10

# The Clown Legend Cascade of 2016

John Laudun

SINCE THE 1980S, LEGENDS ABOUT CREEPY CLOWNS HAVE arisen in the weeks and days leading up to Halloween and subsided shortly thereafter, usually only a day or two after the holiday passes. In 2016, however, the furor over clowns was not only much greater than it had been in the last half dozen years, it also started much earlier.[1] The change in intensity, timing, duration, and spread of this annual legend cycle can be traced to two distinct yet increasingly connected media environments: mass media and social media. As the 2016 clown legend cascade moved back and forth across these two domains, it eventually began to express deeper anxieties about the status and nature of social media itself—a legend consumed, like an ouroboros, by its own place in the world.

Most studies of cascades in information and computer sciences assume a consistent, if not uniform, substrate (Bikchandani et al. 1992; Sadikov et al. 2011). But, as Trevor J. Blank (2015), Andrew Peck (2015), and Robert Glenn Howard (2011) have made quite clear, the relationship between folk culture, mass media, and social media infrastructures is complex. Social media does more than simply expand informal and formal communication networks: it can extend, refute, amplify, and comment on them, among many other possibilities.[2] In the case of the clown legends of 2016, we have a hybrid cascade: there appeared to be legend performances (of various kinds) on the ground, followed by reports of such performances in both mass and social media.[3] These reports fed back into the legend cycle, forming the basis for further legend performances, ongoing discussions on social media, and subsequent mass media coverage. In other words, the clown legends of 2016 occurred locally, in mass media, and in social media, and all three domains were aware of, and informed by, the others.

The idea of following an idea as it moves through a particular medium is not a new one, of course. It is the touchstone of the study of folk culture. What is new, and what folklorists are trying to grapple with, is the speed and spread of information like legends and rumors in the age of networked devices that are always on, always with us, and seemingly always in our faces. As in previous eras, all information has an origin, and as in previous eras, that which we call folklore becomes such by its widespread diffusion with little to no regard for its origins. Folklorists have long assumed that legends had a fairly even and/or random distribution through communities, but the rise of online communities has given folklorists the opportunity to reexamine some of their founding assumptions and to attend to matters of affinity, as Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi set out in their consideration of the legend conduit, and which they later realized could be generalized as the folklore conduit.[4]

This chapter examines 180 instances of the 2016 clown legend cascade, attending to the first instances closely, then treating subsequent texts in aggregate with occasional texts profiled as indices of larger trends. Of these texts, 162 were drawn from mass media sources, which, as noted above, often cyclically drew not only on oral instances but also on social media instances.[5] In this work, as in others, the nature of the network is understood in terms of text reuse: who likes, shares, retweets, quotes, forwards, or replies.[6] While a more comprehensive study would trace the lines of social and institutional networks with the texts as evidence of linkages, the current study attends only to the texts themselves, tracing how the legend changes as it transits through the various networks.

## ORIGINS

The clown legend cascade of 2016 seems to have as its "event zero" the dissatisfaction felt by residents of an apartment complex in Greenville, South Carolina. There is no way to determine if the residents' lack of safety concretized into clown sightings, but a search for news about clowns ahead of the first legend report reveals the following chronology: On July 22, a local television station reported that people living in the Fleetwood Manor apartment complex had filed complaints about what they believed were unsafe living conditions (Cedrone 2016). There was no mention of clowns. Two weeks later and several states away, a viral marketing campaign for an independent film became a national news item when the film's creator started circulating "real" photos of a creepy clown lurking around Green Bay, Wisconsin, on social media (Le Duc 2016). On August 4, for example, *USA Today* reported

that "Wisconsin residents are calling police, asking about a disheveled clown walking through Green Bay with four black balloons." Three weeks afterward, on August 26, matters seem to have converged, with a South Carolina Fox affiliate reporting that "multiple law enforcement agencies are investigating a rash of incidents involving clown sightings at apartment complexes and other areas of Greenville and Spartanburg counties." The report further detailed:

> Greenville County deputies were called to investigate a clown sighting on Rutherford Road Friday afternoon, emergency dispatchers confirmed. Dispatchers said they received a call from the 1700 block of Rutherford Road about a man dressed as a clown who was last seen running into the woods. Both the Greenville Police Department and Greenville County Sheriff's Office have open cases and the Spartanburg Police Department confirmed Thursday that a clown sighting had been reported at an apartment complex there. Deputies in Greenville County said the clowns were initially seen in wooded areas, where they reportedly tried to encourage children to join them, but the situation escalated to reports that clowns were also knocking on the doors of homes. Investigators said no conclusive photo or video evidence has surfaced and no suspects have been named in any of the incidents. Officer Gilberto Franco with the Greenville Police Department said the biggest obstacle investigators are facing is lack of detail in the descriptions they are receiving of the clowns. Franco said that of the three reports his agency is investigating, not enough information was received about the costumes, hair colors, and whether or not the suspects had on masks or painted faces. (Shaw et al. 2016)

