RECRUITING COMPOSITION:
EXAMINING THE SOCIAL RELATIONS IN PROMOTING TEXT CIRCULATION

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how phenomena of recomposition relate to notions of literacy sponsorship. Several examples I examine demonstrate explicit practices of *composing for strategic recomposition* (Ridolfo and DeVoss 2009), such as retailer Babeland’s recruitment of Facebook users to spread its brand name and sex-positive ideology to potential consumers; social activist clementine cannibal’s recruitment of grrrls to spread feminist ideology throughout their virtual and geopolitical communities; and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) recruitment of reporters, bloggers, and social network users to prevent the spread of suicide contagion. As digital technologies and networks have increasingly facilitated methods for recomposing and recirculating texts as consumer-producers, the study of sponsorship as a phenomenon that structures channels for information distribution and that acts upon those who consume sponsored writers’ texts has gained in importance. However, my study of interactions between text-promoters and their sharers and of a series of outbreak narratives portraying the circulation of popular or purportedly dangerous texts uncovers the inadequacies of existing frameworks—top-down sponsorship, memetics, and virality—for conceptualizing the production and spread of texts. These constructions, I find, frequently reduce complex social relations to analogical models that portray sponsored writers, text-sharers, and readers as acted upon, afflicted, or otherwise interpellated. I argue that rather than simply describing or even illuminating systems of compositional activity, these conceptual frameworks can operate to favor producers who wish to efface their involvement in promoting certain interests and that richer understandings of compositional participation are required to recover participants’ agency within the necessarily collaborative activities of circulating composition.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Every day, I open my email to find pitches from numerous social and political causes soliciting not simply my funds or my vote but my writing and my “voice.” Wildlife Emergency Services asks me to sign a petition\(^1\) pledging not to purchase Yoplait yogurt, whose discarded funnel-shaped cups pose a danger to animals. The NGO Avaaz asks for my written support in creating a public relations disaster for Italian clothing company Benetton in order to pressure them into compensating survivors of a collapse in their eight-story sweatshop in Bangladesh. Planned Parenthood asks me to write to my representatives to support or protest bills that could be passed into law. What these requests have in common is their call for many voices to spread the same message. Planned Parenthood, for example, declares the need for a “chorus of opposition” to unfavorable policies, and it is not enough that I lend my digital signature; I must broadcast the proposition as well: “Help us today by sharing this with just ONE friend to spread the word! \textbf{Click here to SHARE with a friend!}”; “Share this email with your mom, your sister, your neighbor!”; “Tell your friends on Facebook and \textbf{Twitter}!” To these ends, Planned Parenthood and many other organizations often provide scripted text for me to pass on, with directions such as, “Use this note in your own e-mail or Facebook page,” and motivation that ironically declares, “Your voice makes a difference.” This dissertation interrogates the entailments of metaphors\(^2\) currently used as conceptual tools for understanding the role of the social in these processes of recomposition. How can we understand processes of promoting the spread of specific messages, the activity of passing along texts prompted or even scripted by another, and the interactions between those promoting the spread of such texts and those they
recruit to circulate them? How do certain understandings of texts’ circulation favor, prioritize, or facilitate some rhetorical goals over others, and at the expense of which interests?

Within scholarship in writing studies, the trope of literacy sponsorship appears as the most salient conceptual framework for making legible how ideological—and especially economic—interests are transacted through processes and products of literate activity. Deborah Brandt identifies sponsors of literacy as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (1998, p. 166; 2001, p. 19). Despite Brandt’s (2001) identification of sponsors as operating in a variety of forms, including social institutions; public infrastructure; and communication technologies, subsequent studies of literacy sponsorship have focused on person-centered views of sponsorship, often starting with writers’ own accounts of their work; their personal experiences; and the individuals who have shaped their writing (see Selfe and Hawisher’s (2004) study of computer-related literacy and Sara Webb-Sunderhaus’s (2007) research on immediate and extended family members’ sponsorship of students in Central Appalachia). While such studies productively examine the relationship of literacy to those instructed or otherwise enabled, regulated, or constrained in reading or writing, my dissertation argues for an object of inquiry beyond sponsored writers as an approach to the study of literacy sponsorship. For the purposes of this project, I interrogate sponsorship as a phenomenon that structures channels for information distribution and that acts upon those who consume sponsored writers’ texts. I focus my object of study on channels of information with the goal of achieving richer understandings of how sponsorship shapes the consumption of texts, particularly as digital technologies and networks allow for increasingly faster and easier methods for recomposing and recirculating texts as consumer-producers.
Throughout my dissertation, I examine how phenomena of recomposition relate to notions of sponsorship. Several examples demonstrate explicit practices of *composing for strategic recomposition* (Ridolfo and DeVoss 2009), such as retailer Babeland’s recruitment of Facebook users to spread its brand name and sex-positive ideology to potential consumers; social activist clementine cannibal’s recruitment of grrrls to spread feminist ideology throughout their virtual and geopolitical communities; and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) recruitment of reporters, bloggers, and social network users to prevent the spread of *suicide contagion*. Specifically, I focus on retailer Babeland’s recruitment of Facebook users to spread its brand name and sex-positive ideology to potential consumers; social activist clementine cannibal’s recruitment of grrrls to spread feminist ideology throughout their virtual and geopolitical communities; and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) recruitment of reporters, bloggers, and social network users to prevent the spread of *suicide contagion*. In each of these examples, sponsors (and processes of sponsorship) actively recruit composition and recomposition from writers who have social networks to which the sponsors seek access to circulate their messages.

I have selected these sites of study to illuminate a process I identify as *dislocated sponsorship*. In the examples I study, I see a commonality that reminds me of the Wizard of Oz; sponsors recruit writers to mediate their messages to audiences so that the readers pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, or the actual sponsoring interests behind the messages they consume. I propose the concept of *dislocated sponsorship* in part to help us in analyzing persuasive strategies of getting voices that do not seem to share sponsors’ interests to propagate them, such as television characters involved in product placement who do not explicitly announce, “This scene is brought to you by Coca Cola” to credit those underwriting their media.
For the purposes of this project, it helps us to recognize Babeland’s interest in driving enthusiasm for its products from consumers rather than its paid staff; grrrlVIRUS’s interest in creating a collective by de-emphasizing clementine cannibal’s role as creator of movement; and NIMH and the CDC’s shared interests in creating the impression of universal truth by directing reporters to insert material directly from their guidelines into their writings on suicide. Recruiting writers with an audience allows these sponsors not only to amplify their messages but also to shape how their messages are received. By channeling the messages through more voices and ones that are not its own, the sponsor gains credibility, whether through seemingly more trustworthy voices or in apparent consensus. The more such voices are recruited and induced to speak, the more the message resounds and the more likely it is to become a social fact, with no apparent author or origin. Beyond these processes, however, I further consider how invoking tropes of viral spread might function to dislocate sponsorship, to make the principal interests beyond a message less obvious, more difficult to identify. In working to obscure the top-down action of teaching, regulating, ventriloquizing through, and suppressing individuals in literate activity, the process of dislocated sponsorship often calls attention to flatter processes of spread not typically theorized in current studies of sponsorship.

Brandt’s portrayal of sponsorship is largely that of macro-social powers acting upon sponsored readers and writers. Her definition of sponsorship as enabling, supporting, teaching, modeling, recruiting, regulating, suppressing, or withholding literacy epitomizes this vertical action with a long series of top-down verbs portraying its parameters of action. I work to add horizontal dimensions to the vertically oriented metaphor of sponsorship in two ways. I first build on Webb-Sunderhaus’s (2007) and Pavia’s (2013) work on competing and complementary sponsorships, by examining the intersecting action of multiple sponsors upon sponsored writers,
introducing the terms confluent sponsorship and composite sponsorship. Confluent sponsorship, as the term suggests, involves sponsors with confluent interests, such as social network Facebook’s interest in aggregating consumers in one site to sell advertising space and retailers interest in making their products and brands visible in a space with not only an amassed audience, but personal data frequently available to target specific populations that meet their target demographics. Throughout this study, I examine networks of sponsors that interact without explicitly conspiring with one another to reach their goals, rather than the more typical study of sponsorship by individuals or organizations. By taking up the channels of information distribution and textual recomposition that the social network site Facebook and users such as retailer Babeland create for affiliate users within the network, I outline a process I term composite sponsorship, in which the synergy of multiple sponsors (whether confluent or not) results in structural significance and ideological freight distinct from those that result from the operation of any single sponsor on its own. As multiple sponsors intersect, I find that the structure of who is sponsoring whom becomes less clear, as Facebook sponsors Babeland’s literate activity even as Babeland recruits its own body of writers, and Babeland and its affiliates recruit each other in constructing their digital identities within Facebook’s social network. While Babeland recruits sex-positive writers to spread its interests, sex-positive Facebook users can also recruit Babeland into their identity construction or social action projects through their written interactions with the retailer.

After unpacking these processes of mutual sponsorship, I take up Goffman’s (1981) production format to examine how the functions of authorship, animation, and principalship lead to richer understandings of how sponsored writers function as social actors. Here I introduce examples in which animators have spread and repurposed other authors’ texts so quickly and
broadly that they have been framed by media and popular terminology through metaphors of virulence and memetics, in addition to a series of examples in which authors themselves invoke metaphors of virulence in portraying the messages they seek to spread. I find it productive to place these conceptual frameworks for understanding recomposition in conversation with frameworks of sponsorship, as viral, point-to-point models of circulation more ontologically focus on flat processes of spread rather than on the portrayal of the influence of a macro-social actor. Just as recognizing the multiply-distributed and sometimes overlapping functions of author, animator, and principal can help to enrich our understandings of the activity and agency of sponsored writers, so to can these functions help to reconcile metaphorical framings of composer-initiators in the metaphorical role of patient zero in outbreak narratives, a role that, on its own, does not capture the agency of either sponsors or sponsored writers in producing text, nor the often-collaborative interaction of multiple writers.

As I place the conceptual frameworks of sponsorship, viral and memetic spread, and Goffman’s production format in conversation with one another, I take up Spiro et al.’s (1989) argument that although analogies are an important tool in communicating, conceptualizing, and acquiring knowledge, their reduction of complex concepts to similar and more familiar analogical cores can impede fuller and richer understandings of the concepts they portray and often produce erroneous understanding. Their study posits two remedies to this problem: 1) to pay more conscious and sustained attention to the ways that analogies fail, mislead, or are incomplete and 2) to employ integrated multiple metaphors to better capture the complexity of difficult concepts or to employ several already known concepts rather than only one (p. 499). These remedies require detailed consideration of how each metaphor maps and doesn’t map onto the phenomenon of interest it is intended to explain. As I work to fuse and refine the metaphors
of sponsorship and viral spread, I argue that both of these metaphorical frameworks typically portray sponsored writers, text sharers, and readers as acted upon, afflicted, or otherwise interpellated, without focusing on their agency in composing, spreading, or ascribing value to the texts with which they interact. To address these problematic accounts of agency, I propose intervening in the analogies of sponsorship and viral contagion to more effectively capture the activities and agency of writers commonly identified as sponsored or even patient zeros. In addition to Goffman’s production format, I take up Lasswell’s (1981) metaphors of resonance and dampening and Kawachi’s (2008) study of spreaders and stiflers to explore how we might represent sponsored writers as not merely acted upon, but as social actors themselves.

Throughout this study, I employ the term recomposition (Ridolfo and DeVoss 2009) to cover the many activities of producing, promoting, sharing, and appropriating texts that are involved in the process of spreading them. In studying these various activities, it is important to investigate a variety of textual modes, particularly with the “viral” proliferation of multimodal texts across the Internet each day. Though terms such as “writing” and “literacy” tend to signal a limited range of the semiotic resources that are in fact involved in sponsorship and recomposition, especially in current digital domains, my sites of study frequently include image-texts, or a combination of visual image and written text, as objects of study. Thus, I have also applied a multiliteracies approach to the study of literacy sponsorship, expanding the trope of sponsored literacy to include sponsored semiosis. In particular, Pahl and Rowsell (2006) emphasize the need to combine the New Literacy Studies (NLS) conceptualization of literacy as social practice (Street 1993) with multimodal approaches to literacy, which reveal how texts operate as material objects and how literacy sits within a much wider communicational landscape (p. 8). Likewise, Street, Pahl, and Rowsell (2009) call for scholars to bring
multimodality and NLS together to fill out a larger, more nuanced picture of social positionings and communication by building an equal recognition of practices, texts, contexts, space, and time (p. 194). Answering this call, my dissertation unpacks implications of literacy sponsorship that have yet to be fully explored: how sponsorship plays out in social domains, how it is technologically mediated, and how it is embodied by and through sponsors, sponsored writers, and their audiences.

**Chapter Outline**

Chapter Two, “Synthesizing Sponsorships: Toward a Lens of Composite Sponsorship,” introduces as an object of inquiry systems of sponsorship in which two sponsors or more interact in bringing together writers with individual audiences within a networked compositional platform. In my primary example for analysis, I focus on sex-toy retailer Babeland’s sponsorship of writing contests within the compositional spaces of the “status update” and “comment” features of Facebook, a platform that, notably, requires legal names for its participating members. I observe that Babeland, through its writing prompts, and Facebook, through its terms of access to its compositional spaces, merge sex-positive ideologies and brand promotion with the social value of reputation—specifically constructed through legal names. I argue that Babeland thereby creates a multilayered composite between itself and Facebook and conclude by interrogating the consequences of this co-sponsorship.

Chapter Three, “The ‘Power Over What Goes Viral’: Locating Actors in the Circulation of ‘Viral’ Texts,” reviews viral and memetic understandings of recomposition and how they may act to obscure the work of both sponsors’ recruitment of writers and recruited writers’ production and dispersion of texts that are framed as viral and self-propagating. Examining the Twitter phenomenon of #AlexFromTwitter, the Philosoraptor T-shirt-design-gone-meme, and grassroots
feminist movement grrrIVIRUS, this chapter considers the ways in which originators of viral texts have been recovered by reporters covering memetic phenomena; have fought to reclaim ownership of their texts after the texts’ popularity soared and was attributed to the masses; or conversely have invoked metaphors of virulence themselves, downplaying their involvement and disclaiming the identity of sole concept-originator in order to contribute to a larger collective.

Taking up Goffman’s production format of authorship, animation, and principalship, I juxtapose examples in which authors actively sponsor the recomposition of their texts; demonstrate no such goals for recomposition; or find animators appropriating their texts against their specific goals for recomposition to question the degree to which intentionality fits in current conceptualizations of literacy sponsorship and to consider how more complex models of agency are needed than those offered by the conventional trope of top-down, unified sponsorship of passive writers.

Chapter Four, “Containing Contagion: Medical Framings of Composition as Vector,” examines the sponsorship of the National Institute of Mental Health and the Center for Disease Control as they work to intervene in channels of mass communication of suicide reporting by recruiting writers with already assembled audiences to both spread and stifle (Kawachi 2008) specific messages under the advisement of the medical institutions. In this chapter, I argue that just as the supposed role of “speaker” actually covers a variety of roles of authorship, animation, and principalship, so too is the term “sponsor” in need of unpacking. In their recommendations for reporting suicide, both institutions’ writers animate the work of numerous authors’ scholarly works even as they ask others to further animate their guidelines for spreading their own messages and stifling competing messages. In these examples, principalship is complex. For example, NIMH and CDC sponsor messages that they judge to be in the public’s best interest. What do NIMH and CDC gain by persuading others to adopt their guidelines? What do news
media gain by following the guidelines? What do scholars and medical practitioners gain by getting their specific recommendations adopted and promulgated by these governmental agencies? Without denying that there could be some economic influences (e.g., avoidance of liability for news media; internal bureaucratic advantage for scholars, doctors, and government officials), I argue that understanding sponsorship as motivated primarily by economics—even outside of literal financial gain—is quite limiting.

In Chapter Five, “Conclusion: Integrating Multiple Metaphors of Literate Activity,” I shift my focus from the ways the metaphors and analogies discussed throughout this dissertation fail, mislead, or operate incompletely, and from modifying metaphors of sponsorship, such as with the lenses of *confluent sponsorship, composite sponsorship*, and *dislocated sponsorship*, to argue that our understandings of sponsorship and virality would further benefit from the integration of new analogies. I turn to Lasswell’s (1959) theory of resonance and Kawachi’s (2008) study of rumor spread to demonstrate the dynamic social activity of sponsored writers and consumer-recomposers through terms that do not define them primarily by their interpellation by their (apparent) sponsors. I examine how might we emphasize the agency of sponsored writers by focusing on their roles as *animators*, as *resonators* or *spreaders*, and as *dampers* or *stiflers*. This dissertation then concludes by considering how a multiple metaphors approach can help us to capture the agency of the frameworks listed above; the exchange of resources illuminated by metaphors of sponsorship; and the flat spread of texts that may change over time, as portrayed in metaphors of viral spread, for a more nuanced understanding of processes of recomposition.

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1 While the act of signing my name may appear weak as an example of composition, by signing my name to such a text, I become one of its animators. Though I am not necessarily the sounding box through which is its orated, as Goffman (1981) presents the idea, I am one of many participants metaphorically voicing another author’s text to an audience.
Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define a metaphorical entailment as the imparting of a characteristic of the source domain (the metaphorical image) to the target domain (the concept receiving metaphorical treatment) by logical means (p. 89).

For further reading on the obfuscation of fact as socially constructed and possessing its own history of construction, see Latour and Woolgar’s (1986) Laboratory Life: The construction of Scientific Facts.
In whatever form, sponsors deliver the ideological freight that must be borne for access to what they have. Of course, the sponsored can be oblivious to or innovative with this ideological burden. (Brandt, 1998, p. 168)

In 1993, Claire Cavanah and Rachel Venning opened the first Babeland sex-toy store (temporarily titled Toys in Babeland) in Seattle as a corrective to what was, in their view, a citywide shortage of women-friendly adult shops. Since its founding, Babeland has offered itself as a non-threatening, comfortable environment for customers to ask intimate questions about sex. This view is embodied in the company’s mission statement, which casts Babeland both as a provider of access to top-quality products and as a forum for women seeking to uninhibitedly explore their sexuality. It is this aspect of the mission, to educate, that is most highlighted on the company’s website, babeland.com, where a demarcation is set between the company’s brick-and-mortar shops (which now total four), described as “stores,” and the website, described as “thriving and educational”; mention of the website’s commercial function is absent, rendering it an afterthought to the information available through the site (About Us: Babeland and Its Mission). Throughout babeland.com, in fact, founders and staff identify themselves as educational resources with features such as “Live Help,” “Ask Rachel and Claire,” “How-Tos,” “Sex Tips,” and “Staff Reviews” (listed separately from consumer reviews, which appear with the products). In addition to “Live Help,” “Ask Rachel and Claire,” and consumer reviews, hyperlinked “Community” spaces such as the Babeland Blog, Moms in Babeland (a second
blog), Facebook, and Twitter provide spaces in which consumers can interact with the information providers through questions or feedback.

These social media interactions between Babeland and consumers, and the role of sponsorship therein, are the subject of this chapter. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the sponsorship of writing in networked spaces, wherein Babeland and the networked compositional platform Facebook—which requires one’s legal name to gain membership—co-operate\(^4\) as sponsors.\(^5\) In current marketing trends in social network sites (SNS), I notice sponsors prompting, modeling, and rewarding compositions often rely on additional sponsorship to not only reach the sponsored writers but to further spread their economic and ideological interests beyond those individuals whose writing they directly elicit. For example, as retailers create Facebook pages and use the compositional spaces there to prompt consumer-written praise for their products and brands, they reach the consumers of writing they have prompted; each consumer-written response further reaches various members of an individual writer’s social network, allowing retailers direct network access to potential correspondents and indirect access to potential consumer markets. Building on Brandt’s (2001) demonstration that sponsors come in a variety of forms, including social institutions, public infrastructure, and communication technologies, this chapter examines systems of sponsorship in which one sponsor recruits composition through the technology of a writing platform that simultaneously enables recruiters to reach and make use of the writers they sponsor and constrains them in what they can compose, through both technological structure and rules for participation. Using Babeland’s sponsorship of writing contests within the “status update” and “comment”-feature compositional spaces of Facebook as a case study, I demonstrate that sponsorship is frequently multiple and layered, a
series of processes in which multiple sponsors elicit sponsored writers to structure channels between themselves and a broader audience than they could attract alone.

