VIRTUAL VICTORIANS
NETWORKS, CONNECTIONS, TECHNOLOGIES

Edited by
Veronica Alfano and Andrew Stauffer

palgrave
macmillan
Contents

List of Figures and Tables vii
Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1
Andrew Stauffer

Part I Navigating Networks

1 How We Search Now: New and Old Ways of Digging Up Wolfe’s “Sir John Moore” 11
Catherine Robson

2 Viral Textuality in Nineteenth-Century US Newspaper Exchanges 29
Ryan Cordell

3 Networking Feminist Literary History: Recovering Eliza Meteyard’s Web 57
Susan Brown

4 Frances Trollope in a Victorian Network of Women’s Biographies 83
Alison Booth

5 Representing Leigh Hunt’s Autobiography 107
Michael E. Sinatra

6 Visualizing the Cultural Field of Victorian Poetry 121
Natalie M. Houston

Part II Virtual Imaginings

7 Virtual Victorian Poetry 145
Alison Chapman
Contents

8 Artificial Environments, Virtual Realities, and the Cultivation of Propensity in the London Colosseum 167
   Peter Otto

9 The Imperial Avatar in the Imagined Landscape: The Virtual Dynamics of the Prince of Wales’s Tour of India in 1875–76 189
   Ruth Brimacombe

10 Steampunk Technologies of Gender: Deryn Sharp’s Nonbinary Gender Identity in Scott Westerfeld’s Leviathan Series 215
   Lisa Hager

11 Strange Fascination: Kipling, Benjamin, and Early Cinema 231
   Christopher Keep

Select Bibliography 251
Notes on Contributors 271
Index 273
CHAPTER 2

VIRAL TEXTUALITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY US NEWSPAPER EXCHANGES

Ryan Cordell*

N.B. Additional images associated with this chapter are housed in the digital annex.

INTRODUCTION

On February 8, 1862, the Ashtabula Weekly Telegraph (Ashtabula, Ohio) published on its back page a list of fourteen “Health Hints—Follies.”¹ These follies, attributed to a “Dr. Hall,” critique ideas about diet and exercise (“1. To thing [sic] that the more a man eats the fatter and stronger he will become”), education (“2. To believe that the more hours children study at school the faster they learn”), home organization (“5. To act on the presumption that the smallest room in the house is large enough to sleep in”), and even ethics (“7. To commit an act which is felt in itself to be prejudicial, hoping that somehow or other it may be done in your case with impunity”). This snippet exemplifies the listicle genre, which is often associated with popular content

* Thanks to my co-PIs David Smith and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon for their contributions, both technical and theoretical, to the Viral Texts project. Thanks also to project research assistant Kevin Smith, who helped me track down many of the references here from our very large database of nineteenth-century reprinting. Finally, thanks to project intern Laura Eckstein of Haverford College, who prepared the maps included here.
online in the early twenty-first century, but which was also common in nineteenth-century newspapers. The “Follies” piece is, on its face, quite conventional and unassuming, but it was one of the most widely reprinted newspaper snippets of the nineteenth century, appearing at least 136 times in newspapers and magazines between 1862 and 1899.

By the time “Follies” was reprinted in *The Appeal* (Saint Paul, Minnesota) on December 23, 1899, it had been substantially changed. The original list had been reduced from fourteen numbered to seven unnumbered items, while words and phrases from the items themselves had been altered. The article’s title—which was to be read as the leading clause for each list item—had become the more direct and blunt “You Make a Mistake” (i.e., “You make a mistake . . . in eating without any appetite, or continuing to eat after it has been satisfied, merely to gratify the taste”). But the essence of the piece remained the same, having wended through newspapers and magazines across the country for decades, filling a few inches of column space in the *Caledonian* of St. Johnsbury, Vermont (April 25, 1862), the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* of Honolulu, Hawaii (June 26, 1862), the *Big Blue Union* of Marysville, Kansas (August 15, 1863), the *Arizona Miner* of Fort Whipple, Arizona (February 29, 1868), the *Morning Star and Catholic Messenger* of New Orleans, Louisiana (May 8, 1870), and the

Figure 2.1 Reprintings of “Health Hints—Follies” in nineteenth-century American newspapers. The state boundaries here are from 1870, about midway through the text’s life in the press, though these boundaries shifted considerably during the decades the text circulated. This map was prepared by Viral Texts project intern Laura Eckstein, an undergraduate at Haverford College.
New Ulm Weekly Review of New Ulm, Minnesota (April 23, 1879), to name just a few. In fact, this seemingly ephemeral snippet appeared in approximately 20 percent of the nineteenth-century newspapers now collected in the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America archive. Considered in aggregate, as a widely successful newspaper selection, this piece is not simply a strange curiosity (as it might seem in the context of any individual newspaper) but is instead a telling example of popular newspaper literature. We might say “Health Hints—Follies” went viral, 150 years before social media.

These reprints of “Follies” were uncovered by the reprint-detection algorithm developed by my colleague, David A. Smith, for the Viral Texts project at Northeastern University. Our broadest aim for Viral Texts has been to “better understand what qualities—both textual and thematic—helped particular news stories, short fiction, and poetry ‘go viral’ in nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines.”

We have written in detail about the development of this reprint-detection algorithm and about our experiments with different iterations in attempts to detect the most authentic reprints while omitting as many false positives as possible. In this essay, however, I want to reflect on how the modern “viral” metaphor might contribute to theorizations of nineteenth-century reprinting practices. The word *viral* is necessarily anachronistic when applied to the nineteenth century; biological viruses were not themselves named until the century was nearly over. The “viral media” metaphor is even more recent, linking the spread of content or information to our understanding of contagion and containment. Did antebellum poems, fiction, news stories, travel accounts, trivia, and jokes “go viral” in any way analogous to the tidbits that tile our Facebook walls today? It is of course a stretch to call the antebellum newspaper “the BuzzFeed of its day”—but how much of a stretch, and is it a stretch worth making?

While it is a twenty-first-century neologism, I will argue in this essay that virality can provide a useful comparative frame for thinking about the exchange of texts in nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines. J. Gerald Kennedy notes briefly in his introduction to *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture* that “first-hand news reports from ‘correspondents’ circulated with viral alacrity, even though no organized system for gathering and distributing news yet existed,” but he does not further develop an idea of how the viral metaphor might illuminate textual exchange within the “more leisurely and inconsistent pattern” of early nineteenth-century circulation. By applying recent theorizations of online virality to these historical mass media, however, we can identify common aspects of content sharing...
across historical periods, isolating cultural, aesthetic, and literary values that persist from print to Web. Perhaps most importantly, a viral theory of textuality foregrounds circulation and reception, describing not static textual objects but instead the ways texts moved through the social, political, literary, and technological networks that undergirded nineteenth-century print culture. Indeed, I would propose that a robust theory of virality, developed from corpus-level text analysis, offers a critical perspective that allows us to understand nineteenth-century circulation not simply as “arbitrary, irregular transmission of tales, essays, and poems,” but instead as a complex but comprehensible system of textual exchange and influence. Notions of virality highlight the ways texts create, sustain, or sometimes sever network connections.

