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# Folk Wiki: The shared traditions of folk music and the Wiki way

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Folk Wiki: The Shared Traditions of  
Folk Music and the Wiki Way

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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# Folk Wiki: The Shared Traditions of Folk Music and the Wiki Way

Phillip Chamberlin

## ABSTRACT

Wiki is often perceived as representing a revolutionary break from conventional notions of authorship, writing, and textual history. Dialogues concerning Wiki tend to ignore the characteristics that Wiki shares with earlier forms of collaboration, particularly folk music. In both Wiki and folk music, content is often collectively shared and authored, even if specific individuals create and change the content. Many collaborators are anonymous, quasi-anonymous, or pseudo-anonymous, but the perception of this anonymity is, in both genres, problematic. Second, both Wiki documents and folk songs exist in the "Eternal Now," a seemingly perpetual state that makes these texts available for addition, division, or deletion. Both forms of text resist finality. Third, both forms of texts can involve complicated textual histories as they split and merge into versions and variants. The geographical spaces involved in this process influence the ultimate outcomes of each version and variant. Finally, much of the language used to describe Wiki can also be used to describe folk music.

## Introduction

Who is singing? Who are these people? If you could put your hand through the mask  
you would feel nothing but air.

--Greil Marcus

Consider this observation from researcher Constantin Brăiloiu:

The cultivated Westerner has such a strict notion of artistic  
creation, its nature and its aims, that the very hypothesis  
of a collective act of creation can only seem to him  
aberrant. (p. 102)

These are not the words of a cyberspace theorist or a composition  
scholar but a Romanian ethnomusicologist writing a full decade before  
Ward Cunningham created the first wiki. Brăiloiu's comment (1984)  
could apply to wikis as much as folk music—perhaps more so.  
Westerners can indeed be quite shocked at the idea of a collectively  
created text, particularly a wiki document drafted by collaborators who  
receive no tangible rewards. In his widely celebrated blog, Ulises Ali  
Mejias (2005) observes, “[W]ikis significantly alter our ideas about the

ownership and stability of text to an extent that not even earlier forms of electronic text achieve.” Considering how common collaboration is in writing courses and in business, Brăiloiu’s comment may seem somewhat overstated (or dated), but it nevertheless reminds us of the attitudes many Westerners have about authors, collaborators, and texts.

To some, wikis seem unique, providing an entirely new model of authorship and collaboration. According to Mejias,

[W]ikis are challenging and redefining our notions of how text itself works. While hypertext changed our understanding of textual linearity and flow, wikis are changing our ideas about the ‘social’ life of text.

Other bloggers use words like “revolutionary” and “radical” to describe wikis. For Tim O’Reilly (2005), Wikipedia represents “a profound change in the dynamics of content creation.” These and similar statements are not entirely untrue; Wiki does challenge many of our notions concerning authors and texts.

However, as innovative as this new tool may be, Wiki’s departure from conventional notions of writing is not as radical as it first may seem. Some of the traits that can be observed in Wiki, such as the quasi-anonymity, the lack of “final” versions, and the



duplication and fragmentation of texts, can also be found in a much earlier tradition: folk music. As it is most widely understood in the Western world, folk music has always been created and changed by authors whose identities are generally lost to history, and usually, no individual or group owns the songs. The origins of folk songs often predate copyright law, and in Australia, "folkloric" texts are automatically deemed by law as ineligible for copyright (Brown, 2003). Of course, it would be a gross exaggeration to claim that a wiki community is a traditional folk community transplanted into cyberspace or that a wiki page can be defined as a folkloric text; however, Wiki culture is not unprecedented in its asynchronous, quasi-anonymous collaboration.

The word "collaboration" is problematic. We often think of collaboration as taking place by people who are fully aware of each other's existence and who share the goal of creating something new. Wiki fits this traditional conception; although the editors of a wiki page may never meet offline, all but a tiny fraction of the beginner population is aware that an open Wiki is an inherently collaborative medium. Folk songs, however, often change as they pass through oral tradition, often from lapses in memory, and many of the singers may be unaware they are taking place in a collaborative process.

Collaboration, in this sense, does not require the consent or even the awareness of its participants, but the participants are nevertheless individually contributing to a collectively authored text.

