

Folklore, Storytelling and Coping with the Internet on TikTok

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Abstract

Social media platforms such as TikTok are often regarded as constituting a fundamental shift in everyday modes of sociality; their immense scope, mysterious algorithms and darker subsections seem to pose a threat to ‘traditional’ forms of social communication. In downloading TikTok during an undergraduate degree in anthropology, however, and furthermore in conducting that degree during the COVID-19 pandemic, I have in fact found some of the most essential components of ‘traditional’ sociality, and thus the traditional subjects of anthropological inquiry (specifically folklore and storytelling), to have emerged in my interactions on the app. As I have studied anthropology during a global pandemic, so too have I learnt the varied social rules and collective norms of TikTok, which provided many with a sense of sociality which was lost during lockdowns, and in my involvement with the TikTok Ethnography Collective at Goldsmiths I have found new possibilities of conducting ethnographic fieldwork at a time when it seemed impossible. In this article, I draw on my experience of using TikTok whilst conducting my degree in order to highlight the richness of sociality which is present on the app and the ethnographic possibilities which it holds.

Keywords: Folklore; storytelling; sociality; communication technology; social media; TikTok.

Introduction

In print and television journalism, pop-cultural discourse and conversations with friends, social media platforms are often viewed in a somewhat pejorative light. They seem to be regarded as constituting the modern apex of social communication, a relational extreme of ‘modernity’, which have been incorporated into our day-to-day lives at the expense of ‘traditional’ modes of interaction, such as the written word, oral storytelling, or localised folklore. The enormity and reach of the internet and social media platforms is often lamented; as we can now access *anything*, and contact *anyone*, has something been lost in our social ways of being?

In studies of the digital and social media, however, anthropologists have found that such online spaces might instead hold the potential to harbour rich and varied forms of social interaction and communication. Building on theories of sociality which incorporate “non-humans, objects and things” into our understandings of human social relations (Long & Moore, 2012, p. 41), the discipline has come to account for the extent to which relations are mediated through and impacted by new information technologies. Whether on chat room forums (Yogarajah, 2022), Amazon’s comment sections (Phillips & Milner, 2017) or image messaging apps (Miller, 2015), sociality has been found not to be limited online, but prevailing. When sociality is understood principally as “a dynamic relational matrix” by which subjects “come to know the world they live in and find...meaning within it” (Long & Moore, 2012, p. 41), it can be revealed in such sites as a social media platform. In this article, I aim to explore such digital sociality on TikTok specifically, in tandem with a reflection on digital studies in anthropology and the social sciences, especially during periods of time in which in-person ethnographic fieldwork was made impossible.

Having started my anthropology undergraduate programme in September 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to in-person teaching just six months into my first year, and I felt keenly the impact of the transition to online lectures and seminars. The seedlings of new friendships were put under immense strain, familiarity with lecturers became practically impossible, and any hopes of conducting practical ethnographic fieldwork during my time at university were shattered. Although online teaching fulfilled its base function of transferring knowledge and information, the serendipity of everyday social interaction was sorely missed. The happenstance of sitting

next to someone in a lecture hall, or meeting someone at the pub afterwards, for example, was inimitable on programmes like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. It seemed that the transition to digital sociality, which was necessary at the time, was largely ineffective.

During this time, however, the social media platform TikTok emerged as a potential substitute to the social serendipity of spaces like the pub or university corridors. Under national lockdown and during periods of self-isolation, TikTok provided me and my housemates with a tangible link to the wider world where other digital platforms were found to be lacking. As digital anthropology has followed sociality online, so too did it follow TikTok. During my second year, I joined the TikTok Ethnography Collective established at Goldsmiths – a network of students and lecturers that, like me, had discovered TikTok through lockdown and now wished to interrogate it ethnographically. Through this collective, I soon found myself able to engage practically with anthropological questions from my bedroom, connecting ethnographic theory from readings and seminar classes to my newfound ‘field site’. As a result, TikTok couldn’t be viewed through anything other than an ethnographic lens; traditional subjects of anthropological inquiry, such as folklore, symbolism, linguistics, community and storytelling, began to emerge even in my most idle interactions with the app. Post-pandemic, TikTok continues to provide me and my friends (if not my wider age group) with talking points, niche and layered cultural references and a space to exchange jokes and stories. It continues to reveal itself as a legitimate site for storytelling and folkloric exchange, and therefore has also continued to be an effective site for anthropological research.

In this article, I draw on my experience of using TikTok - whilst conducting my degree - as ethnographic material, in order to shine further light on the richness of sociality which is present on the app. As highlighted in a recent ‘Social Infrastructures’ report compiled by Laura Bear and other anthropologists, the sociality provided by social media proved crucial to many across the country that sought solace online during lockdown (Bear, et al., 2021, p. 40). 20% of the people they interviewed cited social media and online communities as a significant source of support during the pandemic – placing it ahead of faith institutions, neighbours, mental health professionals, and local support groups, and only behind friends, support bubbles and family (ibid). The speed at which the TikTok userbase in the United Kingdom grew between 2020 and 2021¹ was no doubt largely due to people seeking alternative modes of sociality under lockdown. But despite the pandemic’s role in TikTok’s prevalence today, this article will discuss not only online sociality during lockdowns but also the changes in sociality that have occurred more broadly with the development in information and communication technologies. There was already a sentiment pre-pandemic that sociality had changed dramatically thanks to the rise of the internet and social media; it is that sentiment, whether boosted or just reiterated by online communication infrastructure during lockdown, that this article is concerned with. Through extending classical areas of anthropological exploration – storytelling and folktales – to the digital realm, I will outline the ways in which sociality is in fact achieved on and through TikTok.

