



# INTERNET

**LIFE & LORE**

in southeast asia

traditional medicine street vendor in Myanmar >

### Leading Contributors

Gregory Clancey (Principal Investigator)  
Connor Graham  
Eric Kerr  
Aieshah Arif (Research Assistant)

### Collaborators

Celine Coderey  
Crystal Abidin  
Hallam Stevens  
John W P Phillips  
Nancy Mauro-Flude  
Sarah-Tabea Sammel  
Song DongHyun

**Edited** by Eric Kerr

**Layout design** by Aieshah Arif

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# INTERNET

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# FOREWORD

by Eric Kerr

Following a trip to Scotland in 2016, I gained some insight into just how broad the topic we were dealing with has become through meeting some of the folklorists and storytellers that document Scotland's rich mythological history.

At different times, folklore was taken to include an extensive list of things, texts, and practices including ballads, fairytales, and ghost stories but also boat-building, instrument-making, cosmology, dance, and other forms of intangible cultural heritage. Repositioning our project on "lore" allowed us to narrow our focus.

Lore is a term that is frequently employed by internet users themselves to refer to an (often acknowledged to to be fabricated) history of a website, community or subculture. Further, it dissolves the problematic question, especially when dealing with online communities of who "the folk" are.

When we initially hatched the idea for the project, Connor and I were reading Don Ihde. One of the aspects that characterized Ihde's work, as opposed to something like Latour's actor-network theory which emerged around the same

time, was an attempt to retain a normative perspective, for example, when looking at the design of technical artefacts.

We have retained this desire for an epistemological evaluation in one of the research tracks on the project, called 'rumours'. Both Ihde and Latour emphasized close, empirical case studies of technological relations and were critical of the more "armchair" theorizing of early phenomenologists. They sought to characterize how, in Polanyi's evocative turn of phrase: "We may say that when we learn a probe, or a tool, and thus make ourselves aware of these things as we are of our body, we interiorize these things and make ourselves dwell in them." Ihde suggested that there are four types of relations to technology – embodiment, hermeneutic, alterity, and background – that, although it has its limitations, is useful to point out different levels at which different groups engage with technology.

Roughly these are relating to the world through technology, relating to technology as an interface with the world, standing in need of interpretation, relating to technology as an other or quasi-other, and relating to technology at the periphery

of human attention; as something not directly experienced yet giving structure to direct experience (like an automated airconditioning system).

Over the course of two half-day workshops in 2017 we threw ideas onto a whiteboard and eventually whittled down four research tracks: **storytelling**, **figures**, **layering**, and **rumours**.



Each of these four relations can be related to the four tracks we developed in our groundwork. Storytelling to hermeneutic, questions about how online worlds are interpreted. Figures to alterity, questions about who the "other" is online. Layering to embodiment, the idea of dwelling and worlding. And perhaps we can say that rumours, broadly, informal communication, form the background relation, the

present absence that Ihde referred to. In other words, it's the 'filter bubble' that most of the time we don't notice; the water that the goldfish swims in.

One central phenomenological question for this project remains:

*WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE ONLINE?*



▲ electronic waste dump

# INTRODUCTION

"Internet Life and Lore in Southeast Asia: Histories, Mythologies and Materialities" is a collaboration between ARI, NTU, Yale-NUS, MIT and Trinity University. The aim of the project is to explore the "lives and lore" of four representative "online connected worlds" in Southeast Asia, anchored by Singapore as the most IT developed site. Studies in other Southeast Asian countries will also be conducted to give the project a regional, comparative dimension.

## *WHAT ARE THE INTERNETS?*

Taking four basic aspects of folklore as our 'research tracks' (storytelling, figures, layering, and rumour) the project aims to test how each has changed (or not) given this new communications medium.

The project also means to test three hypotheses through this research, namely:

1. That the assumption of a single, global, monolithic Internet needs to be adjusted to account for multiple internets, and that the diversity of Southeast Asia makes it an excellent site to study this phenomenon;
2. That the multiplicity of online connected worlds are productive of new cultures and social groups, whose speculation is undertheorized and understudied by academics around the world, but particularly in Southeast Asia;
3. That the tracking of internet lore, based on insights from folklore studies but also fields like science and technology studies (STS) and information systems, provides a theoretically and empirically fruitful way to study how online communities form, are maintained, and, occasionally, disappear.