In a moment where material evidence was otherwise in short supply, the report also included reference to a letter sent out by the heretofore-mute Fleetwood Manor Apartments management. As local news outlets began reporting on the clown sightings at the complex, residents shared a letter they said they found on their apartment doors. The published images are all of tri-folded pieces of paper with a company logo at the top and the complex's address at the bottom and typically include a portion of a hand holding the letter, a graphical representation that acts to authenticate the letter both through the seeming realism of a person holding it as well as through the implied presence of an apartment complex resident in whose hand the letter resides. The letter in the images is dated August 24 and states that the complex's management has received complaints of a person dressed as a clown trying to "lure children into the woods." It concludes by reminding its readers, who are now also readers of the photographed image of the letter around the world, that "to ensure your childrens [*sic*] safety please keep them in the house duing [*sic*] night hours."
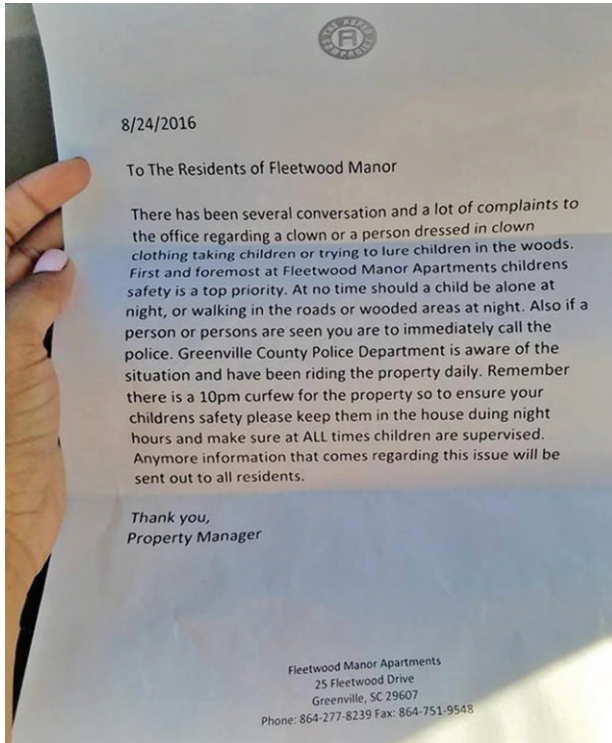
**Figure 10.1.** A local warning letter shared on social media.

On the same day, a Facebook post of the photo appeared with the caption: "GREENVILLE AREA ALERT: This came from one of the residents of Fleetwood Manor apartments, over behind Waffle House on South Pleasantburg." The accompanying photo is of the letter sent out by the Fleetwood Manor apartment management and is again held by a hand that presumably belongs to a complex resident (figure 10.1). The text of the letter notes that clowns have been seen "trying to lure children in the woods" and that management takes safety seriously. It also advises that police patrols have increased, and there is a curfew.

Three days later the local NBC affiliate, WYFF, returned to the scene and captured additional information: according to residents, the clowns were whispering and making strange noises in the woods; they offered children cash; they lived in a house near a pond in the woods. Other sources seemed to quote other residents, some (not all) of whom had reported what they had seen or heard from children to the police: the clowns were hanging out in the woods near the basketball courts; they were flashing "laser

lights" in the woods. While these variations are compelling, their overarching nature is of clowns in the woods luring or threatening children, who then report this to adults. That same day, August 29, the story, still focused on Greenville, appeared in the *New York Daily News*, on another Fox affiliate, WPMT, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, as well as in *People* magazine and on *CNN*.

## PATHS

The story continued to spread and, as more and more outlets attended to the clowns, the reported nature of them became part of the story. On August 30 the *Atlantic* observed, in a somewhat self-serving fashion, that the virality of the clown legend was a product of mass media attention: "The story has garnered national media attention—the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *BuzzFeed* all reported on the alleged sightings. It's not surprising, considering scary clowns are, after all, one of pop culture's favorite tropes, as *The Atlantic*'s Sophie Gilbert wrote in 2014" (Wagner 2016).

