answering the telephone in Italian and at work in the hey-presto of the conjuror. If humans are attached to the fantasy of the magic imperative that causes things to move from one state to another without transition, the fact that instantaneity has been a fantasy for so long means that there is also a sluggish kind of resistance to the instantaneous, the feeling that nothing can happen *ex nihilo*, or for religious believers, nothing except absolutely

everything in divine creation. Booting up fulfils this affective demand that there be some quasi-intelligible process involved in moving from one state to another. There must always have been something going on before the legendary ‘word go’, so beloved of weather-forecasters (‘it will be warm and sunny on Saturday from the word go’), if only in some process of readying and steadying which allows one to count out, or, more musically, count in, in the formula *ready, steady, go*.

Booting might perhaps have something to do with bidding in the sense of commanding, but most have assumed a more specific origin in Rudolf Erich Raspe’s book *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia* of 1785, which gathered together a number of boastful tall tales concerning the adventures of the titular Baron. Among the less spectacular feats recorded by the Baron is rescuing himself from a muddy ditch by pulling himself out by his own hair. Somehow this modulated into the idea of lifting oneself up by one’s own bootstraps, an idea suggested perhaps that straps like these were used to help pull heavy boots on.

Much more might be said at this point about the difficulties of manufacturing footwear that is at once durable enough to provide protection to the delicate, if despised human foot while being ductile enough to be bent round the awkward right angle of the ankle a word which actually means angle. You could theoretically explain to an octopus or extraterrestrial with a different bodily morphology the muscular-kinetic impulses activated in the idea of pulling boots on, but the point is that you would have to explain it, in a way that would be unnecessary to any organism supplied with feet that they could reach with their hands. The unacknowledged pressure of the hand and foot in folklore conceptualisation could be taken much further but, since we all have homes to go to, I will leave it at that. The metaphorical use of ‘to bootstrap’ is defined by the OED, in a rare example of definitional wooliness, as ‘To make use of existing resources or capabilities to raise (oneself) to a new situation or state’, with its first appearance in this sense being applied to computing from 1958. This may be part of the reason that an alternative for to boot is to boot *up*.

One of the material traces of this is the function of the Enter key, diversified into the clicking function of the mouse in graphical interfaces. Early electric typewriters provided a small screen which allowed the user to edit a buffer of a couple of lines of dot-matrix text, which could be despatched to memory by pressing a key sometimes marked ‘Send’. Somewhere in this arrangement perhaps was the memory of the compositor’s stick in early type-setting, with what was known as its ‘slug’ of type. As this text could not be retrieved once sent, one needed to be sure that the lines were what were required before pressing Send. The coming of email allowed this usage to be preserved, with all the miniature dread of the irrevocable it encoded. I used to think of the memory of this device as the ‘memory-hole’ employed by Winston Smith to unwrite the past in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Everywhere the usages of software seem designed to protect against terrifyingly irreversible actions – what T.S. Eliot calls 'The awful daring of a moment's surrender/Which an age of prudence can never retract' (Eliot 1969, 74). For some years the Send key, which survives as the Enter key, would also be designated the Execute key. More recently, the anxiety about the aptness of electronic traces to irretrievable evaporation seems to have modulated into the opposite fixation on the comic terrors of uneffaceability. This comes to a head in the much-debated question of what to do with hard disks. Everybody knows that it is prudent to remove the hard disk from a PC or laptop before taking it in one's citizenly way to the recycling centre. But what to do with the physical embodiment or repository of one's precious data? Much might be said at this point about the folk-understandings of the idea of data: but it may suffice to say that data, as that which is given to computerised reading, understanding and exploitation, is nowadays imagined to be not just given, but *given off*, like an odour, or the photological effigies which for centuries it was believed were emitted spontaneously from the visible surfaces of bodies. The anxious care for one's off-scourings, like hair and nail-clippings, which, though dead, still seem to carry with them something of one's *mana*, or life-essence, and so can be used against us, as the formula of legal caution has it, should they fall into the hands of sorcerers, carries across into the manipulable traces we all leave behind in a world in which ever more of those traces are legible and transactable as data, willingly or unwillingly donated.

