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## Preface

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## Preface

This volume presents selected papers from a panel session on virtual lives held at the 10th Congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF). This tenth meeting had the title *People Make Places: Ways of Feeling the World* and ran from 17 to 21 April 2011 in Lisbon, Portugal. The theme for the first day was *Shaping Lives* and the name of our panel session was *Shaping Virtual Lives: Identities on the Internet*. The panel was a result of informal research cooperation (launched in 2005) between members of the Meertens Institute (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences) in Amsterdam and the Folklore Department at the University of Łódź in Poland.

Our panel was received with enthusiasm. Its presentations focused on new ways of establishing and representing oneself in cyberspace and on the question of how the Internet shapes people's lives nowadays. Interest in the topic exceeded our expectations, and at the start we had to choose from a large number of submitted presentations. We then found that the conference room was crowded to capacity, the discussions from the floor were lively, and there were many reactions after the conference. We were convinced of the importance of the subject matter and that scholarly research needs to continue in this field, so we refined a selection of our presentations for a wider audience through the publication of this book.

From its beginnings, the discipline of folklore has studied how people have been shaping their lives and feeling their world. Folklorists studied narratives and song, beliefs and rituals, cultural practices and celebrations, folk art and material culture, social spaces, collective memories, and the heritage (both tangible and intangible) of tribes and groups, communities and subcultures, regions and societies.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the world rapidly became a global village of information, thanks to new media such as radio and television via satellite and cable, then to waves of progress in microelectronics, computing and networking, wireless technology and smart phones. The digital revolution achieved global reach by the turn of the century with the emergence of the World Wide Web and the spread of personal computers and Internet connectivity to large parts of the world. It was further enhanced by the development of integrated multimedia and applications and services running on handheld devices. The benefits of this brave new digital world are still unavailable to most of the world's population, but the coverage is increasing rapidly.

In our view, these revolutionary changes have opened up a new cultural sphere based on ultrafast information and communication exchange on a global level in an almost infinite cyberspace of digital virtual reality. The new digital culture can be seen as an emergent phenomenon arising from globalisation, in which global value

chains spread new technologies, new ideas and priorities, market economies and consumerism (as well as new kinds of abuse and crime). In this new culture, the evolution of communication technologies is but one aspect.

For folklorists, ethnologists, and cultural anthropologists, however, the new digital culture they have started to study has led to new modes and styles of communication from person to person and between people and institutions. The communication is not merely for practical purposes but also for entertainment, social contact online, exchange of beliefs and opinions, and even the expression of emotions. It can also be viewed as a new avenue for spending leisure time in the (virtual) company of people with similar or related interests on social networking sites, sharing digital forms of entertainment such as movies, music, photo galleries, humour, and addictive computer games.

Post-modern *homo irretitus* (web-entangled man) spends many hours a day in front of a computer screen. He or she often uses cyberspace as a safe haven for friendly social contact and as a place to overcome the limits of his or her physical embodiment, real age, and given social position, as well as the constraints of one's 'tribal' or inherited traditions. With the increasing salience of online life, we observe an evolution of such notions as privacy, intimacy, and identity towards public, free, anonymous, open, and multiple identities, often expressed by means of avatars. The distinction between real and virtual life swiftly fades when people realise that they always, both online and offline, play all kinds of roles depending on where they are and whom they are with. Online life has become an integral part of people's existence and can no longer be dismissed as unreal, fictitious, escapist, childish, or deviant and therefore irrelevant.

Reflecting on such perspectives, our volume showcases research reports from today's online fieldwork and 'action research' laboratory. The respective authors Theo Meder, Jennifer Robinson, and Óli Sóleyjarson investigate rules, rituals, morals and self-representations in the worlds of social media and (social or free) gaming; Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Andy Ross look at how avatars are used for self-representation on dating sites; Maria Yelenevskaya focuses on the stereotypes and rivalry between (the inhabitants of) Moscow and St. Petersburg as expressed on a national Internet forum; Anders Gustavsson compares various websites for mourning over and remembering suicide victims in two countries; and Robert Howard deals with the way the Internet can be used by new vernacular religious movements. Andy Ross edited and formatted the book.

All of us hope that these insights about online identities, representations, and conduct will contribute to a fuller and deeper understanding of the (virtual) lives of the World Wide Web entanglement of our new human being.

Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Theo Meder

Łódź and Amsterdam, March 2012