Such collaboration can be found not only in songs but in all folklore. As it is most widely understood, folklore is a broad term that includes music, dances, stories, visual art, and countless other artifacts and performances, and is usually characterized as traditionalist and as belonging to a specific culture. This article will focus on folk music as its primary example, but the concepts described here could apply to many other forms of folklore.

In scholarship, in the popular press, and on blogs, Wiki is often presented as being a revolutionary departure from conventional notions of authorship, writing, and textual history. What I hope to introduce to these current dialogues is an analysis of how even something as innovative as Wiki can echo earlier forms of collaboration. The ease with which Wiki allows global asynchronous collaboration is unprecedented. The corresponding issues of authorship, creation, and textuality, I believe, are not.

## Authorship and Anonymity in Folk Music and Wikis

Reading a Wikipedia entry is like reading the bible closely. There are faint traces of the voices of various anonymous authors and editors, though it is impossible to be sure.

--Jaron Lanier

The cover of Ward Cunningham's co-authored *The Wiki Way* features M. C. Escher's 1948 illustration of two hands drawing each other in a self-propagating loop:

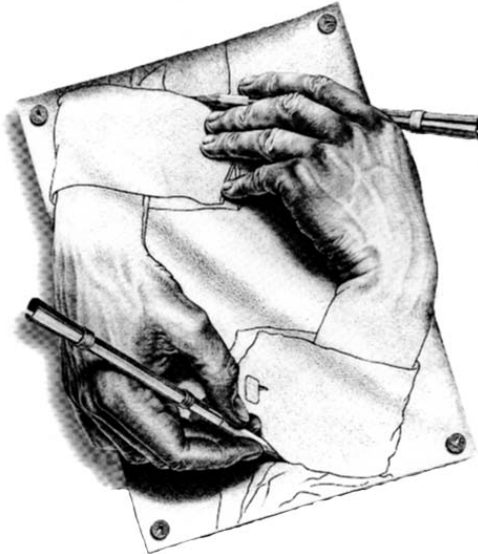


Figure 1. M. C. Escher's Drawing Hands (rotated 90°)

Wiki pages and folk songs, with their authors sometimes anonymous or quasi-anonymous and often geographically dispersed, can indeed seem to arise from nothing. On fully public, open access wikis, editors rarely meet each other offline, working within a method that could be called blind collaboration. Online quasi-anonymity, of course, is not new to Wiki; where Wiki is unprecedented is in its ability to allow geographically dispersed editors to collaborate on texts with relative ease. To a Wikipedia newcomer, who can visit page after page of texts authored by only quasi-anonymous and pseudo-anonymous sources (each being essentially unverifiable), it may indeed seem as though Wikipedia's million plus articles (in the English language version alone) have materialized from oblivion.

The perceived anonymity of users in cyberspace is a defining characteristic of the Internet, just as the perceived anonymity of folk song composers is integral to the collectivist mythos of folk music. Researchers have investigated online identities for many years, long before the earliest days of the MUDS; likewise, ethnomusicologists have long been interested in authorship and identity in folklore. In both cyberspace and in folk music, the perceived anonymity of collaborators challenges notions of authorship without rendering

authorship meaningless or irrelevant. An analysis of one form of anonymity helps to illuminate the other.

Indeed, one of the distinguishing traits of wikis is that they give seemingly anonymous users the ability to collaborate on creating and changing texts, a characteristic not unlike the folk process that drives the creation, evolution, and dissemination of public domain music. Without the burden of acquiring permission or paying royalties, singers and wiki editors can add to, delete from, and copy from most folk songs and open access wikis, particularly wikis licensed under a policy of community ownership, Copyleft, or the public domain. If such contributions are generally not driven by commercial interests, why contribute to a wiki or sing a folk song if not for the intangible rewards of creation, communication, and culture? No Wikipedian receives royalties, and although musicians often do get paid, many songs are composed and transmitted without any financial transactions at all. On Wikipedia and on wikis that use a similar interface, users can—and often do—contribute without even logging in to a registered user ID, itself a self-consciously created identity. A folk singer may not be anonymous when performing in his or her own community, but the singer's name will likely be lost to history.

Brăiloiu refutes the common Western notion that "Every song has its author and, consequently, a birthplace and a date" (p. 103). Traditional songs pass from generation to generation, often splitting into multiple versions and variants, often without clear origins or clear authorship. But do these authors, birthplaces, and dates actually not exist—or are many of them simply lost to history? To what extent is the perceived anonymity of folk songs simply that: a perception, one relevant to the study of folk songs and the communities that perform them, but nevertheless a misconception, or at least an oversimplification? And similarly, to what extent is the anonymity of users in cyberspace a misconception?