There are of course ethical and political dimensions to studying alternative modes of sociality (Long & Moore, 2012, p. 43); the motivations of a particular app or algorithm, and the negative effects of social media on mental health, cannot be disregarded. This is raised in everyday conversations, too; TikTok specifically is actively avoided by many friends who say they already spend ‘too much time on their phone’, whilst regular users bemoan their overuse of the app and the overexposure it provides to such a broad variety of content. Such arguments are also deployed in broader political discourses surrounding TikTok, which is regularly regarded with disdain, whether for its negative effects on young people and mental health (Paul, 2022), its mysterious and addictive algorithmic framework (ibid), its role as a surveillance apparatus or for its connection to China (Milmo, 2022). All this does not, however, negate the possibility for sociality to be present, and therefore studied, online; Daniel Miller, for example, has conducted extensive research into digital sociality whilst also investigating the extent to which it occurs in accordance with the intentions or interests of the corporations which operate social media platforms (Miller, 2019). I understand and share many of the criticisms of TikTok; but as a TikTok user myself, immersed in the app and the social life emerging from it, and as an anthropologist, I often find myself jumping to its defence, or else wishing to complicate the discussion surrounding it. Many of those criticisms are legitimate, but I also find them to provide only a partial and incomplete picture, and this article is concerned with redressing that balance; principally in discourses of popular culture, the media, and everyday conversations.

¹ TikTok's userbase grew from 530 million monthly users in the first quarter of 2020 to 1.2 billion in the fourth quarter of 2021. It has since grown further, to 1 billion, 677 million users in the first quarter of 2023 (Iqbal, 2023)

Identifying a Dilemma of Sociality

Welcome to the Internet

Could I interest you in everything?
All of the time?
A little bit of everything,
All of the time. (Inside, 2021)

In the comedian Bo Burnham's 2021 Netflix show *Inside*, he paints a picture of the internet as a sinister and boundless space, full of ecstatic delight and ominous danger in equal (and apparently infinite) measures. His song *Welcome to the Internet* addresses this at length, describing an environment where you can instantly jump from the news, to pornography, to cooking tips and back again, and get just as easily caught up in light-hearted online quizzes as you can in misogynistic chat rooms (Inside, 2021). It is depicted as a near-sentient entity, which forces online content onto the user faster than the user can seek it out themselves. The song's YouTube video has over 115 million views², and the comments section is filled with testimonies to the accuracy of Burnham's description (Burnham, 2021). It is also an appraisal which aligns with the criticisms of the internet often deployed in the media; that the internet is increasingly globalised, anonymous and impersonal (Clarke, 2022), and can therefore foster or encourage the dispersal of harmful information (Myers, 2022).

To the outside observer, or even to TikTok users themselves, the dilemma of sociality which Burnham is posing could well be equally directed towards TikTok. The app is deeply multiplicitous, with users watching several videos on an enormous range of topics in just a matter of minutes. When *Inside* was released, my For You Page (FYP)³ was filled with discussion of its themes and topics, with users relating it to TikTok specifically. Aside from the responses to *Inside*, I have also seen several users complain that unrestricted access to the internet in their youth may have caused them long lasting harm, and the experience of being exposed to such a wide variety of content on TikTok is often discussed pejoratively. It seems, then, that Burnham's feelings on the internet are common; there appears to be a shared understanding that despite its benefits, there is something about the immense scope of the internet that gives rise to something darker.

In the summer of last year, a pub opened near to my flat with a strict no-phones and no-music policy, owned by a family-run Yorkshire brewery which enforces this rule across all their pubs. Although my housemates and I were at first drawn in by its inexpensive beer, it didn't take long to catch on to the reasoning for the rule; compared to other, more student-orientated pubs in the area, it felt more relaxed, more open and often more enjoyable to be in. The quietness of the space is not threatened by the distractions of the internet, and so embodied sociality moves in to take its place; conversations flowed in a way they often didn't elsewhere, and I found myself having more impassioned and important discussions with my friends and with strangers. The noise of the internet was dampened, and with apparently positive results.

If something has in fact been lost, then, in the adoption of universalising technologies such as the internet or TikTok, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin might have the answer; storytelling (Benjamin, 1936). If Benjamin were alive to see the internet today, he might well share Burnham's perspective, and his writings could shed further light on the phenomena which Burnham describes and which I've mentioned. In his 1936 essay *The Storyteller*, Benjamin laments the demise of traditional storytelling, and levels his criticism unsparingly (and almost entirely) at the development of information technology (ibid). He argues that by means of this development, we have become oversaturated with excessive information; as a result, the value of the individual experience has diminished (if not vanished), and therefore any story (or communication) of those experiences, passed by word-of-mouth within communities or from a distant traveller, has disappeared with it.

It is information, he says, stripped of the rhythm, wisdom or moral counsel of 'stories', which constitutes the "new form of communication" in a capitalist society (ibid, p. 4). No longer do we hang on the every word of a traveller, nor do we rejoice in telling and retelling of local folklore. Everything is abbreviated (ibid, p. 6), boiled down to its essential, informative content which can then be easily disseminated. "Every morning brings us the

² As of July 2023

³ The 'For You Page', often shortened to the FYP, is the landing page on TikTok. It is the equivalent to the 'feed' of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, but also has similarities to YouTube and Pinterest's home pages and Instagram's 'explore' page. On their FYP, TikTok users will watch content from people they follow, but also see videos which are selected 'for them' by the app's somewhat mysterious 'algorithm' in accordance with content which they have previously watched or engaged with.

news of the globe,” he says, “and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories” (ibid, p. 4). “It was always the plan”, sings Bo Burnham, “to put the world in your hand” (Inside, 2021).