While Babeland.com has compositional spaces that allow writers to remain anonymous, pseudonymous, or ambiguous, contest guidelines for compositional sponsorship events such as the “Seven Days of Cobra Libre” giveaway require written participation on Facebook. Bound thus to verifiable composition, contest participants are identified as affiliates of Babeland’s brand within a vast social network where identity is constructed, and social capital gained, through public displays of connection. Regardless of whether participants see themselves as or explicitly declare themselves to be affiliates of Babeland or any other specific brand, their compositional act allows others within their network to interpret them as such. This may apply to networks such as Facebook, which do not legislate the interaction between business sponsors and sponsored writers. Nevertheless, the networks do enable this interaction by providing and profiting from the writing platforms for retailers to exploit, in turn rendering themselves co-operators in the sponsorship. The interactions between these multiple sponsors and sponsored writers yield mutually constitutive identity constructions that publicly represent each of the participants, human and corporate, to other social network users; much as sponsored writers are inevitably “branded” through their compositional interactions with Babeland, so is the retailer itself branded as potentially legitimate, mainstream, or, at the very least, not seedy.

The notion of multiple, simultaneously operating sponsorships has recently made inroads into literacy scholarship. While Brandt focuses on accumulations of sponsorship over the course of individuals’ lives, some scholars have begun to examine more temporally intersecting sponsorships. Webb-Sunderhaus (2007) has shown that sponsors of literacy can abet “competing meanings of literacy,” appearing as both enabler and inhibitor of literate activity through
seemingly contradictory messages about literacy (p. 7). Pavia (2013) argues that we need to consider the complementary and competing relationships among the multiple types of sponsors of digital literacies. In this chapter, I take up an example of what I term *confluent sponsorship* of literate activity. Facebook’s interest in providing a compositional platform that captures the attention of millions of consumers is confluent with the interests of retailers seeking to reach as many consumers as possible with information about their brand and products. Facebook, seeking user data to distribute to its advertising partners, thus sponsors both Babeland’s and Babeland’s potential consumers’ occasions for literacy use within the network. Babeland has an economic interest not only in the wellsprings of user connections and compositional interactions within the network, but also in the platform’s requirement of identifiable authorship and its philosophy of identity as constructed through social connections.

This chapter introduces a lens of *composite sponsorship*, which examines sponsorship in terms of *system* by recognizing how interrelated sponsors interact with each other in specific settings, and asks how such a lens might raise new questions and awarenesses of who writes, where they write, for whom they write, and for what gains they write within networked writing economies. How can we more effectively understand such gains by studying the ideological freight borne through sponsorship in terms of both “freight” as a burden and “freight” as a *service* of conveying resources? How can such a perspective alter our understandings of how freight is not simply borne, but often leveraged?

As I proceed with my analysis, I begin with a background in Facebook’s founding principles in order to demonstrate how the philosophy informing the platform’s design operates so that users construct public identities not only through the content they post but also through their visible connections with others. Because the philosophy of social reputation as built upon
visible social connections lies at the core of the network’s design, it is essential to examine the intersection of the writing platform’s philosophies of participation in conjunction with the technological affordances and constraints that shape writers’ interactions with it.

From a brief background on Facebook’s sponsoring interest as a writing platform, I shift to an investigation of how Facebook structurally sponsors Babeland’s interactions with consumers, breaking down how Babeland uses Facebook’s interface to prompt, model, and reward composition through Facebook’s status and comment features, tweaking its prompts and the responses it receives throughout a contest awarding tickets to *SHINE: A Burlesque Musical*.

After this exploration of composite sponsorship at a structural level, I move to an analysis of the “Seven Days of Cobra Libre” contest, in which Babeland prompted and rewarded “sex while driving” stories not in the anonymous, pseudonymous, or ambiguously identified compositional space of its home site but in the identifiable space of Facebook profiles. Through this case, I illustrate the synthesis of sponsored ideologies that can occur in composite sponsorship. Ultimately, I parse out Brandt’s metaphor of the ideological freight borne through sponsorship in order to examine sponsored writers as simultaneously acting and acted upon within a network of sponsors and sponsored writers, identities that I argue are not mutually exclusive.

**Facebook’s Role in Composite Sponsorship: Authenticity, Reputation, and Connections**

This section works to provide an understanding of the mechanism of the writing platform that Facebook affords to users, whether individuals or corporations. Its implications for the building and projection of identity are essential to this project’s discussion. Because Babeland and its consumers are Facebook users, public displays of connection construct public identities for both. I specify “public identities” here to emphasize that regardless of whether the users
genuinely self-identify with them, these representations serve as identities for their digital social contacts to recognize and, as such, can have social repercussions for the individuals and the institutions they represent. As a sponsor, Facebook brings to its composite sponsorship with Babeland a specific construction of compositional space and an ideological emphasis on identifiable authorship and the construction of identity through social connections.

Numerous Facebook corporate documents stress the need for “real” names and identities and emphasize the security measures Facebook has in place to prevent the creation of inauthentic identities and the consequences of false identity construction. For example, Facebook’s Help Center explains Facebook security measures as enacted “to help ensure that Facebook remains a community of people using their real identities to connect and share” (Help Center). Facebook’s document of principles declares as the purpose of its authenticity standards “to make the world more open and transparent, which we believe will create greater understanding and connection. Facebook promotes openness and transparency by giving individuals greater power to share and connect” (Facebook Principles). Within its list of ten founding principles, Facebook defines “social value” (the fifth principle) as “the freedom to build trust and reputation through their identity and connections” (Facebook Principles). Within this structural perception of a social reputation as built upon visible connections, Facebook emphasizes “[m]aking connections [as] the main way to express yourself on your profile” (Help Center: Community Pages and profile connections). Thus, wall posts to one’s connections, both on one’s own wall and on others’ walls as they appear in user newsfeeds, are the main way that Facebook users construct their identities through literate practice. As boyd (2011) observes, Facebook profiles themselves are the locus of a Facebook user’s social-networked written interaction as conversations take place directly on user profiles (p. 43). As such, the writing that appears on Facebook profiles reflects
not only a user’s engagement with the social network site based on the conversations appearing on his or her profile but also the writer’s engagement with the individuals, organization, brands, and ideologies with whom he or she makes public connections. Because the writing that appears on a user’s Facebook wall works to shape that user’s identity, boyd argues, participants do not have complete control over their self-representation.

Facebook’s affordance of compositional space provides retailers with a platform in which consumers are already consuming and producing texts. My analysis departs from the necessary observation that retailers that do not necessarily pay for ad space, can reap the benefits of a social network’s drawing consumers together. Inviting consumers to become part of the advertising process on Facebook requires no financial payment to the social network site.

As a business that takes advantage of Facebook’s compositional space to connect with current and attract new customers, Babeland co-operates with Facebook’s network not only to prompt compositions but further to channel them beyond the writers they sponsor for the consumption of each writer’s social contacts. The utility of user platform migration for Babeland is manifest most obviously in the company’s “Toy-a-Day Giveaway” writing contest participation. For this contest, Babeland asked consumers to identify themselves as a “friend” or “fan” of this company with the possibility of a reward in turn for such public identification. “All you need to do is become a Friend or Fan of Babeland on any of our official Facebook pages and send us a quick ‘Hello’ on our wall or via Facebook mail11 to let us know you want to win one of these great toys” (Babeland’s Toy-a-Day Giveaway). The webpage provides links to three official Babeland pages—Babeland NYC, Babeland Seattle12 and the Babeland.com Fan Page—allowing consumers to move, with one click, from a digital space wherein they can participate
anonymously, pseudonymously, or ambiguously to a site where the actual names of users are both expected and (to varying degrees) enforced.

Such a move calls attention to the ideological freight borne in accessing Facebook’s provision of compositional space. In receiving access to Facebook’s mass-distributed compositional spaces, a retailer gains exposure to potential customers. Sponsorship of composition thus not only shapes the sponsored writers’ production of writing but also acts as a mode of reaching other consumers in their social network. In turning to Facebook as a sponsoring platform for its writing contests, Babeland rewards not simply compositions that help to demonstrate the appeal of their products, such as helping to construct a supposedly inherent sex appeal of cars for their car-inspired toy, but also users’ functional self-identification as a brand affiliate through their correspondence. Babeland’s access to and use of Facebook’s compositional network necessitates further analysis of Brandt’s concept of sponsored writers as bearing the ideological freight of its sponsor; Babeland does not bear such freight as a burden, as this branding in fact should benefit the company, but rather potentially bears this ideological weight reproductively, multiplying opportunities for its own compositional (and thus ideological) sponsorship. The following sections of this chapter review Facebook’s structuring of “authentic” identities constructed around public displays of connection to inform how the selection of a writing platform as an initial layer of sponsorship can additionally layer ideology to a second sponsor’s benefit.

**Composite Sponsorship at a Structural Level: The Role of the Writing Platform Interface in Sponsorship**

Facebook’s interface, its structuring of compositional spaces, its determination of how many characters users can include, of how they can be “tagged” or hyperlinked to one another, and its affordances to upload photos and video all work to structure what, how, and in what
contexts its users can compose. The construction of compositional space (whether through digital coding or otherwise) is thus one process of sponsorship: beyond providing a context for composition, compositional interfaces facilitate, constrain, and ultimately regulate how and what a person can compose within its affordances and boundaries. And it is through this compositional structure that Babeland rewards consumer writing with material prizes such as featured products or tickets to sex-positive events. Babeland and a number of other retailers (including sex-toy company LELO, t-shirt retailer Threadless, and DSW, formerly Discount Shoe Warehouse) take up this structure to carry out writing contests that prompt sponsored compositions to appear in various social networks’ newsfeeds across Facebook. How Babeland specifically decides to use the structures that Facebook provides to influence their contest writers and those writers’ readers, then, is one facet of the composite sponsorship of Babeland and Facebook; the platform’s interface shapes Babeland’s interactions with writers.

Between Tuesday, June 29 and Thursday, July 1, 2010, Babelandsea Seattle issued a series of status updates prompting Facebook “friends” to comment on its Facebook wall to win tickets to *SHINE: A Burlesque Musical*. Through this contest, Babeland deployed its sponsorship of literate activity through repeated and revised writing prompts that increasingly narrowed compositional content to specifically focus consumer responses to capture elements of the product being raffled. In the first message, Babelandsea Seattle posted, “We are giving away 2 tickets to *SHINE: A Burlesque Musical* [hypertext]. Just comment below to enter to win. Winners chosen on Thursday” (Babelandsea Seattle).
Figure 2.1

At this point in the giveaway, contest guidelines said simply to leave a comment without specifying content. Similarly, the third post appears simply to remind readers to post a comment of any kind: “Last day to enter to win tickets to SHINE: A Burlesque Musical. We are giving away 2 pairs today. Leave a comment below to enter” (Babelandsea Seattle). Comments to these posts typically express a general interest in winning the tickets – “Pick me, pick me!”, “meeeeeeeee” – or in the show and the contest itself – “AWESOME!”, “yay!”, “That's very cool!” (Babelandsea Seattle). These messages appear to fulfill the contest criterion of leaving a comment and have the concomitant effect of hyping the show itself.

On the second day of the three-day contest, Babelandsea Seattle posted a second prompt for the giveaway, spurring new comment-entries: “Have you entered to win tickets to SHINE: A Burlesque Musical [hypertext] yet? we [sic] have 2 pairs of tickets and we are picking a winner
tomorrow! Leave a little sparkly love below to enter to win” (Babelandsea Seattle). Of the first few comments, half appear to appeal to the “sparkly” and half to the “love” of the “sparkly love” guidelines: “Loveloveloveree. ♥”; “Sparkle!”; “i would love to go!”; “glitta glitta haaay!” (Babelandsea Seattle). After these four comments, Babelandsea Seattle jumped in with praise, encouragement, and further comment guidelines to more explicitly capture the burlesque show for which tickets are being raffled: “Great Glitter and Sparkle comments y’all. Keep ’em coming. Think pasties and tassels and shimmy and shaking. It IS a BURLESQUE musical after all” (Babelandsea Seattle). Here, Babeland appears to have found the initial comments’ generality lacking. Therefore, beyond flattering those comments and explicitly appealing for more, Babeland stimulates and molds the comments to come by elaborating the call to leave “sparkly love” with a conjuration of the “pasties and tassels and shimmy and shaking” of the burlesque show advertised.

Following the re-crafting of this prompt, Babeland received fifteen additional messages, reproduced below:

blinggggggg!

Little sparkly love
sparkle!!

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
♥

Please yes....yes please - love sparkle!

***♥*** :D

Mwah.Mwah.Mwah.Mwah!**xoxo**

***little sparkly love!*** ♥
Sparkling Pasties and Twirling Tassels - so much fun to see them in action
Sparkly rays coming out from the giant vagina on the Babeland float! XD LMAO!
oh ho! would love to be there!!!
I need the "SHINE" in my life please......
Thinking all pasties and tassels and shimmy and shaking. It IS a BURLESQUE musical after all. :)

*******♥*******

These comments exemplify writers responding to specific Babeland posts that direct the content of their writing within a reward system. In addressing the prompt, several posters even assume its language nearly word for word, as in “Little sparkly love”; “***little sparkly love!*** ♥”; and “Thinking all pasties and tassels and shimmy and shaking. It IS a BURLESQUE musical after all. :).” Multiple posters chose to emulate “sparkly love” with images rather than written words, such as “_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~*_~*~_*”, “***♥*** :D”, and “*******♥*******,” or with both images and text, as in the case of “***little sparkly love!*** ♥.” Though the commenters have gone about answering the prompt in different ways, every response takes up the terms “sparkly love” with the word “love,” variations of the word “sparkly” (“sparkling,” “sparkle”), textual images of sparkles (**), textual images of love (♥) or words that evoke sparkling (“blinggggggg!”).

In this case, Babeland is asking respondents to craft their responses to meet the particular compositional goal of more specifically representing the tickets being raffled. This treatment of Facebook users as, in a sense, students who must suit their responses to company guidelines for their reward appears in one commenter’s response to Babeland’s announcement of contest winners; this commenter asked Babeland what she had to say to win the contest and what the
winners said: “Babeland, I missed it...what did I have to say to win a ticket? or what did the winners say?” (Babelandsea Seattle). In this post, this Babelandsea Seattle “friend” identifies a relationship between the content of participatory comments and the prizes Babeland distributes to select participants. Her question “what did I have to say to win a ticket?” suggests an understood requirement of answering a specific prompt (“what did I have to say”) for a reward (the ticket). Her second question, “what did the winners say?,” further identifies a hierarchy of responses; the post assumes that the ticket winners have won their reward through the response closest to what Babeland wants (as opposed to being randomly selected). Such concern for the winning way of writing speaks to the perception or assumption of an evaluation on Babeland’s part in determining the most appropriate, and thus most successful, composition for winning the contest.

In this example, Facebook structurally sponsors social relations between Babeland, as the initial speaker, and the brand’s potential consumers, as respondents. I observe similarities between Babeland’s reissuing of the contest writing prompt and a classroom instructor’s re-articulation of writing prompts when initial student responses—made orally or through writing in class or homework—do not align with the instructor’s intentions or desired outcomes. In this respect, I see Facebook’s organization of conversation threads as lending itself to an Initiation-Reply-Evaluation (IRE) mode of recruiting writing. The documentation of this IRE pattern of instructor and instructed interactions was originally developed through studies of common structures of classroom discourse in which an instructor initiates writing with a prompt or assignment, the student replies with a text, and the instructor evaluates the product (Mehan, 1979; Prior, 1998; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Wallace and Ewald, 2000).

Facebook’s structure of indenting responses beneath the initial prompt, but not allowing
responses to be indented beneath other participants’ responses, structures all comments as responding to the initial Babeland prompt, never identifying a new Initiator to whom to respond within the many comments (as many threaded forums do). Individuals first seeing the contest or returning to it later can easily locate prompt responses through this organization, and Facebook notification settings allow users who have participated to receive messages whenever a new comment appears, keeping the conversation alive across time and space, as users need not remain present in real time.

**Confluent Ideologies: The Use of Identifiability in a Networked Economy**

In addition to the promotion of sex-positivity on its home site, Babeland prompts and rewards those bold enough to connect their names to publicly distributed narratives of public sexual acts. With the “Seven Days of Cobra Libre” contest, Babeland, according to the guidelines on its website, gave away seven Fun Factory Cobra Libre vibrating masturbation sleeves to users who responded via comments to any of the “sex questions” Babeland asked on its official Facebook pages over the course of seven days. Participation came with a caveat: “You will need to be a member of Facebook to participate in this contest” (“Seven Days of Cobra Libre”), warns the guidelines, thus syncing Babeland with Facebook’s requirements of identifiable authorship. Some of the contest questions included:

- The Cobra Libre design was inspired by the AC Shelby Cobra; what other cars scream "sleek and sexy"?
- Planes, trains, and automobiles – are you turned on by sex en route?
- On the hood, in the back seat, solo? What car sex positions are out there? (“Seven Days of Cobra Libre”)
Other questions asked contestants, “Does driving fast get you aroused?,” “Do you have a ‘sex while driving’ story?,” and “What car seems like it was designed with car sex in mind?” (Babeland Seattle). These questions are followed up with the instruction “Comment below to enter to win the Cobra Libre today” or “Win the Fun FactoryCobra [sic] Libre by answering this question” (Babeland Seattle). When consumers responded to these questions, their names appeared next to the comment as a hyperlink allowing readers to connect to their profile, which may or may not have been public or private to varyingly fractal degrees. Facebook profile photos appeared next to names and comments as well, although these photos do not always show the user. Entries were often sexually explicit.

In response to “Do you have a ‘sex while driving’ story?” one contest entrant writes, “Why yes, I do. On our honeymoon, my partner and I drove from Montana to the Oregon coast. To pass the time during the drive, we told each other stories, talked dirty, and generally did our best to get each other hot and bothered. It worked like a charm! And even when things got a little touchy-feely, we managed not to crash” (Babeland Seattle). Another uses her partner’s name in her response:

“Paul and I used to live in CA, taking long drives regularly to visit family...we often talked dirty, or talked about fantasies we each had. A few times on hwy 101, when the talking had become uncomfortable squirming, I leaned over and gave Paul one of his number one fantasies. Hwy Oral, and let me just say as good as I am, Paul is a very steady driver :P” (Babeland Seattle).

Such Facebook comments, as boyd (2011) observes, “are not simply a dialogue between two interlocutors, but a performance of social connection before a broader audience” (p. 45). Consumer responses will be seen not only by Babeland, or even only by other Babeland
consumers, but likely by numerous Facebook friends subscribed to a user’s newsfeed updates as well.

In responding to such prompts, these users have constructed their compositional sexual identities—as well of the identities of the sexual partners they include in such narratives—on Facebook as per Babeland’s instruction, publishing the specific stories that Babeland prompts—in this case, sexual narratives surrounding the semi-public space of a car. Babeland instigates expressions of both public or semi-public sexual desires—by asking, for example, for information about contest participants’ “turn-ons” en route on planes, trains, automobiles—and practices—by soliciting entries about, for example, “sex while driving stories,” positions on the hood, in the back seat, etc. These contest prompts, coupled with the contest requirement of publishing the explicit narratives under one’s legal name on the Babeland Facebook wall, transgress social norms of public decency—what constitutes social propriety versus tackiness, vulgarity, or even immorality. Such challenges to constructions of public, private, and normative sexual behavior are, of course, of interest to a company, of whose products are prohibited under obscenity laws in various states; widespread word-of-mouth can help to promote products whose public advertisement on television broadcasts or billboards would be greatly limited by social and legal constraints.