Alan Lomax believed that folk songs were the expression of a community's "collective soul," a notion almost universally abandoned by later ethnomusicologists (Nettl, 2005). While it would be simplistic to assume that every folk song has an identifiable author and an available, original text of inarguable authenticity, Mark McCormick (1978) cautions against the notion that folk songs inherently have no origins or authors at all:

At one time it was assumed that folk songs arose from anonymous and undetectable sources. More recently, somewhat like a youngster discovering the origin of

babies, it has been observed that specific individuals are usually responsible. Songs are first composed; it is afterward that they may or may not become popular, or become part of a tradition. (p. 7-8)

Like folk songs, "specific individuals" are responsible for the genesis of every wiki page (except for rare pages created through automation). Some of these pages will not only flourish but become heavily edited and viewed, and they will enter something resembling a tradition. Others will die quickly. Not every wiki prove relevant to the culture of the wiki community, just as not every folk song will appeal to the culture that spawned it. Humans, not ghosts, create these texts.

If, as McCormick states, a folk song is first composed (to "completion"?) before potentially becoming traditional, do the history archives of wiki pages reveal a similar pattern? Usually, no. Many (probably most) articles on Wikipedia and other wikis begin as mere stubs. Even featured articles often begin as tiny, poorly written sketches with little or no research. The featured article "Albatross" (2001) was once a reproduction of an article from an unspecified 1911 encyclopedia. "Michel Foucault" (2002) began with a mere 133 words; "Free Will," (2002) a meager 91 words. "Anne Frank" (2001) began with only 74 words, excluding a plea at the bottom of the page:

“Please add more to this if you can – there is so much more to tell about Anne Frank.” The public demand for each article, not the few merits of the original meager contributions, drove the growth of the texts until they became selected by the Wikipedia community as featured articles (and therefore, a kind of tradition).

A full song is more likely to attract other performers than a fragmentary idea, whereas a wiki stub may be a sufficient contribution for attracting other editors and being valued by the community, eventually becoming a collectively authored (and popular) document. It is difficult to imagine a mere sketch of a song entering an oral tradition; only a more substantially composed song could attract enough attention to be passed on, changed, and eventually, transcribed or audio recorded for archival, artistic, or commercial purposes. The identities of the authors who write these fully composed songs are usually lost to history, even as there have been instances of identifiable authors. And even if scholars have the means to research the histories of individual songs, the communities who perform them may not. For the vast majority of folk song performers, traditional songs are essentially anonymous compositions, and legally, a single entity rarely holds the copyright to a song.



Wiki pages, like folk songs, are sociologically shaped by collective forces, but the choices of individual humans are behind the textual evolution. Jaron Lanier (2006) believes that online collectivism is dangerous, and he has lamented that at the basis of Wiki is the “the idea that the collective is all-wise” and “can channel the collective with the most verity and force.” The founder of Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales (who is, incidentally, an Ayn Rand fan) rejects this notion:

[T]his alleged "core belief" is not one which is held by me, nor as far as I know, by any important or prominent Wikipedians. Nor do we have any particular faith in collectives or collectivism as a mode of writing. Authoring at Wikipedia, as everywhere, is done by individuals exercising the judgment of their own minds.

Although folk songs and wikis can seem to be developed by a seemingly anonymous collective, the choices of humans are behind these societal forces.

To what extent is online collaboration truly anonymous? Consider the case of Wikipedia vandals. Wikipedia, being the largest and most prominent of all wikis, is no doubt also the most frequently vandalized wiki. When users first begin editing Wikipedia, they may certainly feel anonymous. Not only can they edit most pages without logging in,

leaving no trace but a seemingly meaningless IP address, they can create their own screen name and identity. Users can even create multiple identities. Doing so is discouraged by Wikipedia, although an official policy would be mostly unenforceable, at least in the case of users using multiple or dynamic IP addresses.

