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"Welcome to the World of AIDS"  
An Urban Legend as a Model of Diffusion

Imagine yourself sharing a drink with a few friends after work. One of them recounts the following story: a friend of my brother's was at a club in Kansas City, right in Westport, and he met this woman. They danced and had a few drinks together and one thing led to another and she ended up coming home with him. They have their little fling and when he wakes up in the morning, she's gone. He's actually kind of relieved that he won't have to make awkward conversation until he goes into his bathroom. There, written on the mirror in lipstick, is "Welcome to the World of AIDS!" (Mikkelson & Mikkelson, 1995).

The content of the story is arresting. According to folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand (2001), this type of story exemplifies the common response of people to a situation of unrest and crisis: a dark brand of humor circulating person to person. This person-to-person aspect is of equal interest as an example of information transfer, of diffusion. That the information is spread in story form allows us to actually look at the importance of narrative in diffusion. The word "narrative" comes from the Latin root *narrare* "to relate, to tell" and shares the same root as the Latin *gnarus* "knowing, acquainted with, expert, skilful." This linked meaning suggests the role of narrative as a mode by which one translates knowing into telling, of diffusing information (Nicolaisen, 1996).

To understand the diffusion of information, it is first useful to define our terms. Rogers and Scott (1997) provide a concise definition: "Diffusion is the process by which (1) an

innovation (2) is communicated through certain channels (3) over time (4) among the members of a social system. Diffusion is a special type of communication concerned with the spread of messages that are perceived as new ideas," (Rogers & Scott, 1997, p.5). Miller cites the 1963 work of Katz, Levin and Hamilton to focus more on the actual process of diffusion, which "may be characterized as the (1) acceptance, (2) over time, (3) of some specific item - an idea or practice, (4) by individuals, groups, or other adopting units, linked (5) to specific channels of communication, (6) to a social structure, and (7) to a given system of values or culture," (Miller, 2001, p.2).

Rogers (1995) further elaborated on the process of diffusion by stating that the innovation is passed through communication channels from an experienced or knowledgeable individual to one less experienced. This dichotomy of experience will be of especial importance as we apply diffusion to the spread of our urban legend. First, a further definition of communication is in order. According to Rogers (1995), communication is "the process by which participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding,"(p.17). This understanding, reached through narrative, is the element which separates diffusion from simple dissemination.

Diffusion is used to communicate an innovation. In the original studies of diffusion of innovations, the focus was on technology. More germane to the discussion of urban legends, though, is a focus on innovation as an idea or practice, as mentioned by Miller. With urban legends, we see mass media channels of communication, effective in creating knowledge of innovations, intersecting with the interpersonal channels which are more effective in forming and changing attitudes toward new ideas (Rogers & Scott, 1997). These new ideas are embodied in the content of the urban legend.

At the simplest level, an urban legend is a cautionary tale (Harris, 2001). Many folklorists see the first antecedents of the urban legend in the folktales of pre-industrialized Europe (Dégh, 1994). The term "urban legend" by itself isn't seen until the late 1930's and early 1940's but the form is simply the modern version of traditional folklore: instead of warning against the dangers of the forest or contaminated food, the modern tale warns against the salient fears of this age (Harris, 2001). If one asks how such legends can continue in such an ostensibly enlightened age, one could consider it a question of epistemology (Llewelyn, 1996). These legends are an embodiment of one type of knowing.

Usually, this knowledge is conveyed by some mixture of humor, horror, warning, morality or appeal to empathy (Harris, 2001). There is a strong element of *schadenfreude* present in many tellings of urban legends. The O. Henry ending, often macabre in nature, further heightens the effect of the tale. The content of many of the legends focuses on the difference between perception and reality (Barnes, 1996). The surprise narrative twist acts to transform the information for the listener, in essence giving it a new context.

Although the traditional mode of the cautionary tale in folklore was usually an oral narrative (Dégh, 1994), the modern urban legend exists in both oral and written forms. We see today e-mail often taking the place of face to face conversation. Why, then, does the legend form survive? Brunvand (1981) suggests that folklore or legends will continue to survive in a wired culture so long as they contain three essential elements: a strong narrative appeal, a foundation that reflects actual belief, and a meaningful message. In other words, so long as the legend is felt to convey information useful and relevant to a culture, it will exist. Again, whether that information is internalized and utilized signals the difference between dissemination and diffusion.

In this Internet age, researchers have actually charted a huge surge in urban legends, with the most common communication channel being forwarded e-mail. This poses an interesting variation on the use of localized details to give an urban legend more credence. An e-mail is usually forwarded without emendation of any local context. The fact, however, that one sees the original message gives a compensating feeling of legitimacy (Harris, 2001). Another aspect of e-mail which works in favor of urban legends lies in the nature of the networked community. Rogers (1995) stated that transfer of ideas occurs most frequently between individuals who are similar. To be on-line is to share some basic characteristics which ensure at least a degree of homophily. There is, of course, great variation still in those who use the Internet. Rather than posing an obstacle, however, to the diffusion of information, this solves a problem. Rogers (1995) has stated that, while homophilous communication channels are best for spreading information, diffusion demands some degree of heterophily. In other words, if the sender and receiver of information are too similar, nothing novel can be imparted.

