

Archiving Orality and Connecting with Communities: World Oral Literature Project 2010 Workshop

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Location: CRASSH, 17 Mill Lane, Cambridge

Keynote speaker abstract

Oral Tradition and the Internet

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Although the proposition may at first seem counterintuitive, humankind's oldest and newest technologies of communication are fundamentally homologous. To put it succinctly, oral tradition (OT) and Internet technology (IT) share the core dynamic of navigating through networks, of blazing a trail through webs of potentials. Rather than tracking along the fixed, linear sequence typical of texts, OT and IT foster co-creative, participatory, contingent, and ever-emergent experiences. In other words, they mime the way we think. In this lecture I will explore the homology between OT and IT, and their contrast with textual technology, by introducing *Agora-theory*, a perspective that highlights the kinds of transactions that occur in each verbal marketplace. For example, the oral and electronic marketplaces – the oAgora and eAgora – support “distributed authorship,” a mutual, ongoing brand of co-creation that textual ideology does not permit. Correspondingly, the oAgora and eAgora function not through fossilization and resistance to change, but through built-in, rule-governed variation. The tAgora, on the other hand, supports many different and highly effective textual alternatives for conveying knowledge, art, and ideas through a variety of media-strategies. With the OT-IT homology described, we then go on to consider (a) how it facilitates the representation of oral traditions and (b) how it informs and advances the study and understanding of oral traditions. Along the way there will be brief demonstrations of related projects undertaken by the University of Missouri's Center for Studies in Oral Tradition and Center for eResearch, including the migration of the journal *Oral Tradition* to open-access, gratis status on the web; the invention of eEditions and eCompanions; the multimedia Pathways Project; and an announcement of several new initiatives.