Finally, virality offers a theoretical frame focused on textual similarity rather than originality or novelty—a necessary critical reorientation, I will argue, for the study of literature in mass media. The central fact of either nineteenth-century reprinting or twenty-first-century retweeting is repetition—the way ideas, instantiated in media artifacts, are inscribed and reinscribed in culture. In many ways, virality is another name under which to discuss bibliography. In essence, both virality and bibliography describe how often a given text was reprinted and in what venues. Unlike an enumerative bibliography, however (which focuses primarily on accounting for witnesses), or a descriptive bibliography (which attempts to account for the textual differences among witnesses), accounts of a text’s virality would focus on its social life and rhetorical power. How far and in what forms did it spread? In which communities did it circulate? How was this text modified, remixed, responded to, or commented upon? To what extent did this text saturate a given network? How does the spread of this text compare with that of others? And, finally but perhaps most importantly, what textual, thematic, or stylistic features allowed this text to be easily shared? The lens of virality privileges questions of circulation, reception, and comparison over questions of textual authority; it elevates the social over the stemma. As an interpretive frame, virality also requires a more capacious understanding of “the text,” including in its ambit both bibliographic witnesses and a penumbra of related, often fragmentary texts that speak to the social, literary, or historical impact of the original item.

**Defining Virality**

To “go viral” today is to be widely and quickly shared—to move rapidly from obscurity to ubiquity—through interrelated platforms such
Viral Textuality in US Newspaper Exchanges

as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. In Going Viral, Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley offer this useful definition of virality, which they describe as:

[A] social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration of the number of people who are exposed to the message.8

In short, to call something “viral” is to note the speed, scale, and sociality of its spread. The pop star Psy, while not obscure in Korea before the appearance of his song and music video “Gangnam Style,” became a global sensation in a matter of weeks after that video was viewed millions of times on YouTube.9 We could list many more examples, from the amateur “Yosemite Mountain Double Rainbow” video, viewed nearly 40 million times, to the quirky advertisement that launched the Dollar Shave Club business.10 Videos are not the only media that go viral online. Photographs, GIFs, image memes, and even political or social causes—often anchored, certainly, by a particularly resonant image or video, as in the recent “Ice Bucket Challenge” videos in support of ALS research—can gain sudden attention, largely through the agency of social networks, and be widely and rapidly shared.

To cite a personal example, in January of 2013 my daughters Cadence (then twelve) and Emerson (then 9) posted a picture of themselves with their siblings Jonas and Rory (then 4) and Jude (then 1) on a Facebook page they titled “Twogirlsandapuppy.” The children were holding a sign that read, “Hi World / We want a puppy! Our dad said we could get one if we get 1 million likes! So LIKE this!” with a note to the side that read, “He doesn’t think we can do it!”11 This picture quickly circulated through social media, first among friends and friends of friends in my and my wife’s social networks—but soon far beyond. Within eight hours, the picture had received one million likes; within twenty-four hours, it had received nearly four million. In addition to these likes, the campaign’s Facebook page was flooded with comments and private messages from people around the world who responded to the girls’ campaign in (mostly) positive ways. These commenters cited a wide range of reasons for supporting the girls’ viral plea, from a love of dogs, to religious identification (despite the picture having no overtly religious content), to shared Star Wars fandom, to—if I might indulge—the fundamental cuteness of my children. And of course, a great number of them cited a desire to prove a
Viral media isn’t always so light or flippant, however, and it often seeks to inspire more serious forms of identification from those who view or read it. Consider, for instance, the “It Gets Better” campaign, inspired by a video created by columnist Dan Savage and his partner, Terry Miller, which organizers touted as “provid[ing] hope for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other bullied teens” through video messages submitted by hundreds of people. These ranged from group posts by the employees of businesses, such as Facebook and Google, to videos by celebrities, such as Sarah Silverman and Steven Colbert, to submissions from political figures, such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama. While the effectiveness of such campaigns is a subject of significant debate, it is clear that they exemplify another kind of online viral media—politically activist rather than entertaining—that generates energy by encouraging viewers to share with their own social networks. The most successful viral media pieces, whether serious or light, become cultural touchstones in their own right, inspiring new content in response.

In *Going Viral*, Nahon and Hemsley use the term “viral events” to describe the constellations of engagement that emerge around viral media. A viral event includes not only an originary piece that is widely shared, but also the rich ecology of media that emerges around it—responses, reviews, remixes, mash-ups, and so forth. Consider, for instance, the hundreds of response and parody videos that appeared in the wake of “Gangnam Style,” in which navy midshipmen, prisoners, lifeguards, moms and babies, and a wide variety of college groups imitated or reinterpreted scenes from the original video, sometimes with the original song as their background and sometimes with new lyrics that rework the song for specific communities of viewers. These responses both testified to and contributed to the song’s pervasiveness and cultural impact. The photograph, video, or text that spawns a viral event can quickly become subsumed by waves of new, responsorial media, linked by a particular artistic, aesthetic, or thematic idea.

Like my daughters’ puppy campaign, the most successful viral phenomena provoke a range of reactions from their audience, provoking viewers or readers to respond and share widely, but for different reasons and toward different ends. Indeed, the “Twogirlsandapuppy” campaign was inspired when my eldest daughter saw a Facebook post in which two children held up a sign claiming their dad would get them a cat if they received one thousand likes. When she asked me
whether she could do something similar for a dog, I demurred, claiming one thousand likes would be too easy, thus inspiring her to up the ante to one million. Her adaptation of the likes meme itself spawned a host of imitators, until “one million likes pleas” became internet clichés. The most viral media are interpretively flexible and highly adaptable rhetorically, aesthetically, politically, or otherwise.

This notion of virality recalls the meme, first proposed by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, as a “replicator” for ideas, “a unit of cultural transmission . . . drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup” of “human culture.” In Dawkins’s original conception, memes describe far more than shared Internet content. Memes can be “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.” For Dawkins the meme is not a metaphor, but a physical reality: “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.” While memetics has been increasingly marginalized as a scientific discipline, the idea of memes—the meme meme—continues to propagate and mutate with our culture. In particular, the word *meme* has shifted from referring to a generalized idea replicator and has instead become a shorthand term for viral content online, particularly for works that have become so widely known that an ecology of variations, remixes, and responses has emerged around the original pieces. When discussing online content, then, the meme and virality are now entangled concepts—indeed, Dawkins’s broader theorization of the meme has been largely replaced by discussions of content sharing and virality. As a way to consider the transmission of ideas, the meme proves useful, if only because it asks us to attend not to distinct cultural artifacts—this entire poem, that entire story—but to the more amorphous concepts and rhetorical figures that underlie specific artifacts and often propagate beyond them.

