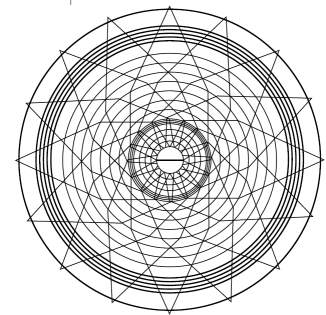


## [Scientific Articles]

*Chumakova V., Fedotova E.*

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment



# THE TRADITION IS THE MESSAGE: HOW TRADITIONAL STORYTELLING CIRCULATES IN THE DIGITAL INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

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### **Abstract:**

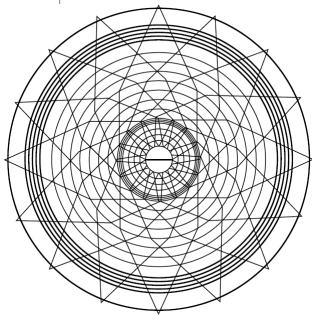
The paper explores how traditional storytelling adapts to the digital environment and adopts/assimilates it. This study is based on a corpus of fourteen semi-structured in-depth interviews of researchers and performers with an expertise in seven different storytelling traditions. Therefore, we present a new typology of traditional storytellers and depict their Internet/New Media usage specifics.

**Keywords:** traditional storytelling, oral culture, digital media, Internet

### **Introduction**

Traditional storytelling is a vivid example of oral culture and a practice that persists despite its rivalry with technologically-driven entertainment and education media. Therefore, modern oral tradition does not exist in a vacuum, but survives in print, electronic and digital environments, mixes with and adapts them. Further development of the digital environment establishes new questions on the ways communities are transmitting culture orally.

Media ecology proposes to divide the history of communication “into five cultural stages: 1) mimetic or pre-linguistic culture, 2) orality or oral culture, 3) chirographic or manuscript culture, 4) typographic or print culture, and 5) electronic/digital culture” (Logan 2002, Rose 2017). Media researchers claim that each type of information organization has its specific patterns (McLuhan, McLuhan 1988) and affects our perception (Manovich 2001). Nowadays we can suggest that digital culture should be separated from electronic culture and explored differently. And there are different hypotheses about the patterns of digital culture. While Umberto Eco suggested that the Internet is the renaissance of the Gutenberg Galaxy, for it brings back texting



## [Scientific Articles]

*Chumakova V., Fedotova E.*

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment

(1996), Thomas Pettitt suggests that the Internet brings us back to the medieval way of thinking and communicating, for in the digital era the oral tradition continues to develop as it did when it was interrupted in the Middle Ages (Pettit 2016). The traditional storytelling in digital environment is the vivid case of what is going on with orality.

### **Brief Review of the Historical Context**

2009, Pettitt 2012, 2016 etc.) to discuss the peculiarities of contemporary digital culture, including folklore in the digital environment. This hypothesis merges Marshall McLuhan's idea about the Gutenberg galaxy (2011) with Walter Ong's concept of "secondary orality" (2012). The idea is that printed culture provided a set of consequences that influence the perception of digital patterns.

We should recognize that some cultures accepted printed technology later (Pettitt 2012) and have not experienced all the consequences of the Gutenberg revolution before the spread of new media. In this paper we are going to discuss interviews with traditional storytellers from Congo, Japan, and contemporary post-Soviet countries (Russia, Belarus, Tajikistan). In all these cultures the Gutenberg Parenthesis occurred differently than in western culture. Hence, before discussing the results concerning their use of digital media, we are going to depict the historical context of traditional storytelling that we study. This historical context shows how the Gutenberg Parenthesis was manifested in these cultures in the past.

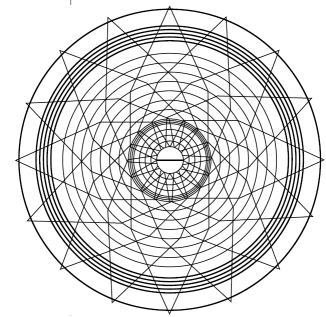
According to Pettitt, the press restricted all words to page frames and layout (2016). The concept of press is even correlated in many languages with repression, and the whole culture of print bears the metaphor of "imprisonment" -- of the word in the cover or envelope. Similarly, in the age of print music was limited to the rules of musical notation, and pictures were inserted into the framework. Textual change and improvisation are considered normal outside the framework of the "Gutenberg Parenthesis", but inside the author's work was often valued for immutability, its ideal imitation of the original. The restriction was one of the first steps of the Gutenberg revolution, while the development of "western values" such as rational thinking or freedom of speech (Postman 2000) are longer consequences which needed more time.