Various strategies are popularly proposed for the destruction of hard disks, or effacement of the data they contain. Owners of Landrovers are advised to drive back and forth over the disks. Plunging them in hot water is mostly held to be contemptibly ineffective, as is the application of strong magnets. Putting the disk in a stout bag, and beating it into cartoonish smithereens with a sledgehammer has a certain atomising absoluteness to it, even if there is perhaps an uneasy recall of the magician's trick with the audience-member's watch. Even drilling holes through the disks is open to the fear that the data might somehow be reconstitutable, either by criminals or, more likely (oddly more likely), by agents of the government. Most conclude that paying for industrial incineration is the only safe way, though one would really have to own an incinerator of one's own to be sure that the business had been done without double-dealing pr selling on of one's precious data by members of the doubtless underpaid class of incinerator operatives.

There is an in fact an entire genre of folk comedy designed to deal with varieties of bootstrapping, the dream of using your body to escape your body. An expression like 'pull yourself together' hints at this mild absurdity: if you are in bits, like the Iron Man at the beginning of Ted Hughes's children's fable, what part of yourself do you use to pull the other parts of you together (Hughes 1968)? In Hughes's case, it is a mobile and sensate hand, groping for the rest of its apparatus. Munchausen's self-levitation may be thought of as belonging to the comic genre known as the 'Irish bull', so

known either because it mocks the alleged stupidity of the Irish, or because it dips into an Irish tradition, embodied in writers like Swift, Sterne, Wilde, Beckett, and O'Brien, of learned mock-stupidity. A famous example of the bodily illogic (Connor 2017) of the Irish bull is the story of the Kilkenny cats, as rendered in this elongated limerick:

> There once were two cats of Kilkenny,
> Each thought there was one cat too many,
> So they fought and they fit,
> And they scratched and they bit,
> Till, excepting their nails
> And the tips of their tails,
> Instead of two cats, there weren't any.

Because folklore tends to mediate between formal and informal systems of knowledge, encoded in English in the abstraction of Latinate words and constructions and the somatic intimacy of words of Germanic origin (*language* is Latin, *word* is German), folklore tends to cluster around the consternations of the comic. If all comedy reduces to the feeling of incongruity, as has frequently been proposed, the essential incongruity is that of having a body which at the same time you are.

Folklore often deals in hocus-pocus, popularly supposed to derive from the *hoc est corpus* of the Mass (the supposition is itself a bit of folk-etymology, in the absence of any determinate evidence of the derivation). This is to say that it tends to take its theme and occasion the fact of incarnation, or the comic crucifixions of the creature that George Herbert called 'a wonder, tortur'd in the space/Betwixt this world and that of grace' (Herbert 1953, 90).

This often involves making virtual experiences into what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1981) taught us to call metaphors we can live by, through imaginary projections of corporeal habitats. One of the most important dimensions of this metaphorical existing is the dimension of height. There is in particular the implicitly celestial diagram implied in 'uploading' and 'downloading'. The one who downloads is imagined as dwelling at the receptive bottom of the cosmic pile, drawing selective sustenance, like the gentle rain from heaven, from what we have been taught to call the cloud, though this usage in computing to refer to shared network is not much earlier than 1989. Up is the direction of emission and dispersion: down is the direction of actualisation ('upon the place beneath'). Up is possibility and futurity: down is actuality and presence. Up is the dimension of the open, or unbounded, earth that of the human, named from the humus, as attested in the near universal view of heaven as the dwelling place of the superhuman, hence the 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help' of Psalm 121. The force of gravity seems to operate asymmetrically across these dimensions, such that the way down

is instinctively understood as much less laborious than the way up. This is mimicked by the fact that when you check the speed of your broadband connection, your upload speed is always much less than your download speed. But why? For economic reasons no doubt, but these are just in either cases transmissions of data, and there is no natural reason that copying something to a server should involve any greater struggle against gravity or passage through a straiter gate than copying documents from a server.

In

In fact, the work done by folk culture on the conditions of digital life repeats that done on other dematerialising systems of abstract thought, including the history of theology and reflections on the nature of money. Your bank can supply the answer to your question ‘How much money do I have in my account’ only subject to the following four metaphysical provisos:

1) It’s not in your account
2) It’s not even in the bank
3) It’s not yours
4) It’s not even money

Though these conditions sound very ethereal, they are the plain facts of the matter. It is the familiar acceptation of the words ‘money’, bank’ and, most perplexing of all, the word ‘in’, that are in fact mystical. Gaston Bachelard made a similar point in his explanation of the phenomenologies of localisation in physics in his 1937 book, *L’Expérience de l’espace dans la physique contemporaine*, in which he explains that realist understandings of matter and location involve an imaginary economy of the container and the contained in just the same way as my serene assurance that my assets are in my wallet, which is in my safe, which is in my office (Bachelard 1937, 12-13). Richard Feynman’s teasing explanation of what energy is, in terms of a story involving a mother trying each day to tidy up the coloured blocks with which her toddler has been playing all day, and in the process scattering them all over the house, demonstrates that the operations of dissipation and ordering of the blocks are exactly the same as the dissipations and ordering of energy, except that ‘*there are no blocks*’ (instead of two cats there weren’t any).