For critics, both the notion of memes and the viral metaphor are flawed because they occlude human agency, portraying the transmission of ideas as a deterministic, quasibiological process rather than as the result of individuals’ tastes, choices, and social interactions. Henry Jenkins calls “viral media” a term “at once too encompassing and too limiting,” conveying an idea of “circulation as the empty exchange of information stripped of context and meaning.” He prefers the term “spreadable media,” which in his view recognizes “acts of circulation as constituting bids for meaning and value” that “shape the cultural and political landscape in significant ways.” At present, however,
“viral media” has resonated in cultural discourse in ways alternative terms have not. For practical reasons, we chose the name of the Viral Texts project in order to suggest analogies between the reprinted nineteenth-century newspaper and magazine snippets we are studying and more recent forms of media sharing online. Not coincidentally, our use of this analogy has led to significant public interest in the project, which offers historical context for media outlets and others working to understand what had seemed to be a sudden and recent phenomenon. I would argue that such public engagement is in itself a significant good, particularly for literary-historical work in this current moment of “crisis”—whether real or imagined—in the humanities. In addition to these pragmatic motives, however, many of the models developed to describe online virality can illuminate rhetorical and systemic features of widely circulated nineteenth-century texts that are not readily apparent when described using established bibliographic or literary-historical models.

GOING VIRAL IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEWSPAPERS

Virality extends the notion of “the social text,” first proposed by D. F. McKenzie in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* and further developed by Jerome McGann through projects such as the Rossetti Archive. As McGann notes, when McKenzie first proposed the “social text” as an editorial procedure, prominent bibliographers “remarked that while McKenzie’s ideas had a certain theoretical appeal, they could not be practically implemented” because “critical editing—as opposed to facsimile and diplomatic editing—was designed to investigate texts, which are linguistic forms, not books, which are social events.”20 In the Rossetti Archive, McGann seeks to represent the “social text” by including all editions of a given work in an online archive, rather than simply the “Reading Text” and “Variorum Text” of the standard critical edition. However, even the social text model remains focused on discrete works—books, most often, though also stories or poems—that can be collated and compared as distinct entities. Virality is messier, aligning fragmentary texts and textual echoes not only through books but also through ephemeral and hybrid media; the latter of these is exemplified by the nineteenth-century newspaper. The “viral text” of a particular poem would include official and unofficial reprintings, but also parodies, quotations, reviews, paraphrases, allusions, and more—what Julia Flanders has named “reception items.” A theory of viral textuality must wrestle with unusually capacious ideas of “the text,” including in its purview the continually
shifting penumbras of readers’ responses that testify to that text’s life within culture(s).

For this reason, virality proves especially useful for thinking about how texts circulated in the increasingly complex mass media ecology of the United States during the nineteenth century. During this time, newspapers and magazines proliferated, and this rapid expansion of the print sphere was accelerated by a system of content sharing among publications. The periodical press in the United States depended on “exchanges,” through which editors subscribed to each other’s publications (paying little to no postage for the privilege), and borrowed content promiscuously from each other’s subscriptions. Texts of all kinds were reprinted—typically without authors’ or publishers’ permission—across books, newspapers, and magazines. Content shared through the exchange system was not protected under intellectual property law. Instead, periodical texts were considered common property for reprinting, with or without modification—much as articles, music videos, and other content are shared online today among blogs and social media sites. And as is the case today, antebellum content creators reacted in disparate ways to these sharing practices. Some writers and editors compared reprinting to theft, decrying a system that popularized writers’ work without supporting them financially. Others exploited the reprinting system in order to build a reputation that could be leveraged toward paid literary employment.

The spread of “viral” content in nineteenth-century newspapers depended on a range of factors, from the choices of editors to the preferences of readers to the material requirements of composing a given day’s issue. The frequently reprinted listicle “Editing a Paper,” for instance, lays out the dilemma that faced nineteenth-century editors considering whether and how much to reprint:

If we publish telegraph reports, people will say they are nothing but lies.
If we omit them, they will say we have no enterprise, or suppress them for political effect . . .
If we publish original matter, they find fault with us for not giving selections.
If we publish selections, folks say we are lazy for not writing more and giving them what they have not read before in some other paper. (11 July 1863)

The first reprinting of “Editing a Paper” identified by the Viral Texts project appears in the Big Blue Union of Marysville, Kansas, but
even here an editorial preface claims that the list has been “going the rounds of the papers. If we knew in what paper it first appeared,” the editor continues, “it would afford us pleasure to give the writer due credit.” This piece and its preface illustrate much about editors’ and, presumably, readers’ attitudes toward reprinting, and how those attitudes might line up with modern ideas of viral media.

Considering nineteenth-century newspaper snippets as “viral media” allows us to frame their spread in terms of “rhetorical velocity,” a term first developed by Jim Ridolfo and Dânielle Nicole DeVoss to describe online composition practices in which writers take reuse and remixing as a given and compose with an eye toward facilitating such reinterpretable acts. Such writers take as their primary assumption that a piece will be recomposed by others—reprinted or otherwise remediating. Ridolfo and DeVoss propose that “when academics uphold distinctions between author and producer, we are left in an uncomplicated, often acontextual space that does not provide the tools we need to best negotiate the ways in which production and authorship become more slippery in digital spaces and within remix projects.”

They argue, “The term rhetorical velocity means a conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time, pertaining specifically to theorizing instances of strategic appropriation by a third party.” In other words, “rhetorical velocity” posits “the text” through multiple dimensions, charting its uses and movements—both social and geographic—alongside its evolving content. What’s more, a piece need not be consciously crafted for a wide audience to have rhetorical velocity; if it is compelling, concise, and easily modified, then it can go viral with or without its creator’s knowledge.

While Ridolfo and DeVoss refer specifically to composing practices online, the frame of rhetorical velocity offers insight into widely reprinted newspaper content during the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century editors relied on the exchange system to provide engaging content, and they in turn composed (or solicited) original pieces with an eye toward their readers and those of the papers with which they exchanged. In the first post–Civil War issue of the Pulaski Citizen, for instance, editor Luther W. McCord apologizes for the sorry state of “The News” in the paper because “we have no exchanges yet, from which to make up our news items. Our readers can readily appreciate,” the squib continues, “the impossibility of making an interesting paper without something to make it of.” McCord then assures readers that they “hope to have a full list of exchanges by next week and, per consequence, a more readable number of the Citizen” (January 5, 1866). This apology echoes a common notion among editors
in the period: newspapers that aggregated content from exchanges were of higher and more consistent quality than newspapers written entirely by locals. In other words, McCord assumes that his primary job will be selecting and propagating writing from elsewhere—contributing to the rhetorical velocity of content written for a distributed network, not for individual newspapers.