On Facebook, the elicitation of consumer compositions about products and brands distributes consumer word-of-mouth both deeply and broadly. That is to say, a consumer’s Facebook friends can view his or her compositions or writing and hear about a brand or product from a familiar source, while a consumer visiting a retailer’s Facebook page can read about that company’s brand and product from a number of sources beyond his or her individual network of friends. Marketing research suggests that both consumers and retailers value consumer-produced
information regarding product use and attempt to counteract consumer concerns about information asymmetry between themselves and vendors (Bebczuk 2003; Mackiewicz 2010; Paradis 1994; Park, Lee, and Han 2007). In other words, retailers acknowledge consumer skepticism about whether a product is as it was advertised—skepticism that proceeds from the consumer’s lack of commercial interest in or firsthand knowledge of the product—and simultaneously recognize that they themselves may not be the most disinterested mouthpiece for removing that skepticism. To give a more authentic attestation to a product’s pros and potential, therefore, retailers seek consumer reviews for distributing knowledge. Just as consumers are likelier to favor an alternative perspective, the thinking goes, so will they value what they likely see as a more objective source to back up the retailer’s claims.

As such, Babeland can make productive use of the ideological freight it amasses from Facebook’s sponsorship of identifiable authorship in social networks. In a compositional space in which both sponsor and sponsored publish, the publications construct compositional flecks of identity for both the page owner and its visitors. As Babeland scripts the sexual narratives and ideologies it sees as productive to both company sales and consumer sexual health, sponsored responses to these scripts ultimately co-construct facets of identity of both the sponsor and the sponsored to other social network participants. How, then, can we understand this co-construction of participants’ identities to both take into account Babeland’s influence and the writers’ agency in actively choosing to participate in such visible interaction? How do we understand sponsored writers as admittedly used by their sponsors, but as not simply bearing the ideological freight they bear as a burden but potentially leveraging it for their own means?

Just as Babeland can make use of Facebook’s creation of a social network in which users’ personal lives are particularly identifiable to one another in order to have users “walk the walk”
of sex-positivity by composing about sex without anonymity, Babeland’s consumer-participants can self-present as sex-positive, feminist, transgressive, sexual and/or sexy by not only taking up Babeland’s invitations to interact but specifically in taking advantage of a context in which to bring up such discussions. Babeland’s freight may certainly act as a weight these writers bear in terms social connections who find these compositions tacky, vulgar, or immoral, but that does not mean that they do not necessarily bear the weight willingly, or even purposefully. If we consider, for a moment, the incentives for lifting physical weights, we might conjure several potentially overlapping purposes: shaping the form one presents to the world, the representation others see; developing greater strength; displaying feats of strength to those viewing; efforts at general self-improvement and becoming more well-rounded; feeling empowered after the effort put forth; and genuinely enjoying the activity of consensual, even recreational, labor. In each of these contexts, weight-lifters put weights to use, often for themselves. In the case of Facebook, Babeland, and the Facebook users in Babeland’s social network, however, the writers that Facebook and Babeland co-sponsor can leverage this ideological freight not only to articulate themselves through their shared interests with Babeland but further to work to create sex-positive culture for themselves and others.

For example, in summer 2010, Babeland ran its “Come for a Cause” campaign to raise money and awareness for causes of sex education, specifically in support of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). Toward this cause, the company explicitly merged the promotion of sex-positivity with the products it trades in:

“As many of our customers will tell you, a great sex toy experience can be truly life-changing. Learning how to orgasm for the first time, coming from a new position, or discovering a new erogenous zone are all possible with the right toy. That's why helping
you find the right toy to suit your needs is our #1 concern at all times. Even if you aren't sure what you're looking for, our helpful staff knows just how to guide you on the path to orgasmic bliss!” (Babeland).

Babeland worked to incite dialogue among Facebook users about their experiences with publicizing sexual intent through the purchase or acquisition of condoms, oral contraceptives, and sex toys, asking: “Do you remember trying to buy condoms, birth control, or sex toys the first time, and what it felt like?” Users answered with personal accounts describing varying levels of comfort in their experiences:

“I was buying condoms and lube w my BF at the time, and the checker person was someone I went to HS with. He gave me a funny look, and then tried to start a conversation but I was so embarrassed, I turned red, and couldn't acknowledge him at... all.”

“Never bought condoms, always gotten them from Planned Parenthood. Never really thought about whether or not getting my hormonal birth control should be weird, but buying sex toys is still enought [sic] to make me blush sometimes. Not entirely sure why...”

“My first sex toy was a vibrator from the Pink Pussycat Boutique in the Village. Wasn't embarrassed at all, unless you count me wondering out loud exactly who some of those toys would fit inside...something I still wonder to this day!”
In talking openly about the potential discomfort of publicly acquiring sex products, these consumers make discussions of sexual activity more public. The writers’ agency appears not only in their choice as to whether to respond to Babeland’s prompts and their rhetorical decisions in how to respond but also in leveraging the freight of Babeland’s sponsorship of sex-positivity and Facebook’s sponsorship of identifiable authorship in social connection. In so publicly signing off on their own sexual activity to their social contacts, the writers implicitly work to foster a culture in which such conversations are more socially acceptable and less uncomfortable in the future.

The Freight of Sponsorship as Rhetorical Resource

In this chapter, I have examined how Babeland and its sponsored writers act to align and forge networks among existing resources, and I have unpacked the implications of the composite sponsorship that is the effect of that linking. Specifically, I have found that the composite sponsorship between Babeland and Facebook merges the sex-positive ideologies and brand promotion that Babeland sponsors through its writing prompts and, with publicly displayed and certifiable network connections, the social value of reputation that Facebook sponsors through its terms of access to its compositional spaces. For the writer, the synthesis of these sponsorships means the prompting, rewarding, and regulating of a named and identifiable affiliation with the Babeland brand, the sexual products it vends, and the sexual desires and practices such products mark. By posting on Babeland’s Facebook pages, writers not only endorse Babeland’s brand to their social contacts on Facebook and weave Babeland’s brand into their own identities; they also further the sex-positive philosophy that Babeland wants to promote, whether out of the ideological stances of its founders or out of the economic optimization of its mission as a business. And by actively engineering the compositions in this space—first by enticing writers
with the promise of prize rewards and then by assessing their entries’ fit with the writing prompt as they are submitted—Babeland directly aids those users who, through their speech on the store’s behalf, seek to incorporate and highlight their connection to Babeland into the networked identity they are actively shaping for themselves.

The convergence of multiple sponsors—Facebook, the social network platform, and Babeland, the retailer—in producing this end results in structural significance and ideological freight distinct from those resulting from the operation of either sponsor on its own. I propose taking this analysis of freight still one step further, examining freight not simply as a load or burden to bear (or even flex) but also as a service of conveying resources. Consider the examples from the introduction of this dissertation: social and political organizations providing audiences both aligned (in shared interests) and assembled (already organized as recipients on mailing lists) with scripts for lobbying their government representatives; critiquing companies for their acts and policies; or spreading information about and arguments for causes throughout their social networks. While these scripts may be in many ways constrained, they can also provide consumer-sharers with news, with complex concepts to consider, and with language to use in contacting others to spread messages that express their shared interests. Not only is it faster and easier for potential advocates to get involved in causes they support, but with access to data, language, and arguments they might not otherwise be able to muster on the spot—particularly in discussions on social network sites—advocates may more effectively perform their parts with the technological affordances that allow for easily be copying, pasting, and hyperlinking text to share.

We can similarly apply this framework of freight as conveying resources to the example of co-sponsorship between Facebook and Babeland. Through the Cobra Libre contest prompts
and Come for a Cause campaign, Babeland offers not only talking points in their prompts but contexts for discussing otherwise socially inappropriate matters of conversation. Their invitation to discussion allows for sharing stories that would appear especially abrupt without such an occasion for raising the subject in public. Asking for such stories specifically for purposes of social change, or even prizes, gives users cause to share such narratives publicly. In addition to the resources Babeland provides in post content and rhetorical opportunity, Facebook’s digital network of intersecting social circles enables Babeland’s affiliates to engage the interests that they and Babeland share with people outside of their current social contacts, other Babeland affiliates, and people in their current social contacts not already availing themselves of Babeland’s resources.

By ventriloquizing through their social contacts, by promoting direct repetitions in contests such as SHINE, and by scripting sexual narratives in contests such as the Seven Days of Cobra Libre, Babeland dislocates its sponsorship to a degree, working to elicit not only consumer enthusiasm for their brand and products but enthusiastic responses that appear to be the consumers’ own words that she or he wishes to share with others. However, Babeland cannot afford to disappear entirely from the discussions it prompts; keeping its brand name known and positively viewed is important both for profit and for staying afloat to promote its social cause. In the next chapter, I will examine a series of sponsors whose identities do not remain as visible across the recomposition of their texts as I study the conceptual framework of sponsorship in conjunction with metaphorical frameworks of recomposition taken up both within and outside of academia in portrayals of viral or memetic spread.

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4 I use the term “co-operate” rather than “cooperate” to emphasize these sponsors as operating upon sponsored writers simultaneously.
5 While Facebook users have successfully set up “fake” Facebook pages for identities under made-up names, names attributed to fictional characters, and so on by connecting multiple accounts to separate email addresses, Facebook’s Statement of Rights and Responsibilities asserts the right to shut down profiles of users that do so (Statement of Rights and Responsibilities). This policing of authentic named identities creates a productive avenue for marketing through word of mouth, allowing for a wider distribution than non-digital face-to-face interactions but a greater degree of personal accountability to known friends than anonymous, pseudonymous, or ambiguous consumer reviews. Furthermore, users who set up accounts for themselves under a false name, rather than accounts for entirely fictional personae, are still representing themselves to their social contacts. Such accounts might be more difficult for future employers to locate, but current social contacts would still be privy to the social actions and connections publicized by those accounts.

6 For example, consumers might post their names and locations, such as “Danielle from USA,” without much risk of identification.

7 Judith Donath and danah boyd (2004) define a public display of connections as an implicit verification of identity that ventures one’s reputation with all transactions; a negative transaction with one member of a network can sully one’s reputation with other members of that network (p. 73).

8 One example of such repercussions is that of Stacy Snyder, whom Millersville University accused of promoting underage drinking through a photo she posted in 2005 with the caption “Drunken Pirate,” for which the institution denied her a certification in teaching in 2006. Even in 2015, a Google search for “Stacy Snyder” brings up not only Snyder’s story but also the actual photo of her in costume, drinking from a plastic cup. After ten years, it is possible and actually very easy to locate and view a text that Snyder undoubtedly composed and shared with little insight into the degree to which it would impact her reputation, let alone her life trajectory. Snyder’s story helps to illuminate the stakes of digitally mediating transgressive behavior in identifiable contexts.


10 The Facebook “wall” has since disappeared with the “timeline” feature now serving the same function for posting.

11 This option to participate through less publicly visible composition disappeared in later contests, which required public wall or timeline posts.

12 This link actually leads to what is currently listed as Babelandsea Seattle, a personal profile, and not to the Babeland Seattle fan page.

13 Given that this, after all, a burlesque musical, this excepts the response that nearly word for word repeats Babeland’s prompt to think all pasties and tassels and shimmy and shaking.

14 Babeland, in fact, never specifies that the best answer will win the tickets and may, like a radio station, simply choose the fifth response.

15 or IRF in earlier definitions using the term “feedback”

16 This can include oral participation.

17 Here, I invoke Patricia Lange’s (2008) representation of hybrid forms of fractalized gradations between “public” and “private” in “publicly private” and “privately public” activity on online social networks. These notions of fractalized gradations of privacy are drawn from Susan Gal’s (2002) theorization of the public/private dichotomy as having a fractal distinction in that “the distinction between public and private can be reproduced repeatedly by projecting it onto narrower contexts or broader ones” (p. 81). Gal provides the example of the home as contrasting with the public nature of the street, while in narrowing one’s focus inside of the house, the living room becomes the public part of a domestic private space, such that “the public/private distinction is reapplied and now divides into
public and private what was, from another perspective, entirely ‘private’ space” (p. 82).

While numerous Facebook users succeed in creating Facebook profiles under pseudonyms, they are still recognized within their social networks. I, for example, have numerous contacts using the network pseudonymously, largely protect themselves professionally, and yet their I still understand their interactions on the network as theirs.

more so than in discussion forums with fewer technological affordances or socially appropriate contexts for sharing photos of personal moments as varied as restaurant experiences, professional engagement photos, and at-home pet and baby photos

For the purposes of this project, I draw on Cliff Pervocracy of the self-identified kinky, feminist sex blog Pervocracy and Sesali B. from the online community Feministing in defining sex-positivity as understanding sexual pleasure as a legitimate thing worthy of ethical exploration; as interrogating pre-conceived notions about what kind of sex people should have and judgments about what kind of ethical sex people do have, while demanding sexual activity be consensual; and as supporting honest, non-judgmental, and comprehensive sex education.
Chapter Three

The “Power Over What Goes Viral”: Locating Actors in the Circulation of “Viral” Texts

On October 26, 2014, a Texas teenager snapped a cell phone picture that would start a Twitter trend, stir controversy about a potential marketing hoax, and turn an unknown 16-year-old Target employee into an internet celebrity later featured on CNN and *The Ellen Show*. Fifteen-year-old Brooklyn Reiff told *The Daily Dot* that her friend Alanna Page had tweeted about an attractive teen working at a Target checkout register, and when Reiff later found herself in his checkout line, she snapped his picture and retweeted it to friend (Votta 2014a). On November 2, Twitter user @auscalum tweeted Reiff’s photo to her 14,000 followers, bringing so much attention to the image that, for days, its origin was debated, incorrectly attributed to @auscalum, and even claimed by Los Angeles startup Breakr. The boy in her photo, Alex LaBeouf, became immortalized with the hashtag #AlexFromTarget.

On November 3, Dil-Dominé Jacobe Leonares claimed in a LinkedIn post to have orchestrated Alex’s rise to fame as a way to demonstrate that he and his colleagues could build a fan base for anyone that could theoretically translate from a large following into a career (Figures 3.1 and 3.2):

Yesterday, we had fun on Twitter with the hashtag #AlexFromTarget which ended up to be one of the most amazing social media experiments ever. We wanted to see how powerful the fangirl demographic was by taking a unknown good-looking kid and Target employee from Texas to overnight viral internet sensation. Abbie (@auscalum), one of our fangirls from Kensington, UK posted this picture of Alex Lee (@acl163) on Twitter. After spreading the word amongst our fangirl followers to trend #AlexFromTarget, we started adding fuel to the fire by tweeting about it to our bigger YouTube influencers.

Figure 3.1
We saw two sides of the conversation happening with people joining in to support the hashtag just to trend it and the other side of people getting upset that a guy with good looks could become "internet famous" with no work. In reality, when you look at the whole situation from a macro view you can see that if we can build an individuals fan-base on Breakr, we can translate that powerful following into a bigger career. Just like Jack & Jack from Vine with millions of followers going into the studio with no record label support for six week then launching to reach the top of the iTunes charts.

Figure 3.2

Here, Leonares identifies the first person with a large audience to spread the content—“(Abbie @auscalum) one of our fangirls from Kensington, UK”—but not the actual originator of the image, an oversight numerous media outlets noticed, particularly when @auscalum denied any connection to, or even familiarity with, Breakr (Broderick 2014; McKinney 2014; Votta 2014a, 2014b). As journalists, bloggers, and followers of the story tried to make sense of the conflicting accounts, their portrayal of the image’s rapid circulation took on the language of an outbreak narrative (see Figure 3.3). On the same day that Leonares posted his claim, Dayna Evans (2014) of Gawker wrote, “We still don't know who the first person to tweet the photo—patient zero—was,” casting her refutation as an epidemiological quest to find the index case of infection. As reporters began to tease out inconsistencies in Leonares’s claim that undermined its veracity, Jess Zimmerman (2014) asserted in The Guardian that “nobody wants to be handed an advertisement, then told it’s part of a grassroots phenomenon. That’s not ‘viral’; it’s just condescending.” Per Zimmerman’s distinction, viral spread is natural and spontaneous, organic and not pre-orchestrated.
Figure 3.3

How did #AlexFromTarget come to be understood in terms of outbreak and virulence? Mark Giesler (2014) represents both the appeal and limitations of epidemiological framings of recomposition in his depiction of them as fantasy: “The case of #alexfromtarget feeds into our longstanding epidemiological fantasies: the idea of creating an innovation, a new technology, an advertising campaign, a meme, or a piece of online content so brilliantly designed, captivating, funny or otherwise compelling, it will virtually spread overnight.” #AlexFromTarget, like other memes, has not spread with the agency of a virus; people actively distributed it and then came to see it as the agent spreading itself. Indeed, the very idea that there was a contagious meme only emerged during the process of hundreds of thousands of people sharing, manipulating, and adding entirely new meanings to the original photo through Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other platforms.” In describing the appeal of creating something with an innate, inevitable
transference beyond the immediate audience, an inherent spreadable quality, Giesler provides a rationale for mapping physiological processes, such as viral infection, to the socialization of thoughts and social structures through composition. Invoking virulence both implies the successful delivery of a message and likewise assumes that ideas themselves can somehow effect their own spread. But the attractiveness of this notion does not hold up under scrutiny: as Giesler observes, “virulence” ignores the agency of consumer-producers, those truly responsible for furthering spread.

Despite the agency trick here diagnosed, the idea of “virality” persists within popular media and scholarship. Indeed, while lay and academic use of terms such as meme and going viral might not appear to have a substantial effect on the production, dispersion, or consumption of texts, Mitchell (2011) argues that such popular use of the contagion metaphor in and across public and cultural discourse attests to the concept’s potency and currency” (p. 4). Furthermore, the uptake of these terms in academic scholarship has skewed recent publications to present the dispersion of so-called memes as not only metaphorically contagious (Burgess 2008; Guadagno et al. 2013; Kumar 2015; Nelson-Field, Riebe, and Newstead 2013; Wiggins and Bowers 2014) but further as mathematically mappable through epidemiological understandings of the spread of infection (Wang and Wood 2011).

In Chapter Two, I worked to add dimension to the vertically oriented metaphor of sponsorship by examining the intersecting action of multiple sponsors in recruiting writers to advance a brand and the consumer-writers’ subsequent use of the compositional space granted them by this sponsorship to brand themselves (or to become branded). Even as actions overlapped and interests converged, however, my chosen representative example, Babeland, exhibited an articulated and easily traced lineage of sponsor, prompt, composition, and
distribution. Chapter Three interrogates cases in which compositions spread so quickly and broadly that their original impetus and authorship are difficult to track down and identify—cases, in other words, erroneously called “viral.”

In particular, Chapter Three confronts examples of rapid mass circulation in which individuals appropriate and spread texts in the absence of, explicitly against, or in concert with the original authors’ goals for recomposition. I ask the following questions: What rhetorical activities are potentially obscured or facilitated through frameworks of writing as infectious? What is the role of content producers within the framework of an outbreak narrative? What rhetorical goals do these understandings potentially serve or undermine for producers? And, finally, where does intentionality fit in current conceptualizations of literacy sponsorship?

I begin by reviewing scholarship in the field of memetics, most notably from the work of Richard Dawkins, and current work in media theory responding to such notions of viral or memetic spread. I then invoke Goffman (1981) to propose a more fitting framework through which to understand the process mischaracterized as “viral” or “memetic” and the actors therein. Taking up Goffman’s production format of authorship, animation, and principalship, I juxtapose examples in which authors actively sponsor the recomposition of their texts; demonstrate less obvious goals for recomposition; or find animators appropriating their texts against their specific goals for recomposition. I consider how creators of said texts have been recovered by reporters covering memetic phenomena; have themselves fought to reclaim ownership of their texts; or, conversely, have themselves invoked metaphors of virulence to disclaim their sole authorship and contribute to a larger collective. Ultimately, the chapter will demonstrate how viral and memetic frameworks of composition as self-propagating shift our focus away from where it is
most properly situated: on the many activities, people, and rhetorical contexts that truly originate and instigate the spread of these texts.