Folk culture is ceaselessly at work in giving abstract processes this kind of local habitation, and turning abstract relations into corporeal reifications, through the phenomenological topologies of upness and downness, inness, outness, amongness, alongness, betweenness and beyondness. One might say that the folklore of digital life rotates around prepositions, in order to keep hold of the physics in metaphysics. Though folk culture might seem like the groping, intuitive, untutored opposite of metaphysics, it is its arena and vehicle.

Folk culture is sluggish and conservative, largely because it is implicit. But it is also, for that same reason, erosive. Tacit or implicit practices rub the edges off things, but also sometimes encrust them. If technical devices and apparatuses colonise the lifeworld, then, in the fuzzy, approximating forms of folk culture, the lifeworld can recolonise them, naturalising them as anemones and aubretia naturalise in a garden. One of the most cheerful examples is provided by the fate of artificial intelligence. Increased processing power, combined with the availability of large amounts of data, which is just a fancy word for stuff made ready for computational processing, has opened up hugely powerful possibilities of automated processing, in many different fields, some of them of considerable utility. Scarcely any of this gives any sign of anything that might reasonably be regarded as intelligence, and could not possibly be any good if it did, since there is already so much human intelligence to hand, and it is a positive pest.

Luckily, folk culture has seized on the phrase artificial intelligence to describe sorting, crunching and synthesising procedures enacted at very high speeds and started to apply it to all kinds of procedure that make no pretence of being intelligent in any other sense than that of a thermostat or automatic switchboard. So-called 'generative AI', which is capable of synthesising sentences, sounds and images more efficiently than humans, is routinely applied to the marginally improved forms of computer-generated imagery that allows for convincing lip-syncing, grafting of celebrities into pornographic scenarios and other kinds of simulacral mischief-making. As the author of a study of the two-thousand-year-old history of the idea of ventriloquism, I am very familiar with the omnipotence fantasies and cosy dread that the idea of 'throwing voices' can evoke. Charles Brockden Brown seems to have thought his novel *Wieland*, about the civic chaos wrought by a ventriloquist, worthy of the attention of the Vice-President of the US, Thomas Jefferson, to whom he sent a copy (Brown 1798; Connor 2000,229). Were I devoted to the cause of persuading people that something like human intelligence is at work in, or at hand in, such processes, I should be hugely irritated by the casual application of the term AI to what it should be as plain as a pikestaff are operations of automated processing, that could equally well be performed by trained chimpanzees, urchins or suitably indentured members of despised social groups, provided they could be speeded up, or, what comes to the same thing, prolonged indefinitely. But, since I am not committed to the cathexis of AI, but rather an absorbed observer of its career, I regard the casual erosion of the idea of AI in the public imaginary – let us call it degenerative AI – as steadily but irresistibly contributing to its disrepute, allowing for its slow drift into another variety of the magical thinking that human beings have never shown any signs of being willing to put aside. Like the SARS-CoV-2 virus that brought the world to a standstill, but can now be regarded with sangfroid ('which translated means his usual bloody cold', according to Noel Coward), melting away into the sniffly background of the indispositions with which human beings have been living for millennia, the ubiquitous and carelessly approximate evocation of AI, as

prospect and actuality, enacts the same immunological process. In their actualisation as idea and action, technologies always end up under the weather.

Much of folk culture is dismissable as nonsense, in that universal racism deployed by almost all human groups at the expense of the stupid, a stigmatisation comparable in its prevalence and virulence only to the supremacism of the beautiful. One might well feel that such ideas are just too daft to be taken seriously. But that is just what they want, assuming, folkishly enough, that ideas can ever be said to want anything in particular, beyond persistence in being. The yield of pleasure at their absurdity may in fact be the ground rent they pay in return for being granted indefinite leave to remain, at work and in play, if never exactly in mind, in human affairs.

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