Even in these early reports, several features that would become standard in the 2016 cascade were present. These include: "a suspicious character . . . dressed in circus clown attire and white face paint, enticing kids to follow him/her into the woods"; "clowns in the woods whispering and making strange noises"; "clowns . . . flashing green laser lights before they ran away into the woods"; "chains and banging on the front door"; "large-figured clown with a blinking nose, standing under a post light near the garbage dumpster area"; "clowns had displayed large amounts of money in an attempt to lure [children] into the woods"; "the clowns lived in a house located near a pond at the end of a man-made trail in the woods"; "a teenage girl . . . saw a man taking pictures of kids, and shortly after, saw a man wearing a black jacket and a clown mask coming out of the woods."

While the features above are all from just one text (Shaw et al. 2016), they are repeated in other reports, with some features clearly repeated and others a blend of features added by later reports, allowing the legend to tune itself to spread more widely. In an effort to understand a similar collection of texts, Tim Tangherlini (2017) has used tiered, or scaled, structures to understand how vaccine legends, among others, circulate, actualizing certain ideas through focusing on particular kinds of stories featuring particular kinds of agents. In order to move from the legend as a device that structures the essential sequence (or sequences) of texts, through the narrative frameworks available to populate the sequences with agents and actions, to the discourse where actual instances of stories are performed, Tangherlini

relies upon a set of algorithmic methods that discern the relevant features for each level. In the case of the 2016 clown legend cascade, one concern is to determine what features of the legend tend to cohere with other features.

In this case, our features are words, and one method for understanding how words stick together across/within a collection of texts is to use a technique known as topic modeling, which seeks to understand which words regularly occur with other words, a measure known as co-occurrence in corpus linguistics, natural language processing, and machine learning. Working with the current collection of 180 news reports and social media posts (which is relatively small for these kinds of approaches), a couple of trials suggested that twenty topics were analytically useful.[7] The results of the model can be seen in table 10.1, which has limited the number of words associated with each topic to the top ten. *Clown* or *clowns* feature in all but two of the topics wherein *police* also appears and, perhaps not surprisingly given the basis for the legend's reproduction based on quotative authorization, both those topics feature either a speaking verb or a reporting agenda: topic 6 has "said police" as its top two words and topic 10 has "news add police" as three of its four top words. Interestingly, *said* features in half the topics, underlining that the legend, as it is reproduced in mass media, is about reported events.

Such a set of topics, developed for exploration and not for precision, contains a great deal of overlap. Our concern here is to discern which topics occur most frequently in news media reports and in social media reports as well as to determine which topics are common to both. By compiling a list of the top three topics for each of our 180 news reports and social media posts, we can count the number of times a topic occurs in the first, second, or third position in terms of frequency. The results are compiled in table 10.2, which reveals that the topics common to all the texts are, principally, 4, 6, and 17, with 5 and 14 having significant but not dominant roles. Topic 4 clearly expresses the sentiment most regularly, and alliteratively, associated with the clowns: creepiness. Topics 6 and 17 are keyword clusters that combine both authoritative figures and quotative verbs. Topic 6 in particular focuses on the reportings by police, featuring *said* and *police* as the top words and then a number of terms drawn from police vocabulary, including both *victim* and *incident* as well as the precision of days of the week.

The two kinds of texts, news reports and social media posts, also distinguish themselves in terms of topics, though, given the overwhelming number of news reports in the collection, it is not surprising that it is difficult to distinguish common elements from those particular to the news. Nevertheless, some collating suggests that the dominant topics for news

**Table 10.1.** The top 10 words for 20 topics in the clown legends

| Topic | Keywords |
|---|---|
| Topic 0 | just like didn clown let don time going wasn did |
| Topic 1 | clown clowns police children sightings reports evil oct local pennywise |
| Topic 2 | ago months clown point people just school comments clowns video |
| Topic 3 | greenville clown said clowns children deputies county apartments police woods |
| Topic 4 | clowns people creepy like fear really time creepiness said don |
| Topic 5 | clown police reports reported wearing sept woman dressed person mask |
| Topic 6 | said police monday reading mask street victim wearing tuesday incident |
| Topic 7 | aid henry house clown just dude ronald fucking party parents |
| Topic 8 | clown clowns state penn people students campus twitter reports said |
| Topic 9 | ago months clown machete just point deleted good kids like |
| Topic 10 | news county add police office sheriff com sponsored site facebook |
| Topic 11 | clown said 2016 police clowns threats october children sightings girl |
| Topic 12 | woods clowns report told deputy saw children said according clown |
| Topic 13 | clown said event threats march matter lives creepy tucson canceled |
| Topic 14 | clown says people sightings scary year hysteria creepy media just |
| Topic 15 | clowns clown circus people king jester clowning anxiety trump hysteria |
| Topic 16 | school threats schools threat media social county students said clown |
| Topic 17 | said clowns clown people school flomo police woods told old |
| Topic 18 | people clowns reports uk clown sightings 10 police including trend |
| Topic 19 | clown town night like school clowns wasn got eyes wanted |