If we look at our particular AIDS-related urban legend, one might see the necessary heterophily in levels of world experience, including sexual experience. We'll return to this idea but the reasons for the existence of urban legends need to be further examined first. Why, in this so-called Information Age, do urban legends persist? As stated before, they reveal what is salient in a culture. In a sense, they are the public's verdict about an institution or a practice (Llewelyn, 1996). Perhaps, as Barnes suggests, they are reflective of "a felt need to search for meaning and order...In short, urban legends may thus be said to function as meta-interpretive texts,"(Barnes, 1996, p.3).

This level of meta-interpretation suggests that information has been internalized and thus has reached the level of diffusion. One can see in the Internet an example of a decentralized

diffusion system, one which Rogers (1995) identified as being based on convergent communication in which the users "create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding," (p. 370). Folklorist Linda Dégh (1994) suggested Marshall McLuhan's metaphor of the global village to describe the community created by the sharing of uniform information. Although Dégh describes the information conveyed as uniform, she allows for the variations to occur which give the local context so often necessary for the survival of an urban legend. She states, "The simultaneity of repetitions within extremely short periods of time inadvertently results in the multiplication of variants through diverse interconnected channels of communication," (Dégh, 1994, p.24). This appears contradictory to our earlier discussion of the effects of forwarded e-mail but Brunvand has identified the mechanism by which this can occur.

In his collecting of folklore, Brunvand (2001) found that many people *do* add their own commentary to the e-mails which they forward. The reasons for adding this commentary illustrate the *raison d'être* for urban legends and the motivations of those who spread them. Murray Wells, of the Urban Legend Research Centre, has identified four geneses of legends: some are deliberately manufactured hoaxes, some are created by a person who has heard a remarkable story and wishes to retell it in a personalized way to make their own life seem more interesting, some are created by a person wishing to appear more knowledgeable or informed (recalling Roger's requirement of heterophily for diffusion), and some are created inadvertently by those who misremember the details of a narrative (Wells, 1999).

The motivations of those who spread urban legends speak directly to the subject of diffusion. If one accepts that diffusion demands not only the transmission but also the internalization of information, then one can see this internalization in the various reasons people

pass on legends. Again, Wells has identified some specific types. Believers pass on a legend they believe to be true, often as a warning to others. Fence sitters suspect or hope that the information is true and fear the consequences of not transmitting the story. Substantiators retell the story because it illustrates their own world view. Self-promoters want to demonstrate or establish their knowledge (or perhaps their level of sexual or other experience) and often retell a story in the first-person. Entertainers don't necessarily believe it but recognize its narrative value. Skeptics will tell the story expressly to illustrate its lack of validity. Finally, alarmists, in an echo of the *schadenfreude* aspect of urban legends mentioned earlier, enjoy the havoc and community concern the story could evoke (Wells, 1999).

In each of these instances, the information fits a particular context for the person who chooses to retell the story. As any student of information transfer knows, we tend to accept at face value those things we learn from a trusted source (as in face-to-face communication) or which reinforce our world view (as in mass media communication). For us to accept a new idea or practice, for diffusion of information to occur, we must build on or amend our existing conceptual framework. The perception of utility aids this and is perhaps the key to understanding the appeal and vitality of the urban legend. For, despite the connotation of artifice in the word "legend", these cautionary tales often contain a germ of truth (Harris, 2001).

"Welcome to the World of AIDS" became prominent to folklorists in 1986, the year in which many became aware that heterosexuals as well as homosexuals were susceptible to the disease. The version already related is often identified as "AIDS Mary" and warns men of the dangers of promiscuity. A version for women, "AIDS Harry," also exists in which a girl goes to a faraway place, has a love affair with a man and is given a parting gift which, when opened, is revealed to be a miniature coffin marked with the "Welcome," (Mikkelsen & Mikkelsen, 1995).

The emergence of this story in the mid-1980's illustrates again the urban legend's embodiment of a collective unconsciousness becoming verbalized. By using a narrative to convey knowledge, the odds are increased that the information is memorable and thus aid in its diffusion. The diffusion of this particular story was increased by mass media reporting, as the AIDS crisis progressed, of the existence of "Patient Zero." Gaetan Dugas, a flight attendant, was identified as the vector through which AIDS was so rapidly spread. In the last years of his life he was aware of his illness yet, through a mixture of denial and indifference, continued to have unprotected intercourse. He is reported to have afterwards told his partners, "I'm going to die and so are you," (Mikkelson & Mikkelson). How better to reinforce the need for the knowledge conveyed by the story than by backing up the legend with reported fact?