In a YouTube conversation to celebrate a new edition of *The Storyteller* by Verso Books, Esther Leslie (the translator of the edition, and Professor of Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck) brings Benjamin’s ideas into direct conversation with contemporary social media (Leslie & Jeffries, 2023). Leslie focuses on Benjamin’s observations on the newspaper, where several pieces of information exist side by side without relation to one another (ibid), and likens these observations to her understanding of social media, especially TikTok. She describes such platforms as an “endless flow”, of “fifteen second” videos, “each one different, and by the time you’ve seen the next one you’ve forgotten what the last one was” (ibid). The result is an “amplified” version of Benjamin’s depiction of the newspaper (ibid), where the fragmented arrangement of information is taken to an extreme, and so presumably the communicability of experience is similarly diminished. In the discussion, both Leslie and Stuart Jeffries (a journalist and author) note that Benjamin’s reaction to online technology might not be entirely negative; just as he did not dismiss the newspaper outright, he may have found interest or value in these forms of media. They both, however, seem to acknowledge that such developments in technology has invoked a radical shift in our means of communication, and their discussion implies that this shift might be a negative one.

Benjamin’s argument could be regarded as reactionary and overly nostalgic; there is a glimmer in his writing of a half-forgotten, unspecified past, where stories are shared over the hearth and passed on between and within communities. As is also the case with the pub with no phones, there is a danger here of pining for a past which you don’t yourself remember (Boym, 2001); for Benjamin it is pre-novel, for myself the pre-internet. That said, his writing is convincing and thorough, and he makes a good case for the demise of an important part of sociality.

For my purposes here, the core value of Benjamin’s writing lies in the resonance it holds when placed in relation to such contemporary, pop-cultural discourses as a comedy-musical Netflix show. Nearly a century after it was written, *The Storyteller* holds key insights into the consequences of ever-expanding information technologies. “Boredom”, says Benjamin, “is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience” (Benjamin, 1936, p. 5) – without boredom and relaxation, we risk losing both the ability to listen to, remember and tell good stories. And as Bo Burnham sings in the chorus of *Welcome to the Internet*:

Apathy's a tragedy,
And boredom is a crime,
Anything and everything,
All of the time
(Inside, 2021)

Problematising the Dilemma

As anyone on TikTok will know, the app is at times disorientating, overwhelming and multiplicitous. An extensive amount of information can be packed densely into an extremely short amount of time. Following on from Benjamin, TikTok might well be deemed to pose a threat to storytelling and folklore; when users are kept hooked to the app via its algorithmic display of content, and boredom is apparently so quenchable, the idea that it might constitute such a threat is certainly convincing. It is this perspective which I am often presented with when talking to friends, family or colleagues about conducting research on TikTok. Especially to people who do not use the app, the prospect that TikTok might hold something academically or culturally interesting is met with confusion; ‘isn’t that just a dancing app?’, ‘isn’t it addictive?’, ‘where’s the craft on TikTok?’.

Having used TikTok for over two years, and in parallel to my university studies, I have become used to its interface and grown familiar with its functions, whilst also regarding it through an anthropological lens; as a result, I have found the opposite to be true. As I have watched and made TikToks of my own, both by myself and with friends, I have found that the app is built on a social collaboration of ideas, principles and rules that could well be seen as analogous to Benjamin’s understanding of storytelling, and fulfil any anthropological criteria for the constitution of folklore. At its point-of-use, TikTok operates as a means of cultural exchange of a startling variety, ranging from quick, vulgar jokes to thorough intellectual discourse. Interestingly, it was on my FYP where I first saw a clip of the Verso interview between Esther Leslie and Stuart Jeffries. It was this short, one-minute-long video of their discussion on Walter Benjamin that prompted me to watch the full video on YouTube, and in doing so I discovered more material relating to this article which I might not have otherwise

come across. In which case, are even the teachings of Walter Benjamin found to be recapitulated according to his principles on TikTok?

In her article *Walter Benjamin on the Video Screen: Storytelling and Game Narratives*, Carly Kocurek describes a similar potential for Benjamin's writings (Kocurek, 2018). Although not focused on the internet or online platforms, Kocurek reorientates the key ideas of *The Storyteller* towards video games, and in doing so highlights the possibilities they hold for positive and meaningful experiences, equally imbued with counsel and wisdom as the storytelling which Benjamin laments. The games which Kocurek discusses "aspire to convey or form shared experiences and produce deep emotional responses" (ibid, p. 2). This is achieved through the game designers' choices in producing games which incorporate some form of moral value, which model political or cultural dilemmas, or which centre on complex narrative worlds (ibid, p. 7-8). Although the efficacy and value of storytelling might not be reducible to a standardised formula, Kocurek details several games which do achieve these basic criteria, and which have elicited profound emotional reactions from those who have played them. Despite the technological disparity, then, between video games and stories shared around a fire, there is a commonality here, of narrative communication, social rules and "experiential knowledge", which bridges that divide (ibid, p. 2).

This relates closely to the "revitalised" understanding of sociality as set out by Nicholas J. Long and Henrietta L. Moore (Long & Moore, 2012). In their article *Sociality Revisited: Setting a New Agenda*, they look to new approaches in anthropology to understand sociality "in light of developments and challenges that have been posed...over the past twenty years" (ibid, p. 41). Technological developments, as well as theoretical turns within the discipline, have left previous definitions of sociality on uncertain ground, and Long and Moore work to conceptualise a working theory of sociality as "a dynamic relational matrix", in which humans and non-humans are involved in an ongoing process of interaction and influence (ibid, p. 41). Long and Moore call on ANT (Actor-Network Theory) to suggest that "phenomena should be considered 'social' if they are 'intrinsically interactive'" (ibid, p. 44); as such, sociality could come to be described as "a radical relationality, association, or assembly" (ibid). When considering ethnographic sites online, this broadens their potential for sociality.