**Memes as Viruses of the Mind: Dawkins and His Respondents**

Though many now use the term *meme* to refer to digital content that is easy to reproduce or alter, Richard Dawkins originally introduced the concept of the meme in 1976 as an idea for mapping contemporary understandings of genetic replication onto theorizations of cultural transmission. He coins the term in the final chapter of *The Selfish Gene* (1976), a book focused on the role of genes in natural selection, and chooses the word *meme* “to convey the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation,” drawing on the Greek *mimeme*, to capture a monosyllable that sounds a bit like “gene” (p. 192). His theory of the meme’s action, however, describes not simply the copying of genetic material but also a process of parasitism that *changes* genetic material:

If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches [sic] on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. As my colleague N. K. Humphrey neatly summed up an earlier draft of this chapter: ‘…memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.’ (p. 192).

Here, Dawkins explicitly invokes the model of the virus as an explanation of the meme’s propagation. Though Dawkins urges that we “not think of genes as conscious, purposeful agents” (p. 196), he also credits them, and by extension memes, with being self-propagating, for “[j]ust
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” (p. 192). Dawkins specifically characterizes this process of memetic spread as one of self-replication rather than one in which the actors are consumer-readers who judge an idea worth passing on to others. He attributes agency to the ideas themselves and not to the people performing acts of invention or imitation in developing, articulating, and sharing the ideas.

In his 1993 essay “Viruses of the Mind,” Dawkins redirects his metaphoric focus from gene to virus and proposes computer viruses as a model for “informational epidemiology.” Robert Aunger (2002) similarly explains the transmission of memes through a description of the Michelangelo computer virus and the transmission of Kuru, a biological disease related to what is commonly termed mad cow disease (pp. 7-13). This work not only ties the meme to the virus but further underscores Dawkins’ portrayal of memes as spreading through their own agency.

For example, Aunger presents the theory of memetics as the idea “that thoughts can think themselves” and an understanding of the meme that begins by recognizing that many of our thoughts are not generated from within our own brains but are acquired as ideas from others. What memetics argues is that, once inside us, these thoughts then go to work for themselves, pursuing goals that may be in conflict with our best interests. These ideas have their own interests by virtue of having qualities that make them like biological viruses. (p. 2)

While Aunger’s work focuses on portraying the meme’s supposed agency inside us, and often against us, Susan Blackmore (1999) goes even further and explicitly derides human agency itself, arguing that humans are nothing but “memeplexes” or “meme machines” and that, as a
species, we need to move beyond the idea of human agency.

Other scholars have met such notions with resistance, as memetics researchers have yet to identify a mechanism by which a meme could reproduce itself. Mark Jeffreys (2000), for example, asserts that “contagions, hosts, etc., are hopelessly inadequate tropes for discussing a presumed second replicator and a presumed second process of natural selection” (p. 228). In a similar critique, Jenkins et al. (2013) refer to this concept of self-replication as “oxymoronic” because “culture is a human product and replicates through human agency” (p. 19). As cultural anthropologists and linguists have argued in treating the term culture as a signifying process, culture is not only actively constructed, but also multiple and contested (Hallam and Street 1998; Street 2000; Wright 1997). As such, Rosaria Conte (2000) argues for treating people not as vectors of cultural transmission but as actors behind this process, and building on her work, Shifman (2013) contends that the undermining of human agency is not inherent to the meme concept itself but only to certain strains of its interpretation (p. 366).

Though the undermining of human agency may not be inherent to all understandings of the meme since Dawkins first coined the term,21 the concept of ideas as potentially contagious is not limited to the field of memetics. The conflation of the spread of ideas with epidemiological understandings of transmission also appears in applied mathematics research modeling “the viral propagation” of memes, ideas, ideology, and rumors based on compartmental modeling in infectious diseases (Bettencourt, Cintrón-Arias, Kaiser, Castillo-Chávez 2006; Kawachi 2008; Santonjaa, Tarazonaa, Villanueva 2008; Wang and Wood 2011). In popular culture, Christopher Nolan’s 2010 blockbuster Inception opens with this same premise, through Dom Cobb’s comparison of an idea to a highly contagious parasite almost impossible to eradicate from the brain: “What is the most resilient parasite? Bacteria? A virus? An intestinal worm? […] An idea.
Resilient – highly contagious. Once an idea has taken hold of the brain it’s almost impossible to eradicate. An idea that is fully formed – fully understood – that sticks; right in there somewhere” (Nolan 2010). In the context of Nolan’s film, we could attribute this direct access to the brain to the film’s approach to accessing the human subconscious through dreams. In this metaphor, the fast-spreading ideas of uncertain provenance and the epidemiological contamination of bodies are one. This view suggests that the ideas take hold without any rhetorical activity such as clear articulation or persuasion by a speaker/writer that is part of successfully communicating them or disagreement or misinterpretation by a recipient that may repel or dissipate them. The only actor, according to the metaphor, is the idea/text itself.

Over the last five years, scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Xiaochang Li, Ana Domb Krauskopf, Joshua Green, and Sam Ford have critiqued the biological metaphoricity of terms such as *viral* and *meme*, arguing that they confuse the actual power relations between producers, consumers, and properties. Jenkins et al. (2013) and Green and Jenkins (2011) have developed their critiques of these terms primarily in studies of audience and its role in appraising and ascribing value and worth through circulation—a role obscured through metaphors of virality and memesis that frame popular digital texts as self-propagating. I argue that conceptual frameworks of viral and memetic spread, like academic signifiers such as “sponsored writers,” often fail to distinguish the equally necessary interrelated activities of actors producing and actors spreading—and even appropriating—composition within contexts of circulation. While this effacement of agency clouds processes of production and authorship that could be of value to authors who might wish to receive credit for the creation of a popularly circulated text, it can also help to obscure authors who do not wish to be associated with their texts and to veil the social and/or economic interests behind promoting the spread of a text and its content; authorial
recognition is not always a goal in composition, as Goffman suggests by distinguishing the roles of author and principal.

**Restoring Agency: Goffman’s Production Format**

How do we remedy this tendency to undervalue the agency of creators, distributors, and even sponsors of so-called viral textual spread? One solution lies in the work of the Goffman (1981), whose production format offers a way to capture the agency of participatory audiences in spreading a message and is, therefore, a useful tool in further flattening heretofore-vertical conceptions of sponsorship. Goffman differentiates the role of *animator*, or the “sounding box” through which utterances are made, from that of the *author*, who composes the words and sentiments uttered by the animator, and the *principal*, whose viewpoints and interests are represented by the words uttered. These roles are not necessarily fused in any communicative act; in fact, multiple parties can, and often do, fill them. According to Goffman, parsing out these roles illuminates the often multiple actors and interests behind what we often portray in the singular as a *speaker*: “When one uses the term ‘speaker,’ it often implies that the individual who animates is formulating his own text and staking out his own position through it: animator, author, and principal are one” (p. 145). I take up Goffman then to push back against the misconception that, in mass text distribution, the *speaker* is the sole, or even dominant, superintendent of the composition. The *animator* and *principal*, in fact, are equally paramount in propelling the composition’s reception and, like the writer-consumers studied in Chapter Two, have their own interests, possibly divergent from or contradictory to, those of the text’s authors, in advancing the spread.

Differentiating these roles helps to examine the often multiple parties and stages involved in animating a message. Explaining what the process of animation can entail, Goffman writes:
reciting a fully memorized text or reading aloud from a prepared script allows us to animate words we had no hand in formulating, and to express opinions, beliefs, and sentiments we do not hold. We can openly speak for someone else and in someone else’s words, as we do, say, in reading a deposition or providing a simultaneous translation of a speech – the latter an interesting example because so often the original speaker’s words, although ones that person commits himself to, are ones that someone else wrote for him.

(pp. 145-146)

In the previous chapter, for example, Babeland as a sponsor functioned as an author and principal as it modeled compositions in the SHINE giveaway for consumers to animate in order to spread its interests; as a principal as it called for sex-while-driving narratives for the Cobra Libre Giveaway; and as a partial animator (along with Facebook) as it provided its Facebook page space as a point of distribution. At the same time, the author of a narrative on Babeland’s Facebook page is clearly animating that narrative and representing his or her own interests and perspectives. The confluent and composite sponsorships of Babeland and Facebook help to illuminate how principalship, like authorship, can be multiple; both Babeland and Facebook share interests in writers participating on Facebook’s compositional platform (confluent sponsorship) in the examples in which the two sponsors simultaneously act on writers, combining their interests in identifiable authorship and sex-positivity to invite writers to identify themselves with Babeland’s products and values (composite sponsorship). In these processes of sponsorship, both Babeland and Facebook function as principals. As such, while the concept of the animator can inform our understanding of sponsored writers’ roles as social actors, the concept of principalship can further inform our understanding of sponsoring interests.
In the example of Babeland, the retailer’s goals and intentionality as a principal were explicit and unambiguous, and its authorial origin seems clearly identifiable. In the following section, I will study a pair of examples in which these are less obvious. With both examples—the Philosoraptor macro\(^\text{22}\) (see Figure 3.4 below) and, again, of #AlexFromTarget—the spread of these seemingly authorless compositions was tagged by media or popular terminology as “viral” or “memetic”—thus self-propagating and potentially insidious in infecting changes in their human hosts. Bringing Goffman’s theories to bear, I will illustrate the complexities of understanding text circulation as an outbreak narrative with an index case, a patient zero.

**The Problem of Patient Zero: Authors, Principals, and Sponsorship in “Viral” Narratives.**

*The Philosoraptor Macro*

Although T-shirt company Lonely Dinosaur does not publish a mission statement, history, or “About Us” section to represent its brand, just a glance at the shirts on its home page shows a theme of message tees that largely use puns and other forms of wordplay (see Figures A.1-2), often relying on somewhat esoteric terminology (see Figures A.3-4). One such example is the Philosoraptor, a portmanteau that combines the words “philosopher” and “velociraptor” over an image of a velociraptor, as it is portrayed in the *Jurassic Park* franchise. In the design, the dinosaur’s forelimb\(^\text{23}\) is digitally manipulated into an upturned position pressed to the chin that gives it a contemplative appearance (see Figure 3.5).
The caption for the image reads, “This is the shirt that started the meme! We designed it in 2008, and when we put it online, the image took off and became a meme on 4chan. You can read about all that [here].” The “here” link directs the site’s visitors to Know Your Meme: Internet Meme Database site that identifies itself as documenting Internet phenomena such as viral videos, image macros, catchphrases, and web celebrities (knowyourmeme). Here, Lonely Dinosaur appeals to a third party with no obvious bias toward the company’s profits as a source of authority. Know Your Meme’s organization of individual memes’ histories through categories of “Origin,” “Spread,” and “Notable Examples” expresses an interest in identifying 1) an original producer, 2) how the text went “viral”, and 3) what variations to the text epitomize the meme. By charting the image’s rise in circulation, Know Your Meme thus assists Lonely Dinosaur in being credited as the source of the popularly disseminated design.

One could argue that Lonely Dinosaur’s effort to establish Philosoraptor’s origin within their company plays into the viral metaphor in working to establish a patient zero; yet I see the origin story of Know Your Meme as a challenge to that framework. The concept of a producer as a patient zero implies a singular origin of composition, potentially obscuring processes of
explicit collaboration or constellations of unrelated producers, and yet Know Your Meme is attuned to these possibilities. In the origin section of its page on Philosoraptor, Know Your Meme posts an initial sub-heading, “LonelyDinosaur T-shirt,” under which the site identifies the “original Philosoraptor” as created as a T-shirt design by Sam Smith, who registered the copyright for his design on October 8, 2008. According to the site, Smith revealed in an email exchange that the idea was conceived in early summer 2008, while the final image was not created until late summer, with T-shirts entering production in August or September (Philosoraptor). Smith relates, “It was inspired by our friend Devin, who was a philosophy major and was always hunched over his desk thinking, so we called him the philosoraptor. We had never heard of it before at the time, but apparently the joke had been made previously on the interwebs” (qtd. Philosoraptor). In its second subheading in the origin section, Know Your Meme goes on to indicate that the earliest known depiction of a Philosoraptor, a digitally manipulated still of a velociraptor from Jurassic Park holding a copy of Plato’s complete works, was posted via YTMND25 on March 30, 2007 (Figure 3.6). This first example received minor attention and was not regenerated on 4chan’s site.26 Instead, it was the Lonely Dinosaur design that took off: “One of the first archived instances of Philosoraptor macros on 4chan that has been archived occurred in a /b/ thread27 posted on February 18th, 2009, almost two months after the sharp rise in trend. The Philosoraptor text is clearly visible, followed by a blank exploitable in the second post” (Figure 3.7).
Thus, the Philosoraptor t-shirt design illustrates how authorial sponsorship interest can be obscured even when the composers declare an interest in making themselves visible. Though the designers at Lonely Dinosaur created the concept and image behind the macro template, they did not necessarily encourage any literate activity beyond the brief consumption of the text. Although the users of 4chan not only turned the design into a template for writing but, further, created the rhetorical conventions for composing macros of the Philosoraptor’s often ironic ponderings, they do not necessarily gain advantage from it or seek to as they re-animate Lonely Dinosaur’s design (itself a reanimation of Jurassic Park’s portrayal of the velociraptor). While Smith and the designers at Lonely Dinosaur neither created the template for adding print text to the image nor invented the if/then-question syntax of the meme embodied therein, they do have both a financial interest in the recomposition of their Philosoraptor T-shirt design through consumers purchasing the print to wear and an interest in the social capitalism of being recognized as the author. When placed in conversation with the example of #AlexFromTarget,
Smith’s creation of Philosoraptor and 4chan’s appropriation of the design help to illuminate agency potentially obscured by the recompositions and resultant frameworks of viral spread.

#AlexFromTarget Revisited

Reiff, the photographer of #AlexFromTarget, does not articulate directions or motives for her Twitter followers to retweet her photo, though she does upload it within a network that has the technological affordances to 1) quickly and easily reproduce another user’s texts exactly and 2) track popular topics through hashtags and to display the most popular topics for those who may not yet be in on them. As such, the network constructs the act of posting something worth retweeting, let alone trending, throughout the network as valuable in constructing social capital.

In creating #AlexFromTarget and Philosoraptor, Reiff and Smith are social actors, not simply afflicted or acted upon by a virus of the mind. In fact, several reporters covering the #AlexFromTarget story have cited the hashtag as evidence of the power of fangirls in arbitrating popular media. For example, Caitlin Dewey (2014a) of The Washington Post writes that “while it’s difficult, from a distance, to look at an inexplicably viral phenomenon like “Alex” and figure out how it happened, this sort of thing plays out within the teen fandom space more or less every week. These fandoms have enormous power over what goes viral.” I see this notion of power as being at odds, however, with the notion of virality, which obscures the rhetorical decisions of the composers and sharers. Dewey’s observation of the girls’ agency in this story is atypical in the early reporting of the story, in which, as later reporters noted, the girls’ agency disappeared, particularly in the conflicting claims of the image’s origin and intent. Kelsey McKinney (2014) reminds readers in Vox that “[t]he girls, really, are the ones lost in this story. Two 15-year-old girls took this picture that made Alex from Target’s fame, but they’ve received no attention. @auscalum, who made his image go viral, has only been chastised for taking credit for the
photo.” Rae Votta (2014b) similarly observes in *Femsplain*,

We’re celebrating a teen boy and a company (run by a man) all over the Internet, while the girls who created this remain practically anonymous. @auscalum, the teen who did the actual tweeting about Alex originally, locked down her Twitter for a while. She’s already getting backlash, even though she’s the true cog of power in this situation. Alex could have been any boy […] Page and Reiff have gained very little. Alex, the boy they simply thought was cute, hasn’t even contacted them, let alone Target or Ellen Degeneres or very many media outlets.

Reiff composed a tweet to meet a specific audience interest, that of her friend’s interest in a local boy, which funneled outward into a much larger audience interest, that of young girls in teenage heartthrobs. Sam Smith and the other designers at Lonely Dinosaur created not just a concept or even a design but a portmanteau that fits an entire portfolio of designs, namely, a portfolio that uses wordplay to appeal to consumers of message tees. In both cases, these producers composed texts of value to others within an economy of composition, activity scholars can easily overlook in identifying writers as hosts to ideas rather then producers of them; unlike hosts of H1N1 or avian flu, these individuals are making choices of their investments, alignments, connections, and intentions.

In the case of #AlexFromTarget, for example, Page first brought up Alex’s looks, and Reiff followed up with the photo; Reiff produced the photo, but Page initiated the context and inspired the audience interest in it. That specific context, in turn, instantiates a larger context of teenage girls interested in teenage boys who draw their styles from One Direction, 5 Seconds of Summer, and Justin Bieber. Their creation of #AlexFromTarget was collaborative not only in the sense that Reiff composed her image-tweet in answer to Page’s previous tweet about Alex, but
also in the sense that their interest in Alex has been influenced by larger social-collective expectations. As LeFevre (1987) observes:

Invention is influenced by a social collective, a supra-individual entity whose rules and conventions may enable or inhibit the invention of certain ideas. Even when an individual appears to invent in isolation or with one or two others, she is also interacting with social collectives. The locus of evaluation of what is invented, according to this perspective, lies in this larger social unit, which can be a specific organization or more abstract socio-culture. (p. 80)

Alex is conventionally attractive and coiffed as per contemporary teenage trends. This is not to say that the girls’ attraction to him is not genuine but to observe that it is part of a greater social agreement about gendered norms and ideals for their age group, through which they frequently are taught or pick up on what is attractive. As John Dewey (1927) explains, “[i]ndividuals still do the thinking, desiring, and purposing, but what they think of is the consequence of their behavior upon that of others and that of others upon themselves” (p. 24). It is important to recognize, however, that the girls are not simply acted upon by collective values in their collaboration but actively constitute this social collective and act to perpetuate and reinforce its values. LeFevre emphasizes that “[i]nvention is a dialectical process in that the inventing individual(s) and the socioculture are co-existing and mutually defining” (p. 35). I emphasize here that the social collective dictating the norms that raise boys like Alex to popularity do not exist without the work of girls like Reiff and Page.

Of course, these compositions have gone “viral” within a set of constraints; I only learned of Alex from my study of circulating texts, and although I imagine many of my readers will not be familiar with him, within sectors of the teenage girl population (particularly among those
actively tuned into particular internet forums and associated fads), he has a large following. Both the spread and the constraint of Alex’s popularity show how the users who made him popular did so by making use of available technological affordances to capitalize on rhetorical resources of assembled and aligned audiences. By creating and using the hashtag affordances of Twitter, users spreading the hashtag were able to reach beyond the audiences they already had assembled—the followers receiving their tweets—to audiences with aligned interests in following the hashtag and making use of it themselves. As users continued to employ the hashtag, the Alex craze grew further through Twitter’s affordance of showing “trending” hashtags—those most commonly used at the time, bringing in more people curious to see what #AlexFromTarget signifies. Those most interested in Alex carried his image over to social networks such as Tumblr and Instagram, where hashtag affordances allowed further alignment of interested audiences.

Outside of such aligned and assembled audiences, #AlexFromTarget did not enjoy the same popularity. As Lasswell (1959) argues, creative linkages among members of similar social contexts facilitate individual creativity (p. 221); this would, half a century later, be seen in the explosion of #AlexFromTarget. In spite of Lasswell’s findings, LeFevre’s research on invention and Lasswell’s work on creativity both identify understandings of authorship that may skew academic and lay understandings alike to focus on singular origins of authorship. LeFevre and Lasswell respectively cite the Platonic view of invention and individualistic tradition as leading us to look for creative individuals, “the da Vincis in prodigality of skilled expression, the Galileos in the march of human enlightenment” (Lasswell, p. 205) and to favor individualistic approaches to research and to neglect studies of writers in social contexts (LeFevre, p. 23). In her work, LeFevre works to portray invention often as a process out of the mind of the individual.
and in the interaction of real people, where it may be defined as an act, a response of another individual to an initiators’ gesture (p. 62). Lasswell further argues that the hidden complexities of the double process of innovation and recognition are among the factors that facilitate production, as evaluative norms are obviously involved in judging that a product or idea is of value (p. 206).