But how truly anonymous is an IP address? Most likely, it depends primarily on the edit. Criminal edits—such as those involving child pornography or threats to the President—could no doubt be investigated by authorities who would have the means to track the IP to a specific machine and user. The Wikipedia community, generally, does not have the resources to connect an IP address to an offline identity; doing so is not always impossible, but almost always extremely difficult. Sometimes Wikipedians, even those with administrative power, seem to be powerless to stop the vandalism of single individuals. While static IP addresses can easily be blocked, some dial-up services (most notoriously American Online) provide dynamic IP address that change not only with each session, but during each session. To block persistent vandals, Wikipedia sometimes even blocks entire ranges of IP addresses, usually for about fifteen minutes. The most persistent, notorious vandals (whose bizarre names, such as Pelican Shit and Willy on Wheels, are instantly recognizable to

dedicated Wikipedians) are held at bay not through technological security but through the intervention of the community, particularly by administrators with the power to ban user IDs and block IP addresses temporarily or permanently.

Although authorship is never completely nonexistent or irrelevant in either folk music or Wiki, it tends to be problematic. Anonymity is not inherent, but it is an undeniable factor in how these texts are perceived by their respective communities and how the individuals within these communities create them. As important as quasi-anonymity may be to Wiki, the concept has a precedent not only in older online communication tools but in other forms of writing, including folk music. While the goals of Wiki and folk music can vary considerably, the names and identities of those who contribute to each form of text are almost never as important, ultimately, as the text itself.

## Wikis, Folk Music, and the Eternal Now

At what moment is a document, a song, a painting, a film, or any other text, actually finished? At what point can the creator—whether an individual or a group—step aside, and proclaim, “This is the final version”? And at what point will an outsider regard the text as being no longer a “work in progress,” whether or not the creator agrees? The stereotypical Western painter, working in isolation, has little guidance but his or her own judgment—“a good artist knows when to stop,” we have heard. A film director or producer may release several “final” cuts of the same film for different countries and media. Often a supposedly definitive “director’s cut” will be the version preferred by fans and critics; sometimes it is not. Occasionally, directors will, as George Lucas did with the original Star Wars trilogy, update films long after their original (and enormously successful) theatrical release, from which we can infer that the films fans in love with must have been works in progress.

At what point is a written text, whether printed or online, actually complete? With the lines between “process” and “product”

blurred, it can be hard to tell. Books are frequently revised (with both “updates” and “corrections”) for subsequent editions after their initial publication. A text may be regarded as “final” by publishers, scholars, and other readers, simply because it is the most recent draft available, but the author may nevertheless not regard the work as truly complete. Although editors on Ward Cunningham’s WikiWikiWeb have labeled wiki’s seemingly perpetual “present tense” as the Eternal Now (a term with distinctly spiritual overtones), many texts will always be in a similar state of flux—never truly finalized, always open to revision.

The Eternal Now of wikis, however, differs greatly from the counterpart of other written texts, at least by a matter of degree; as Ulises Ali Mejias (2005) writes in his blog, “In wikis, the process becomes the product.” Although businesses and schools often use closed wikis to draft documents which eventually enter a state of completion (truly “final drafts,” for all their limited, practical purposes), open wikis resist this finality. Although a published text can remain in a completely static state for many years before being reintroduced to its audience (or introduced to a new one, or both), an open wiki is in a perpetual state of publication—readers, who are often also editors, always see the most recent draft by default.

If a wiki page is always in the Eternal Now, a seemingly perpetual state that takes textual fluidity to the conceivable extreme, can folk music be characterized similarly? In the sense that a recent version of a folk song is not instantly available to a geographically disparate public, no; but the fluidity of folk songs makes such a comparison appropriate. Folk music has almost always been transmitted orally, and as Ruth Crawford Seeger reminds us, "It is in the nature of oral tradition...to change" (p. 29). A folk song, like a wiki document, can remain in a seemingly perpetual state of flux, always ready to be rediscovered and further changed. In the Wisconsin folk song "The Cranberry Song," authorship becomes a game in which singers compose new verses every spring, and presumably, discard (if only by forgetting) old verses (Stratman-Thomas, 1960). "The Cranberry Song" is never finished, and for that matter, neither is "Barbara Allen," "John Henry," or "The Dying Cowboy," even if those songs are ballads, not game songs. But such a state of flux can enter an extended static state—of permanence or of hibernation—if the song or wiki document fails to attract readers and authors.