We must therefore assume that newspaper editors and writers were concerned with the rhetorical velocity of what they published; a newspaper whose content was regularly reprinted in other newspapers would, presumably, soon be added to more exchanges, as editors further down the line sought the source of the pieces they encountered in intermediary papers. This would, in turn, increase the popular newspaper’s circulation and subscription fees. Indeed, when considering nineteenth-century newspaper snippets, we might speak of “composing for recomposition” in a more technical way, using “composition” not only in its modern sense, as a near synonym for “writing,” but also as a printers’ term of art. As scholars such as Ellen Gruber Garvey have shown, texts were reprinted in newspapers to help editors compose entire daily or weekly newspapers with small staffs. “By yoking together scattered producers who shared labor and resources by sending their products to one another for free use,” the network of newspapers sustained the proliferation of its medium.25 In other words, reprinting existed in large part to meet the material needs of publication. Many of the changes introduced into texts as they circulated through the newspaper network—a line removed here, two lines added there—were motivated by these practical considerations, as a given newspaper’s compositors shaped exchange content to fill empty spaces on a nearly composed page. It seems reasonable to presume that as a newspaper’s compositors prepared their pages each day or week, they expected—perhaps even hoped—that other compositors in their exchange networks would later recompose their texts, extending the texts’ rhetorical velocity to reach distant audiences.

As with modern viral media online, one of the clearest testaments to the rhetorical velocity of a text in the nineteenth century was the emergence of parodies. A parody assumes widespread audience familiarity with the original piece it mocks (or enlists in the service of mockery)—otherwise much of its humor would be lost on readers. In rewriting the piece for comedic or satirical effect, the parody is both a distinct bibliographic artifact and part of the viral event surrounding the text it parodies. Consider, for instance, the poem “The Inquiry,” by Scottish poet Charles MacKay.26 The original text meditates,
through four stanzas, on the difficulties of earthly life. In each of the first three stanzas, the speaker questions the “winged winds,” “mighty deep,” and “serenest moon,” asking whether there is on earth “some spot / Where mortals weep no more” or “Some valley in the west . . . free from toil and pain” where the “weary soul may rest.” To these and similar questions, nature answers “No!” in each stanza’s closing couplet. Finally, the speaker asks “my secret soul,” “Is there no happy spot / Where mortals may be bless’d, / Where grief may find a balm / And weariness a rest?” To this final inquiry, the speaker receives a new response: “Faith, Hope, and Love, best boons to mortals given / Wav’d their bright wings, and whisper’d—‘Yes, in Heaven.’”

MacKay’s sincere affirmation of mainstream Christian ideas of the afterlife was widely loved and shared, appearing not only in many newspapers, but also in many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century poetry anthologies. The poem also sold well set to sheet music. According to many of his biographers, “The Inquiry” was a particular favorite of Abraham Lincoln, who may have purchased the sheet music for the piece during his time in Springfield. But the poem also provided rich fodder for satirists, who copied its basic structure and many of its central images but recomposed its details for comedic effect. On March 4, 1857, the Grand River Times (Grand
Haven, Michigan) printed “A Parody. By an Old Bachelor,” which reworks MacKay’s devotional lines into a bachelor’s misogynistic lament. This speaker inquires also of the wind, the waves, and the moon in turn, but he asks if there is “some spot” where, for instance, “women fret no more,” “babies never yell,” “hoops are out of place,” “muslin is not known,” or “weary men may find / A place to smoke in peace.” As in MacKay’s original, all three forces rebuff the speaker, though this time with colloquialisms: “Nary place,” “Yeou git eout,” and “Pooh!” And the parody borrows the final couplet of MacKay’s poem almost exactly, as the speaker learns from Faith, Hope, and Truth—not Love, perhaps appropriately—that “females never go” to one place that “bachelors are blessed” and “may dwell in peace”: “in Heaven!” Here the conventional piety of MacKay’s poem becomes a punchline about domestic tranquility, or the lack thereof; this parody too “went the rounds” of the papers.

This first parody was not the last recomposition of “The Inquiry.” On June 6, 1857, the Keowee Courier (Pickens Court House, South Carolina) printed “Parody Parodied,” which the editors introduce as written by “some fair writer” who “thus retaliates on the parodist whose production we published some days since.” The editors continue, insisting that “both sides must be heard, and we give the lady a chance.” In this poem, the speaker again queries the elements, wondering if a place exists where “bachelors come no more,” “no moustache is seen,” and “cigars are not,” a place where “weary girls may find / A rest from soft dough faces” continually wooing them. Again after three denials—one tinged with temperance rhetoric, as the sea murmurs, “Not while brandy smashes live”—the three angels of the final couplet assure the speaker that she will find rest from men in heaven. This parody is twice removed from MacKay’s original poem; it is a recomposition of a recomposition. Nevertheless, it clearly belongs to the same viral event as “The Inquiry,” both exploiting and feeding back into the rhetorical velocity of MacKay’s piece.

This viral event was in fact so widespread that the central images and structure of “The Inquiry” would eventually be invoked without any direct reference to MacKay’s original, and even without the visual markers of poetry. In November 1857, for instance, the Raftsman’s Journal (Clearfield, Pennsylvania) first printed this satirical squib, as a prose block rather than in poetic lines:

Query.—Tell me ye winged winds that round my pathway roar, do ye not no [sic] some quiet spot where hoops are worn no more? Some lone and silent dell, some Island or some cave, where women can walk
three abreast along the village pave? The loud winds hissed around my face, and snickering answered, “nary place.”

This is the entire piece, and we might imagine it as written and then reprinted primarily to help compose the page—to fill a small gap. That MacKay’s poem was chosen for this short joke, however, tells us much about the extent of the text’s virality, the practical force of its rhetorical velocity. Editors who printed this squib in their newspapers expected readers to get the joke, quickly and without additional context. Moreover, they could make the joke in shorthand, offering what is in effect a one-paragraph prose poem in place of the four stanzas of the original text or its first parodies. Clearly “The Inquiry” had gone viral to such an extent that an offhand, even oblique, reference could be expected to resonate with readers. Like a ubiquitous online meme today, “The Inquiry” was so familiar that recomposing it became a performance of simultaneous affection for and ironic distance from the original work.

Despite these transhistorical resemblances, rhetorical velocity remains a difficult measure of comparison between the early nineteenth century and the early twenty-first. The particular metaphor of virality emerged in large part because digital platforms enable observers to track the spread of content on an individual level (whether through views, likes, or retweets)—a granular view of information flow that seemed comparable to the spread of disease from person to person. Modern content-tracking systems allow us to see that a given YouTube video was viewed two million times, liked on Facebook one million times, tweeted another five hundred thousand times, and so forth. The idea of virality inheres less in the kind of content that is shared online, then, than in the way the online medium lets us observe and track the social processes of sharing. By contrast, while we can know that “Editing a Paper” was printed in 134 newspapers, we cannot know how many readers actually read it, much less how many valued it.