We see this double process of innovation and recognition at play in the participation in both #AlexFromTarget the uptake of appropriation of the Philosoraptor designs. Though Sam Smith identifies his design as “the shirt that started the meme” and cites Know Your Meme’s archive in documenting the concept’s origin and spread, both Smith and Know Your Meme recognize multiple origins of the concept. Although Lonely Dinosaur’s design specifically is the one that spread, both designers drew on the Jurassic Park franchise’s portrayal of the velociraptor, which made the “raptor” somewhat of a household name, an icon not only popularized but financially exploited in merchandise beyond the control of the actual franchise—much like the case of Philosoraptor (see figures A.8-9). With both #AlexFromTarget and Philosoraptor, the audiences that have gone on to spread the messages are already assembled. Absent Jurassic Park and its many years of fandom, the Philosoraptor would not have taken off in the same way. As LeFevre proposes, invention builds on a foundation of knowledge (p. 34), or, I would add, cultural capital. The Philosoraptor macro was built off a resource, and the designers aligned with pre-existing audiences. There is a great deal of power of the people sharing this text to form a force whose needs the writers must meet in order to spread their compositions.

In fact, the role of audience alignment in spreading these texts demonstrates the multiplicity of principalship as a function in processes of recomposition. As individuals spread Philosoraptor and #AlexFromTarget, their actions of retweeting, hyperlinking, and so forth are
rhetorical acts of choosing to re-animate what they themselves take interest in spreading, demonstrating a dimension of principalship as well as animation. In the examples of Philosoraptor and #AlexFromTarget, we see authorship, animation, and principalship each as multiply distributed as Smith and his designers and Reiff and Page, respectively, collaborate to author texts in a process of animating already-popular cultural tropes that align with their interests, and as their animators in turn spread their shared interest in the cultural capital of a box office blockbuster or contemporary teen trends.

While both Lonely Dinosaur’s and Reiff’s compositions build on existing cultural capital, not every design inspired by Jurassic Park takes off, as we see with the Philosoraptor holding Plato’s works, nor does every photo of a teenage boy with Justin Bieber hair. In both examples, authors created a specific text that appealed to large audiences. Together, Philosoraptor and #AlexFromTarget demonstrate how easy it is for authors of circulated texts to become obfuscated in the focus on the content of the text itself and to go unseen as texts circulate more and more widely from more and more sharers, particularly as sharers tweak the text. While Alex’s photo and Alex himself became famous on Twitter, even the reporters investigating the story struggled to identify the initial creators of the photo-Tweet. Perhaps more so than Reiff and Page, Sam Smith and Lonely Dinosaur have a vested interest in maintaining credit for their production; while all may benefit from the social capitalism of being recognized for their designs (Reiff now has over 1700 followers of Twitter), the Philosoraptor design concept originated as a way to sell T-shirts and thus has real-world economic implications for its designers, and it is to both their economic and authorial advantage to receive brand recognition, cultivate a business persona, and maintain sales for their now widely distributed and altered design. This composition, as far as its history discussed here details, did not come to the designer in the form
of a prompt or script and could arguably be interpreted more bound to the creator’s identity than the corporate-prompted identity-branding compositions addressed in the previous chapter. And yet the Babeland-prompted compositions acted to affirm identity, whereas Philosoraptor macros, through their propagation and understanding as a viral, memetic phenomenon, have acted to obscure Sam Smith and Lonely Dinosaur’s identity in concept production. If even a company with an economic interest can be mystified in the circulation of text, what happens when a sponsor does not want to be identified with the spread of its message, and how might the framework of virulence potentially color such situations?

The remainder of this chapter investigates these questions within the context of compositional recruitment. Within the conceptual framework of sponsorship,29 I use the term recruit to signify activities seeking out and recognizing the rhetorical skills and resources that another has to offer. In the case of my research, skill/resource is that of connecting to an established audience. In the next example, in contrast with those of the previous chapter, the sponsor’s interests and a spotlight on the writer’s agency in promoting that interest through said recruitment are at odds. Concealment, in other words, is actively preferred as clementine cannibal launches and recruits labor for a girl collective, as the writer does not portray it as a proprietary movement with themselves30 as the originator, and thus an effort based on their individual perspective. Instead, their use of numerous physical and digital anonyms to counter normative depictions of women helps to make these counter-perspectives appear as universal fact—a God trick, as Donna Haraway (1996) calls it—which would, in turn, help to make counter-discourse seem true. As noted earlier, I see such practices as a method of dislocating sponsorship, and I document in this case that frameworks of virulence are not simply conceptual tools for scholars to understand or explain the literate activities of sharing texts but resources that
individuals, collectives, or institutions can employ to define and construct their roles as sponsors in relation to their recruited producers and sharers.

“come on, infect us all”: grrrVIRUS and the Benefits of Dislocated Sponsorship

In the previous chapter, I observed that Babeland has an active interest in dislocating itself in its sponsorship of consumer discussion of its sociopolitical interests and products, both in promoting them to wider networks than Babeland might reach on its own and in supporting Babeland from a point of view that is not financially invested in its profits. These benefits of dislocation are ones that are also sought by clementine cannibal, creator of the social movement girlVIRUS. By employing what she identifies as infectious spread to separate herself from her role in initiating girlVIRUS, she is able to make the campaign appear less centered on her as an individual and more so as belonging of a variety of grrrls representing a collective who are reclaiming women’s worth. In both examples, these sponsors not only actively promote literate activity but actively recruit others to spread their interests.

Feminist activist, zinester, and musician clementine cannibal began girlVIRUS as a grassroots initiative to spread messages made by girls to counter popular portrayals of “what it means to be female, or how we are supposed to be women” and identifies such portrayals frequently not created by women but designed to make a profit from “mak[ing] us feel bad about ourselves” (see Figure 3.8). Through their blog, clementine cannibal works to reach a public beyond their readership by creating a digital database of these texts and encouraging readers to create and upload their own materials for others to distribute and to download and distribute materials from others. With a manifesto taken from Courtney Love, clementine cannibal lauds infection and correlates it with the internalization of subjugated points of view: “as courtney says ‘come on, infect us all’; it’s time for grrrl’s [sic] voices to be heard and valued. it’s time to make
them listen” (clementine cannibal). This message is the epitome of girlVIRUS, a movement that not only takes up, but actively embraces the metaphor of virulence in the production, distribution, and consumption of composition and forwards virulence as a productive force in spreading ideology.

clementine cannibal’s reference to grrrls invokes the Riot Grrrls feminist movement of the punk underground in the early 1990s. The additional “r”s are designed to make the girls roar, representative of the riot grrrl emphasis on giving girls a voice. This, it was thought, would come largely through DIY ethics of women’s experiences embodied not only in music but also through zines (derived from magazine), independently- or self-published booklets typically created by cutting-and-pasting photocopies in a collage fashion. In fact, this style appears in the girlVIRUS sample flyers (see Figures 3.9 and 3.10 for examples). On the “girlVIRUS” page of their blog, clementine cannibal begins their conceptualization of girlVIRUS with a Courtney Love epigraph: “the VIRUS that tells me deep in my brainstem that i can be whatever it is that i want to be”. She explains that “the girlVIRUS is alive, mutating, infecting. i’m going to upload the girlVIRUS flyers made by me and other grrrls to this page, so you can print them out, photocopy them and spread them around your communities.” In this description, clementine cannibal portrays the girlVIRUS as spread through the composition, distribution, and consumption of flyers digitally and physically spread throughout virtual and geo-political communities:
what are grrrlVIRUS flyers?
they are flyers made by grrrls, which express grrrl creativity, solidarity, empowerment, and outspokenness. we are constantly flooded with images and messages everyday about what it means to be female, or how we are supposed to be as women. these images are most often not created by women, and are designed to make a profit and make us feel bad about ourselves. we want our voices heard. we want to decide for ourselves what being a grrrl is all about, and we know it’s different for every single one of us. we want to communicate with other grrrls and speak back to sexists. we want to let the world know that we have things to say, that we are smart and capable, that being a grrrl is a good thing, that sexual harassment is not okay, that we won’t just sit by silently and swallow all this sexist bullshit. they are a way of creating community, speaking back, speaking out and speaking to each other.

Figure 3.8

Figure 3.9  Figure 3.10
In their call for submissions for “GRRRL VIRUS” flyers for 2011, they write, “with the new year fast approaching and the grrrlVIRUS spreading and mutating like crazy, it’s time for a new batch of flyers. I want you, grrrls, to design new flyers!” They organize this call into four sections: “what are grrrlVIRUS flyers?”; “how do you make a grrrlVIRUS flyer?”; “what happens with the grrrlVIRUS flyers?”; and “how do you submit?” This task breakdown reminds me of how I have formatted many of my classroom writing assignments in “What,” “How,” and “Why” sections to explain, respectively, the goals of the assignment; how students might carry out the pursuit of such goals; and why we are taking the time and energy to pursue these goals. It is a call that recruits and instructs its recipients on how to compose these texts.

In the first section, cannibal defines grrrlVIRUS flyers as flyers made by grrrls, which express grrrl creativity, solidarity, empowerment, and outspokenness.” cannibal elaborates:

we are constantly flooded with images and messages everyday about what it means to be female, or how we are supposed to be as women. […] we want our voices heard. we want to decide for ourselves what being a grrrl is all about, and we know it’s different for every single one of us. we want to communicate with other grrrls and speak back to sexists.

This definition portrays grrrlVIRUS flyers as a way to make subjugated points of view heard. In turn, the framings of the virus and infection function to frame the spread of these perspectives as inevitable, as not only circulating, but as taking hold in the readers consuming them. According to clementine cannibal’s framing, the production and circulation of grrrlVIRUS compositions infects because the producers and consumers have already internalized images and ideologies of what it means to be female and how to be a woman. Infection, then, appears not simply as the
spread of texts but specifically the spread and uptake of counter-discursive understandings of what a woman is.

cannibal’s definition of the flyers identifies as the flyers’ purpose to spread *grrrls’* voices [my italics], as opposed to solely cannibal’s own, though cannibal does provide examples of work that potential participants might produce and offers possible genres of composition that could promote the interests of a grrrl collective. Under the “how do you make a grrrlVIRUS flyer?” section, cannibal answers,

any way you want to. you can do collages, draw pictures, write shit by hand or print it off a computer. you can write a manifesta, put song lyrics or quotes by grrrls you love, you can write an open letter to other grrrls, or rant about sexism, you can talk back, you can use pictures of your grrrlheroes, whatever you want. basically, i want you to use your own voice, because each grrrl’s voice is different, and we need to break open the boring monotonous narrow possibilities available to grrrls, and be ourselves.

The emphasis on *mutating* allows cannibal to use the framework of the virus to mean more than simply passing cannibal’s message on to grrrl after grrrl. Here, cannibal sees the potential of the viral metaphor in framing their movement as not simply spreading but evolving to fit the different needs of different women. Within this framework, however, there appears to be no distinction between the grrrls spreading the virus and those who consume their messages but do not become actively involved in spreading the ideology—or even feel compelled by it. Here, cannibal emphasizes a multiplicity of different voices to oppose the “monotonous narrow possibilities available to grrrls”; this chimes with the collective-but-multiform representation of women that lies at the core of cannibal’s larger project. By encouraging grrrls to use their voices
without attribution to cannibal’s, cannibal demonstrates a greater interest in collective authorship than in cannibal’s own; there is no evident need—and perhaps an outright refusal—to claim credit for coining the girlVIRUS concept, starting a movement, or advancing feminism.

Exploiting the meme-as-virus metaphor to decentralize their role in the movement, cannibal benefits from the authorial effacement the metaphor brings about.

At some point between my focused analysis in late 2011 and fall 2012, clementine cannibal took the site down, though the girlVIRUS/grrrlVIRUS/theVIRUS Facebook page to which it was mutually linked remains active, and girlVIRUS posters remain posted across multiple tumblr pages (girlVIRUS/grrrlVIRUS/theVIRUS). Their new website identifies them as Clementine Morrigan and markets their work in art, essays, film, and poetry (see Figure 3.11).

![Figure 3.11](image)

When juxtaposed with this self-promotion, cannibal’s previous effacing of their role in creative girlVIRUS becomes a telling rhetorical strategy. This self-effacement helps to portray girlVIRUS as more organically spread, infectious, a self-propagating force, as opposed to an accomplishment of crafted work. In this way, making spread seem natural, if not inevitable, rather than rhetorically calculated is a rhetorical strategy for spreading the movement’s messages. As such, I contend that entailments of viral metaphors implicitly obscure not only...
writers’ agency in identifying ideas themselves as agents but also principals’ roles in promoting their interests through writing; by casting virulence as self-propagating, these frameworks explain the gain of recomposition as reproduction itself. With replication itself as the gain, the virus’s stand-in, the textual content, would appear to take on the role of the principal or sponsor, rather than the actual sponsors/principals. In this way, sponsors may actually be able to use viral metaphors to dislocate their sponsorship, and thus the role of their personal interests in promoting a specific text or message.

The Production Formats of Recomposition and Viral Spread

In the examples of recomposition throughout this chapter, the initial authorial animus becomes more and more distant, distorted, or lost as the spread grows. Principalship also becomes obscured in these examples, though the principals’ interests are facilitated or forgotten to varying degrees across the cases examined. I argue, however, that the author and principal do not entirely overlap in all of the examples considered. While clementine cannibal superficially appears to provide a case that fits most neatly within the framework of sponsorship, Goffman’s separation of author and principal may work to complicate our view of sponsors’ gains. While cannibal promotes the spread of their personal interests, these are interests they further recognize as of value to others as well, making the principals of this example multiple as they fight for equity across constructions of gender and sexuality.

In the following chapter, I examine two sponsors who recruit writers to mediate messages for the specific interest of protecting the general public. I specifically examine National Institute of Mental Health and Center for Disease Control recommendations for reporting suicide in order to prevent suicide contagion to examine processes of sponsorship in which those consuming sponsored writers’ texts, rather than the sponsor, appear to be the primary principals. While
Chapter Three shows the action captured by viral metaphors and sponsors using viral metaphors to try to emulate that action, or even to make it happen, Chapter Four shows what can happen when we take the metaphor seriously to the point of conflating figurative and literal contagion in medical understandings. Through the following examples, I break down more explicit portrayals of viral metaphors by literacy sponsors that work shape how the participants they recruit view the activities, motives, and consequences of their decisions of attempting to facilitate or halt viral spread. These more literal understandings of composition as contagion build upon viral entailments of both 1) point-to-point spread of contagion and 2) the agency of contagion as infecting, focusing on specific content as particularly virulent (for example, the glamorization of suicide in news or social media). I argue that the high stakes of these examples, the co-construction understandings of medical health and how writing functions between authors, animators, and consumers, underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary studies of recomposition to take into account other fields’ and social institutions’ take-up of our object of study—and how they may influence not only our research or lay non-academic writing practice but even understandings of phenomena that appear to have little to do with writing, such as the contemplation of suicide, because of the degree to which our lives are textually-mediated.

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21 For example, numerous scholars have noted that Internet users have picked up the concept of the meme in popular vernacular, and not necessarily with the same explicit focus on virulence as academics studying memes in relation to its origins (Knobel and Lankshear 2007, Shifman 2013, Wiggins and Bowers 2014). Shifman, for example, observes that Internet users have picked up the concept of the meme enthusiastically, despite the term being disputed in academia (p. 364). Knobel and Lankshear suggest that usages of the term between Internet users and academics differ, arguing although “[t]here are some broad surface similarities between theorized conceptions of memes within memetics and ‘popular’ appropriations of ‘meme’ as a word to describe particular ‘infectious’ phenomena (and which tends to conflate the message/idea and the idea ‘carrier’ or ‘vehicle’ under the same term)”, these similarities do not run very deep (p. 199). To them, the difference in usage and meaning appears to lie in longevity: “It seems to us very unlikely that many, if any, so-called internet memes of the kinds we talk about in this chapter will have even remotely the kind of shelf life and cultural influence that serious memeticists assign to memes” (p. 199).

22 An image macro is an image superimposed with text, often for humorous or ironic effect. In Internet culture, image macros are commonly referred to as “macros” for short, and this is how I will use the term moving forward.
Jurassic Park enthusiasts have observed that while the Philosoraptor’s visible limb suggests that it is the animal’s forelimb, the large claw appears to portray the armature of the animal’s hind legs instead. In this project’s appendix, Figures A.5 and A.6 expand upon the Philosoraptor’s image to explain how the animal’s body would need to be positioned (in the case of Figure A.6, rather awkwardly and even erotically in what appears to be a satirical classical art of the nude form) in order for her rear claw to reach her face in such a pose. Figure A.7 further revises the original design to portray more accurate fore claw.

4chan began as an online bulletin board where anyone could post pictures and has since evolved to a community fostered by numerous participatory boards, many of them for specifically-themed content. As Sorgatz (2009) reports in his interview with 4chan’s founder, Christopher Poole that 4chan “is the direct or indirect source for many of the strangest internet memes: RickRolling, LOLcats, Sarah Palin’s email hack, Anonymous, Chocolate Rain, and many other minor and major feats of esoterica (i.e., fucked up weird porn). Most of these viral specimens arose from the site’s most popular image board, /b/, which can be the source of considerable hand-wringing and fist-clenching for anyone who has dared navigate its murky, anonymous waters.”

4chan is known for creating memes, yet it’s designed for threads that are carried over to the next day are worth repeating. The things that are genuinely funny get carried over.

This ephemeral quality to the bulletin boards may inform, in part, how the velociraptor holding Plato’s works did not seem to reappear after its initial post, even as uptake of the Philosoraptor template based on Lonely Dinosaur’s design exploded.

In his interview with Sorgatz (2009), Poole explains the /b/ board’s origin, function, and reputation as such: “I was 15 years old and into anime. I threw up one image board, which was the original /b/. At first it was all anime. As people started posting other things, I added more boards and /b/ remained the random board. […] As people started posting other things, I added more boards and /b/ remained the random board. […] 4chan has blown up over the past five years. It's gone from 100 people to 4.75 million per month. And /b/ is pushing 100 million pageviews. [sic].”

When I asked my 14-year-old sister whether she had heard of #AlexFromTarget, she responded, “um, yeah”, though she does not actually have Twitter—such is Alex’s popularity in her demographic. In fact, users of other social media networks such as Instagram circulated his image and organized a day to wear red for Alex at the public schools throughout her county.

Recruitment is one of the many activities Brandt defines as sponsorship (1998, p. 166; 2001, p. 19).

Clementine’s new website, under the name Clementine Morrigan, identifies the writer as genderqueer and refers to them through the singular them rather than feminine pronouns or the gender-neutral pronouns of ze, hir, etc.

The inclusion of the band Hole, for which Courtney Love sang, in this movement is widely debated, and when the band is included, it is typically for reasons of genre similarity rather than shared political interest.
Chapter Four

Containing Contagion: Medical Framings of Composition as Vector

On August 11, 2014, news of actor and comedian Robin Williams’s death spread rapidly across the Internet, particularly on social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition to simply sharing links to news articles reporting Williams’s death, admirers of the performer tweeted images from Disney’s *Aladdin* franchise, for which Williams famously voiced the character Genie in two films. Among these, tweets from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and actress Evan Rachel Wood in particular garnered attention because of both the content and the posters’ large number of followers. Both tweets included images of Aladdin hugging the genie and were captioned with a line from the first film in which Aladdin declares, “Genie, you’re free” (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

![Figure 4.1](Image.png)
Figure 4.2

The quoting of this line implicitly linked freedom from servitude with death and was seen as a symbolic reaction to the widely suspected, though yet-unconfirmed, cause of Williams’s passing: suicide.

Citing the analytics site Topsy, Caitlin Dewey (2014b) of The Washington Post reported that as many as 69 million people may have seen the Academy’s image once it reached 270,000 shares. While, in some ways, this electronic massing of public grief may be said to serve a therapeutic purpose for Williams’s legion admirers, Dewey contended that the tweet “violates well-established public health standards for how we talk about suicide,” citing Christine Moutier, chief medical officer at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: “If it doesn’t cross the line, it comes very, very close to it. Suicide should never be presented as an option. That’s a formula for potential contagion” (qtd. in Dewey).