If the Wikipedia community does not value a page (particularly a stub of a potential article), a few different results are possible. If the text fails to attract further interest—or any interest at all—it will

merely reside dormant in the Wikipedia database, like an unremarkable folk song's text or sound recording lying unexamined and dormant in an archive or private dresser drawer. The wiki page, however, may remain publicly accessible and perpetually available to be read, revived, and revised. (The reality of server problems may make this theory problematic, just as supposedly permanently physical archives of folklore can be destroyed by vandalism or fire.) Some contributions on Wikipedia break one or more of Wikipedia's community-authored policies and attract negative attention, provoking Wikipedians to place the text in the "Candidates for Deletion" or even "Candidates for Speedy Deletion" categories where the articles can be erased from the view of the general public by administrators with special privileges. Forbidden articles include "vanity pages," which are blatant attempts at self promotion; spam; articles on a duplicate topic; and "patent nonsense." Original research is also prohibited; all ideas need to have a documented tradition. If the article follows Wikipedia's standards, and if the article attracts enough interest in the community, it may become discussed, critiqued, and most importantly, expanded, edited, and monitored by other Wikipedians.

In archives, libraries, music stores, and on the Internet, public domain folk songs similarly await rediscovery by a new generation.

Some of these folk songs are buried so deeply within inaccessible archives, they may never be rediscovered by another generation, remaining forever static in anything but a wiki-like state of flux. Other folk songs have become so standardized (for some audiences), such as the Beach Boys' rendition of "Sloop Jon B.," that a performance of any other version would likely be perceived by its audience as simply erroneous, not interpretive. But other songs can be built upon, as Bob Dylan and countless other popular musicians have done numerous times, creating an original variation—in modern times, a proprietary derivative work, eligible for copyright protection. These new versions are, to use the broad definition of "collaboration" presented earlier, collaborations between the living and the dead.

Contrasted with folk songs which can be composed over countless generations, wikis begin to seem less "asynchronous," as they are usually described. But even so, wiki collaboration is not simultaneous, and the technology behind many wikis is not designed to allow two editors to open a page at once. Although wikis may be barely a decade old, contributions do take place over an extended time as with folk music. Many of their participants will never see each other. Anything transmitted orally (and without the aid of audio recordings) inherently requires face-to-face communication, although printed



words and notation have also played a role in folk music. Online editors can meet each other if they should choose to, but the vast majority of contributors to folk songs and wikis work through blind collaboration.

Such blind collaboration differs from other forms of collaboration in that it allows anonymous users to work collectively and asynchronously, often over a geographically disparate area. But where folk and Wiki differ most is in the level of self-awareness involved in the creative process. Every wiki editor knows his or her reason for making changes: to expand, to streamline, to correct, to clarify—or, sometimes, to vandalize or otherwise cause mischief. A folk song performer may or may not make similar changes consciously. Although folk songs can be composed and recomposed according to the conscious creative needs of their individual performers (as in the previously mentioned “Cranberry Song”), they also change when a performer simply forgets part of the song and then either substitutes something new or perhaps nothing at all.

This point is illustrated on the Library of Congress field recording compilation *Cowboy Songs, Ballads, and Cattle Calls*. On a version of “The Dying Cowboy,” the singer (recorded by Alan Lomax) stumbles

over a line, forgetting a portion of a stanza. While this incident may at first seem unremarkable, Duncan Emrich (1952) observes:

[The singer's] broken text—the result of forgetfulness and perhaps of initial misunderstanding as the song first came to him—is, from the folklorist's point of view, an excellent example of the folk process of the transmission of material, and of what can happen by way of "recreation" and of deterioration as the song passes from one person to another. (p. 19)

Many folk singers would not self-identify as composers but simply pass on the songs as they know them. Other singers do make conscious changes to songs. Regardless of how conscious this collaboration may be, its asynchronous process and geographical dispersal are major aspects of what makes folk music different from other forms of music, but not different from other forms of writing. In both folk music and in Wiki, the Eternal Now perpetually awaits.

## Versions and Variants: Fragmentation in Folk Music and Wikis

In his article "Music in Your Own Back Yard," influential folklorist Alan Lomax (1940) describes the cowboy song tradition:

[A]s they worked, they would make up new verses to familiar songs, and out of their experience, compose whole new tunes. It's said that there was one song as long as the trail from Texas to Montana, and that there was a stanza for every cowboy who rode over the trail. (p. 48)

This statement, while perhaps hyperbolic and sentimental, accurately describes the mythos of folk music: the shared intellectual "property"; the collaboration, both synchronous and asynchronous; the anti-elitist, even quasi-democratic, composition and re-composition process. The restrictions imposed by modern copyright law have no doubt hampered the folk process in music, but each of the above characteristics can be found in Wiki culture, albeit in significantly different forms, and they contribute to the fragmented textual histories in both Wiki and folk music.