Daniel Miller brings a particularly ethnographic focus to such discourses around sociality and technology. Miller has conducted extensive fieldwork on social media, detailing the ways in which these sites are alive with social relations and interactivity. His study of social media photography (Miller, 2015), for example, reveals that people of a range of ages in Britain use social media apps as a dynamic means of social expression, articulating their thoughts and values whilst also responding to the techno-cultural milieu in which they are situated. The uploading of images to Instagram, for example, is regarded by the young people Miller talks to as a distinct "craft", which requires an understanding of collective social rules of what "looks good" (ibid, p. 6-7). Such an observation invokes discourses around taste, cultural norms, status and image-making technologies; as a result, sociality on the app is made demonstrably clear. Indeed, the concepts of 20th Century social theorists, such as Marilyn Strathern and Pierre Bourdieu, are found to be entirely apt in Miller's discussion (ibid, p. 5, 7). In his article, Miller details the ways in which social media users engage with one another and the technology they are using to constitute a valid, even valuable site of sociality.

In growing more accustomed to the norms and principles of TikTok over time, and becoming more in tune with the ways in which experiences are shared through (and shaped by) videos, I began to find profound similarities between my experiences of using the app and the archetypal image of an anthropologist in the field. I slowly came to understand the unfamiliar behaviour which I found on TikTok, and began to incorporate anthropological studies of sociality (both on and offline) into my perspective of interactivity and social life on the app. In which case, it is necessary to provide a description of that process, of arriving on TikTok, and the subsequent process of participant-observation that has informed my understanding.

An Arrival Story

First Impressions

My initial understanding of TikTok was of its predecessor, Musical.ly. An avid dancer, my younger sister had used the app from 2017, and it was its early format of dance and lip-sync videos which I was first aware of. When I moved to London to start my degree at Goldsmiths in the autumn of 2019, I was surprised that some of the people I met in my university accommodation were using it – I had thought that TikTok was an app for teenage dance enthusiasts, not undergraduate art students. When I moved back home during the first lockdown

of March 2020 I spent more time with my sister, and she would regularly show me videos that she had made. She was still predominantly on 'DanceTok'⁴, but as I watched more videos, and she persuaded me and my parents into learning routines, I became more familiar with the app and its nuances.

It was not until I moved back to London for the beginning of my second year, however, and moved into a house with the same TikTok-using art students from my first-year accommodation, that my perception of the app entirely shifted from the impression I still had of it from when it was Musical.ly. I was shown increasingly subversive and alternative content from my housemates, where political discourse, pop-cultural analysis and humour were all interwoven with one another, and it seemed the platform had come a long way from where it had been before the pandemic. It felt as if a whole avenue of popular culture had just emerged overnight, and I felt drawn to explore it. Slightly hesitantly, I downloaded TikTok in January 2021.

Arriving on TikTok

The first few days or weeks of using the app is a bewildering experience. I was shown wildly different types of content on my For You Page (much of which I wasn't interested in or I actively disliked), but my housemates reassured me that it would not be long before the algorithm began to 'work me out'. They were right, and I was soon watching videos which aligned strongly with my interests, politics and tastes. Indeed, this is what many members of the TikTok Ethnography Collective found and recounted – an initial period of disorientation from watching random videos, before the algorithm eventually figured out their interests. As I spent more time on the app, the content became more and more streamlined, and I began to enjoy the strange mix of functions which TikTok seems to facilitate; learning, laughing, heckling, and relaxing.

The lines and rules of sociality on TikTok, however, are less clearly drawn than on other social media sites, and I quickly found myself in a dilemma of my own positionality. To start watching videos, you need neither an identifiable username nor a profile picture (both of which are actively encouraged on Facebook and Instagram), and I was struck by the anonymity with which I was able to interact with content. In this sense it felt akin to YouTube, for which you do not even need to create an account, but there was something different here, a certain sense of intimacy; many of the videos coming up on my FYP were being uploaded by accounts with very small follower counts and often with rather personal content (details of holidays, family dynamics, break-ups, friendships etc.). Whilst the anonymity of the viewer is seemingly similar to YouTube, the level of interaction required to fully engage with TikTok is much higher; in order to influence your FYP algorithm effectively, it is necessary to at least 'like' videos. As I started getting more relevant content from people who I related to, I felt uncomfortable that any interaction such as liking, following or commenting, would come up on their notifications as from an anonymous user. I felt voyeuristic and creepy, as if I was looking in through people's windows from the street outside.

It is this feeling, of an exchange of gazes, which was the first indication to me that the app is embroiled in a very particular sense of sociality. It felt as if I was looking directly at other users, who in turn were looking back at me, and I couldn't shake my feeling of TikTok as a distinct *place*, where people could *go* to see one another and interact. This is of course perhaps due to my downloading it at a time of national lockdown, when I could not meet up with friends in person and most of my social interaction with the outside world was already through a screen. There is also, however, something to be said about the uniqueness of the app itself. There is a feeling of mingling, as if you could be seen across the room by practically anyone.

Perhaps influenced by an increasingly reflexive and self-aware academic anthropology, or perhaps just motivated by a social fear of being 'weird', I felt that I needed to identify myself⁵. This first involved the uploading of a profile picture and the creation of a username, and subsequently the uploading of content. In doing so, I felt like I became a 'proper' TikTok user, and had crossed over into the murky grey area in which most people on TikTok seem to operate; both a producer and consumer of content, never entirely one or the other.

⁴ The prefacing of 'Tok' with a word or genre indicates a particular niche sub-group of users on the app who are interested in that thing. There is DanceTok, for example, but also BookTok, WitchTok, FilmTok, FoodieTok, FrogTok, even AnthroTok. Some Tok's have even transcended the app itself, with "as seen on BookTok" now being a regular advertising feature in large book shops such as Waterstones.

⁵ This of course isn't necessarily a universal experience; I know many people who choose not to upload content and are happy to use TikTok just as a space to watch videos. However, I do think that the sense of mingling and being 'seen' is broadly true; 83% of users, for instance, have uploaded at least one video (Wallaroo, 2023).