This chapter examines the “well-established public health standards” that Moutier references. To combat the tendency toward what they allege is irresponsible and contaminating speech on the subject—to control textual spread that they see as quite literally contagious—NIMH and the CDC have delivered a set of recommendations for media discourse,
recommendations that, as outlined by the two groups, take suicide contagion to be the byproduct of specific suicide-reporting practices. With the recommendations, NIMH and the CDC work to shape what information and affect reach the public through composers of news articles, television broadcasts, blogs, and message boards; the institutions demonstrate an interest in instructing not only the writers they influence but also the audience these writers reach. As such, NIMH and the CDC intervene in channels of mass communication of suicide reporting by recruiting writers with already-assembled audiences to both spread and stifle (Kawachi 2008) the specific messages those institutions wish to advance.

If literate activity is about nothing less than ways of being in the world (Prior and Shipka 2003), then how we understand literate activities shapes how we understand our everyday lives through a multitude of textually mediated experiences and phenomena. As the examples of NIMH and the CDC illustrate, institutions beyond academia actively frame what writing is and what it does, creating both tacit and explicit understandings of how people do, can, and should interact with writing as a technology. In the cases examined, understandings of how writing works and what writing does affect how medical professionals understand literally life-of-death stakes of everyday exposure to news reports or social network profiles. In these examples, understandings of medical health appear to be at least partially predicated on understandings of composition: if compositions function as a vector, transmitting ideas like viruses, then minds can become contaminated with contagion through the consumption of texts.

Both NIMH’s and the CDC’s portrayals of reporting suicide present the transmission of ideas through a signification system such as language as acting not only as a vehicle, in transporting a meaning from point A to point B, but as a vector that transmits a meaning with a reproductive capacity. As such, these writing guides’ sponsorship of literate activity evidences
assumptions of an epidemiological transmission and replication as underlying the sharing and spread of composition. I have argued in Chapter Three that virulent metaphors have limitations for understandings of recomposition, in that they passivize textual consumers, and yet the composition-as-contagion formulation is too entrenched (in the English language, at least) in our understanding of communication in general and in the language in which such understanding is conceived and expressed to propose eliminating the metaphor from our studies of writing. So settled is the framing, in fact, that in analyzing NIMH’s and the CDC’s depictions of self-harm as a disease that is actually spreadable through verbal and written communication, I find that there is no clear terminology to distinguish this phenomenon from epidemiologically communicable disease. Significantly, the spoken and written word itself appears to be a biological vector of such infection. Because the concept of communicability has defined human interactions in the cases of both information and of disease since the 1600s (online OED “Communicable”), it is difficult even to find terminology to replace what we might typically term “communication” in terms of conversation or monologue in trying to isolate understandings of the spread of textual communications from those of the spread of communicable disease. As Cynthia Davis (2002) writes, “[c]ontagion and writing are both forms of communication” (p. 829). Furthermore, metaphors for understanding recomposition through frameworks of virulence are conceptually interlinked with typical understandings of verbal communication frequently critiqued for reducing the complexity of social interaction: Reddy’s (1979) conduit metaphor.

In the previous chapter, I challenged the virality tag often misapplied to phenomena of mass and quick-spreading recomposition. At the same time, in exploring the consequences of this misconstruction for the sponsoring interests of so-called viral compositions, I acknowledged and depicted how certain literacy sponsors deliberately exploit this mislabel to shroud
themselves as the originator of the spread. The intended audiences for their writings, however, were narrow, targeted, and primarily self-selecting. In the current chapter, I extend this analysis of literacy contagion by looking at NIMH and the CDC as two sponsors that literalize the metaphor of contagious spread by framing suicide ideation as actual medical contagion. The institutions invoke metaphors of virulence not simply as a rhetorical strategy to incite recomposition but further as in compositions they portray as contagions. Here, then, my study expands to consider the view of compositional contagion as a real-world bearer of malady rather than simply as a figurative condition of principalship in order to underscore the stakes of how not only writing scholars but publics at large understand processes of recomposition.

I begin with a brief theoretical background of the conduit metaphor, a concept that uncovers implicit understandings of language as a vehicle of meaning within the English language. To consider how—at least, within the context of suicide ideation—verbal communication is understood not simply as a carrier of meaning but a vector of meaning with its own agency, a contagion that infects and reproduces itself, I review literature credited by the CDC for informing its recommendations and finally examine the recommendations themselves as they articulate this logic of compositional contagion to a writing public. Ultimately, I ask how these examples help to illuminate the entailment of metaphors of sponsorship and viral spread as they both inform each other and, at times, potentially contradict each other’s portrayals of how texts spread. In doing so, I renew the claim that viral metaphors entail a threefold obscuring: not only of authors and animators as actors, by identifying ideas themselves as agents, but also of principals, by framing contagious concepts themselves as the actors gaining within a framework of self-propagating contagion. How might the examples of NIMH and the CDC, which simultaneously invoke metaphors of contagion while actively sponsoring writing in the interest
of protecting the consumers of their sponsored writers’ texts, help us to develop richer, more complex understandings of gains within the traditionally economic conceptualization of sponsorship?

**From Vehicle to Vector: Scaffolding Understandings of Viral Metaphors from the Framework of the Conduit Metaphor**

In 1979, three years after Dawkins proposed the concept of the meme, Michael Reddy fleshed out the concept of the *conduit metaphor*, which he observed as implicitly—and problematically—underlying understandings of communication in the English language through common scripts, such as a person having to get his or her thoughts across or give someone an idea (p. 286). Reddy argues that such scripts of how humans transact ideas suggest (to English speakers) that language functions like a conduit, transferring bodily from one person to another (p. 290). Scholars such as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) distilled Reddy’s conduit metaphor as “entail[ing] that words and sentences have meanings in themselves, independent of any context of speaker” (p. 11). That is, the understanding of language as a conduit for meaning does not take into account differences in interlocutors’ situations, contexts surrounding conversations, or even vocal tone, body language, or written punctuation that shape the tone of language, all variables that shape communicatory transactions. Understanding language as a conduit is predicated on the misassumption that units of language—words, phrases, sentences—have a single inherent meaning that transcends contextual and tonal discrepancy and may as such be given over to another as if in a pristine container. This leaves little conceptual room for the inevitable miscommunications that enter into these interactions and affect the understanding between speaker and audience, thus effacing the agency of both the producer and receiver of messages in encoding and decoding meaning.
While Reddy proposes that understanding language as a conduit is an implicit assumption among English language users, I observe similar assumptions invoked more explicitly in metaphors of contagion. For a medical institution to identify writing as contagion is to cast writing as a physiological force beyond the cognitive processes required to make sense of text, further framing a compliance in reading. What room is left to disagree, ignore, forget, or be unaffected? While language as a conduit, as noted above, assumes an inherent meaning transferred in communication, communication as viral, contagious, or infectious further assumes an inherent spreadable quality, with the “contagions” propagating themselves when speakers do so much as encounter them, and an insidious transference to and beyond the immediate audience. To invoke virulence, contagion, or infection, then, is to exceed the confines of the conduit metaphor: whereas the latter implies the successful delivery of a message from producer to receiver, the former also ascribes agency and spreadability to ideas themselves.

It is worth considering whether the entailments of the conduit metaphor limit our understandings of communication to a degree that makes it, as a conceptual framework, more of an obstacle than a tool for studying talk and writing. Eubanks (2001), for one, argues that we need not throw out the conduit metaphor based on its supposed limitations. Building on Lakoff and Johnson’s research on conceptual metaphors as operating as part of larger conceptual systems (Lakoff 1996; Lakoff and Johnson 1999), Eubanks emphasizes that we cannot gain important insight into a single metaphor without also considering the metaphors that support it and to which it responds (p. 94). The conduit metaphor is one such example, a composite of multiple sensorimotor experiences; these include sight as a channel into acquiring knowledge, the metaphor of seeing another person’s view. Eubanks elaborates that, as speakers, we do not imagine that this component of the conduit metaphor “unproblematically” describes every act of
communication, as “we are forever reading between the lines [italics original]’’ (pp. 106-107). Here, Eubanks works to demonstrate that just because we understand something as operating through a certain metaphorical framework does not mean that we are incapable of understanding the framework’s limitations or of extending the metaphor to complexities within its framework. To continue the visual metaphor, although we might presume to understand language as something seemingly transparent, we do not necessarily assume that we will never need to look closer at this material to read the fine print, as another visual metaphor puts it, in order to process it.

Eubanks, however, frequently focuses on successful communication as specifically made possible by the volitional choices of a successful rhetor. As he represents communication through a number of sensimotor experiences from touch to sight, he repeatedly ascribes communication breakdowns to the speaker’s failure to capture meaning, paint an accurate picture, or choose accessible, direct, straightforward, and pointed language. Throughout what he titles a “defense of the conduit metaphor,” he does little to address the possibility that the rhetor’s interlocutor(s) are potentially distracted, engaged in bad faith, somehow lacking in comprehension, or otherwise even partly responsible for miscommunication.

Up to this point in this dissertation, I have examined channels of communication as mediated by animators between author and audience as well as the limitations of the metaphors we use to understand these phenomena. I now interrogate the consequences of sponsors actively deploying metaphors of virulence to intervene in existing channels of communication. In these examples, NIMH and the CDC invoke not simply the entailment of point-to-point spread involved in metaphors of virulence, but also that of an external power acting on textual
consumers, as pathogens act on their hosts, and specifically an pathogenic power that, unlike the grrrlVIRUS described in the last chapter, does harm to its host.

**Theoretical Framings of Ideas as Contagious: A Literature Review from the CDC**

The CDC website projects an air of authority in its coverage of proper and improper practices for reporting suicide. The page listing recommendations for reporting suicide proclaims in its subtitle that these are “Recommendations from a National Workshop,” one that, the site reports, featured suicidologists, public health officials, researchers, psychiatrists, psychologists, and news media professionals who had gathered to address general concerns about and specific recommendations for reducing the possibility “of media-related suicide contagion.” The “National Workshop” in question, though, took place in 1989; it was confronting media threats for a different generation, in a far less diffuse media climate. Though a majority of the articles generated through the meeting focus specifically on youth and adolescents, today’s adolescents were not yet born at the time of this research. The publications that appear in the recommendation’s reference list dates as far back as 1985, and none were more recent than 1993. None of the recommendations were made in a context where the public Internet and social media existed.

In one of the CDC’s cited texts, Lucy E. Davidson and Madelyn S. Gould (1989) describe medical researchers and practitioners as struggling with the task of recognizing susceptible individuals beforehand, which Harry Bakwin (1957) distinguishes as “the sole approach to the youth suicide problem.” Davidson and Gould define suicide contagion as “a hybrid term that appends to suicide the medical meaning of contagion as the transmission of a disease through direct or indirect contact” (p. 88). They further argue that the term “copycat suicide” trivializes the many other factors contributing to suicide, in that “[t]he simplistic notion that one person
merely copied another’s suicide does not explain why the suicide was copied by that particular individual and not be [sic] hundreds of others who were similarly exposed” as “[e]xplaining cluster suicides by imitation alone does not take each decedent’s susceptibility and stresses into account” (p. 91). While imitation does not account for individual susceptibility and stress, they postulate that “applying the infectious disease model to suicide contagion can clarify from whom and through what sorts of contact the likelihood of suicide is increased,” arguing that components of the infectious disease model of host susceptibility, modes of transmission, degree of virulence, and dose dependency are analogous factors of suicide contagion (p. 88). I provide an overview of each of these model components below.

**Host Susceptibility.** Davidson and Gould define host susceptibility as measuring an individual’s intrinsic ability to resist illness; they illustrate this factor with the example of an immunized child who does not contract measles even if exposed to an outbreak (p. 88). They explain that host susceptibility to suicide is multiplely determined, with genetics playing a part, as some forms of depression have a strong genetic component, and depression is a common antecedent of suicide.

**Modes of Transmission.** Davidson and Gould explain that modes of transmission can be direct, as in person-to-person, or indirect:

[p]erson-to-person spread may be implicated in subsequent teen deaths following the suicide of another member of the same social network. The suicide of someone famous, such as Marilyn Monroe, may be an indirect exposure to suicide for millions of people. Thus, various suicide contagion pathways may exist: direct contact or friendship with a victim, word-of-mouth knowledge, and indirect propagation through the media. (p. 89)

**Degree of Virulence.** Davidson and Gould point out that infective agents are different in
their degree of virulence; beta-hemolytic streptococci, for example, are more virulent than other types of streptococci. They postulate that “for youth suicide, the virulence of the agent may be greater when the first death in a potential cluster is that of a highly esteemed role model, such as the class president, rather than a loner who was always perceived as odd or disturbed” (p. 89).

*Dose Dependency.* Davidson and Gould relate the concept of dose dependency to suicide through an analogy of eating salad contaminated with staphylococci: while not all persons who consume the salad will get food poisoning, those who had two helpings are more likely to become ill than those who took a single taste. They suggest that “[t]he risk to an individual youth for suicide may increase as the number of suicides increases in his or her peer group or in the community” and that “[t]he seventh youth suicide in a widely publicized series of seven is likely to have been more exposed to suicide than his predecessors and, in effect, to have received a higher dose” (p. 89).

**Theoretical Implications of Ideas as Contagion: Deconstructing the Metaphor**

As Davidson and Gould carefully work through each component of the infectious disease model to correlate it to suicide, they draw a series of sub-metaphors to substantiate the larger metaphor of suicide contagion. In discussing not simply susceptibility but specifically host susceptibility, they do not explain how ideas of suicide themselves act to parasitize and prey on a human as a host. This same critique applies to the scholars’ comparisons of word-of-mouth communication to person-to-person communication of disease; of the suicide of the class president with that of a loner, of how order or the person’s esteem relate to varying degrees of virulence of different types of streptococci; and of increased publicity to increased viral dosage. All of these examples rely on tropic similarities rather than detailed explanations of a mechanism wherein words enable words to prey on a host. As Bashford and Hooker (2001) observe,
contagion “implies absorption, invasion, vulnerability, the breaking of a boundary imagined as secure, in which the other becomes part of the self. Contagion connotes both a process of contact and transmission, and a substantive, self-replicating agent, and is centrally concerned with the growth and multiplication of this agent” (p. 4). How is it, then, that the metaphor of contagion appears to so neatly fit without an explanation of the supposed agency of articulated ideas in the ability to replicate in a host body?

Davis (2002) points out that contagion has a peculiar ability to be both content and method, “both disease and the process of its spread,” and, as such, offers a compelling analogy or metaphorical shortcut to portrayals of spread (p. 830). I posit that the need for such a shortcut in explaining how the concept of reporting as contagion may result from difficulties in studying, let alone evidencing, the spread of ideas as a contagion. Davidson and Gould acknowledge that a major constraint in examining the impact of media coverage of suicides is that such a study cannot demonstrate whether the suicide victims were actually exposed to the media events (p. 94). If, the complexities of its effects aside, the mere fact of exposure to media coverage is difficult to confirm, why do NIMH and the CDC train such effort on scripting reporting guidelines?

Patrick O’Carroll, listed as a member of the CDC staff responsible for preparing the report of recommendations and cited for his publication, “Suicide Causation: Pies, Paths, and Pointless Polemics,” may provide an answer. O’Carroll (1993) observes that, to a large extent, most medical and scholarly attention in what causes suicide derives from our interest in preventing suicide (p. 29); he further argues that suicide always has multiple causal components working together and that, in order to prevent a particular suicide, researchers do not need to identify and understand all of the causal components at work. To back this, O’Carroll summons
the metaphor of a car engine: “Few of us know how an internal combustion engine really works. But most of us, if properly motivated, could devise any number of ways of preventing an engine from operating” (p. 30). O’Carroll further challenges the assertion that suicide prevention should focus on the causal elements most strongly associated with suicide by observing that some causal elements may be far more amenable to intervention than the element that is most strongly associated with suicide (p. 34). Although suicide is often connected to emotionally traumatic life events, he notes, there is little chance to eliminate such events in suicide prevention efforts (p. 35). Based on O’Carroll’s argument, the potential facilitating factor of textual portrayals of suicide deaths and methods used appears far easier to control than factors such as traumatic life events.

Although this theoretical representation helps to inform us why NIMH and the CDC work to influence reports of suicide, it does not necessarily explain how either institution understands writing to operate as contagion or what it means for these institutions to portray writing as contagion. Davidson and Gould critique the term copycat suicide as trivializing the many factors that contribute to suicide by arguing that imitation does not account for individual susceptibility to external influence, and yet I question how a framework of contagion more accurately captures such other factors motivating suicide. In fact, I see the framework of contagion as erasing motivation from suicide, as motivation informs choices for actions, and thus agency. Imitation is one form of action. Contagion, however, leads not to choice or action but to symptoms and afflictions. As I review the data from NIMH and the CDC, I find that virulent frameworks of contagion not only obscure agency in terms of composing and spreading composition, as I argued in the previous chapter, but even shape understandings of other roles of human agency based on our participation in textually mediated experiences; in the case of this
study specifically, these frameworks assist in framing suicide itself as the effect of disease rather than an act an individual chooses.

**Suicide as “Contagion”: Constructing a Communicable Threat to the Public**

The CDC recommendations for reporting suicide list some aspects of media messaging thought to promote contagion and briefly explain how these may negatively influence consumers, while NIMH recommendations are organized into “Do”s and “Don’t”s elaborated in “Instead of This” and “Do This” advice columns for reporters to follow “suicide contagion” guidelines (see Figure 4.3).

![Figure 4.3](image)

In this document, NIMH states that “the way media cover suicide can influence behavior negatively by contributing to contagion or positively by encouraging help-seeking”; suicide contagion occurs “when one or more suicides are reported in a way that contributes to another suicide.” Here, NIMH stresses reporters’ agency in composing, presenting reporters with a
choice to spread or halt contagion based on their adherence to compositional guidelines. By deriving its definition from the reportage of suicides by media rather than from the imitation of other suicides by individuals, NIMH skews the attribution of responsibility toward speech and away from action—away from those who take the decision to end their lives. Furthermore, in pathologizing suicide as potentially contagious through textual exposure, NIMH frames multimodal reporting in newspapers, online news articles, and television news stories as carriers of contagion that do not catch the condition themselves but can pass it on to others.