Of course, even modern, granular measures of views and likes do not tell us that much about how viral media content is received and used. Writing about likes on Facebook, for instance, Robert Payne notes:

Clicking “Like” may not only mean “I like this” or “I enjoyed this item” but a whole host of possible responses, including “I think this is amazing,” “I think this is reasonably interesting,” “I think this is stupid,” “I want to increase traffic to this page” and “my friend is
pressuring me to Like her page and I don’t really like it but I like her so what else can I do?” In some circumstances, given the lack of alternatives, “Like” may even mean “Dislike” . . . all of these motivations for clicking “Like”—and all of them are valuable—lead to the same result of the item increasing in circulation and possibly going viral, but nothing of these outcomes registers the multiplicity of user engagements. “Like” flattens out this multiplicity and becomes more about technical functionality, an unreflexive bodily response, a way of interacting with the media object without having to express individual motivation.30

Payne describes the like button as a flat signal, attesting to nothing more than the bare fact that a picture, text, video, or other media was clicked after a binary—and perhaps arbitrary—decision. “Like” can even mean its opposite in many cases, given users’ desire to signal a response to content when only one signaling mechanism is provided. In other words, the mass of potential reasons motivating someone to click “like” is buried by the functionality of the platform.

Like a modern like or retweet, the reprinting of texts in nineteenth-century American newspapers is a flat signifier. Editors selected texts from other publications for a wide range of reasons, from admiration to repudiation to capitulation. Editorial paratexts explaining why a given text was reprinted are relatively rare; the occasional line of explanation proves immensely valuable.31 Such commentaries on reprinted content sometimes praise it, as when the Grand River Times (Grand Haven, Michigan) “commend[s] to all our patrons and friends” a list of rules for home education “for their excellence, brevity, and practical utility.”32 The Grand River Times’s editorial endorsement of this listicle builds on—and includes as part of its reprinting—the Plymouth Pilot’s (Plymouth, Indiana) declaration that the list was “worthy of being printed in letters of gold, and placed in a conspicuous position in every man’s household.”33 These and similarly laudatory sentiments are the most common editorial comments on viral texts in the period. As we have seen, editors touted reprinting as a mechanism for improving their newspapers and so were very likely to praise reprinted content as entertaining, enlightening, or useful for their readers. But editors sometimes inserted a line indicating their skepticism or hostility toward republished pieces. In these cases, the text is reprinted so that its errors can be more widely known and condemned.

Whether reprinting to praise or condemn, editors consistently invoked their readership as the inspiration for their selections, claiming to reprint content needed, solicited, or even created by readers. In an article often titled “How to Do Up Shirt Bosoms,” for instance,
the *Democrat and Sentinel* (Ebensburg, Pennsylvania) noted that “we often hear ladies expressing a desire to know by what process the gloss on new lines, shirt bosoms, &c., is produced, and in order to gratify them we subjoin the following recipe.”34 Here the editors claim to be printing in direct response to their readers’ expressed needs. This language of needs met and interest sated—of *usefulness*—pervades reprint culture, aligning viral newspaper literature with what Franco Moretti calls “the style of the useful” in nineteenth-century bourgeois writing.35

Many of these useful texts were even penned, at least in part, by readers rather than editors. A widely reprinted piece on the health benefits of tomatoes began as an editorial response to an inquiry from one “P. B. T.”; this individual’s letter, appearing in the *Edgefield Advertiser* (Edgefield, South Carolina), notes that “so little attention has been given to [tomatoes’] preservation” that many Americans are unaware they can be eaten year-round and report finding their taste unpleasant. P. B. T. asks the editors to correct these myths, as tomatoes’ “presence on the table at any, or even with all meals of the day, is quite acceptable. A notice from you at this time,” this correspondent continues, “would be of service to at least one of your readers.” The *Advertiser* obliges, following P. B. T.’s letter with a long “Answer by the Editor” concurring that “the Tomato has long been known and used for culinary purposes in many portions of Europe . . . and within a few years has become a general favourite in this country.” The piece then cites the many health benefits of the fruit, each ascribed to a particular doctor or professor, before offering six recipes for cooking or preserving tomatoes. In later reprintings, P. B. T.’s letter largely disappears, summarized in a single introductory sentence—“To many persons there is something unpleasant, not to say disgusting, in the flavor of this excellent fruit”—which is then followed by some version of the original editor’s reply, though sans the “Answer by the Editor” subheadline of the original article.36

Reprinted pieces in nineteenth-century newspapers were in fact often cocreated by correspondents and editors, as the newspapers’ readers and subscribers wrote through the medium to the wider community it created and sustained. The correspondent who sparked “The Tomato” seeks to correct a perceived error in his or her community and sees the newspaper as a vehicle for a public address. In such pieces we might recognize something more akin to modern viral media, in which the readers drive the popularity of content from the bottom up, rather than editors determining what readers need from the top down. Indeed, we might even identify readers corresponding
with their newspapers as a form of social media, an attempt to connect private practice with a broader community.

Nevertheless, in this system editors ultimately controlled what did and did not appear in the newspaper. This model, of editors swapping texts through semiformalized and formalized exchange networks, might seem too organized to fit our expectations for viral media. Such a distinction, however, stems from a common misconception about modern viral media online, one that imagines virality to be driven largely or entirely by the crowd. This is often framed in contrast to “traditional” media, in which gatekeepers—editors, journalists, writers, reporters—choose what information is worthy of distribution. This idea of virality sees gatekeepers as removed entirely from the information loop and casts online content not as a “one to many” medium, but instead purely as a “many to many” medium. Such a frame is difficult to reconcile with nineteenth-century exchange reprinting.

However, viral media researchers are increasingly finding both top-down and bottom-up models insufficient for describing the way content actually goes viral online. Instead of discovering sudden and unprompted swells of attention from individuals, they note the importance of gatekeepers—though, to be fair, not necessarily the same gatekeepers as in twentieth-century print economies—in helping a given piece gain an initial audience who will spark its viral spread. Nahon and Hemsley describe viral events as driven by a complex interplay of “organic” sharing among social media users, coverage by mainstream media sources, and attention from “opinion leaders”—such as the “about 20,000 elite users” who “attract about 50 percent of the attention (measured by the spread of URLs) on Twitter,” which currently claims about 270 million active monthly users.37 Consider the “Double Rainbow” video, which has garnered nearly 40 million views on YouTube. In many ways it epitomizes our ideas about Internet virality—it’s an amateur video, shot without any ambitions regarding widespread use or popularity, that people found remarkable for the filmmaker’s rapturous narration. However, the video was originally posted on January 8, 2010, and it sat largely unremarked on YouTube until late-night comedian Jimmy Kimmel tweeted about it nearly seven months later, on July 3, 2010. The widely connected Kimmel—a gatekeeper, in other words—seeded the video’s viral success, bringing the piece to the attention of a large number of people who would otherwise have been unaware of its existence and who then shared it with their smaller but numerous networks.