Becoming a 'TikToker'

The first video I uploaded was a short piece of footage that I had filmed a few days before whilst cycling on my bike (fig. 1). It was not made to be uploaded for TikTok, and this is quite clear to anyone who uses the app; it is in landscape rather than portrait, and has no music, text, or substantial content. It's not really a 'TikTok' as such, but more an attempt to establish myself in a cultural and aesthetic milieu which felt unfamiliar. Many of the first videos I made followed this theme; they were made without much knowledge of the principles, subtleties or presuppositions which run through the particular 'side' of TikTok which I now inhabit. I was experimenting with the tools and technology of the app itself, unaware of the nuanced ways in which features such as duetting, stitching or using audio⁶ can be utilised to make both powerful political statements or banal (but nevertheless funny or poignant) personal observations. I was trying to force my own creative principles and tastes onto an environment which already had a language system and codes of communication in place. What followed, then, was a learning process, of the techniques and reference points which together make up a sort of collective language on the app. To make 'TikToks' you have to become used to a series of cultural codes and dialects which have been established collectively by a vast group of people over a long period of time. Any social gaffes and awkward uncertainty, therefore, are the same as occur when arriving in any new environment or anthropological field site.

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This process of learning social rules online could well be connected with the phenomenon of 'lurking'. A popular term in online communities and chatrooms, a 'lurker' is a user who does not create content, but rather sits and watches from afar. In some cases, newcomers to a certain platform or subgroup are actively encouraged to lurk by more experienced users, in order for them to get a proper understanding of the social and cultural norms of the 'space'. Gabriella Coleman, for example, provides an example of this in her book on the online group Anonymous;

Anonymous...now constantly cautions its newcomers to take security seriously. "If you're a newblood," Anon2earth tweeted, then "chill—sit back and lurk. Don't get into any ops unless you know what the fuck you are doing. Protect yourself."
(Coleman, 2015, p. 408)

Whilst this does relate to TikTok, there is a key difference in that my friends and I learnt its cultural coding through trial and error of making content, and this seems to be a shared experience on the app; 83% of users have uploaded at least one video (Wallaroo, 2023) and the social cues of TikTok videos are constantly evolving due to the vast amount of content produced by users with both large and small follower-counts. Indeed, it is even possible to be rewarded for uploading videos with mistakes, as are many elderly TikTok users, who upload clumsily edited videos which sporadically go 'viral'. Whilst chatrooms like 4chan, or platforms like Twitter, might evoke a feeling of browsing through content, with which users are free to engage as they wish, TikTok inspires a sense of immersion in the content which surrounds you. It is therefore very difficult to lurk on TikTok; even if you remain anonymous to other users, you will still be 'seen' by the app and its algorithm, which tailors content based on your previous activity. TikTok thus inspires a mode of sociality which is well suited to an anthropological investigation; participant observation on the app is a necessity.

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After a few weeks of watching and making videos by myself, I made a TikTok with the help of my housemates (who were at that point much more well-versed in the lore and principles of the app), and this was the first of my TikToks to mimic a particular trend. I had received a small plastic greenhouse for my birthday, which meant I could relocate plant pots and seed trays from my bedroom out into the garden. I suggested that this gardening upgrade might make a good TikTok using the song *Hayloft* by the band Mother Mother, which I had seen trending and which had begun to be referenced "off-app" in everyday life.

The 'Hayloft' trend usually begins with a scene which is in some way calm or has a clear status quo. The second line of the song is preceded by a strum of an electric guitar, at which point a new character/component is introduced who represents a disruption or threat to the status quo. This new character/component is almost always represented by someone with two fingers of one hand pointing to the opposite forearm⁷ (fig. 2). The

⁶ 'Duetting' records a new video whilst another one plays next to it; 'stitching' interrupts a video around 5 seconds in with a new recording; 'using audio' uses another video's soundtrack, allowing for lip-syncing or soundtracks.

⁷ This was a popular pose on TikTok which caused lots of confusion, with no one seeming to know where it had come from. Consensus is that it originally came from Lakers basketball player D'Angelo Russell, who pulled the pose in 2016 to signify he had "ice in his veins" (and was cold-blooded) after scoring a basket (Hamilton & shevyrolet, 2021).

extent to which the pose or the song⁸ translates directly into the context of the trend isn't immediately clear, but is indicative of the remarkable way in which trends and jokes manifest on the app. Based on several (and often disparate) cultural touchstones, a trend such as this one emerges onto an FYP, often from a single original video, where it is then reproduced and built upon by other users. It's largely irrelevant if a TikTok user hasn't seen that original video or isn't entirely familiar with all of the trend's components – if a user doesn't understand a trend then it won't take long for them to work it out, have a friend explain it to them off-app, or else it might be explained in another video. The fact that the 'Hayloft' trend is so difficult to explain coherently in written form is testament to the idea that TikTok has to be learnt (its deeply contextual nature is also made clear when trying to explain it to a 'non-TikToker'); far from being an endless vista of disparate, multiplicitous and disconnected content, the app is rich with shared principles of social expression. My version didn't entirely fit with the usual semiotics of the trend (the only thing that I/my greenhouse was disrupting was a haphazard method of home gardening), but at the time I thought the idea was funny enough to enlist my housemates to help film it, and I was proud that the end result felt much closer to a 'proper TikTok' video than my initial clumsy attempts.