NIMH presents this framework as applying beyond professional reporters to anyone writing about suicide in any public capacity. In “Suggestions for Online Media, Message Boards, Bloggers and Citizen Journalists,” NIMH asserts that “[t]he potential for online reports, photos/videos and stories to go viral makes it vital that online coverage of suicide follow site or industry safety recommendations.” In this section, NIMH explains that “[s]ocial networking sites often become memorials to the deceased and should be monitored for hurtful comments and for statements that others are considering suicide. Message board guidelines, policies and procedures could support removal of inappropriate and/or insensitive posts.” Similarly, “[b]loggers, citizen journalists and public commentators can help reduce risk of contagion with posts or links to treatment services, warning signs and suicide hotlines.” The following table (Table 4.1) organizes related aspects of reporting identified as contagions by both institutions with the recommendations NIMH provides to avoid such contagion:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“aspects of news coverage that can promote suicide contagion” (CDC)</th>
<th>“Instead of This” (NIMH)</th>
<th>“Do This” (NIMH)</th>
<th>Analysis of These Examples as a Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* Providing sensational coverage of suicide.</td>
<td>* Big or sensationalistic headlines, or prominent placement</td>
<td>* Inform the audience without sensationalizing the suicide and minimize prominence (e.g., “Kurt Cobain Dead at 27”).</td>
<td>Concerns about sensationalizing, glorifying, and increasing viewer/reader preoccupation with suicide by associating suicide with affects of excitement, glory, praise, memorialism, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Glorifying suicide or persons who commit suicide.</td>
<td>* Describing recent suicides as an “epidemic” or “skyrocketing,” or other strong terms.</td>
<td>* Carefully investigate the most recent CDC data and use non-sensational words like “rise” or “higher.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Focusing on the suicide completer’s positive characteristics.</td>
<td>* Including photos/videos of the location […] of death, grieving family, friends, memorials or funerals.</td>
<td>* Use school/work or family photo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Engaging in repetitive, ongoing, or excessive reporting of suicide in the news.</td>
<td>* Reporting “how-to” descriptions of</td>
<td>* Including photos/videos of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Reporting “how-to”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Concerns for instructing suicide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Both NIMH and the CDC recommend against detailing suicide method, which could instruct those considering suicide, and against the sensationalization and glamorization of death, which could make suicide seem alluring. Of the former, CDC and NIMH recommendations
respectively identify “[r]eporting ‘how-to’ descriptions of suicide” and “[i]ncluding photos/videos of the location or method of death” as aspects of reporting that can contribute to suicide contagion. What both institutions label as “contagion” could also be understood in a more straightforward way as a matter of instruction—the possibility of incidentally teaching methods of suicide through narrative or photographic details of methods that have been carried out.\(^\text{34}\)

Contemporary suicide literature offers some evidence for re-reading accounts of contagion as, at least in part, issues of instruction/learning. For example, while arguing that suicide contagion is a genuine phenomenon, Becker et al. (2004) also acknowledge alternative terms and frameworks such as the “imitation hypothesis,” “suggestion theory,” “disinhibition effect,” and, “imitational learning” (p. 111). Stack (2003) argues that while associations are drawn between the reporting of suicide in news media and a rise in the social suicide rate, it typically is not known to what extent the people committing suicide are even aware of the suicide story. Describing the associations as “indirect” and “not fully satisfactory” (p. 238), Stack notes that the most direct evidence has come from reports, for example, of the role of a guide to suicide for the terminally ill being present at the location of a number of suicides and of a statistical increase in particular methods of suicide that the book detailed. Another report noted again an increase in method (hanging) following a media report of a suicide by hanging. Stack did not indicate that either of these reports found an overall increase in the suicide rate. In any case, it appears that the most direct evidence tying media coverage of suicide to suicides could be taken as evidence of instruction.

Stack reviews three major theories used for interpreting these associations (p. 238). First, Stack observes explanations of media impacts on suicide as generally framed in terms of social
learning theory, in which “one learns that there are troubled people who solve their life’s problems (for example, divorce, terminal illness, dishonor) through suicide. Mentally troubled persons in society may simply copy the behavior of troubled people in the suicide stories” (p. 238). He then identifies the learning process of differential identification as suggesting that, “to the extent that people identify with a type of story, that type would be expected to have more of an impact. For example, if people tend to copycat the suicides of superior people, they would be expected to copy the ones of famous celebrities more than the suicides of ordinary people” (p. 238). Finally, he discusses an explanation not of the characteristics of the message but of audience mood, which suggests that suicide stories “that appear when suicidogenic conditions are high in society (for example, high unemployment, high divorce rates, low church attendance rates) will have more of a copycat effect since more people are on the verge of suicide”, which he cites as the most understudied explanation. (p. 238). Stack’s review acknowledges that studies of suicide contagion have faced methodological challenges and that the empirical evidence has been complicated (i.e., lots of contextual effects) and somewhat mixed. For example, if there is a statistically significant uptick in the number of suicides in a certain period after a major media story of a suicide, it is difficult methodologically to determine if the change represents a change in the number of suicides or in the timing, or as noted earlier, in method of suicide.

In addition to concerns about instructing methods of suicide, both NIMH and the CDC express concerns of audiences identifying with positive portrayals of those who have committed suicide appear in NIMH and CDC guidelines as they list “[g]lorifying suicide or persons who commit suicide,” “[f]ocusing on the suicide completer's positive characteristics,” and “[b]ig or sensationalistic headlines, or prominent placement” as further aspects of reporting that drive contagion. The CDC notes that suicide reportage sometimes associates the act with honor or
praise, which, the CDC reasons, might not only facilitate suicide preoccupation but further cast suicide in a positive light for viewers. For the CDC, community expressions of grief, such as public eulogies, flags flown at half-mast, and permanent public memorials, are potential contributors to suicide contagion “by suggesting to susceptible persons that society is honoring the suicidal behavior of the deceased person, rather than mourning the person's death.” The CDC further remarks that “[e]mpathy for family and friends often leads to a focus on reporting the positive aspects of a suicide completer's life,” and, “[a]s a result, […] suicidal behavior may appear attractive to other at-risk persons—especially those who rarely receive positive reinforcement for desirable behaviors.” The fear described here is that reportage not simply reveals suicide methods but further impart the lesson that suicide reaps positive value and secondary gains such as appreciation. According to the CDC, repeating suicide stories on a seemingly endless media loop poses the greatest threat to “at-risk” individuals, whose preoccupation with suicide may increase. The solution to this, the CDC puts forward, is “by limiting, as much as possible, morbid details in their public discussions of suicide.” All of these concerns fit with theories of social learning and differential identification as Stack describes them. Still, in one of its pronouncements on the relationship between mass preoccupation with suicide, as disseminated through media, and actual incidences of suicide, the CDC again casts its discourse specifically in terms of epidemiology: “This reaction is also believed to be associated with contagion and the development of suicide clusters.”

While suicide statistics may yield clusters, the CDC reporting guidelines do not document a clear leap from “clusters” to “contagion”—from correlation to causation—as they portray reporters’ roles in spreading or preventing said contagion. That is not to say that literature in suicide-related research does not work to document the interrelation of these terms
as conceptual frameworks. Cheng et al. (2014) argue that despite the increasingly common invocation of the term *contagion* to analogize the spread of suicidal thoughts, behaviors, and deaths, “there has been scant effort to rigorously assess the underlying concept or theory supporting the use of this term, or appraise its practical utility” (p. 1). As they review literature published as of April 4, 2013 to obtain a comprehensive picture of the academic use of contagion, they find that, for the specific use of contagion-as-cluster, studies lack specification or agreement regarding the measurements of time, spatial distance, and social distance that qualified as “acute” or “proximate” enough to connect the suicides they studied, arguing that, “[w]ithout either *a priori* standardization or empirical demonstration of metrics for time, space, or social connection, the process for defining connection or contact becomes potentially unreliable” (p. 2). They further observe:

The invocation of contagion in these records appears to have provided a meaningful analogy for the authors to use to describe the phenomenon and underscore their high degree of concern. However, unlike “clustering,” which describes proximity in time, spatial arrangement, or both, contagion implicates some type of “contact” mechanism through which a disease is spread. Guided by this presumption, authors who use clustering to infer contagion point to proximity as their evidence; in essence, it becomes a circular argument (i.e., closely occurring events, however defined, must be related and thus there must be contagion). […] Therefore, using contagion as equivalent to cluster is not robust heuristically—that is, it does not open doors that could lead to new research—and inadvertently, it may have constrained research by not encouraging investigators to more deeply explore the phenomenon. p. 3
After these critiques of contagion as it appears in contemporary suicide research, Cheng et al. eventually examine contagion’s force as a metaphor, concluding that “[w]hen applied as a descriptive metaphor, to say that the apparent spread of suicidal behaviors among persons or populations is a ‘contagion,’ its use has illustrative and frightening power” (p. 8). In light of these critiques, how can we understand how virulent frameworks of recomposition appear as a likely basis both for believing that composition poses a risk on par with contagion and for conveying risks of contagion as a convincing reason for writers to change their future compositions?

In framing the reporting of suicide as a potential contagion rather than simply a potential source for misinformation, NIMH and the CDC in effect reformulate suicide reportage as a disease, the act of reporting as a transmissive event, and the reporters themselves as risk-bearing carriers. For Priscilla Wald (2008), communicable disease illustrates “the logic of social responsibility: the mandate to live with a consciousness of the effects of one’s actions on others” and “the possibility of constituting a threat to others” (p. 22). Grounded in this kind of ethical stance, NIMH instructs news writers to avoid an epidemic of suicide contagion in two ways: by not participating in the spread of the contagion through explicit descriptions of methods, dramatic headlines or images, or extensive coverage that glamorizes death; and by avoiding the language of communicable disease in which NIMH itself, ironically, has engaged. Though NIMH opens with the statement that “[s]uicide is a public health issue” and calls suicide “contagious,” it also specifically advises media reporters against using epidemiological terms to denote statistical increases in reported suicides; instead of “[d]escribing recent suicides as an ‘epidemic,’ ‘skyrocketing,’ or other strong terms,’” reporters should “[c]arefully investigate the most recent CDC data and use non-sensational words like ‘rise’ or ‘higher.’” Thus, NIMH
engages in fine-grained linguistic parsing, openly identifying suicide as a “public health issue” and a “contagion” but warning that it not be publicly called an “epidemic.” Reporters are not only to avoid spreading the contagion by escalating the terms of depiction but also to avoid suggesting to their consumers that there could be a spreading contagion. In this construction of suicide, containment and prevention are matters of rhetorical restraint.

Terming suicide “contagion” and, further, a “public health issue” frames it metaphorically as the effect of a disease upon a body, as something that may infiltrate and damage a public body rather than as the act a person resolves upon and takes with his or her own body. With suicide as contagion, individuals completing suicide cease to be actors consummating an act. The rhetorical presentation of suicide as contagion is not a human decision but an effect of the disease. Framing suicide as contagious removes agency from individuals, as in general I have noted that viral metaphors do.

Metaphorical Entailments and the Beneficiaries of Sponsorship

The examples of NIMH and the CDC sponsoring writing guidelines that engage in in metaphors of viral spread and attempt to intervene in that spread present us with a culmination of metaphorical entailments that simultaneously reinforce and contract one another. For example, while clementine cannibal may work to eclipse her sponsorship of grrrlVIRUS by framing the movement as infectious, and therefore spreading of its own agency, metaphors of virulence also portray textual consumers as acted upon by an external power, much as the metaphor of sponsorship does. Underlying this is the implication that there are others whose ideas, if not interests, are acting upon us through our interactions. What of this distinction between ideas and interests? In Chapter Three, I pushed on the entailment of interestedness within the metaphor of sponsorship, as sponsors, by definition, gain something from their actions. I argue here that
NIMH and CDC understandings of compositions as contagions and their goals of promoting and obstructing specific messages that reporters and bloggers might spread to larger publics may raise further questions about the interests literacy sponsorship fulfills.

In the examples of NIMH’s and the CDC’s sponsorship, the principal appears to be the audience itself. NIMH and the CDC sponsor messages they judge to serve the public’s best interest. In this case, this includes members of the public who are difficult to identify and locate, populations potentially vulnerable to suicide ideation. In their reading of Foucault’s *Security, Territory, Population*, Livingston and Puar (2011) argue that the classification of humans as a biological species allowed for the synecdochic logic that the life and futurity of a human body represented the interests of the life and futurity of the human population. Thus, in sponsoring messages of interests to a potentially vulnerable population, NIMH and the CDC are also sponsoring messages for the good of the population as a whole. While, in this way, the audience is the principal, the medical institutions recruiting reporters and digital writers to mediate these messages to wider audiences are arguably principals as well, in that it is their responsibility to promote and maintain public health. The vagaries of principalship at play here extend as well to sponsorship. If sponsors, by definition, gain something from their activities, how do we understand sponsors like NIMH and the CDC who seek gains not for themselves but for others? Is this simply an issue of multiple parties occupying the role of principal, or does it press upon our notions of sponsorship as operating economically? If sponsorship does in fact operate economically, how do we account for not only sponsors and sponsored writers but also for the ultimate beneficiaries, the consumers of sponsored texts?

We might first try turning to Selfe and Hawisher’s (2004) term benefactor, used in examples in which the actor providing access to literacy does not gain anything in return.
However, because NIMH and the CDC *use* other writers in order to reach the consumers they intend to help, I do not find this framework fitting for these examples.

In light of these examples, I argue that just as the role of *speaker* actually covers a variety of roles of authors, animators, and principals (Goffman 1981), so too is *sponsor* a multilayered term that we must unpack in order to understand who is acting and who is benefiting within this system, one traditionally understood as operating economically. The writers of these recommendations, for example, are actually reanimating messages of numerous authors’ scholarly works. Thus, the apparent sponsors are themselves animators of other authors’ arguments, even as they ask others to further animate their guidelines for spreading their own messages and stifling competing messages.

Furthermore, these sponsors ask their audience to take up the roles of social actors even as they portray their animators’ readers as passive recipients acted upon by the content of the texts they consume. As I move forward, I ask how we might more explicitly recognize the importance of audience participation and agency in recomposition. Because recomposition requires not only the communication from a speaker to a passive audience to but an audience that further circulates the message, it requires not only a speaker successfully convincing the audience of his or her composition’s value but also an audience acting beyond receiving or even appreciating the content. How can we articulate these activities and roles to overcome the shortcomings of sponsorship, viruses, and conduits as metaphors for recomposition?

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33 In fact, Davidson and Gould’s explanation of degrees of virulence does not even frame the reporting of death of a classmate as virulent so much as the actual death itself.

34 Becker et al. (2004) and Stack (2003) examine influences of suicide instruction, with Becker et al. documenting the story of Lisa searching for suicide methods on suicide forums online, while Stack observes that, in the year *Final Exit*, a guide for suicide for terminally ill persons recommending asphyxiation as a means of suicide, the number of suicides by asphyxiation in New York City rose by 313% with the book found at the scene of 27% of those suicides (p. 238).
In “Instead of This” and “Do This”

36 This is not a term not from their text but one that I use to capture the phenomenon they discuss.
Chapter Five

Conclusion: Integrating Multiple Metaphors of Literate Activity

This chapter asks how we can overcome the shortcomings this project has outlined in notions of sponsorship, viruses, and conduits as metaphors for recomposition. I suggest, as a jumping off point, Spiro et al.’s (1989) argument that, although analogies are an important tool in communicating, conceptualizing, and acquiring understanding, their reduction of complex concepts to similar and more familiar analogical cores can make them serious impediments to fuller and more precise understandings of the phenomena they portray, often resulting in erroneous knowledge. Spiro et al. posit two remedies to this problem of what should be done to counter the tendencies toward oversimplification that come with the use of analogy and lead to misconceptions (p. 514): 1) paying more attention to the ways that analogies fail, mislead, or are incomplete and 2) employing integrated multiple analogies to convey more of the necessary complexity of difficult concepts or employing several already known concepts rather than only one (p. 499). They explain that, in the case of integrating multiple analogies, there are two main ways of adding new analogies to earlier analogies: modified analogies, in which new analogies merely emend an earlier ones, and new analogies, in which totally new analogies are added (p. 521).

Up to this point, I have primarily worked to revise the vertical character of the sponsorship metaphor in two ways. In Chapter Two, I worked within the framework and terminology of sponsorship through the lenses of confluent and composite sponsorships, which demonstrate that the intersection of sponsors can be simultaneously horizontal—as multiple sponsors collide and co-operate—and vertical—as one may, in some respects, actually sponsor the other. In Chapters Three and Four, I examined more horizontally oriented metaphors of viral
and memetic spread, specifically focusing on sponsors recruiting writers to “infect” others or prevent “contagion” through the spread of texts. Interestingly, however, both the vertical and horizontal metaphorical frameworks portray writers, text sharers, and readers as acted upon, afflicted, or otherwise interpellated, not accounting for their agency in composing, spreading, or ascribing value to the texts with which they interact. At this point then, I shift my focus from the ways the analogies discussed throughout this dissertation fail, mislead, or operate incompletely and working to modify them and on to exploring how we might integrate multiple analogies in order to mitigate the gaps or misrepresentations the individuals metaphors on their own might entail. Like Spiro et al., I do not advocate complication for its own sake (p. 501). I propose intervening in these analogies in an effort to integrate frameworks that more effectively capture the activity of writers, whether identified as sponsored or patient zeros. Though I have used the term sponsored writers for my work, I recognize that this term identifies these writers primarily based on the activity, influence, and agency of another. The fact that we have no terminology for discussing the agency of individuals who feature in the literate activity related to sponsorship, but not as the sponsors, should concern us as scholars, as we implicitly deny them roles as social actors through such conceptualization.

In earlier chapters, I worked to mitigate this passivization of textual participants, highlighting how we might understand affiliates of Babeland on Facebook as recruiting their sponsors into their social goals in Chapter Two and using Goffman’s (1981) production format in chapters Three and Four to articulate how sponsored writers in networks of recomposition and regulated composition are engaged in rhetorical acts of animation and principalship at least (and often are also engaged in authoring). I offer this chapter as further recovery and reclamation of the activity and agency of those participating in networks of discourse. Because recomposition
requires not simply the communication from a speaker to a passive audience, but an audience that acts to further circulate the message, it requires not only a speaker successfully convincing the audience of his or her composition’s value but an audience acting, taking rhetorically motivated action (even if it be as simple as clicking a button that adds their name to a petition or that retweets without comment another’s texts) that goes beyond receiving or even appreciating the content. The remainder of this project works to explicitly recognize the importance of these particular forms of audience participation and agency in recomposition.

Although I have argued that common frameworks for conceptualizing processes of recomposition obscure activities and dynamic social relations, it is important to recognize that other models for understanding exist in scholarship. In Chapter Three, for example, I built upon not only Goffman but also LeFevre’s (1987) examination of the varied social grounds of invention and Lasswell’s (1959) work on innovation as a social process to illuminate the agency and collaborative processes potentially obscured by researching popular circulation in terms of an index case, or a patient zero, as a site of infection rather than as a composer of content. While LeFevre’s framework of invention as a social act helps to frame sponsored writers as agents working within networks of other social actors, I am interested in further articulating the multiple social relations of sponsors and sponsored writers in both distinct and overlapping social roles. To these ends, I take up, as LeFevre did, Lasswell’s metaphors of resonance and dampening but also Kawachi’s (2008) study of spreading and stifling to explore how we might legibilize the roles sponsored writers play as social actors. While Goffman’s terminology productively captures the agency of animators articulating the authored messages and principalship of others, his models are grounded in face-to-face interaction rather than larger scaled, mediated interactions. He does not explore how people shut down or silence others or even how they co-
opt others words and ideologies. Lasswell and Kawachi illustrate actors engaging in more specific activities of encouraging or derailing specific texts and interests, acting metaphorically as *resonators* and *spreaders* or *dampers* and *stiflers*. In the following section, I examine how these frameworks can serve as additional metaphors to inform and flesh out Goffman’s concept of animation for a more nuanced understanding of actors mediating others’ messages.

**Unpacking Animation: Resonance, Spreading, Dampening, and Stifling**

The body of this dissertation examined examples of individuals distributing other composers’ interests, ideas, and even exact compositions, such as Babeland’s revised prompts, Alex’s exact photo, the Philosoraptor design, as well as writing prompts and guidelines in which sponsors sought just that, such as clementine cannibal’s call for grrlVIRUS flyers and NIMH suggesting that reporters use the information from its guidelines to write safely about suicide. Similarly, Lasswell advises that when we focus intensively upon the innovative process in any social setting, we become aware of the phenomena of *resonators* and *dampers*. He proposes that successful innovators set up resonant relationships with individuals in their social environments, while potentially significant innovators may often be stunted through lack of a lack of connections playing a resonating role and through dependence upon an environment exerting a dampening influence (p. 216). While Brandt (1998, 2001) includes productive and counterproductive influences within the framework of sponsorship, with sponsors capable of enabling and constraining, Lasswell isolates resonating and dampening influences. My work has focused on examples of resonance. LeFevre (1987) elaborates on Lasswell’s work to explain that “[r]esonance comes about when an individual act—a ‘vibration’—is intensified and prolonged by sympathetic vibrations […] it requires the participation of real people” (p. 65). We see this resonance and amplification in examples such as the fan girls popularizing #AlexFromTarget and
grrrls spreading grrrIVIRUS, as animators both disperse and temporally prolong what could easily have been compositional blips if not picked up by the radars of audiences with shared or sympathetic interests and then retransmitted to their audiences. These layered chains of audiences not only consumed texts in question but further sustained the interests behind them by repeating them across both digital and physical spaces. Both Lasswell’s focus on creators and LeFevre’s on inventors can be informed by Goffman’s separation of author and principal. For example, the grrrls copying or modeling texts after clementine cannibal’s are not only resonating the work of an author but furthering the interests of multiple principals in promoting cannibal’s interests and those they recognize as helping women in general.