TRACKS

# STORYTELLING

Have we reached a closed circuit movement, from pre-text to post-text that is specifically detectable in digital storytelling?

The Storytelling track focuses on the evolution and description of narratives and mythologies in South-east Asia's digital communities and traces their development, adaptation, mediation and historicity. The research will engage the term "digital literacy" and investigate narrative structures, relevant aesthetics (forms), the medium representation) and sharing culture (remediation and following). The rules of sharing, production and consumption and the influences of platforms will become important ways to study this topic.

Mythologies will be explored in terms of local embeddedness, digital versatility and their global cultural contexts.

We will be attentive to the evolution of storytelling from an oral practice, to a written one, to film and online distributed illustrations, to video. We will focus on specific story-telling forms within the online communities we've chosen as cases, and explore the reasoning behind their expressions of narratives. The investigation of different levels of visualisation will lead us to a thick description of and theoretical insights concerning changing narratives, genres, presentation and representational styles across different digital communities, from words to memes.



▲ storytelling session at the Writing the Internet workshop with Kamini Ramachandran



Whose voices do we hear when we access the Internet in South-east Asia?

## *WHO SPEAKS THE LOUDEST, AND WHAT ARE THEY SPEAKING ABOUT?*

This track focuses on the figures (i.e. individual characters, affinity groups, influencers, bloggers, trolls, states, autonomous bots) that populate the Internet and the vernacular expression through which they become heard. It asks what role they play in broader narratives of the Internet. It will selectively choose prominent figures from each category for close, detailed analysis.

Current academic literature on the folklore of Internet figures is centred on Anglo-centric histories and cultural framings, from trolls and their meme cultures (Milner 2017, Phillips 2015), to vigilante activists and the Anonymous collective (Coleman 2014, Sauter 2014). In Singapore and the SEA region we expect that the folklore of Internet figures will take on different forms, guises, and personae.

While the affordances and norms of global Internet culture have encouraged the proliferation of some folkloric figures, we will consider the hard and soft infrastructure (i.e. physical servers, content filters, protocols) and soft power (i.e. diverse net cultures, paralinguages and Internet lexicon, user rituals) that have stimulated uniquely SEA figures to emerge since the year 2000.

On a larger scale, this track will investigate the insidious subversive frivolity of everyday folklore to understand how mythology becomes established as corporate and national ideology and, at a theoretical level, will explore the relationship between online and offline, physical and digital, living and the continuities that exist between pre- and post-Internet figures.