**Table 10.2.** The top 3 topics as they appeared in news reports and social media posts

| News Reports | | | Social Media | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T1 | T2 | T3 | T1 | T2 | T3 |
| 6 | 17 | 6 | 4 | 17 | 17 |
| 4 | 4 | 5 | 9 | 14 | 19 |
| 17 | 5 | 4 | 11 | 4 | 9 |
| 16 | 6 | 14 | 6 | 0 | 5 |
| 5 | 14 | 17 | 19 | 19 | 14 |
| 14 | 12 | 1 | 16 | 16 | 10 |
| 12 | 16 | 10 | 14 | 15 | 7 |
| 3 | 3 | 19 | 10 | 8 | 6 |
| 8 | 1 | 15 | 8 | 7 | 4 |
| 15 | 2 | 16 | 7 | 6 | 3 |
| 9 | 19 | 12 | 2 | 2 | 2 |

reports are 17, 5, and 12. The latter two topics, 5 and 12, feature people who are not police officers: women and children, with women being associated with dressing and masking and children associated with woods. The dominant topics for social media posts appear to be 9, 11, and 19, which feature two novelties: weapons in the form of machetes and schools.

In fact, on August 31, the *Columbus Dispatch* in Ohio reported that a teenaged boy said he had been chased as he walked to a school bus stop, which is the first instance of schools in the 2016 cascade. The passage below is representative of the larger text, which uses the police as authorities upon which the veracity of the report can be based, deferring responsibility to the police in such a way that the report suggests that neither itself, as reporting agent, nor the police, as receivers of the originating report, can afford to do anything but take matters at face value: "A knife-wielding clown reported in the Northland area might prove a hoax, but Columbus police say they aren't taking any chances. A 14-year-old boy told police that a 6-foot-tall man in dark clothing and a clown mask chased him a short distance as he walked to a school bus stop at about 6:15 a.m. Tuesday, said police spokesman Sgt. Rich Weiner" (Widman 2016). Later in the report we encounter more details about the clown, described as a tall man dressed in dark clothing and wearing a clown mask, as well as the boy's successful defense (throwing a rock at the clown) and his eventual safe arrival at school. The story ends somewhat ominously, however, noting that school security personnel and police will remain vigilant: "They haven't seen anything suspicious since. Forest Park Elementary School is located just down the road." This story was subsequently picked up by *NBC News* and the *New York Daily News*.

It's quite possible that the introduction of the school motif was polygenetic, or that the news traveled more quickly than this discussion can treat, but on September 1 the police in a second community in Greenville County received a call from a concerned parent whose daughter had allegedly seen a clown in the woods while walking home from school. Included in the article are additional sightings, again, of clowns taking photographs: "The girl stated that she saw a man taking pictures of kids, and shortly after, saw a man dressed as a clown and coming out of the woods. She said the man taking pictures of kids was riding a blue bike, and the other man was wearing a black jacket and a clown mask" (Kates 2016).

Within a few days, on September 5, Fox News reported an instance of the legend in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in which "two children reported seeing a clown trying to lure kids into the woods with treats" (Fox News 2016). This instance of the legend included a detailed inventory of how the clown was dressed: "The 'clown' was described as wearing white

overalls, white gloves, red shoes with red bushy hair, a white face and a red nose." The quotation marks serve a double purpose, marking the word *clown* as used by others and, as a result, marking it as dubious. Two days later, on September 7, *People* magazine combined several reports of clown sightings, including one that stated "a man brandishing a machete chased a clown into the woods" and another telling of a delivery driver noticing a clown who then ran into the woods. In both cases, the clown's garb is a focus of the legend text: the man who brandished a machete reported that the person he chased wore "a scary clown mask, red curly wig, yellow dotted shirt, blue clown pants and clown shoes" (Pelisek 2016). The delivery driver said the man he saw wore "a clown mask [and] a clear poncho." The last two reports in *People*'s compilation simply repeat reports of people seeing someone dressed in a "clown costume."

At this point the multiple incidents began to coalesce into a full-blown panic. There are many clowns in many places, reports began to warn, and they are threatening children. On September 6, one headline read: "Another Clown Was Spotted in the Woods and Police Say This Needs to Stop" (Van Dyke 2016). It was followed the next day by "Three More Creepy Clown Sightings Reported in North Carolina" (Tribune Media Wire 2016); "North Carolina Residents on Edge After Multiple Clown Sightings"; and "Reports of Creepy Clowns Spread to More Cities: 'It Is Not Funny,' Police Say" (Pelisek 2016). As the headlines reveal, the police assume increasing agency in the legends, as do other adults. With so many news outlets reporting, and it not being entirely clear which reports are of new events and which are repetitions of previous reports, the overall effect likely gives those following the news the impression of increased activity by clowns. With the police almost omnipresent in reports, the legend's authority also grows—that is, the textual effect of the police as "the authorities" is to authorize the legend, to legitimate it. The takeaway is simple and direct: a larger national craze creates a milieu within which certain kinds of behavior are made imaginable and thus possible.