The public domain encourages change, and with change comes textual fragmentation: versions and variants. To use Lomax's example, no single cowboy owned the rights to the folk tunes. Their existence in the public domain allowed and encouraged others to write additional, often personalized verses, or to change the melodies altogether, often composing a new melody to a familiar verse. This fragmentation occurs in nearly all folk music, which follows a tradition of composition, re-composition, splitting, and merging. In 1967, the Library of Congress released an LP record entitled Versions and Variants of "Barbara Allen", featuring excerpts from more than thirty renditions of the famous ballad. The recording, coupled with Charles Seeger's extensive, academic liner notes, illustrates the process by which a single folk song can become split into multiple versions and variants as it passes through oral tradition. The striking differences in the multiple renditions show how public domain facilitates textual diversity.

If the lack of a continuing, widespread folk process prevents modern songs from becoming textually diverse or fragmented (sampling, turtablism, and hip-hop notwithstanding), a similar pattern can be seen in online content released under special licenses: the Creative Commons, Copyleft, even the public domain. Many wikis, including Wikipedia, require editors to release their work automatically

under such a license. Other sites—both Wiki and conventional—can then duplicate the content without fear of probable legal repercussions. Wikipedians keep an extensive, detailed list of all online content using Wikipedia’s material; the prominent answers.com is one of many non-wiki sites with numerous articles copied verbatim from the wiki. Wikipedia, being publicly accessible, is more often updated than answers.com and other sites, which creates textual variations between two or more otherwise similar documents.

Time, therefore, also contributes to textual variation. Lomax writes of cowboys creating songs together. The average wiki is a poor medium for any kind of synchronous collaboration, as many wikis cannot allow simultaneous edits to a single page, but both folk music and wikis encourage asynchronous collaboration; lapses of memory are essential to the folk process. As a folk song passes through multiple generations, one “draft” isn’t simply replacing another, as on a wiki, but often both versions survive as they pass through tradition. Wikis, by this standard, are considerably less fragmented than folk music, and earlier drafts exist as a backup (and curiosity) rather than as acceptable alternate versions.

The people responsible for creating both folk songs and wikis do not belong to an elite; access is open. The very etymology of the work

“folk” comes from a German word meaning “the people.” Although virtuosity has occasionally played a role in folk music, advanced technical skills are generally thought to be the exception. The accessibility of folk music allows a wide range of contributors who, by creating their own versions, contribute to a song’s developing textual history. Wikis, like folk music, are low-tech and accessible. Wikis allow anyone—at least anyone on this side of the Digital Divide—to contribute to texts.

Although Lomax acknowledges the fragmentation of cowboy songs, his understanding of the ballad “Stagolee” is quite different:

...I’d discovered a Negro piano player who knew all the verses to “Stagolee”...I had heard several versions of the song, but I wanted the correct one...I went down there with my typewriter to get the words of all thirty verses correctly. (p. 50)

This recollection (featured in the same article, “Music in Your Own Back Yard”) makes an implication about folk music which does not fit within contemporary perspectives on traditional music. Lomax implies that there can indeed be a “correct” version of a folk song. While this thinking is unconventional—and perhaps, to contemporary scholars, simply odd—it reminds us that for some, not all versions and variants

are of equal value. A wiki page, too, has a superior version, usually the most recent, although the superiority of this page is determined not by its completeness, as Lomax suggests, but simply by the date of revision.

As wiki pages and folk songs evolve, split, and merge, they inevitably become influenced by geographically disparate regions.

Bruno Nettl discusses a common problem in ethnomusicology:

There is...the problem of deciding on geographic units to be used as a basis for statements of distribution—should they be determined by political affiliation, language, or physical geography, or are we plotting the distribution of a trait among villages or perhaps even families? (p. 327)

Whatever unit is ultimately used, there is no question that folk songs can become influenced by multiple cultures and subcultures as people immigrate, interact, and change. American ballads, for example, often have British roots.