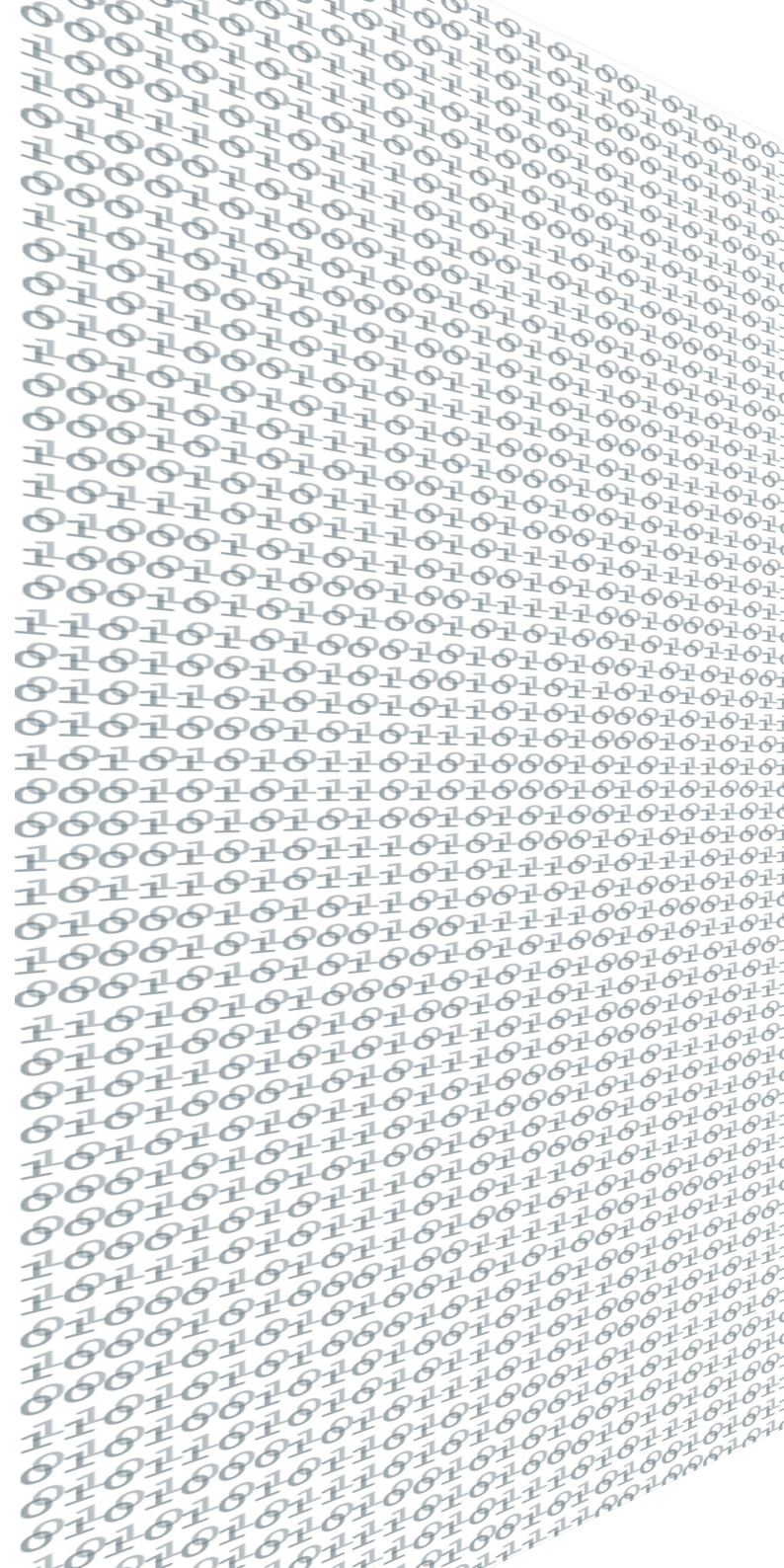
# LAYERS

## *HOW ARE REAL AND DIGITAL WORLDS LAYERED?*

Today, people live in multiple worlds, whether real, imaginative or digital: e.g. the home, the gaming environment, the office. This track is focused on the online connected worlds that are productive of certain imaginations (Appadurai, 1996; Fischer, 1999) and certain forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1986) and lore (Krzywinska, 2008). These imaginations rely heavily on the aesthetic and material qualities of the digital worlds they are associated with, for example, in the case of gaming worlds, in-game (e.g. fantastical narratives) or through-game (e.g. player 'legends').

Consequently, this track centres on investigating the materiality and sociality of these multiple 'converged worlds', and the role of physical infrastructure in their production through 'traditional' fieldwork and digital anthropology. This track builds on existing work investigating 'digital worlds' in Indonesia (e.g. Barendregt, 2012).

The study of different examples of layered worlds will also consider how they are accessed and engaged with (e.g. from the home, the mobile phone). This will include establishing the quality and nature of the networks sustained and maintained through these worlds.



# RUMOURS

To what extent has the Internet equally enabled the rapid dissemination of unverified reports, misinformation, and outright fabrications as well as the transfer of information? In addition to centralized purveyors of misinformation such as gossip websites or partisan propaganda websites, much of what drives the development of Internet lore – including online narratives drawing on myths, urban legends, conspiracy theories, etc. – is best characterized in terms of informal communication.