As explored in this paper, oral cultures survived through the restriction of printed technology first of all. It should be noted that the majority of the interviewed artists represent their art as the legacy of an ancient civilization that fell under the pressure of an alien culture of conquerors or winners of civil and world wars. One way or another, informants say that for this reason there were gaps in the tradition's transmission chain, which were compensated in various ways. All of the considered traditional arts suffered from the influence of alien religion, ideology, or language. The cultural policy of the states that controlled the territory affected the tradition.

## [Scientific Articles]

Chumakova V., Fedotova E.

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment



During the national educational campaign, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) tried to build the “Gutenberg culture” in an environment accustomed to other patterns. The United States of America (USA) performed the same cultural homogenization during the occupation of Japan, as did French colonialists in the Congo. However, we need to note the fundamental differences between these cultures. In Congo and Tajikistan traditional oral storytelling was a foundation of popular culture. Russia and Belarus had experienced the dualism of high book culture and low folk culture. And the Japanese writing system amalgamates both hieroglyphs and the phonetic alphabet. This policy led to several consequences.

First, “gutenbergization” led to the deprivation of some elements in oral traditions. Valentina Suzukey, the researcher of throat singing in Tyva, notes that the cultural policy of the USSR required unifying all cultures. As a result, all performers were oriented to European forms, such as opera and ballet.

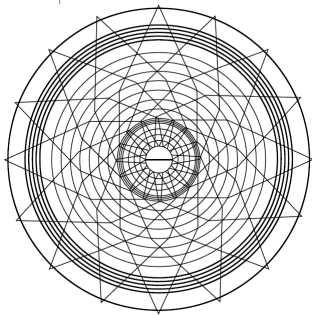
*“And everything else, especially the ritual songs and instruments, because the state was atheistic, were all dismissed. And the explanation was that all of them are residual elements of the feudal past, and it is necessary to get rid of it. <...> There were cases when for playing, for example, on these folk instruments, they could simply be imprisoned for a few days. Because this was seen as disobedience to party policy” (V. Suzukey, Russia, national republic Tyva)*

In Congo, *“the French authorities made it forbidden to speak local languages for a long time” (A. & Ch. Makuaya, Congo)*, and this led to a great crisis of local culture. Thus, some researchers of the tradition in the European colonies blame the “colonial system of education” and its prejudiced opinion about the primitiveness of other national cultures and languages (McDonald 2013). Speakers of different dialects face similar problems.

Second, for some of the traditions, the technology of printing brought by the “outsiders” appeared to be important in preserving them. Texts and melodies were recorded for the first time with notation (initially none of the considered traditions was studied via written or printed notes). Nonetheless for some rural cultures, the Gutenberg informational revolution remained remote.

Third, oral tradition adapted new imagery. In the national republics, the cultural policy of the USSR was not only prohibitive in relation to local traditions, but also tried to introduce images of the new government: propagandistic themes were offered to song-writing performers, which was perceived by many of them positively, as they were allowed to demandingly approach the topic in exchange for state support.

*“Now there are no storytellers who would write new songs about the construction of the Nurek hydropower plant, the Rogun HPP. One of the reasons for the dying tradition today can be in this. And earlier, in Soviet times, they composed dastans about Vakhstroy, about the roads of the Pamirs” (K. Rakhimov, Tajikistan).*



## [Scientific Articles]

*Chumakova V., Fedotova E.*

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment

The Tajik songs researcher Karomatullo Rakhimov said that during the heyday of Gurugli "people were illiterate, books were not read, but the dastans were listened to". In a sense, this was also the adaptation of images imposed from above by folk culture in the logic of Michel de Certeau. de Certeau wrote that folk culture absorbs the images imposed on it from above and embeds them in its traditional narratives (2012). For example, in Russian villages one can find echoes of ancient archaic myths and ideas that are expressed through the palette of television images (Chumakova 2015).