The use of different communication channels to reinforce the diffusion of information still does not preclude the need for contextualizing the information. Without this contextualization, the internalization necessary for diffusion to occur is less likely. This contextualization can be that of an individual or, as folklore researcher Diane E. Goldstein discovered, a culture. Specifically, she examined the variants of the "Welcome to the World of AIDS" legend prevalent on the relatively isolated province of Newfoundland. By doing so, she was able to identify the way in which the traditional information networks of the island transformed and diffused the story.

She found that the extremely efficient interpersonal social network of the island precluded the degree of anonymity for the "AIDS Mary" story to be entirely plausible. Rather, she found that the "AIDS Harry"-coffin variant was culturally viable and reinforced Newfoundlanders' perception of the Mainland as dangerous. Those versions of the "AIDS Mary" legend which she did find told of people involved with Mainlanders come to the island or of

Newfoundlanders behaving like Mainlanders and engaging in risky sexual behavior. She states, "Thus, the process of selection in tradition has shaped a new narrative *that makes sense locally* and, at the same time, the older narrative has been manipulated to facilitate localized commentary on social transgressions," (Goldstein, 1996, p.217).

This appears to have been a successful example of diffusion and yet one element of assessment is missing. For diffusion and not simple dissemination to have occurred, there must be internalization of the information. How is one to measure that internalization? One method might be looking at implementation based on the information diffused. Rogers stated, "Implementation occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) puts an innovation into use... But implementation involves overt behavior change," (Rogers, 1995, p.172). The urban legend, "Welcome to the World of AIDS," deals with private sexual behavior and people are notoriously reticent if not actually unreliable when asked about this subject. To discover whether implementation of the information contained in the legend has actually occurred, one must look elsewhere.

If one remembers that this legend first gained prominence around 1986, one would expect to see the results of the implementation of the diffused information in the following years. And indeed, if one examines the AIDS statistics reported by the Centers for Disease Control, one sees in the years 1993 to 2001 a dramatic drop in the number of deaths due to AIDS from 45, 850 to 15, 603 (CDC, 2002). Granted, some of this is due to improved medical treatment as the nature of the disease has become better understood. The numbers also reflect, however, a decrease in risky sexual behavior suggesting that the story of "Welcome to the World of AIDS" has been successfully diffused and implemented.

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Customizing the Education of Information Professionals: The Paraguayan Experience <http://web.simmons.edu/~chen/nit/NIT'94/94-Customizing-Achleitner-259.html> H. Achleitner's paper is part of panel discussion on Education/Training related to NIT and GII. Paper includes graphic of the Information Transfer Cycle.Â Abstract of Libraries Tomorrow: the library's new perspectives on the threshold of the third Millennium. <http://www.aib.it/aib/boll/1998/98-3-323.htm> Includes a description of the Knowledge Management Model putting the library at the beginning of the Information Transfer Cycle. Diagnostic Study Tool <http://slim.emporia.edu/resource/diagnost/li803a.htm> Created by SLIM students in 1996. Return to models from theory classes. The Information Age. Preface " Introduction " Digital and ICT Revolutions " Information Knowledge and the New Economy " New Work " The Information Society " Globalization " The Digital Divide " The Challenge Ahead " Notes " Further Reading " Contributors " Acknowledgements. An information economy is where the productivity and competitiveness of units or agents in the economy (be they firms, regions or nations) depend mainly on their capacity to generate, process, and apply efficiently knowledge-based Information science: information theory, information transfer theory, information processing and information retrieval theories, among others. Lankes maintains that in order to identify an appropriate theory for Librarianship "one must look to the underlying drivers that lead to the act of creation", which for him are none others than learning and knowledge creation (Lankes, 2011: 22-23).Â We could agree with considering knowledge the actual object of our disciplines, and its representations (data and information) as mere practical surrogates.Â Epistemology and the socio-cognitive perspective in information science. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 53(4), 257-270. HjÃ,rland, B. (2000). A knowledge society generates, shares and makes available to all members of the society knowledge that may be used to improve the human condition. A knowledge society differs from an information society in that the former serves to transform information into resources that allow society to take effective action while the latter only creates and disseminates the raw data. The capacity to gather and analyze information has existed throughout human history. However, the idea of the present-day knowledge LI 803. March 16, 2008. Information Transfer Cycle: State of the Union 2. The Information Transfer Cycle within the State of the. Union Address. INTRODUCTION.Â system, and time (2003, pg. 10). In this sense, the idea. of Diffusion within the context of the State of the Union.Â Information Transfer and the Knowledge Society, at the. School of Library and Information Management at Emporia. State University, Emporia, Kansas, the information transfer.