The shift towards social media, both as a means of communication and as a news source has significantly increased the speed at which messages (of whatever kind) can spread across vast populations – even as our ability to individually ‘monitor’ informants (e.g. in face-to-face communication, or by interrogating them in person) has significantly decreased.

This leads to the question of how

validation of purported facts and justification for what one might call “Internet-based beliefs” are possible, and what it would take to ensure greater reliability, without subjecting all online interactions to restrictive forms of “fact-checking”.

## *IS THE INTERNET POST-TRUTH?*

The goal of this track is to document and describe the production of vernacular knowledge through online lore, and to develop a tentative taxonomy of online lore across our chosen cases. It will also address the normative question of how (over and above individual exhortations to “be more vigilant”) online communication can be organized in ways that achieve communal sense-making without unduly sacrificing reliability and informativeness. These findings will also inform the development of digital literacy in youth, in the form of pedagogical interventions.



# PROJECTS

# FOLKLORE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN (SOUTH) EAST ASIA

Lore represents ways of thinking, living and being, encompassing traditional beliefs, social networks and the circulation of stories through a variety of channels, digital and analogue. It includes both the living and the dead, connected through networks of different kinds. At its core, is the vernacular and everyday: the quotidian narratives that help sustain networks and make up local culture.

## *WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LORE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES?*

This project explores the relationship between folklore and digital

technology. The central question of this project is what place, if any, in a time of regional and global integration, technological modernisation, and national strategies that extend beyond modernity, lore has in Southeast Asia, and what is its meaning and future trajectory?

This leads to the question of what form Southeast Asian folklore and local knowledge. Our initial contention is that technologies, digital and analogue (such as the mobile phone, the television and the typewriter) occupy the locus of stories and experiences that are antagonistic towards notions of modernity. The project addresses three lines of inquiry -

1. Locating lore, its forms and

its presence and circulation

2. How forces like development and modernisation have impacted the landscape of societies, centering on the impact of policies and societal forces and the developing relationship between architectures that have a particular situated meaning.
3. How lore can be considered a form of knowledge, cultural form and political commentary and how it informs social relations and individual beliefs. It also considers how the convergence of contemporary, interleaving technologies and traditional beliefs represent, envisage and describe people collectively.

# AERIAL'S CYPHER (UROP)

personnel: Nancy Mauro-Flude, Val Alvern Cuoco Ligo (student researcher)

In the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Project 'Aerial's Cypher' a narrative is devised through practices of poetic- speculative storytelling, software collage, Wi-Fi meshing and assemblage, thus revealing how calculating machines influence our desires and fears, concerns and prejudices and how we have the ability to re-think the mechanism.

By devising encounters with network entities (chatbots), audiences are haunted by 'sprites or ghosts' (chatbots), with poetic-speculative emails/texts. People are provoked to reply to the data repository with a (ghost) story [via email or text]. If they do so, the network entities are appeased, and the communications cease. If not, communication continues for the duration of the installation. This is the point and reason that the artwork employs a custom WIFI network, to demonstrate it is not simply a neutral technology.

Aerial's Cypher focuses on digital folklore using custom built wireless network as its medium, the artwork makes connections between the presence of the su-

pernatural and also the politics of female artists working with technology; voices that have always been talking - but haven't always been heard, to be able to partially control and rewrite (or at least understand) that technology ourselves, as we live our lives and make meaning from them. The artwork also raises awareness around the ethical issues

that arise in the context of on-going technological innovations in an era of increasing interest in AI, and other nonhuman agents. Making invisible things visible, aesthetically drawing attention to how portable mobile devices are routinely used by large corporations for data mining and related purposes of consumer capture.



◀ Aerial's Cypher makes heard the stories and voices that have always been talking - but not always heard, just like the mythological figure of the Pontianak



# SINGAPORE BLOGGERS: WHAT INFLUENCERS INFLUENCE

*personnel: Connor Graham, Song Dong Hyun, Aieshah Arif,  
Jannelle Leong (student researcher)*

This study of young female Singaporeans in University focuses on how they, as audiences, interact with influencers, and how this relates to ideas of normativity on different scales. Specifically, it takes into account aesthetics, life choices, lifestyle, values and consumption, to reveal (1) what the attitudes are towards influencers, (2) how much influence do influencers exert on their audiences, and (3) whether those two premises react.