On the one hand, some traditions face the dissolution of the Gutenberg Galaxy while also losing state support, which threatens them even more than the state's pressure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But on the other hand, today one can observe the revival of the storytelling traditions throughout the world and become acquainted with very diverse traditions on the Internet. Nowadays traditional storytellers get the opportunity to go beyond the established limits of the Gutenberg Parenthesis.

The researcher of orality John Miles Foley suggests that the Internet is a medium suitable to preserving and transmitting oral tradition, for Internet communication is nonlinear and more like oral performance (2012). This thesis is slightly controversial, as the influence of the Internet on traditional oral culture consists of two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, the Internet gives a lot of opportunities for tradition to be transmitted. On the other hand, it transmits global culture, which eliminates local differences, leading to a common denominator.

Below we discuss the types of traditional storytellers in the digital era, how they use digital media for storytelling, and what challenges they face. But first we will briefly outline our data and methods.

### Data & Methods

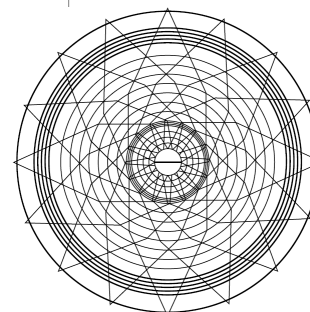
The paper is based on 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews both with traditional storytellers and researchers of traditional storytelling. Those experts represent seven different traditions of storytelling. The list of those interviewed is presented in **Table 1**.

Interviews were held at a symposium called "The Music Map of the World: The Singing Stories", which was held at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory October 18-25, 2016. In the interviews, the experts were asked about the peculiarities of teaching the tradition, its preservation, and its relations with new technologies. Interviews with researchers were held in Russian, interviews with storytellers were held in their native languages with the help of translators or in English. Russian language was additionally used in some cases. Interviews were translated into Russian for the analysis. Below the authors cite all the interviews from their own English translations.

# [Scientific Articles]

Chumakova V., Fedotova E.

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment



**Table 1.** Informants of the study

Country		Informants	
Belarus		Aleksand (Ales') Galkovsky	Storyteller
		Elena Boganeva	Researcher
Congo		Amur Makuaya	Storyteller-explorer
		Christian Makuaya	Storyteller-explorer
Russia	Altaj epos	Ravil Lirov	Storyteller-explorer
	Hoomej - Tyva (throat singing)	Valentina Suzukej	Researcher
		Aigor Koshkendej	Storyteller
		Orlan Burbudjuk	Storyteller
		Angyrak Saak	Storyteller
Tajikistan	Gurugli	Hotam Hakimov	Storyteller
		Karomatullo Rahimov	Researcher
Japan	Rokyoku	Kejko Haruno	Storyteller-explorer
		Hadzuki Ipputej	Storyteller
	Hejkyoku	Arao Tsutomu	Storyteller-explorer

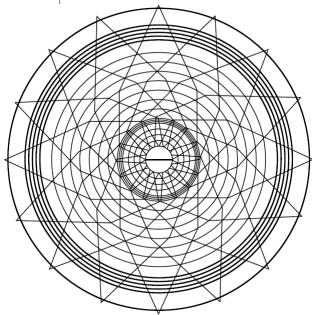
In the interviews, the experts described examples of how traditional storytelling adapts new media, and how the bearers of traditional oral culture have to adjust to global new media trends. Despite the differences, traditions faced similar problems in the XXth century - the decline in popularity of the genre, the pressure of cultural policy, the opposition to modern entertainment, and the challenge of transferring tradition while maintaining its quality. The XXI century, on the one hand, continues these trends, and on the other, thanks to digital media, brings new stories to the tradition.

## **RESULTS**

### **Cultural Policy Regarding Oral Tradition in the 20th Century**

Researching tradition, regardless of the genre, we face the problem of determining its carrier. These people can be considered sources of traditional storytelling art and knowledge about it. So, we can identify three types of traditional storytellers in digital environment: “pure” traditional storytellers, researchers, and storytellers-explorers.

Traditionally, storytellers addressed the audience directly - the performer knew his target audience. However, urbanization and the replacement of traditional cultural practices with new entertainments led to changes in this sphere, as mentioned above.



## [Scientific Articles]

Chumakova V., Fedotova E.