As September drew to a close, a steady stream of analyses began to appear alongside the individual clown sightings. Published in national media like the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *Rolling Stone*, these analyses variously sought to debunk or bust the clown stories or attribute them to foolish pranksters unaware of, or indifferent to, the havoc they were causing. They featured authorities of various kinds to objectify the trend: the president of the World Clown Association appeared in one, and in another the work of cryptozoologist Loren Coleman was quoted in addition to analysis of the phenomenon by a child psychiatrist. But that would not be enough to

quell the immanent explosion that began at the very end of September
when Ohio schools were reported closed due to clown threats and gangs
of clowns terrorized Nova Scotian drivers. More than one serious report
attempted to point out that these things happened every year, but none
noticed that the cycles tend to play out later in the year, closer to Halloween.

## SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

As Andrew Peck (2020) observes about the relationship between mass
media and social media, reporters are increasingly aware of the role social
media can play in disseminating information, not only as part of their pub-
lic service but also to increase their standings by various measures. A week
after the Fleetwood Manor letter photo was posted to Facebook, a reporter
with a local NBC news affiliate, Sarah Krueger, posted the following to her
Twitter feed: "This is where clown sighting was reported. @cityofwspolice
say he used treats to try & lure kids into woods @myfox8" (2016). The
accompanying photo (figure 10.2) is composed of a street intersection
sign, apparently in the middle of the woods because no road is visible.
Just behind the street sign is a large "No Trespassing" sign with quite a
bit of writing anchored by "By Order of the City of Winston-Salem."
There is another sign below that one. To the right of the signs, tucked just
inside the lower-right corner of the photo, is a guard rail. The entire scene
appears to be illumined not by the camera's flash but by a light coming
in from the right, as if by a pair of headlights. This motif of road signs
became a part of the visual language of clown legends as they progressed
across social media networks.

Back on Facebook, on September 13, a user from Roanoke, Virginia,
posted a collection of images and a video in which the status of the leg-
end as possibly ostensive in nature is confirmed. Within the collection of
images there is a bit of text that reads: "Everyone in poor moiuntain please
stay inside.[8] This isn't a joke. STAY SAFE." If the news reports are compos-
ites of children and of people reporting to police, then the legend on social
media is now a hybrid of both the original reality and these news reports,
with the latter providing an additional semantic layer. In addition, like the
news reports, which often required some sort of image (even if it's little
more than a street sign), to mark an "on the scene" imprimatur of veracity,
some of the digitally mediated legend texts now come with images as either
a subsidiary or principle focus. The Roanoke Facebook post also mirrors
news reports in ostensibly not offering any answers in order to let readers
and viewers decide for themselves: "I don't know if this is real or fake. I

Sarah Krueger
@WRALSarah

Follow

This is where clown sighting was reported.
@cityofwspolice say he used treats to try &
lure kids into woods @myfox8

29th ST NE

NO TRESPASSING

3:04 AM - 5 Sep 2016

34 Retweets  17 Likes

**Figure 10.2.** A clown sighting reported on Twitter by a
reporter for a local NBC news station.

didn't take this video or the pictures. A friend of my son sent these to him.
I am not saying this is real. I don't know if this is a creepy man or woman or
teen. I don't know if this is a person playing a prank. All I'm saying is there
are news reports everywhere warning about this. I am simply saying to be
careful and be cautious and lookout. That's all."[9]

In the comment thread, the original poster adds, "This was in the glen-
var area at the back of one of Josh's friends." What follows are various
reactions from other users, ranging from fear to claims that someone will
get shot. Three early comments (out of the total of 157) are indexical of
the larger dialogue that ensues: "This is happening all over"; "I'm not afraid
of clowns but I am a little intimidated by a grown man in a clown cos-
tume stalking people"; and "Just a warning, some people [are] firm believ-
ers in the second amendment. And believe in private property, so a clown
could be held at gun point until proper authorities can determine what a
psychopath is doin dressed like a clown on private property." The overall
sense such comments produce is the inescapability of the moment. The first

comment emphasizes that this has happened before, which is indeed true, as we have already seen in the discussion of origins, while the second comment addresses anxiety—although the underlying legend about clowns themselves is not true or "real," we must still be concerned about people acting upon ideas that the legend suggests. As Bill Ellis notes: "Legends can help the folk relieve themselves of contemporary fears, but they may also serve as patterns for psychotics—or even sane but cunning criminals—for provoking the same fears" (1989, 203). Added to the fear that people will act ostensively upon the legend is the concern, often articulated angrily or with bravado, that someone is going to get shot, either by police or by an armed individual.