Like these modern gatekeepers, nineteenth-century newspaper editors served as catalysts for virality. When one newspaper reprinted a
piece, it went out not only to their readers but also to all the editors of other newspapers with whom they exchanged. The fact that one newspaper chose to reprint a text boosted its signal for editors down the line; when many newspapers did so, subsequent editors would often note that the selection was “going the rounds” of the papers. A piece “going the rounds” had, we might say, achieved substantial rhetorical velocity. Added to its intrinsically interesting features was the fact of its reprinting, of its virality. Like modern viral media online, nineteenth-century viral texts propagated, at least in part, due to network effects.

**Nineteenth-Century Newspaper Networks**

The practice of reprinting illuminates the social, technical, and business networks that underlay nineteenth-century newspaper production. As Payne argues about advertising that goes viral online, there is a “paradox at the heart of the relationship between content, structure and participation that vexes an easy understanding of popularity” on social media platforms. “The specific content of a given item,” he notes, “may account for its viral success *at the same time* as having little or nothing to do with the successful functioning of social networks as distributors of content.” While we might read widely reprinted newspaper snippets as signals of cultural priorities and diversions, then—as I have done and will do in future—we can also use them to trace the broader contexts that enabled and even required their circulation. As with viral content online today, the rhetorical velocity of nineteenth-century newspaper selections depended on a mixture of formal and informal networks of influence, which we can begin to recover through the texts themselves. The bibliographies of viral pieces, gathered en masse, offer new purchase on the sociology of texts during the nineteenth century.

There are few clearer signals of influence among newspapers than shared reprinting, particularly when considered at scale. That two newspapers printed a few texts in common tells us little about their relationship; that two newspapers printed hundreds or thousands of texts in common, however, suggests a connection worth closer attention. At the other end of the scale, the degree to which individual texts saturate a given network can help us understand those texts’ circulation and their significance. Considering reprints as signals of social interconnection among publications, weak in the singular but powerful in the aggregate, we can use shared texts to graph conversation and influence across nineteenth-century periodical culture—much as we can map conversation and influence in a Twitter network.
based on replies and retweets. Unlike Twitter, of course, our archive of nineteenth-century periodicals remains far from comprehensive, which means that counting reprints can only take us so far toward understanding the influence of a given text.

Focusing on raw numbers of reprints can in fact elide the circulation of texts through smaller geographic, ideological, religious, or political networks. Virality is a model that can apply (or not) at different scales, so we might talk of one poem “going viral” across the entire system of nineteenth-century print culture, while the transcription of a political speech “went viral” among the newspapers of one political party only. In this way, virality becomes not simply a measure of raw popularity, but instead a frame for comparison among texts and publications. Much like social interactions online, historical “viral texts” can reveal relationships or influence among publications. At scale, such texts can be used to reconstruct the networks of nineteenth-century print. They can show how information circulated among publications, which publications most influenced (or were most influenced by) which others, and how various communities were constructed through textual exchange.

These are some of the major goals of the Viral Texts project. Though this work is nascent, it has already suggested new ideas about American print, particularly in the period before the Civil War. To cite one small but telling example of how scale might shift scholarly attention, our network analyses of reprinting have pointed toward newspapers in understudied cities in the South and Midwest as more central to textual exchange during the period than previous criticism has recognized. Scholars interested in nineteenth-century periodicals have often focused on large-circulation newspapers from publishing centers, such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia—by necessity, as these papers are the most easily accessible in frequently consulted archives. However, when our data is modeled as a network (as you can see at http://networks.viraltexts.org/1836to1860/index.html), it is striking how papers such as the Nashville Union, Sunbury American (Sunbury, Pennsylvania), Daily Dispatch (Richmond, Virginia), and Fremont Journal (Fremont, Ohio) emerge as shaping influences on the wider network of newspapers outside the urban Northeast. These early findings suggest that influence across the nineteenth-century print network was far more distributed than scholars have typically assumed, a theory we will continue to test as we incorporate more data into our study.

For example, while the 1836–60 graph shows the New York Tribune and Evening Star (Washington, DC) as influential nodes in the
network of nineteenth-century reprinting, their degrees are roughly comparable to those of the Ottawa Free Trader (Ottawa, Illinois), Daily Dispatch (Richmond, Virginia), and Nashville Union, followed closely by a range of regional papers, such as the Glasgow Weekly Times (Glasgow, Missouri), Edgefield Advertiser (Edgefield, South Carolina), Raftsman’s Journal (Clearfield, Pennsylvania), and Burlington Free Press (Burlington, Vermont). This effect certainly stems in part from the data we are analyzing—Chronicling America’s holdings skew disproportionately toward smaller and more rural papers—but it nonetheless provides a valuable window into textual exchange outside the urban centers that often monopolize historical and literary criticism. For the study of virality, the dispersed regionalism of this archive might be as much a boon as a hindrance; for a single text to saturate the newspapers that comprise Chronicling America, it had to resonate in large cities and small villages, in the North, South, East, and West.

Moreover, this network view of textual sharing opens up new possibilities for comparison between and among individual viral texts. Consider, for instance, Charles MacKay’s religious poem “The Inquiry” and “Interesting Statistics,” a column of factoids supposedly compiled by “A gentleman claiming to be a ‘friend of the human race,’” including statistics about the “whole number of languages spoken in the world,” human life expectancy, religious profession, and marriage. “The Inquiry” (graph available at http://networks.viraltexts.org/1836to1860-Inquiry/index.html) and “Interesting Statistics” (graph available at http://networks.viraltexts.org/1836to1860-InterestingStats/index.html) were printed a comparable number of times prior to 1861: we have identified 33 reprints of the former and 32 of the latter. To put it another way, the pieces were both printed in about one quarter of the newspapers in our study for the antebellum period.41 Though they were both reprinted in certain newspapers, however, such as the Evening Star, Nashville Union, and Ottawa Free Trader, their networks were also in many ways distinctive. “Interesting Statistics,” for instance, was printed in several highly influential newspapers that missed “The Inquiry,” including the New York Daily Tribune, the Rutland Herald, and the Fremont Journal. While “The Inquiry” was also printed in influential papers, those that printed only “The Inquiry” are largely concentrated in one state: the Vermont Watchman, the Burlington Free Press, or the Middlebury People’s Press.

Overall, “Interesting Statistics” was reprinted in more of the newspapers identified by our study as central to textual exchange during the period. Thus we might expect to see this piece printed more often
than its counterpart, as more newspapers drew from their network’s influencers. And looking at a larger Viral Texts data set that includes newspapers after 1861, the rhetorical velocity of “Interesting Statistics” does seem to have accelerated at a higher rate—though admittedly only slightly higher—than that of “The Inquiry.” The former was ultimately reprinted at least 120 times through the nineteenth century, while we have identified only 93 reprintings of the latter during that same period. Of course, as a poem, “The Inquiry” was also featured in other media not included in this study, including poetry anthologies and sheet music. It seems likely that the overall cultural impact of “The Inquiry” was greater than a more ephemeral trivia column. Nevertheless, a network effect is discernible for the two pieces within the system of nineteenth-century newspapers. The piece that found purchase in the most influential newspapers was ultimately reprinted in more newspapers—propagated, as Payne argues about Facebook likes, less by the inherent value of the content than by the features of the platform itself, by the medium.