# THE RETURN OF THE GAZE: THE ROLE OF GAZE THEORY FOR THE STUDY OF NEW MEDIA

*personnel: Connor Graham, Song Dong Hyun*

This project discusses the role of Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey's theory in social media studies' engagement with the female online blogging, culture, particularly focusing on their image constructions through gaze. The main questions we pose in this paper are: (1) the extent to which gaze theory has been deployed in studies of social media platforms; (2) what versions/aspects of gaze theory are applied in studies of social media platforms; (3) what these different versions/aspects achieve.




# PINK DOT: ONE SOCIAL MOVEMENT, MANY IDENTITIES

*personnel: Natalie Pang*

Pink Dot is an annual event which began in 2009 to support the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in Singapore, and has been the most successful social movement in Singapore to date. This study of online discourse on Pink Dot focuses on understanding emergent identities and values associated with Pink Dot to reveal that:

(1) beyond those who support the movement because of the LGBT community, the right to be different and the right to be treated equally are dominant values associated with the movement, and (2) as the social movement matures, online discussions are focused on finding solutions rather than identifying problems.



◀ Screenshot from 2018  
PinkDot celebration  
Source: Youtube (PinkDot)

# PUBLIC SHAMING, VIGILANTE TROLLING AND GENEALOGIES OF TRANSGRESSION ON THE SINGAPOREAN INTERNET

*personnel: Crystal Abidin*

This project investigates the history and life cycle of public shaming discourses and practices on the Singaporean internet, specifically reviewing the milestones of virality, rumour, and antagonism that have shaped online boundaries of transgression, and including the role of intermediaries such as internet celebrities, influencers, content creator agencies, and advertising firms.

# OPPRESSED, ORATORICAL, OUTLANDISH: CHINESE PRIVILEGE ACTIVISM THROUGH ENTERTAINMENT IN SINGAPORE'S INTERNET POPULAR CULTURE

*personnel: Crystal Abidin*

This project studies the evolving narrative around racial politics and Chinese Privilege among YouTubers in Singapore, specifically how minority-race influencers are drawing on biographical empathy, accessible humour, and clickbait dramas to generate conversation, at the intersections of discursive activism, vernacular creativity, and internet celebrity.

# HAW PAR VILLA

*personnel: Eric Kerr, Olivier Perriquet, Mun Yee Lee (student researcher)*

This project, named after the location of Singapore's Tiger Balm Garden, is an installation inspired by the Aw brothers' universe. From shots and captures of the gardens, a set of sculptures and scenes of the park will be modelled in 3D to create a composite dynamic diorama in virtual space, which evokes the psyche when it takes forms that are not fully conscious, such as when looking for a memory or during dreams. The project is an art-philosophy collaboration that reflects on memory, place, and virtuality. It is currently a work-in-progress.

Haw Par Villa was originally built in the 1930s and remodelled after the Second World War. The park is a syncretic patchwork of mythologies, religious instruction, and morality tales embodied by sculptures, dioramas, and gardens. Today, it exists in varying states of disrepair although there are also continuing efforts to preserve and maintain. Many



▲ screengrab from early-stages 3D rendering of Garuda

of the original sculptures exist only in media and people's memories. Through this project, we want to explore how processes of memory and memorialization unfold through new technologies of 3D reconstruction and how this might cause us to reflect on visionary environments, memories – collective and individual, and the suspension of time.





PAST  
EVENTS

# READING GROUPS AND HALF-DAY WORKSHOPS

Throughout the first year of the project, we held a series of reading groups and two half-day workshops aimed at exploring the historical and contemporary meanings of folklore in Southeast Asia. through particular technologies, such as social media and online forums, which have extended its place and form.