After the initial comments several users begin to question why the police had not been called as well as query the overall status of the legend: "Anyone know what the 'story' is behind all these clown incidents???" Some commenters ask about the location, and some of the responses challenge people to "see for yourself." The central tension remains "now a days you don't know what anybody will do." Inevitably someone "mythbusting" intercedes. Sometimes the comment addresses the legend from a global perspective: "It's a hoax that teens all over the US are participating in. This same video has been spread across three states and whoever is sharing it as being filmed in VA is not telling the truth. Hysteria spreads like wildfire when ignorance is abundant. Don't share and spread the hype, people!" Other comments offer insider knowledge that video is not real.[10] This dampens the feverish pitch of the comment thread a bit, but discussion continues to pursue the dangers of ostension, warning that individuals may get shot as a result of ostensive actions. Thus, no matter what, the clown legend endangers the lives of children, or at least of adolescents, who do not know when a prank has gone too far.

This transformation of the legend as it moved onto social media can be glimpsed in the shift in language itself. As Tangherlini notes: "Every story performance, be it in whole or in part, offers information about a knowledge domain. Through the repeated telling of stories, a narrative framework, which comprises a relatively stable group of actants (people, places, objects) drawn from a culturally determined pool of potential actants and relationships for that domain, emerges" (2017, 2). There are a variety of ways to approach this task, and while Tangherlini used facets of NLP to compile a list of actants and their relationships (perhaps using SVO [subject-verb-object] triplets), a somewhat simpler, if also a little less granular, technique is used here: word collocation networks.[11]

The idea behind collocation networks is that a text, or a genre of texts, is organized into lexical patterns that can be understood as networks of
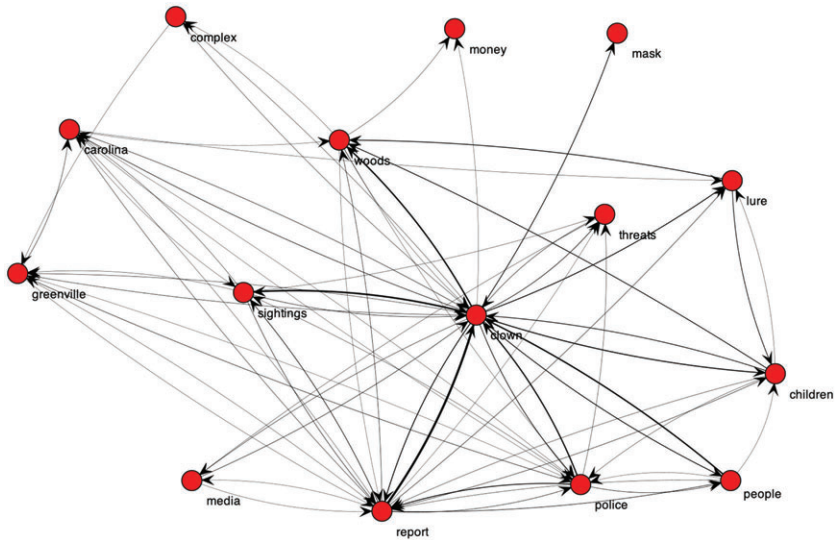
**Figure 10.3.** A collocation network of the news reports.

words that are located near each other in the discourse that makes up the text (Brezina et al. 2015, 142). They are useful for highlighting "syntagmatic lexical sets" (Phillips 1989, 52), or sets of words that co-occur in sentences or, as Tangherlini describes it, the microlevel of discourse itself (2017). The networks were compiled using a three-word window for both the news reports and the social media posts. The same set of words was dropped from both sets of texts, and each set was then lemmatized by hand so that words like *clown* and *clowns* converged, as did *report*, *reports*, *reported* or *police*, *officer*, *deputy*.