These analyses are only a starting point for considering the system of nineteenth-century print as a network. Significant work will be necessary both to create more sophisticated models of publications’ connections and to analyze texts not only across the total system, but also within smaller contexts. In the Viral Texts project, we are working toward more nuanced investigations that take into account both genre and topic (for the texts) and affiliation (for the newspapers). We are currently annotating our initial results to this end, marking the topics and genres of the most widely reprinted texts we have thus far identified (e.g., temperance or abolition, poetry or political speech), as well as the shifting editorial, political, social, and religious affiliations of the newspapers in our study. These annotations will allow us to better compare the rhetorical velocities of viral texts, discovering whether poetry, for instance, was more likely to be reprinted by religious papers than by secular ones, or revealing the degree of cross printing between ideologically opposed newspapers. We are also conscious that the national limitations of our current study do not adequately account for the transatlantic print networks that brought texts like “The Inquiry” to the United States and exported American texts, as Bob Nicholson demonstrates in his study of American jokes in the British press. We are currently exploring partnerships that will allow us to include British and other newspapers in our study to further explore transnational reprinting. Even as we pursue these larger questions, however, our early experiments demonstrate the potential for modern social-network analysis to illuminate aspects of
nineteenth-century print culture that have been largely obscured by the scale of the newspaper archive. If virality both creates and is created by its platform and by that platform’s gatekeepers, then a granular study of viral texts in the nineteenth century will bring both the newspaper medium and its messages into sharper focus.

**Conclusion**

The network graph allows us to map not geographic space, but social space: to visualize the social lives of texts, their viral spread through the interrelated operations of people and platforms. As models, they are partial, privileging certain connections—in this case, shared reprints between publications—and obscuring others. As Franco Moretti argues of geographic maps, the network graph is “a new, artificial object” that “possess[es] ‘emerging’ qualities which were not visible at the lower level.” In this case, such models can help us grapple with the messy, energetic, complex system of newspaper exchanges in the nineteenth-century United States, both tracing the rhetorical velocity of individual snippets across the system and using snippets en masse to envision a larger network structure. What emerges from such modeling is a more capacious understanding of textual influence, including in its purview not only the major print centers of the period but also the regional publications that comprised the bulk of nineteenth-century newspaper culture.

As texts moved through newspaper networks, they assumed new forms and sometimes sparked wider viral events—flurries of responsive textual activity. The metaphor of virality, while imperfect for describing the circulation of cultural ideas and artifacts, nonetheless proves useful for framing the social text: its vectors of transmission, its diverse audiences, its many and varied modes of expression. Perhaps most importantly, virality focuses exclusively on cultural repetition and remediation, on modeling the social diffusion of content. As I wrote in the introduction to this essay, these borrowed terms—virality, memes, viral events, rhetorical velocity—are in essence new ways of framing bibliographic description (what was printed, where, and when?). But virality’s overarching theme remains contagion; the metaphor is somewhat unsatisfying because it implies a paucity of human agency, the unintended spread of disease rather than the passing on of useful, beautiful, or entertaining content. This fact, too, perhaps explains the pervasiveness of virality for describing online content, which is often dismissed as trite and ephemeral. Better, then, that it should spread by contact than by choice.
But this caveat also points to the central reason the virality metaphor is ultimately useful for thinking in new ways, bibliographical and literary-historical, about nineteenth-century print culture. Considering virality forces us to subject textual transmission, repetition, and circulation to systematic scrutiny, to look beyond only human choice and examine the technological, economic, and network effects that shaped what texts nineteenth-century readers encountered in their newspapers. The newspaper was a truly mass medium, both in its reception and in its creation. Editors sifted through a mass of content to choose the selections they would distribute to their readers, who included other editors, who would in turn sift and select. To achieve the rhetorical velocity required to “go viral” within this system, a given piece had to both resonate with readers and fit the material requirements of composition and recomposition. The model of the public sphere has been used to describe the workings of print during the nineteenth century; virality offers a complementary model that requires consideration of people and platform, message and medium, for understanding how ideas circulated during the period.

Notes

1. This is the earliest printing of this piece that I have discovered; there is nothing in the Ashtabula Weekly Telegraph issue pointing to the provenance of the piece.
2. I write more about the listicle as a genre in another forthcoming article. As I say in that piece, it is difficult to find academic citations for the listicle, but Arika Okrent defines the genre succinctly for The University of Chicago Magazine (January/February 2014) in “The Listicle as Literary Form”: “A listicle is an article in the form of a list.” Okrent then attempts to account for the dominance of the listicle online and concludes by defining a listicle in the listicle form:
   Eight fun facts about the listicle
   1. A listicle is an article in the form of a list.
   2. It is kind of like a haiku or a limerick.
   3. It has comforting structure.
   4. It makes pieces.
   5. It puts them in an order.
   6. Language does that too.
   7. Sometimes with great difficulty.
   8. Lists make it look easier.
3. This figure, as will be described below, is based on computational analysis of newspapers in the Library of Congress’s open-access Chronicling America historical newspaper archive and Making of America historical magazine and journal archives. Based on our tests across commercial
archives of nineteenth-century periodicals, we would expect to find many more reprints of this piece in collections managed by Readex, ProQuest, or EBSCO.

4. The reprinting immediately preceding *The Appeal*’s, in the March 1, 1899, *Somerset Herald*, included the even more blunt title “You Are Wrong.”

5. For more on the aims and progress of the Viral Texts project, see http://viraltexts.org.

6. For a detailed description of how the project algorithm works, see David A. Smith, Ryan Cordell, and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, “Infectious Texts: Modeling Text Reuse in Nineteenth-Century Newspapers,” in *Proceedings of the Workshop on Big Humanities* (IEEE Computer Society Press 2013). This version of the algorithm looked for all reprinted texts in the corpus from its earliest issues (around 1835) to 1870, and then looked for additional reprintings of identified texts from 1870 to the end of the nineteenth century. In other words, the only texts from the period 1870–99 included here are those with a first reprinting before 1870. We chose this cutoff not as a strict periodizing marker, but instead as a way to keep computational needs manageable as we scale up the project.