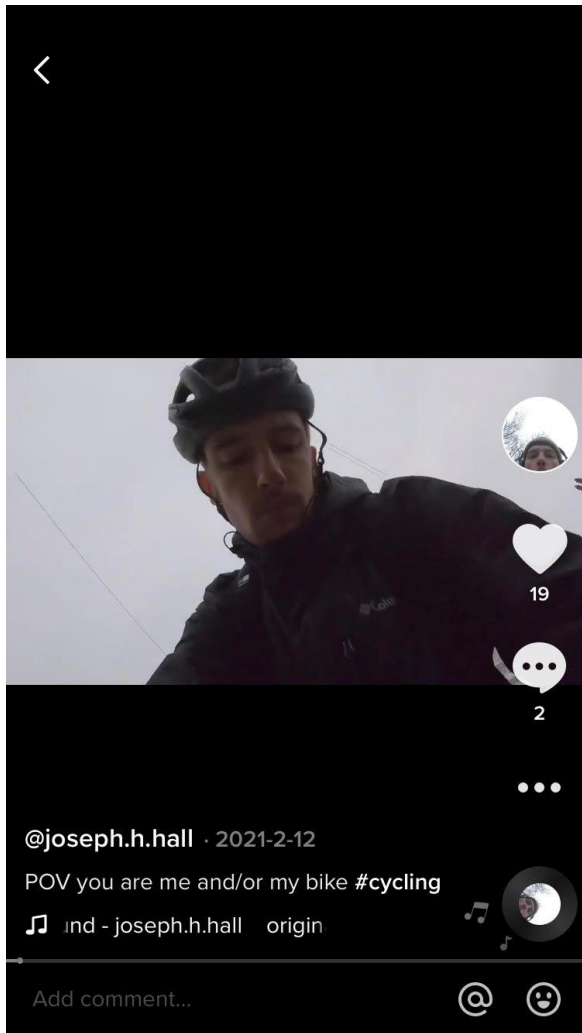


Figure 2

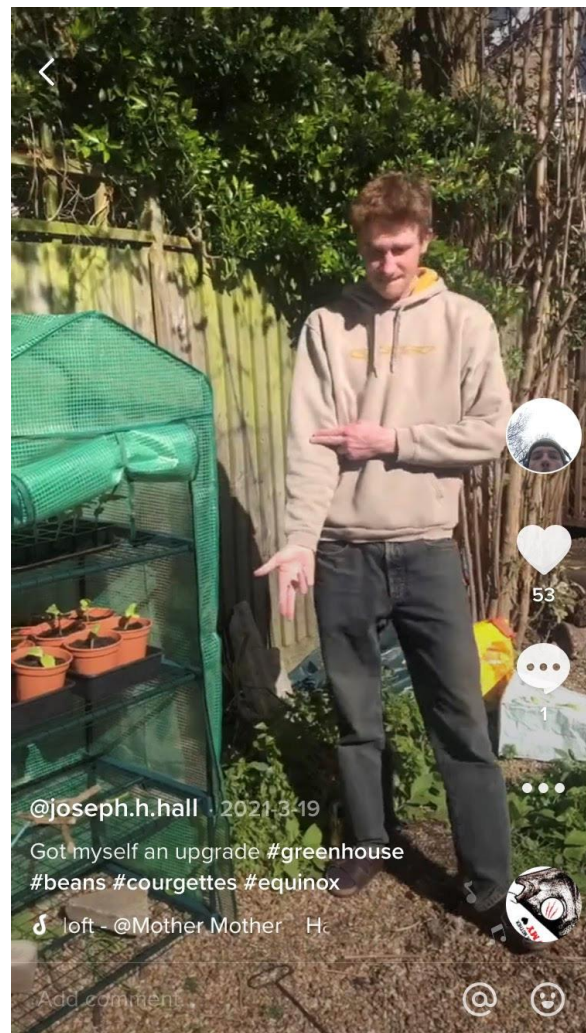


Figure 2

In Walter Benjamin's discussion of storytelling, he describes the way in which "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (Benjamin, 1936, p. 5). But despite his accusation of information technologies bringing about the demise of such a process, this could just as well be a description of a TikTok, which is engraved with specific influences, trends and aesthetics. Every element of the process of filming a TikTok is mediated by an understanding of what a TikTok can or should be; the angle of the camera, the tone of voice, the choice of sound, the subject matter, the use of effects, the list goes on. So when a user picks up their phone to tell a story from their personal life, the TikTok they make is just as rich in communicative content (whether deliberate or accidental) as is the story its creator is telling.

⁸ The song itself was from 2008, and its lyrics also have little to no relevance to the joke itself.

There is also more obvious evidence that TikTok users engage in storytelling practices which echo Walter Benjamin's principles. As Kocurek notes, the oral tradition is vital for Benjamin, and so too is it prominent in video games which aim to provide counsel or wisdom (Kocurek, 2018, p. 7); on TikTok, speaking directly to the camera is the chosen medium of a large proportion of videos. Furthermore, users will often post comments requesting a "story time" if they feel that not enough information has been shared in a video. If a user has uploaded a TikTok which loosely references a dramatic event in their personal lives (such as a particularly scandalous break-up, or a shocking interaction with a colleague at work), those who are engaged by the content will ask for this to be expanded on with an additional "story time" video, which will be then uploaded with a link back to the original video. Despite it being mediated through a third-party software, such a direct interaction between the storyteller and the audience is overwhelmingly indicative of the modes of communication which Benjamin laments.

Storytelling and Folklore

Folklore on the internet, what is folklore?

In Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner's book *The Ambivalent Internet* (2017), they discuss the phenomena of online folklore, exploring how a traditional and presumably embodied feature of sociality can in fact thrive in a space as 'modern' and 'new' as the internet. They dismantle the common dichotomy of pre- and post-internet, which is reinforced in everyday conversations and popular media (and indeed in Bo Burnham's song), to reveal that the distinction might not be as clear as is often imagined.

For Ryan M. Milner, his understanding of folklore begins as a child with the archetypal campfire, around which he and his male family members would exchange stories, jokes and profanities on fishing trips. Whitney Phillips, meanwhile, points to a childhood friendship which was layered with pranks, inside jokes and pop culture references, borne out of long days spent together at athletics track meets. Milner's experience might be more "obviously folkloric" (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 23), but Phillips' is shown to be equally so – in recounting their own personal experiences, they muddy the waters of a clear delineation between 'folk' and 'modern' in order to refine exactly what constitutes 'folklore'. Essentially, it involves "a stable (if small) group with many factors in common" and whose communicative exchanges are "steeped in consistent, locally derived traditions" (ibid, p. 24). Alongside these traditions, it is the constant evolution of folklore which brings it to life; traditions are played with and responded to, and the old and familiar becomes the backdrop for new jokes and stories to be exchanged. It is this "twin law", then, of conservative precedent and dynamic transformation, that really defines folklore, rather than the common assumption that folklore equates to little more than 'old stuff' (ibid, p. 23). With this definition, Phillips and Milner are well placed to effectively analyse the ways in which folklore might arise in less obvious environments, such as the internet, and they detail several cases which bridge (if not entirely transcend) the pre- and post-internet and the folk/modern divides⁹.