    The first graph (figure 10.3) is drawn from the 162 news reports and only the 20 most prominent nodes of the 2,660 possible nodes (each representing a word) remain. As is also the case in figure 10.4, *clown* is central, but here there are significant enough relationships between *report*, *police*, *children*, *lure*, and *woods* that even should *clown* disappear, there would still be a relationship between them. The same is not the case for the second graph (figure 10.4), drawn from the eighteen social media posts, with the seventeen most prominent words presented here. In that graph, should *clown* be removed, the network itself would hang together only by the relationship between *sightings*, which carries over from the news reports, and *months*, which is a novelty found in the social media dimensions of the legend. Not only does it appear to represent a durative sense that the legend has about
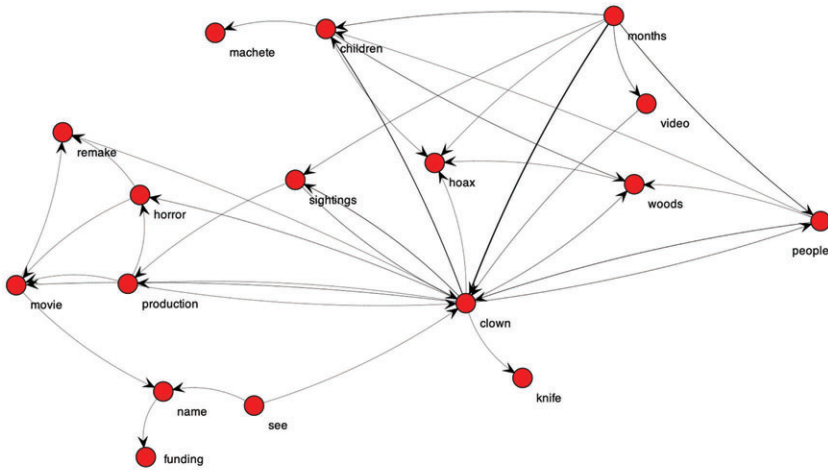
**Figure 10.4.** A collocation network of the social media posts.

itself, it also underlines the theme of inevitability that seems to permeate the social media versions: someone somewhere is going to go too far and either they or an innocent bystander will get hurt. This facet of the social media versions of the legend is underlined by the regular presence of *hoax* in the discourse, here featured fairly centrally in the graph.

In the shift from mass media to social media the reported nature of the legend, especially with the police as a source for authorizing the reports, drops out of the legend complex. Instead, in the transition to social media the legend picks up a bit more reflexivity, with references to the remake of the movie version of *It* being a component loosely attached to the legend, perhaps again underlining the dangers of ostension. To Facebook users, children are no longer in danger of being lured into the woods so much as at risk of being chased by clowns wielding weapons like knives or machetes.

The convergence of social media and mass media, alongside a variety of ostensive activities, can perhaps be best glimpsed in a report published on October 5 in the New Orleans newspaper the *Times-Picayune*, which was picked up from the *Washington Post*:

> It was just after midnight Tuesday at James Madison University when the clown calls started pouring in. Phones beeped and buzzed. There was no official alert at the Harrisonburg, Virginia, school, but on Yik Yak, Twitter and GroupMe, students learned of a possible intruder on campus. A grainy Snapchat video purported to show a menacing clown outside of one of the residence halls. Freakout ensued. Some students panicked; others were

just wary. No one really thought it was funny. In minutes, undergrad posses carrying flashlights and pepper spray roamed the Quad, seeking to capture the clown or at least chase it off. (Heim and Shapiro 2016)

Multiple social media platforms are cited as sources for the legend's circulation, with Snapchat being the one responsible for transmitting the video. This makes a certain amount of sense, given the high anxiety many users, especially adults, have about the purposefully ephemeral, and thus possibly secret, nature of Snapchat posts.

In the transition from mass media to social media, the legend morphed from clowns lurking in the woods attempting to lure children away to clowns lurking in social media (itself) threatening schools with Columbine-like events. The range of schools was rather wide, with the preponderance of legends focused on or mentioning middle schools and local universities. Not unlike the escalation of poisoned candy legends, these legends similarly escalated to include the idea that schools had been locked down. Across the United States, in report after report, local authorities were at great pains to clarify that no schools in their jurisdiction had been locked down or closed.[12]

## TRENDS

The clown legend cascade of 2016 arose out of a tense social situation in which apartment dwellers felt that their needs were being ignored, or even dismissed, by their complex's management. Thanks in no small part to coverage by local media that got picked up by the national media, despite the presidential election dominating American news, the clown legend spread quickly not only to areas where we have seen legends flower before but also to other, less established ones.[13] It might very well be that the clown legends did, in fact, address an otherwise unarticulated complaint about neglect or some other anxiety that allowed the idea of clowns lurking at the edges of civilized places, threatening children, to spread so quickly across the United States, even leaping to other parts of the world.