It is difficult to say with absolute certainty what percent of the newspapers in our corpus reprinted a given text, as the raw number of newspaper titles in Chronicling America does not accurately reflect the actual number of distinct newspapers in the corpus—often a single newspaper changed titles several times during its run, but each title is listed as a separate newspaper in the CA metadata. One of our tasks in the Viral Texts project has been to merge instances of “the same” newspaper in our database so that we can more accurately assess how thoroughly a given text saturated the network of newspapers. We have mostly accomplished this goal for pre-1861 newspapers but are still working through the task for post-1861 publications. In any case, “Follies” was reprinted in at least 136 of 712 (unmerged) newspapers. I use the formulation “at least XX newspapers” throughout this essay because we can be confident about those reprints we have identified, as I have checked each of the clusters cited here thoroughly. We cannot know, however, how many reprints our algorithm missed in our current corpus, due to very poor OCR or an odd selection process by a given editor, and we cannot know how many reprints exist in undigitized newspapers or in other, closed online corpora. As we have discovered through targeted searches in commercial archives (to which we do not have data-level access for text mining), our findings seem strongly indicative of larger reprinting trends.


9. The video remains the most viewed item on YouTube and is fast approaching two billion views as of October 2013. Psy, “Gangnam Style,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0.
10. The “Double Rainbow” video was uploaded to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQSNhk5ICTI on January 8, 2010. Dollar Shave Club’s “Our Blades Are F***ing Great” was posted to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUG9qYTJMsI on March 6, 2012, and has been viewed nearly 15 million times.

11. This page, including its original picture and many following, can be found at https://www.facebook.com/Twogirlsandapuppy. The campaign also received wide media coverage, including several outlets interested in how we might contextualize this event within a wider understanding of viral media. See Rebecca J. Rosen’s Atlantic piece, “The Viral-Media Prof Whose Kids Got 1 Million Facebook Likes (and a Puppy)” (http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/01/the-viral-media-prof-whose-kids-got-1-million-facebook-likes-and-a-puppy/267338/), Radio Boston’s “From Hawthorne to Facebook: How One Social Media Scholar Got Schooled” (http://radioboston.wbur.org/2013/01/25/social), or this interview on CBC’s Q (http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/ID/2330327663/).

12. Readers, we got them a puppy: http://milliesmillions.ryancordell.org/.

13. See http://www.itgetsbetter.org/ for more about the “It Gets Better” project.

14. That these responses often parody a video that is itself already parodic gestures toward many potential conversations about cultural translation and virality for which I unfortunately have little space here.

15. One can read all about the origins and life of these “one million likes pleas,” including a synopsis of my daughters’ campaign, at the Know Your Meme website, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/one-million-facebook-likes-pleas.


17. The Know Your Meme website (http://knowyourmeme.com/about) defines the “Internet meme” as “a piece of content or an idea that’s passed from person to person, changing and evolving along the way. A piece of content that is passed from person to person, but does not evolve or change during the transmission process is considered viral content.”


19. Media outlets, such as Wired magazine, Lapham’s Quarterly, Slate’s The Vault blog, and NPR’s On the Media, have covered the project, in large part because the media is hungry to understand modern virality online.


21. For more about newspaper exchanges and nineteenth-century reprinting, see the introduction to Candy Gunther Brown’s The Word in the World (University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kyle Robert’s “Locating Popular Religion in the Evangelical Tract: The Roots and Routes of

22. In another article in progress, I contend that authorship is at best an amorphous configuration in a print culture founded on sharing, exchange, and remediation of texts, the majority of which were anonymously authored. Often the accomplishment or creative act within the antebellum culture of reprinting hinged less on original composition than on savvy curation. Editors prided themselves on finding and reprinting pieces their readers would admire. For those readers, the newspaper system itself filled the authorial role. For widely reprinted snippets, textual authority and literary value were vested not in the genius of their author, but instead in their circulation and perceived usefulness.

23. First identified in our study in the *Big Blue Union* of Marysville, Kansas, and reprinted in at least 134 other newspapers between July 1863 and July 1897, with the bulk of reprints in the 1860s and 1870s.


26. First uncovered in our study in the *Illinois Free Trader* of November 27, 1840, the “viral event” of this poem includes at least 93 texts in American newspapers between then and July 7, 1899. The poem was printed under many titles, the most common of which, besides “The Inquiry,” is the first line, “Tell Me, Ye Winged Winds.” It was also collected in many poetry anthologies throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

the music can also be found in the Library of Congress’s digital collections. The musical version of the poem testifies to its wide cultural impact—or, in the spirit of this essay, to its virality.


29. First identified in our study in the November 5, 1857 issue of the *Rafisman’s Journal*, this squib was itself reprinted in a number of other newspapers.


31. This is comparable, perhaps, to the few words of commentary that sometimes accompany a retweet and that offer insight into a user’s motivation for sharing.

32. This reprint appeared on March 2, 1852, and was the first to include this particular editorial endorsement, although this language was picked up by many subsequent reprints of the listicle. The piece in question, “Rules for Home Education,” was reprinted in at least 81 newspapers between April 12, 1851 and April 7, 1897.

33. The piece appeared in the *Plymouth Pilot* on May 28, 1851.

34. This piece appeared in the *Democrat and Sentinel* on October 17, 1855, and was reprinted in at least 51 newspapers between January 28, 1853 and January 1, 1864.


36. This snippet appears first in our reprinting data in the *Edgefield Advertiser* of July 6, 1842, and was reprinted in at least 81 newspapers. The summary introduction quoted here appears in the reprinting of the *Burlington Free Press*, August 20, 1852.

37. *Going Viral* 72, 94.

38. “Virality 2.0” 543.

39. Our first experiments focused on the pre–Civil War period, which is why we have more extensive network models of it. We are currently developing network models on more recent data sets that span to the end of the nineteenth century.

40. In these graphs, which you can view online, the nodes (the circles) represent individual newspapers, while the edges (the lines between circles) represent texts shared by the newspapers they connect. The edges are weighted based on how many texts two papers share. At http://viraltexts.
you can find a less cluttered version of this 1836–60 graph, in which I filtered the edges so that only relatively strong connections appear. Thus even a very thin line represents several hundred shared texts between publications, while a thick line represents thousands of shared texts. In these graphs, the nodes are larger or smaller based on their “degree,” which is a measure of how connected they are to other nodes—in this case, of how many texts they print that other newspapers also print. The curve of the lines attempts to represent the direction of connections—in this case determined by time of reprintings—though that measure is imprecise at best, as we cannot know simply from the days printed whether one newspaper actually got a given piece from a particular other newspaper. To create these models, I used Gephi, which is “an interactive visualization and exploration platform for all kinds of networks and complex systems, dynamic and hierarchical graphs” (https://gephi.github.io/). Gephi is typically used to visualize modern social-media data; hence this application of it to historical text exchange is an active exploration of how and to what extent the modern viral metaphor holds for such a study. An interactive network graph of our pre-1861 viral texts can be found at http://viraltexts.ryancordell.org/networks/1836-1860-wMagazines/index.html.

41. “The Inquiry” was also reprinted at least 33 times between November 27, 1840 and March 31, 1860, while “Weights and Measures” was reprinted at least 33 times between October 23, 1851 and December 5, 1860.