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment

The narrators are forced to turn to researchers, a new and small but willing group of listeners, who, nevertheless, are often perceived by performers as "outsiders". Older artists are embarrassed both by the interest of researchers and their use of electronic and digital media - they are accustomed to working for a present and embodied audience. The study of the influence of media on traditional storytelling is complicated by the predictable perception of technology according to age and culture. An older generation, leading the rural way of life, warily perceives technology as hostile: *"the devil in the box rummages and finds"* – in such a way Alexander Galkovsky described how he perceives the computer used by his relatives.

But it can be assumed that the main obstacle to the use of new media by storytellers was not the technologies themselves, but the extension of the chain of intermediaries connected with their use in the transmission of messages, and, consequently, the distortion of material.

Bearers of tradition can be divided on the basis of their cultural predispositions. The "pure" traditional storytellers are entirely immersed in their culture, while researchers tend to fix the art in an unchanged form - whether it's text, audio, or video. They strictly monitor the observance of the purity of the genre and require the same from the young performers.

*"I rethink now, that when I started collecting field material, it would have been better to have a video camera" (V. Suzukey, Russia)*

Finally, the third type is the storyteller-explorer. Young storytellers grew up in the electronic media environment - some learned about the tradition from radio and TV broadcasts. They are familiar with new media and can use them. At the same time, they are not afraid to experiment, modifying the tradition for the sake of its popularization. The tempo of the melody can be speeded up, its picture becomes more complicated, and modern instruments are added.

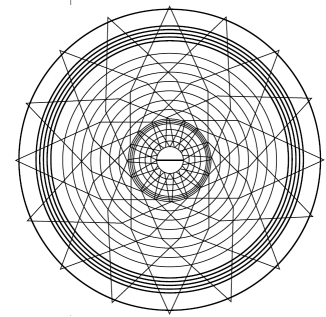
### **The Traditional Storytelling and Digital Media in the 21th Century**

The attitude to digital media resulting from the revival of tradition among storytellers is ambiguous; they point to different, sometimes opposite trends. The research shows that it is impossible to talk about any rigid determinism of the transmission of traditional legends with new media; but, nevertheless, some changes occur with traditional tales and images of storytellers when they enter the environment of new media. We also cannot give an unambiguous assessment of the role of the Internet in the changes in tradition's transmission - there are both positive and negative sides. Also, one cannot generalize about traditions - there are similarities in the use of the Internet and attitudes towards it, but it is the individual features of traditions that are important for understanding how the carriers perceive the Internet.

## [Scientific Articles]

Chumakova V., Fedotova E.

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment



### ***1) Traditional storytelling manifests itself in the digital environment***

One of the hypotheses of our research was that the Internet is perceived as a medium that facilitates expansion of the audience for traditional storytelling. In fact, all the storytellers are represented on the Internet - their videos are posted on YouTube and social networks. In general, all informants note that the Internet allows them to convey tradition to a broader range of people. Therefore, we can say that this hypothesis was confirmed. Digital media are being adjusted to the requirements of tradition.

“Now in Japan people think about the soul, about spiritual development, and Heikoku, of course, plays an important role. And in this respect, the role of the Internet is precisely that people can learn that the tradition of Heikyoku is still alive, so far as it can be heard. And indeed there are people who come to the concert and say that they came because they saw the records on the Internet - on YouTube, on Facebook. And I believe that now [there is] a task to arouse interest, so that people learn that such things exist in principle” (A. Tsutomu, Japan).

If the press and oral traditions are perceived in contradictory relationships, then the digital environment merely prefers declaring the existence of an oral tradition.

"On the one hand, of course, it's very good that, for example, on the Internet, you are uploaded on YouTube, a whole band is allotted to Alexander Nikolayevich for the performance of all the songs. It is the unprocessed, that's exactly the way he sings, as he heard it, the local tradition "(E. Boganeva, Belarus)

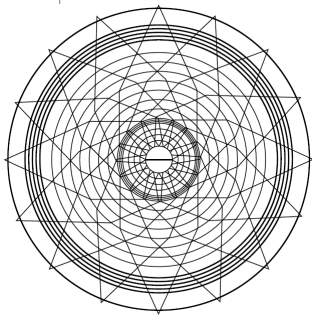
Among the digital formats, storytellers prefer video - all interviewed have videos on YouTube. Therefore, traditional storytelling adapts the Internet to manifest its existence.