But how does geography influence Wiki? In *The Ontology of Cyberspace*, David R. Koepsell (2000) argues against the notion that cyberspace exists independent of physical space:

Cyber-objects are ontologically dependent upon storage media for their existence. Storage media do not exist in

cyberspace, but rather cyberspace may be said to exist in, or by virtue of, storage media. (p. 80)

The physical location of the server may influence the activities that take place in cyberspace by virtue of the server's location and the laws of the country in which it resides. In a strictly ontological sense, "A chat room is no more a 'room' than a telephonic switch which relays our phone conversations" (p. 127). Following this logic, a wiki is not actually a "place," even if the technology required for its existence takes up measurable physical space. A wiki is no more a "place" than a piece of music, a set of ideas to be disseminated by individuals.

It may be tempting to assume that as a cyberspace "location," a wiki is independent of physical geography, assuming the location of the servers are unaffected by information regulation. But some open wikis are specifically designed to be used by residents of a specific locale: a city, a school, and workplace. Other wikis have no obvious connection with any specific physical location. Wikipedia is such a "universal" website, but it, too, is limited by geographical considerations. Wikipedia exists in multiple versions, each in a different language. Articles are not automatically translated and depend on the participation of capable users.



If a wiki has standardized protocols for style and content, its texts can be conceptually diverse but cultural homogenous; such homogeneity can be reflected in Wikipedia according to its Neutral Point of View policy. Although a wiki can reach a much wider collaborative community than a folk song, the diversity of its influences can be less obvious. But if the edits to a popular wiki page were to be carefully studied, tracked, and traced, one would find a history of influences from geographically disparate cultures, not unlike the history of many folk songs.

## A New Direction and an Old Tradition

A wiki page is not a folk text. To characterize Wiki as being directly derivative of the folk tradition is, I believe, an oversimplification of both folklore and online communication. However, people have always collaborated on texts, often anonymously, often splitting texts into multiple versions and variants. In this sense, Wiki is nothing new.

For Jaron Lanier (2006), Wiki is not merely a convenient collaboration tool but part of an overall trend that is “nothing less than the migration from individual mind to collective intelligence.” He explains:

[This trend] represents, for good or for bad, a fundamental change in our notion of who we are. In other words, we are witnessing the emergence of a new kind of person.

I don't doubt that communication and collaboration tools can deeply influence thinking. Consider the ease with which a modern graphical user interface allows us to multitask. A GUI is compatible with nonlinear, sometimes messy thinking, whereas the structure and inherent limitations of a command line interface facilitates a very

different kind of thinking. What I caution against is overstating the case that wikis are a radical departure from all previous notions of collaboration. A description of Wiki can sometimes echo a description of folk music, as can be heard in the following introduction to Wiki:

Content is ego-less, time-less, and never finished.

Anonymity is not required but is common...and notions of page "authorship" and "ownership" can be radically altered. (Lamb)

In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Sven Birkerts argues that modern technology, particularly word processing and hypertext, are not only deteriorating traditional reading skills but radically altering human thought: "[C]ertainly the idea of what it means to be a person living a life will be much changed" (130). A detailed response to *Elegies* would be outside the scope of this project, but it is worth noting that some of the language Birkerts uses seems to foreshadow Wiki and unintentionally echo folk music:

...the emphasis in writing has naturally moved from product to process. The work is not intended to be absolute, nor is it received as such. Writing tends to be seen not as much as an objective realization as an expressive instance. A version. Looking from the larger

historical vantage, it almost appears as if we are returning to the verbal orientation that preceded the triumph of print. (159-160)

Also:

Information and contents do not simply move from one private space to another, but they travel along a network. Engagement is intrinsically public, taking place within a circuit of larger connectedness. (122)

Birkerts, to be fair, is interested in traditional reading, not music or folklore. But it is striking how even in *Elegies*, the language he uses to describe online communication occasionally sounds like a description of folk music.

To what extent does technology influence thought, and to what extent does thinking influence technology? No doubt the phenomena are symbiotic, but the questions raised by the nuances of each process remain unanswered. Although some of its traits have long been foreshadowed or exhibited by folk music, Wiki is indeed a new tool, one that provides new opportunities, presents new challenges, and raises new questions. As the tool and its use continue to evolve, and as more Wiki-related questions are posed by researchers, we will learn

more about not only online collaboration, but individual and collective creation within a much broader context.

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