In his article *Hodling On*, Yathukulan Yogarajah incorporates Phillips and Milner's model into his discussion of online cryptocurrency communities, and identifies a strong thread of folkloric communication in meme culture on virtual chat rooms such as 4chan and Reddit. Yogarajah argues that on these online forums, traditional economic theory and financial logics are subverted and played with through folkloric communication and storytelling. The deliberate misspelling of "hodling" in the title of his article, for example, is a key part of broader lore in crypto discourse. It is a tradition based on a mistake; a drunken rant from a 'netizen' whose share in bitcoin was rapidly decreasing in value. Against the conventional wisdom to sell, he had decided to hold onto his stocks and risk absolute loss; in the title of his blogpost, however, he had misspelt "HOLD" as "HODL". As a result, his typo became a rallying cry to 'hodl' no matter what, and "was later acronymized to 'hold on for dear life'" (ibid, p. 2). Yogarajah argues that 'hodl' became part of the folklore of online cryptocurrency communities, and was used by people to share their own personal experiences remixed with this 'archetypal' story. A process of constant iteration, building on previous stories, comes to keep the online community alive.

It's not difficult to relate these ideas back to the experience of using TikTok. Each video references and builds on videos and trends that have come before; what happens in a particular video will then go on to shape further the particular talking point or joke which it is responding to. The 'Hayloft' trend, for example, is one borne out of apparently inane origins, but has been continuously shaped by users to the point where, for a short time, its

⁹ As a result, their writing could also be seen as an extension of Walter Benjamin's, whereby they enable further discussion of storytelling and folklore in places where before it may have been inhibited.

poses and soundtrack felt like defining features of the app. Indeed, the fact that people didn't understand it at first became a sort of spin-off trend; users created videos of themselves peacefully enjoying TikTok, only to then be disrupted by the confusing and unexplainable nature of the 'Hayloft' trend (all whilst employing its key components and signifiers).

Just as cryptocurrencies were originally put forward as "dehumanised machine systems" (Yogarajah, 2022, p. 3), the internet was predicted to be an expansive or even infinite database of information (BBC, 1994). Yogarajah explains, however, that the value in cryptocurrencies in fact lies in the "communities they form both online and offline" (Yogarajah, 2022, p. 3); similarly, it is the deep sense of sociality and locality of social media apps like TikTok that keep me using the internet as a site of idle leisure.

TikTok is defined by its unusual trends, but equally important are the disruptions to those trends, either in a video's construction (i.e. deliberately edited badly) or in its content (such as a direct critique), all of which in turn give rise to further traditions. With tools such as duetting and stitching, this can manifest as a more direct conversation between two creators, but usually the more popular references are already presumed to be known by a content creator's audience, and so ideas can be inferred, proposed, rejected etc. in a single clip which is only a few seconds long. Each video has a set of presuppositions, a certain amount of cultural lore which it is necessary to know before watching it; depending on your algorithm, you will have likely seen the same kind of content as the people making the content which you are watching.

In October 2021, for example, I made a TikTok where I duetted a patriarchal and likely misogynist video about the problems with being a "beta" male. I had seen several examples of duets being used to criticise or dismiss content they disagreed with, often simply by pulling a certain facial expression or pointing out a minor flaw in the original video. Whilst eating my lunch, I'd watched a more directly critical duet of the 'beta male' video, and was inspired to make my own response just by setting up my phone on the table and carrying on eating whilst the video played. My argument was hardly scathing, but I was trying to make a joke that although I might adhere to the qualities that the man in the video describes as "beta behaviour" (i.e. being emotional, non-hyper masculine, not always socially confident), I cared so little about his opinion that I was quite happy to just carry on eating my lunch, refusing to take him seriously. The original video had frustrated me, but in making my own TikTok in response, and one which utilised the principles I had learnt on the app to dismiss its sentiment with relative ease, I was satisfied that I had made some stand against it. I can't argue that my video influenced any others, as it didn't go 'viral', but it shows the ways in which ideas are exchanged on the app. I was also happy that if my video *was* to go viral, my point would be evidently clear to those who watched it on the app.

There is of course no real formula to kickstarting a trend or going viral, and it cannot be distilled into a neat anthropological diagram of signs and symbols of cause and effect. My housemate, for example, who sporadically uploads short surreal videos, usually doing mundane things or just lying around at home, filmed herself cutting an unusual haircut in our bathroom and got 1.2 million views. Such is the apparently varied nature of TikTok that 'anything' can go viral, but such also is its epistemological cohesion that I wasn't very surprised when this particular video did.

Coping With the Internet (and the Pandemic) Through Social Media

In my discussions above, I have employed the terms 'the internet' and 'social media' somewhat interchangeably. It is not my intention, however, to obfuscate the differences between them, but rather approach them as they seem to be experienced and perceived. The internet is mostly digested via social media, and it is therefore not surprising that TikTok users so readily relate Bo Burnham's song about the internet with the app, or make broader criticisms which conflate the internet with the programs through which it is traversed. There is, then, a distinction to be made: social media is the *means* by which the internet is made navigable (at least, this is true of its casual, everyday userbase). Social media is a site of sociality in which the streams of information made readily available by the internet can be singled out, shared, built upon and connected with. Aptly, it was on TikTok where I first heard about Bo Burnham's Netflix show, and where I first heard clips of *Welcome to the Internet*.