### ***2) “No sense of place” for teaching traditional storytelling in digital media***

The situation with the teaching tradition through new media is ambiguous. On the one hand, some scholars confirm the idea of “glocalization” - when the local space in which the individual is located, ceases to play an essential role in its socialization (Meyrowitz 2005), which means that it can be trained in any tradition available through the network.

"At present, due to technical progress, there is, for example, the ability to record audio, record video. And now the students can learn not only directly from the teacher, but also through audio, video - thanks to these inventions "(H. Keiko, Japan).

But not all informants studied the traditions by the records and generally share the view that it is impossible to do this adequately. Some masters do not believe in the technically mediated teaching of the tradition. At one of the concerts at the symposium “The Music Map of the World: The Singing Stories” (2016), the performer



## [Scientific Articles]

Chumakova V., Fedotova E.

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment

very dryly reacted to the recognition of the viewer that he was trying to learn throat singing according to the textbook.

"From teacher to student - this is the main way to transfer the tradition, and although there is now a video, initially it is still learned through the teacher, because the teacher explains the basics: how to sit, how to keep, what to do. The person still has to [explain]"(H.Ipputei, Japan)

Hence, locality is still important for traditional storytelling, and glocality is perceived ambiguously.

### ***3) Reducing the participative element of traditional storytelling in the digital environment***

As was said above, participation and empathy are crucial for the oral tradition - the listeners have to participate in the story. Therefore, often the performers are confused by communication through the Internet, which blurs the image of their listeners. There are no listeners' faces behind the storytellers, they do not feel the audience. The Internet audience is something generalized, not personal. Because of this, narrators often cannot and do not know how to address the audience directly with the help of video or text in social networks.

Although informants have videos on YouTube, they are not always posted at their request. Alexander Galkovsky admitted that other people often ask him to sing on camera. Information about the tradition is usually put online by intermediaries - researchers or an audience that saw the performance offline. Even the storytellers-researchers often prefer not to upload recordings of performances, but to post advertisements of offline concerts in social networks, preserving the exclusiveness of live storytelling.

At the same time, all experts are united by the concern about the low quality of performance presented on most videos available online.

### ***4) Reduction of communicatively significant redundancy of traditional storytelling in the digital environment***

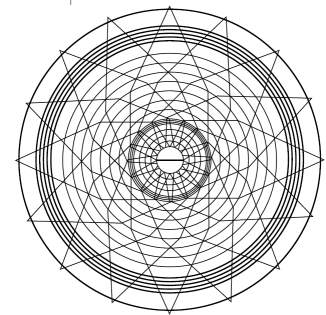
Traditional storytelling is constantly adapting to a new media environment: changes are needed to preserve the genre, as experts admit. In the XIXth century sighted musicians were exposed to the performance of the Japanese epic "Heike-Monogatari", to win the audience back. Before its decrease in popularity it was performed solely by blind monks, so the new approach required recording the music and canceling the diploma that gave the right to perform. In case of Tuvan throat singing, thanks to the master Choduraa Tumat, recently women were allowed to perform in public.



## [Scientific Articles]

*Chumakova V., Fedotova E.*

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment



But there are also gatekeepers for the purity of the genre, which approve only the borrowing of plots by other kinds of art (theater, animation), and not the modification of works. While the digital environment often requires a change in the narration of the work, very often, such changes are associated with a reduction of performance time or fragmentation of the work into excerpts.

One way of such adaptation is to make narration shorter. As Ong mentioned, oral culture is redundant, full of repetitions, returns, etc (2012), and this redundancy is communicatively significant, for it's message is to create atmosphere, to convey emotions etc. (Boot 1978). Digital environment can allow or even require the reduction of such redundancy.

The young Altai storyteller Ravil Lirov prefers to develop throat singing, perfecting rhythmic accompaniment, drawings, and improvising during performance, which often draws the criticism of his conservative colleagues.

"Many people, of course, who are the older generation, say that this is a sacred thing that must always be properly sung, in which one can never be wrong. You must enter the [right] state, there must always be an atmosphere around to convey the art of telling. It's just that you cannot sing excerpts"

Several hours of epics do not correspond to the format of concerts. But, according to belief, for reduction of the song, the spirits of the epic will shorten the life of the Altai storyteller. Nevertheless, young performers are increasingly breaking the rules.