▲ the pontianak is a folkloric figure in Southeast Asian mythology

## INSTANCES & MEANINGS OF FOLKLORE

Folklore is a protean and multi-faceted term: “[It] may be ambiguously used for the voices of the ‘folk’, dealing generally with their unrecorded traditions or, as a generic term to designate the customs, beliefs, traditions, tales, songs, etc. that have been handed down through from generation to generation” (Dhar, 1976:294). It can encompass oral narrations, epic poetry, vernacular expression, fairytales, legends, myths, rumours, and conspiracy theories. Thus folklore represents ways of thinking, living and being, encompassing traditional beliefs, social networks and the circulation of stories through a variety of channels, digital and analogue.

It includes both the living and the dead, connected through networks of different kinds (Galloway and Thacker 2007, Rainie and Wellman 2012). It is both local and epistemological. It is retrospective, can exist in both rural and urban settings, and can originate in actual events, diverge substantially into new versions or be entirely fictional. It is located and transmitted, especially in recent times, through particular technologies, such as social media and online forums, which have extended its place and form.

# INTERNET LORE

We were also interested in exploring a specific type of folklore that emerges out of Internet culture and subculture. It described “the objects and practices emerging from the users’ engagement with digital media platforms and computing applications” (Gabriele de Seta quoted in Valentine, 2015).

*“A (QUASI-) FANTASTICAL BACKGROUND CREATED BY USER(S)...OR THE ATTEMPT TO CREATE A ‘REAL’ HISTORY”*

The term “lore”, in the digital realm, is commonly used online to refer to a (quasi-) fantastical background created by user(s) (often syncretic and compiled from extant mythologies and legends) or the attempt to create a ‘real’ history (Krzywinska, 2008). Internet lore is often more traceable than other forms of lore, in that records and caches of origin stories may still exist on the web. At the same time, it may be explicitly acknowledged to be artificial and recently invented, and even embraced as such. We observe that the users rely on those origin stories to base their actions on ancient narratives, character, form, and style, noting that digital communities draw from what we might observe and investigate as a genesis of storytelling, for example through the application of archetypes, and their rendering and adaptation, to fit current contexts.

# WRITING THE INTERNET + TECHNO-IMAGINATIONS

This international workshop and exhibition was supported by the Folklore and Digital Technology in (South) East Asia HSS seed fund and the Asia Research Institute. It brought together scholars and practitioners of digital folklore in Asia and globally to critique what it means to write the Internet in the sense of emerging narratives and stories online within digital communities, the recasting of traditional stories and mythologies, the underlying languages and infrastructures of the Internet, and what it means for us, as writers, to write about the Internet – what new methodologies may be needed to do scholarship online and about online spaces. The workshop critiqued existing assumptions about the Internet and its relation to storytelling and mythology in Asia.

## *WHO AND WHAT WRITES THE INTERNET?*

The workshop was opened by the media scholar and Internet critic Geert Lovink who spoke about disconnection and the changing ecosystem of social media. This was followed by five panels: approaches, infrastructure, real-isations, figures and literacies, and forms and movement. At the end of each day's panels, writing forums were held where panel members collaborated on a written response







▲ group photo from Writing the Internet workshop and exhibition

to their panel and questions posed by the workshop organizers. The conference ended with the introduction by Connor Graham and Eric Kerr of the Internet Life and Lore in South-east Asia project.

The workshop included a strong component of engaging with artists, writers, storytellers, folklorists, and film-makers. An exhibition was curated by Nancy Mauro-Flude and Eric Kerr entitled "Techno-Imaginations: Internet Lore in Asia," following the first "techno-imaginations" exhibition curated by Eric Kerr in 2016. It included works on networked improvisation, folklore-inspired film screenings, 3D modelizations of Singaporean mythology, VR apps, social media analytics, live performance, and a "storytelling session" hosted by the director of the Singapore Storytelling Centre, Kamini Ramachandran.

31 Participants (with expertise covering a broad range of disciplines and technical practices including STS, the philosophy of technology, anthropology, media studies, critical theory, sociology, policy studies, political science, history, digital humanities, film studies, theatre studies, computer science, media design, and cultural studies) came from NUS, NTU, SUTD, and SUSS in Singapore, and fifteen international universities. There were approximately 95 delegates in total.

# READING LIST

*(compiled from suggestions from participants at the Writing the Internet workshop)*

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