In *The Politics of Storytelling*, Michael Jackson builds on the philosopher Hannah Arendt's work to establish an understanding of storytelling as a "vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (Jackson, 2013, p. 34). At the intersection of public and private, storytelling draws from both spheres to constitute a "subjective in-between" (ibid, p. 31), whereby people can make sense of their surroundings, their communities and any crises which might threaten their way of life. Despite the infinite

enormity of the universe, says Jackson, “every human being needs some modicum of choice, craves some degree of understanding, demands some say, and expects some sense of control over the course of his or her own life” (ibid, p. 33). What emerges, then, is a process of storytelling which symbolically restructures our experiences with meaning and empowerment.

The same is demonstrably true of the internet and TikTok respectively. Faced with the incomprehensible vastness of the internet, and its multiplicitous reams of content, information and people, internet users have turned to storytelling and folklore on an app such as TikTok to mediate that expanse and cope with the uncertainty it inspires. Through TikTok, the internet is made somewhat manageable. Bo Burnham is correct in that the internet is a tumultuous, bewildering landscape, which represents a considerable change in our methods of social interaction. So too is Benjamin, and it is indeed the result of developing information technologies that internet users seem to find themselves adrift and overwhelmed. To stop the analysis there, however, is to paint with too broad a brush the ways in which internet users traverse that landscape. Where both Burnham and Benjamin fall short is that they leave little room for the response and reaction to those changes in technology and communication; namely, they fail to account for the possibility that such changes in technology might also facilitate new strategies for coping with the changes in sociality which they have fostered.

“What happens to our capacity to tell stories”, asks Michael Jackson, “when our lives are torn apart?” (Jackson, 2013, p. 50). His answer is that storytelling becomes even more necessary, and that most storytelling is in fact prompted by some crisis or loss of ground. In having read such literature simultaneously to conducting fieldwork on TikTok, I ask: what happens to our capacity to tell stories when our modes of sociality are disrupted, either by a global pandemic or else by an ongoing rapid development in communication technology? In both watching and making videos, TikTok users have managed both these disruptions by sharing jokes, ideas and advice relating to the predicaments they find themselves in both their on and offline lives. Soon into the pandemic, storytelling practices on TikTok began to allow for the navigation of the uncertainties of pandemic life, and these uncertainties were often translated on to the internet.

“Where radical change is acknowledged”, says Daniel Miller, “then the...task is to focus upon that which is unprecedented and decide what this object now is and how we should approach and analyse it” (Miller, 2015, p. 1). Sociality on TikTok revolves around apparently inane and disparate reference points; to the casual observer, it might seem at once crude, vulgar and vapid. But as Phillips and Milner note: the “lore of the folk” cannot be separated from its “communal or cultural context” if it is to remain legible (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 28). Superficially, the folklore as found on TikTok might appear to lack the depth and wisdom of the storytelling which Benjamin laments, but it in fact holds the potential to evoke profound and sincere meaning.

Stories, as a social phenomenon, affirm collective ideals and provide a sense of belonging for both their tellers and their listeners, and are informed by everyday movements and interactions. Michael Jackson likens their rhythm and processes to the feeling of balancing between certainty and uncertainty; of going out into an unfamiliar space before returning to the hearth to take stock and recount one’s experiences (Jackson, 2013, p. 50). Benjamin too evokes the archetype of the traveller or journeyman, arriving home with tales to tell (Benjamin, 1936). But as Phillips and Milner note, the image of a community huddled around a fire shouldn’t necessarily be clung onto as the defining feature of folklore or storytelling. The ‘hearth’ might now be dramatically unrecognisable, (as might the distinction between known and unknown, no longer separated by the walls of the home or village), but it does not mean that it isn’t there. Both during lockdown and since, a hearth has been located on TikTok, where a particular form of storytelling and folklore continues to take place to form a sense of belonging and a sense of sociality.

Conclusion

Social media acted as a crucial support network for many during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bear, et al., 2021). Post-pandemic, I continue to engage with it as a socio-cultural space, where I find new information and ideas concerning my interests, laugh along with particular jokes or trends, and engage with political discourse. In this article, I have highlighted how folklore and storytelling practices on TikTok have allowed for the navigation of both the internet and pandemic life, and the respective uncertainties they engender.

It is not the intention of this article to negate ‘traditional’, embodied storytelling or folklore in favour of online communication via TikTok. Nor is it to argue that digital sociality provides an entirely direct or even satisfactory replacement to face-to-face interaction and exchange. Despite many claims to the possibilities of democratisation

and flexibility, the direct transferral of sociality to the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic left many of us short changed. In conducting most of my undergraduate degree via Zoom and Microsoft Teams, I bitterly felt the loss of in-person teaching and found my 'university experience', both socially and academically, to be lacking as a result.

What I am trying to indicate, however, is that as a result of these crises, practices have emerged which can be seen to fulfil the criteria as detailed in commentary and social theory surrounding folklore and storytelling (even those which might at first glance be at odds with such a 'modern' site). In this article, I have outlined the ways in which internet users, through TikTok, have found a site in which they can share stories, about pandemic life or the broader anxieties they are experiencing, and feel like they belong. The phenomena of storytelling and folklore are alive and well on the internet, says Yathukulan Yogarajah; it is up to anthropologists, however, to "attune their ears" to it (Yogarajah, 2022, p. 15).

Whilst internet users have found meaningful modes of sociality online (both during COVID-19 lockdowns and into post-pandemic life) members of the TikTok Ethnography Collective have found themselves conducting critical, insightful, and demonstrably ethnographic research at a time when it seemed largely impossible. In conversations with the TEC, and through downloading the app and engaging with TikTok as a cultural space (often as a result of those conversations), I have found myself slowly, and with a certain level of trepidation, starting to put into practice lessons which had otherwise been confined to seminar discussions and reading lists. In using the app, I have had to ask myself essential, practical questions of positionality only previously discussed from afar in essays. As I have learnt how to be a 'TikToker', so too have I 'learnt' anthropology.

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