"Initially, the Rōkyoku<sup>1</sup> plays continue for about 30 minutes. There are people who do not like this, but thanks to the Internet they can look at something shorter, something adapted for not such patient ones. Perhaps it's good that thanks to the Internet you can do something shorter, more understandable, easier to understand" (H.Keiko, Japan)

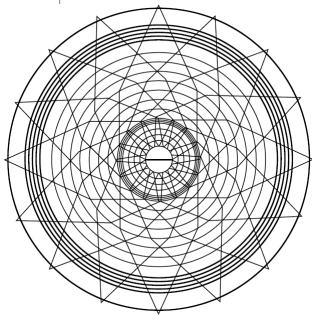
Reduction of communicatively significant redundancy is also connected with the unification of works. Local features are leveled in the digital environment, where there are hybrids.

"Well, and the shortcomings of [the Internet] is a homogenization, you know? Well, in general, it is peculiar, probably, and to amateur collectives?. For example, 'Belarusian dance'. There is a Ukrainian dance, there is a Belarusian dance. But the average Belarusian dance simply does not exist in real life - it exists only in local features and local variations. Just like song culture, as well as legends and fairy tales, narratives of the people's Bible are everywhere in their own way, they are told differently. That is, it is the erasure of local brightness, some special local features - that's very sorrowful, of course. Now there is a process of such leveling, although even the collectives of the city try to preserve [that], where they adopted this or that song or

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<sup>1</sup>The genre of Japanese traditional storytelling





## [Scientific Articles]

Chumakova V., Fedotova E.

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment

a fairy tale or something. Still, the worldview that feeds the tradition endures" (E. Boganeva, Belarus).

There are more radical adaptations of the tradition - in an effort to expand its audience, Haruno Keiko sometimes tells stories to foreigners in English (translations of well-known rokyeku (naniwabushi) stories appeared in 2001), and subtitles are prepared for performances, if possible.

### ***5) The digital context of traditional storytelling: hybridism instead of competition***

Our interviewed storytellers often pointed out that mass culture in the twentieth century competed with their tradition. First of all, we are talking about television.

"Instead of storytelling, in the cabin, the house, there always was TV. But, fortunately, there often were breaks in the supply of electricity. We remember that in our childhood our parents told us much more when there were stops of electric supply. So, it continued even in the cities. Also, children who play football on the street very often, when they need to stop and rest, tell each other stories and fairy tales. So, this tradition is still alive, although it has changed its contexts" (the Macaui brothers)

Following the storytellers, many folklore researchers claim that there are new technologies that destroy the tradition: "people prefer to sit in front of the TV, looking at the picture, instead of taking part in the interaction between the storyteller and the audience together with their friends" (MacDonald, M. R. (Ed.) 2013).

Some experts note that even now this trend continues - not only the TV screen, but the display of the computer and smartphone is involved as well.

"When we were studying, in those years there was no television, no radio, no technological communications ... And now young people, they have no problems - television, computer, telephone ... they have now, unfortunately, no such interest in the epic" (H. Hakimov, Tajikistan).

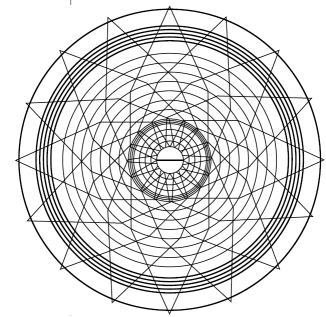
However, scholars who studied the traditional storytelling in different countries in the 1990s concluded that "both stories and storytellers thrive in a modern global village", as for society they are in demand. The difference is that now the audiences of storytellers are their children and grandchildren, and not the neighborhood community. The power of neighborhood communities has decreased, their internal links broken, and the storyteller has ceased to be the center of the community. The transfer of tradition, as a rule, takes place "through the generation": grandmothers, grandfathers and their close relatives have the time and opportunity to teach children the tradition.

Researchers of folklore worry not so much about the new technologies themselves, as about the loss of the worldview of new generations of storytellers, their "context of being", and the integrity of the local culture. Urbanization and the diffusion

## [Scientific Articles]

*Chumakova V., Fedotova E.*

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment



of new technologies gives rise to glocality - the realization of any place and time as a close space. New gadgets act as signs identifying young people with cosmopolitan Western culture. From this point of view, the confrontation of the bearers of traditions with technology is not that with another national or local culture, but with a fashion created artificially in a glocal vacuum by the marketing of corporations.