Similar to Lasswell’s concept of resonators and dampers is Kawachi’s (2008) portrayal of spreaders and stiflers in relation to spreading rumors. In his mathematical model of rumor transmission, Kawachi identifies two social roles outside of the spreaders actively spreading the rumor: susceptibles, those do not know about the rumor, and stiflers, who know about the rumor and do not spread it (p. 1990). He notes that although susceptibles can change their rumor-class and become spreaders, they may doubt the rumor’s credibility and consequently become stiflers (p. 1990). As such, Kawachi differentiates the roles of individuals not actively spreading content because they are unfamiliar with it and those who are familiar with it but choose actively not to spread it. What he does not clarify is the role of individuals actively combatting the content. This results in two facets of the framework not yet fully explored. For example, a person may not only lack interest in or not lend enough credence to gossip to pass it on, but may actively defend the object of gossip or refute a rumor as false. I find this distinction important because Kawachi’s framework also does not consider that refuting a rumor or critiquing the content of another type of message may further spread it in some ways by raising it in people’s consciousness. Notions
such as spreading and stifling may provide us with intellectual space for considering processes of a sort of anti-animation but also restrict our understandings to a binary that ignores that activities may simultaneously spread and stifle a message. In the following section, I consider how we might conceptualize such activities of spreading and stifling as potentially multipart to capture such overlapping action.

**Beyond Binaries: A Rhizomatic View of Recomposition**

I argue that animation may function through one or many activities related to spreading and stifling that are not situated on a clear-cut continuum between spreaders and stiflers as dichotomies but in a more rhizomatic organization in which various roles and effects may overlap (see Figure 5.1).

![Figure 5.1](image)

The activities and roles I provide as examples are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. The terms I employ are not discrete categories, as animators may take up more than one at a time, and the lines between them are not clear-cut. I offer these terms not as a distinctive model of animation, authorship, and principalship but as an invitation to examine the complexity of activities that may simultaneously spread a text while acting against the interests of its principal, incidentally or intentionally.
For example, animators may operate as **copiers**, directly reproducing a text with no alterations. Examples would include writing out a quote word for word or photocopying an image. A copier may then also move on to be a **spreader** by retweeting; sharing on Facebook; or forwarding an email. Copiers help to illuminate how texts’ contexts can be multiple. In her study of memetics, Shifman (2013) suggests that, in the digital age, “people do not have to repackage memes: They can spread content as is by forwarding, linking, or copying” (p. 365) while Kumar (2015) observes that “[s]ince replication is also mutation and the iteration cannot share the presence in time and space of the original, memetic repetition in new sites, through new bodies and in new contexts both disturbs the original and displaces it by being ‘almost the same but not quite’” (p. 234). In more concrete terms, the copier may place the text in a new context by virtue of publishing it in a new space for a new audience without altering the contexts such as captions explaining an image, quote, or news story. I might do this, for example, to pass along news of an event happening on my university campus without comment (though my audience’s experience with my personal history could obviously color their perception of whether I intended the mention promotionally). As Shifman further observes, “a quick look at any Web 2.0 application would reveal that people do choose to create their own versions of Internet memes” through repackaging strategies of mimicry and remixing (p. 365), which leads me to consider a number of roles beyond direct copying.

Animators (re-animators) may also act as **diffusers**, spreading a message thinly, in a way that might not capture its pith. This could include paraphrasing or slightly re-centering a text, such as sharing a news story captioned with a message about a portion most relevant to his interests, sharing an image with a photo about how it reminds her of something not directly related to the context of the image; or sharing a quote with a note about what it means to her.
Animators can act as **imitators**, mimicking a text (see Figure 5.2 of Anna and Lexie Faith of impersonating Elsa and Anna from Disney’s *Frozen* [Official Anna Faith Page]), thus spreading its concept, though not its exact composition or craftsmanship.

Figure 5.2

Some animators act as **appropriators**, taking an author’s work and fitting it for an alternate purpose. 4Chan’s appropriation of Lonely Dinosaur’s T-shirt design in the creation of the template for the Philosoraptor macro stands out as an example from this dissertation. While still circulating a version of the text, appropriators’ activities may shift the resulting text from the interests of the principal. Appropriators may also be satirists, though satire may not simply appropriate a message but further disrupt it and the interests behind it; advocate for revisions to it; or explicitly express dissent against it.

As such, animators may act as **disrupters**, derailing a message intentionally or unintentionally.
They may work as **revisionists**, striving to specifically change or improve a message. Like appropriators, revisionists may circulate the message without continuing to serve its principal. A fictional examination that comes to mind is that of *Thank You for Smoking* (Reitman 2005), in which Senator Finistirre proposes that movies featuring smoking be "improved" by removing cigarettes and replacing them with less offensive objects:

Interviewer: What do you say to the people who claim you are destroying cinema classics?

Senator: Mmm, no. All we're doing is using digital technology to tastefully update movies of the past...by removing cigarettes. I believe that if these stars were alive today, they would agree that we're doing the right thing.

Interviewer: But, in essence, aren't you changing history?

Senator: No, I think we're improving history.

Animators (re-animators) may operate as **dissidents**, actively combating a text, and yet even while acting against the interests of the principal, dissidents are still circulating a representation of the material by voicing discussion (the expression “there is no such thing as bad press” comes to mind).

In some cases, animation may move to anti-animation as people act as **censors**, obstructing part or all of a message from being spread. While revisionists alter and spread a message, censors block others from seeing all or part of it, as exemplified through redactions of circulated texts; banning material from circulating; or removing content from a forum.

It is important to note that active spreaders can play into stifling by bringing content to the attention of would-be stiflers; causing enough attention to make the ideas worth stifling; or presenting, appropriating, or revising the material in a way that incites stiflers. For example, consider fans circulating literature and films to the point at which they are well-known enough
for schools and even legal systems to ban their consumption. Fan fiction, art, and videos may circulate fictional characters and universes, but the changes that their composers make to characters and plot lines can lead copyright holders to seek to censor them.\textsuperscript{37} Stifling can also inadvertently lead to spread, as banning books and films can make can cause both discussion and rebellion that lead some to seek them out. Thus, it is essential not to reduce spreading and stifling to simple oppositions, but to recognize them as activities that are dynamic and complex with repercussions potentially contradictory to their terminology or the intent(s) behind them. Spreading and stifling can work produce unexpected patterns of temporal and spatial effects.

**Sponsorship, Virality, and Recomposition: A Multiple Metaphors Approach**

Spiro et al. (1989) propose selecting a set of analogies so that each analogy might modify, cancel out, and/or correct the negative, unproductive aspects of one or more of the other analogies, such as missing, misleading, or poorly focused information (pp. 520-521). Within the context of this project, I similarly contend that virality helps to challenge sponsorship as defined by vertical hierarchy rather than horizontal connections, while sponsorship helps to characterize individuals, institutions, and infrastructures, not simply ideas themselves, as acting upon writers and readers. While the integration of these metaphors can helps us in the field of writing studies to consider how each metaphor alone may limit its users’ understandings of how they and others interact through writing, it is worth noting that Spiro et al.’s work is not aimed at revising the theoretical understandings of a subject matter at large. As Spiro et al. examine how metaphors for how the human heart works can limit students’ understanding of the organ by reducing its complexity, they propose adjusting pedagogical practices to provide students with multiple metaphors to overcome the limitations of traditional education analogies within their specific field. Though they identify their suggested set of multiple analogies as *interlocking*, their
explanation of implementing multiple metaphors highlights the salience and applicability of specific metaphors within the set in specific contexts of practice. They explain, for example, that “in contexts where it is important to focus on the way muscle fiber is affected by longer lengths and length limitations, the Chinese finger cuffs image would become salient; when thinking is directed at muscle functioning under short lengths and toward the limits to shortening, the turnbuckle image would be ‘programmed’ for high salience” (p. 522). While their study focuses specifically on instructional metaphors in the context of an educational setting, this dissertation has worked to show how the metaphors that shape our understandings of writing come from a number of sources that might be impossible to anticipate.

Spiro et al.’s proposed system of multiple metaphors potentially helps to reflect multiple realities so that fewer are occluded. In the last section, I suggested that metaphors of sponsorship and virality need to be complemented with metaphors that focus on the roles people play in spreading, stifling, using, and reusing the texts they’re engaging with. Other metaphors may also be useful. For example, none of these metaphors really explore systematic structural effects on how messages get spread or don’t. Another metaphor that might be useful in this sense, playing on biological accounts of natural selection, would be a notion of rhetorical selection. In the metaphor of rhetorical selection, certain features of texts (e.g., file type, platform, linguistic characteristics, metadata, etc.) would make a text more or less likely to replicate in the system, just as features of the system (e.g., major events in the world) would affect replication. Of course, it is also worth noting potential risks of the entailments (again, erasure of agency, possible ad hoc accounts of why texts have gone viral, confusion of survival and replication with ethical or rhetorical value). Nevertheless, adding this metaphor to the mix illuminates, as does each metaphor, certain processes in the phenomena of recomposition.
Implications for Writers

While we can extend LeFevre’s, Goffman’s, Lasswell’s, and Kawachi’s theoretical frameworks to understand that that spread, like viral metaphors, cannot work when writers are isolated in metaphorical quarantine, these researchers’ work also suggests that recomposition requires more than bodies to infect; not just anyone will work as a “host,” as principals require audiences with power—authors and animators with access to audiences of their own—to spread their interests. Lasswell’s and Goffman’s work both demonstrate the role and even importance of social linkages (Lasswell) in circulating content. Identifying these connections, their agency, and the resources and responsibility they bring is really essential. As Jenkins et al. (2013) expound, “An attempt to create a “viral” video will be informed by what one knows about viruses […] On the other hand, a creator of a “spreadable” video will be drawing upon an entirely different body of knowledge, perhaps a theory about why people gossip, or the related theory of social capital” (p. 22). This sharing of interests in gossip and social capital is what we see in #Alex and such, and these alignments of interests are an important part of what works within a sponsoring technology such as Twitter; if people don’t want to talk about it, all of the technological affordances in creation do not make them do it—writers need for audience awareness to meet audience needs, though those needs might not be apparent.

Despite this, Google returns millions of hits regarding advice for producing viral content:

“how to write a viral tweet”: About 1,240,000 results
“how to write viral content”: About 12,000,000 results
“how to make a blog go viral”: 32,700,000 results
“how do you make a post go viral” [within the context of Facebook]: 42,600,000 results

These results suggest that metaphoric conceptual tools for understanding recomposition affect
not only how scholars understand and represent writing, but how lay people approach writing practices. For example, Green and Jenkins (2011) observe that:

[m]ajor commercial producers are having trouble adjusting their economic models to take advantage of alternatives to broadcast distribution, because they don’t know how to value the work audiences perform when they are not simply “consuming” content. No wonder, talk of the media viruses has been embraced by professional media producers—it preserves the illusion that they can master some arcane process and design a self-propagating consumable. But the term’s popularity indicates corporate struggles to understand the new roles audiences perform within the dynamic networks of distribution and circulation. (p. 122)

Writers seeking to spread something need to understand their audiences as making decisions about what to ascribe value to and pass on; it is the audience’s agency, its ability to pass on, praise, decry, or ignore a text that rhetors need to cater to, rather than an imagined agency within a given text itself. Seeing the agency of sponsored writers or participants in “viral” textual phenomena is not simply an exercise in theory but a necessary step in the goal for goals of promoting recomposition.

*Implications for Studies of Literacy Sponsorship*

In my critique of the imaginary of a patient zero in compositional outbreak narratives in Chapter Three, I recounted Lasswell’s and LeFevre’s claims that individualistic notions of authors and Platonic views of invention cause us to often identify a sole author or invention, a sole origin, rather than a series of interactive processes between collaborators. This project entreats future theory and research on recomposition to fight (potentially unconscious) pressure to focus on a single point of origin (or a hierarchical pressure of origin) and instead focus on how
writers consistently pull from other works and contexts that make certain texts and messages ripe for selection in appealing to aligned audiences interests. As such, this project joins conversations of literate activity as situated, mediated, and dispersed (Brandt 1990; Prior 1998, 2004; Prior and Shipka 2003). For example, this dissertation has demonstrated the importance of such a focus in identifying both explicit collaboration as well constellations of producers unrelated except for the same cultural capital from which they both pull. Reiff and Page collaborated directly as Page created an immediate context for Reiff’s photo of Alex, while their production took off because it pulled from a much larger context of teenage girls constructing fandoms around boys their age styled like music icons such as Justin Bieber or the boys from 5 Seconds of Summer. Both Lonely Dinosaur and the designer of the Philosoraptor holding Plato’s works built on Jurassic Park’s velociraptor image and fan community, though only Lonely Dinosaur’s design, surrounded by negative space, lent itself to selection and appropriation as a template written text, allowing for a very specific form of participation that the Plato Philosoraptor did not accommodate.

The work of emending the multiple and complex metaphors interrogated throughout this project is certainly not exhausted by the work of this dissertation, which has raised many questions I have not yet answered. As we continue to identify limitations within our methods for understanding and teaching writing, I see a great deal of room for future studies in locating agency within various acts of facilitating and inhibiting recomposition in ways that will force us to question the entailments we intend our metaphors to signify. The concepts of dampers and stiflers discussed here not only help us to identify forces of recomposition that we might not otherwise account for in potentially undermining spread but also may challenge the very definition of sponsorship. While Brandt identifies sponsors as gaining advantage from their
activity in some way (1998, p. 166; 2001, p. 19), Lasswell’s view of dampers and Kawachi’s observation of stiflers might potentially lead us to complicate the anticipation of such gains. Do sponsors always gain something from their activities? Might they sometimes fail to gain what they seek? Does our current framework of sponsorship assume that both the sponsors’ gain and the sponsored writers’ access to literacy are inevitable within the processes of literacy sponsorship? Are there domains of gain (e.g., in identity work, aesthetic sense, humor) that have little or nothing to do with economic gain?

Brandt (2015) recently identified herself as perplexed at how the concept of sponsorship has been taken up in writing studies and education over the years and turned into a more benign concept than she had imagined it (p. 330). She emphasizes the most important phrase of her definition of literacy sponsorship as “gaining advantage [of their sponsorship] in some way,” a concept she sees as frequently deleted or downplayed by other researchers (pp. 330-331). She reiterates, “Sponsors are entities who need our literacy as much or more than we do. They are investors, cultivators, exploiters, proselytizers, innovators, and they are in competition with other sponsors for the formidable powers and benefits that can come their way via our literacy” (p. 331). She further emphasizes that “not all influences and benefactors would qualify as sponsors of literacy. Sponsors of literacy incorporate our skills into their projects, and the value and reach of our skills come to depend on the viability and durability of those projects. This dependency is what exposes literacy to so much turbulence, makes it so fragile and contingent” (p. 331). Although Brandt argues for a more specific and limited sense of the term, sponsorship does not simply have top-down effects, as sponsorship, by definition, is an exchange. In fact, I find Brandt’s last point of dependency of particular interest in the examples of sponsors within this dissertation who seek to help others. I indicated before that I did not find Selfe and Hawisher’s
(2004) term *benefactor* fitting for NIMH and the CDC because they *use* other writers in order to reach the consumers they intend to help. NIMH and the CDC are not necessarily seeking to help their sponsored writers directly but those writers’ readers, and as such, they rely on writers to take up the scripts they model. If the gains that NIMH and the CDC seek are for others, and not simply for institutions themselves, does this complicate sponsorship as it is currently theorized? Certainly, both institutions seek to achieve their own goals, but is it significant that these goals are partly in the interests of helping others?

As Brandt (2105) has criticized, the field has taken up the notion of sponsorship in a wider sense than she had intended. Goldblatt and Jolliffe (2014) argue the last phrase of Brandt’s definition has always bothered them as incomplete and overstated, that "gain advantage" does not exhaust the story of sponsorship because sponsors take risks; they “can be harmed, altered, or even transformed by the population and pedagogy they contract to teach” (p. 127). Scholars such as Cushman (2014) and Moss and Lyons-Robinson (2014) have framed sponsors’ dependency on their readers and writers in such a way as to call the hierarchical relationship between the sponsor and sponsored into question by observing how sponsors often require the consent of those sponsored. In her study of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first newspaper published by an Indian tribe in the United States, Cushman works to add nuance to the notion of sponsorship by examining how sponsors are beholden to those sponsored by their efforts and to those who put them in the position to sponsor in the first place (p. 27). In their study of an African American women’s group, Moss and Lyons-Robinson extend of the role of the literacy sponsor to protecting the vision of the sponsored, who, they argue, can actually set the agenda and terms of access (p. 142).
As these scholars continue to theorize the notion of sponsorship and the power relations it entails, others have tweaked the term *sponsorship* itself to consider situations in which the economics of labor between sponsor and sponsored do not fit Brandt’s description of sponsors gaining advantage through their interactions. Teasing out the subtleties between individual agency and the agendas of invested sponsors, Alanna Frost (2011) shifts her terminology and conceptual framework from *sponsorship* to *stewardship*, proposing that *literacy steward* “can be applied to any individual who demonstrates persistent dedication to the practice or promotion of a literacy considered traditionally important to his or her community. The traditional literacy that a steward engages is notably alternative to those that are institutionally and economically dominant” (p. 56).

Few, however, have reworked the terminology to recover the agency on the part of recipients or “objects” of literacy sponsorship as this dissertation has aimed to do. MacDonald (2015) has made inroads here, introducing the term *emissaries of literacy* to identify agents who participate actively in reworking their relationship to English literacy education, which he proposes as a complement to the figure of the literacy sponsor and as recognition of the work of those “who are the perceived objects of sponsorship” (p. 410). While MacDonald’s term may potentially struggle to gain traction outside of his research’s context in studying refugees, I see his work as a vital entreaty to literacy scholars to not simply acknowledge the agency of sponsored writers but to discuss them in terminology that identifies them by their activities, and not simply by how they are acted upon.

Of course, many recent publications on literacy sponsorship do not necessarily re-theorize, or deal in detail with, the notion of sponsorship itself so much as invoke *sponsors of literacy* to unpack studies as varied as transnational booksellers’ roles in shaping print culture in
Asian culture (Bohley 2010); the literacy work of the social-settlement movement in the United States (Fehler 2010); the unprofessed non-literacy goals of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Lebduska 2014); and the role of the 4-H movement on children’s everyday information creation practices in the Progressive Era (Trace 2014). In reviewing such studies of literacy sponsors, I get the sense that the term sponsorship itself indicates a relationship in which sponsors not only have something to give to those they sponsor but actually do give it to them. Is there room in this framework for understanding those who offer resources that are not taken up? For example, does our understanding of NIMH and the CDC’s prompting and modeling of composition change if writers do not take up their guidelines? We see in Dewey’s (2014) reporting on Robin Williams’ death and social network users’ response to it that these concerns have reached at least some reporters, though we do not know if it was directly from the actual guidelines we discussed. Should it shift our understanding of the guidelines and the work they attempt if they are ultimately ignored?

I raise these questions to stress that, in attempting a multiple metaphors approach to understanding sponsorship, it is vital that we not simply add new metaphors and stir but genuinely take the time to understand the metaphors we currently employ in order to recognize their limitations of use. As I have argued throughout this project, these conceptual frameworks are not simply a tool for explaining textual phenomena but actually shape writing practices. While this project has focused on literate activity outside of explicit educational settings, whether academic or recreational, I hope that it will lead to future studies of not only the metaphors we employ in the classroom but also of what our educators’ roles are in teaching composition within the context of so many institutions, media reports, sponsoring practices, and slang terms also teaching writers and readers various meanings of what writing does, how it interacts with us, and
how we interact with each other through its mediation. This project comes as a reminder that academic instructors are but one of many sources of writing instruction and thus raises the question of where academic instruction fits within a much larger system of everyday recruiting and conceptualizing of writing practices.

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37 Jenkins (2006) discusses this specifically in discussion of the Star Wars franchise’s efforts to control fan productions.
Appendix

Figure A.1

Figure A.2

Figure A.3

Figure A.4
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