### **Conclusion**

This paper brings some light to the problem of traditional storytelling in the digital environment. Oral tradition in the XXth century suffered from globalization and declined in very different parts of the planet, but the Internet gives new opportunity for the development and survival of traditional storytelling. Nevertheless, this new opportunity does not mean that oral tradition remains stable and does not change.

In this paper we suggest that nowadays there are three types of traditional storytellers: traditional storytellers immersed in their cultures, researchers trying to fix the tradition using different media, and the storyteller-explorers. All try to adapt their tradition to the new media environment.

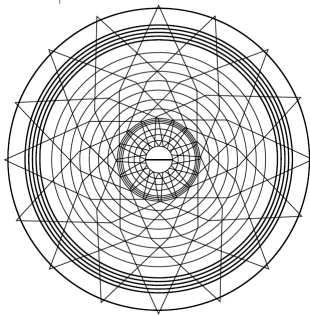
The interviews with traditional storytellers helped us to outline five characteristics of how traditional storytelling uses the Internet and with which we shall conclude:

1. Digital media gives traditional storytelling an opportunity to manifest itself as a living culture.
2. The process of traditional storytelling transmission from teacher to student is not very much mediatized, and opinions about using the Internet in teaching tradition are rather different.
3. The participativeness of traditional storytelling, so familiar to oral culture, is reduced in the digital environment.
4. The communicatively important redundancy, so familiar to oral culture, is reduced in the digital environment.
5. Oral tradition does not compete with literary traditions in the digital environment but mixes into hybrids.

Our exploration can not demonstrate completely Thomas Pettit's hypothesis about the renaissance of the Middle Ages in the digital age, but we can suggest that traditional storytelling in the digital environment could be compared with a patchwork quilt that includes patterns of practically all previous communication stages.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## [Scientific Articles]

Chumakova V., Fedotova E.

The Tradition is the Message:  
How Traditional Storytelling Circulates  
in the Digital Information Environment

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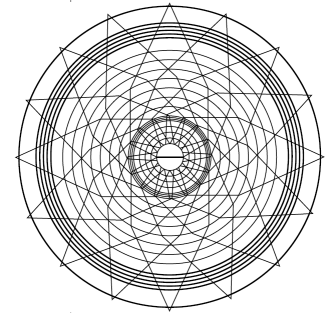
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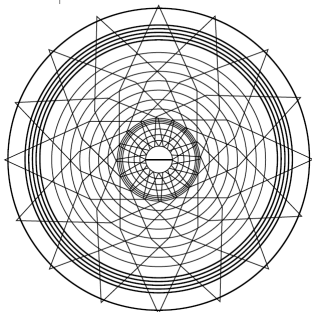
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# ТРАДИЦИЯ ЕСТЬ СООБЩЕНИЕ: КАК ТРАДИЦИОННЫЙ СТОРИТЕЛЛИНГ ЦИРКУЛИРУЕТ В ЦИФРОВОМ ИНФОРМАЦИОННОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ

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### Аннотация:

Данная статья рассматривает вопросы того, как традиционное рассказывание историй (сторителлинг) адаптируется к современному цифровому пространству, как подстраивается под него и изменяется под воздействием этого пространства. Исследование основано на серии из 14 полуструктурированных глубинных интервью с исследователями и исполнителями, являющимися экспертами в семи разных традициях рассказывания историй. Таким образом, авторы показывают новую типологию традиционных рассказчиков и показывают их использование интернета и новых медиа.

Традиционное рассказывание историй является прекрасным примером того, как оральная культура и практики противостоят технологически обусловленному контексту.

Семь традиций рассказывания историй включают в себя традиции таких стран, как Россия, Таджикистан, Беларусь, Конго и Япония.

В статье также предпринята попытка разложить одну из традиций рассказывания историй по тетраде Маклюэна, что может быть интересным как для исследователей, так и для рассказчиков.

**Keywords:** традиционный сторителлинг, устная культура, цифровые медиа, Интернет

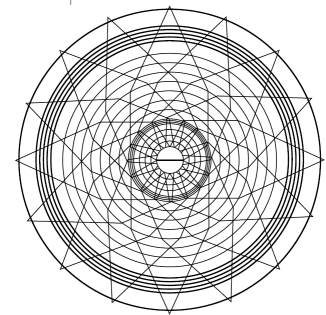
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