As Sylvia Grider notes, most contemporary Halloween legends focus on the danger of strangers, or the estranged, among us (1984, 132). Anxiety lurks at the heart of the 2016 cascade as well, but such an explanation does not address why this phenomenon started much earlier, almost two months ahead of schedule. A closer examination of the five months of web searches focused around the 2016 cascade reinforces the conclusion suggested by the current analysis: the cascade occurred six weeks ahead of the usual timing and, in addition to the early start,
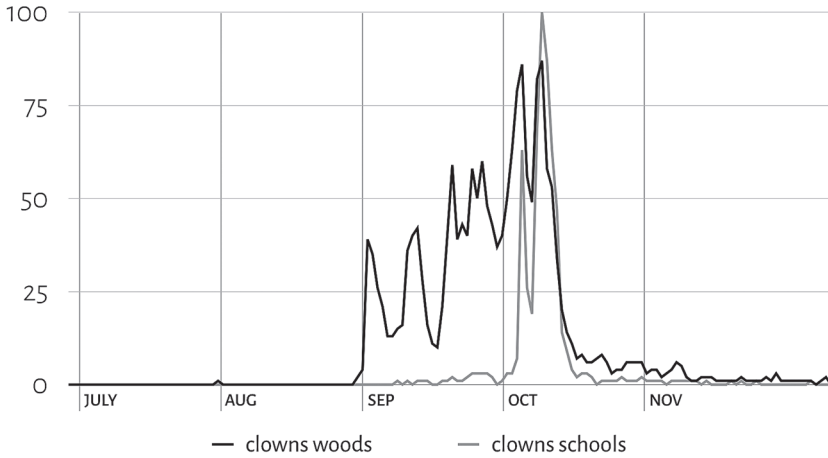
**Figure 10.5.** Searches for *clowns* and *woods* alongside *clowns* and *schools*. (Data source: Google Trends, https://www.google.com/trends.)

there is a pronounced surge in pairings of *clowns* with *schools* that in fact eclipses previous concerns with *clowns* and *woods* (figure 10.5). Curiously, as if eschewing its expected relationship with Halloween, the 2016 cascade diminished significantly in the second half of October, the moment in which clown legends have usually peaked in other years. Moreover, as noted at the beginning of this examination, the 2016 cascade exhibited ten times the usual volume of web activity.

What began as anxiety about masked figures lurking at the edge of civilization ended with a much more troubling consideration of the masks we all wear, and a certain morbid fascination with the thought that there are those among us who might, under the right circumstances, be compelled to do terrible things. A legend that began with clowns luring children into the woods either with treats or money in one locale spread rapidly across the United States—regularly featuring clowns glimpsed at roadsides or playgrounds. Sometimes the clowns chased adults, and sometimes they were themselves chased. Always the clowns got away. But as coverage in mass media ran its course, the legend shifted to social media, where the focus became a concern with pranks going too far. As the cascade continued on social media, almost all the versions of the legend focused on clowns threatening schools (on or through social media). In this way, perhaps, the 2016 cascade articulated the emergent anxiety Americans, in particular, have about mass shootings that too often take place on school campuses, be the schools primary, secondary, or higher education facilities.

Such a broad conclusion must be subject to a broader investigation than the one offered here. The current study is limited in scope by the materials it draws on, but the methods upon which it is founded are open to an expansion of the corpus. For folklorists, computational methods offer a way not only to repeat work we have done before with expansions, refinements, or reconsiderations of the materials at hand, but also to seize the opportunity that the internet offers as the infrastructure through which legends cascade, whether the legend is transmitted by a mass media report or a social media post. Moreover, as other studies of social networks in other disciplines have revealed, we can begin to understand how legends change as they pass through select communities of mass media or social media sites. With the rise of fake news as a topic of popular interest, folklorists face the possibility not only of demonstrating the effervescent power of the legend conduit, as Dégh and Vázsonyi once termed it, but also begin to trace the outlines of the conduit itself as it is instantiated, one legend at a time.

## NOTES

1. According to Google Trends data, the 2016 clown legend cascade outpaced those of previous years by a factor of ten. (For a popular history of clown scares, see Faraci 2016, which it should be noted was published in January, a full seven months ahead of the start of the 2016 cascade.)

2. In an exploration of vulnerability to disease spread, Campbell and Salathé found that when ideas from overlapping social groups coincided, those ideas were more likely to form an individual's own response. They termed this complex "contagion" and described it as "[t]he density of potential social reinforcement is determined by how structured or random the contact network's topology is prior to the period of opinion formation" (2013, 4).

3. Much of legend scholarship assumes this hybrid nature, but it still helps, I think, to articulate it up front in order to foreground, if only for analytical purposes, that the "social" of social media is not purely online. In many cases, posts are, depending upon the platform involved (and email still counts as social media here), shared, liked, commented, forwarded, quoted, and/or retweeted solely online—and we do not yet have a clear discussion of cross-platform diffusion. But in one experience of the clown legends, I witnessed a group of middle school soccer players discuss the legend's various manifestations online as well as a particular localized version that reported the closure of a school because of an online threat.

4. By turning to the conduit, Dégh and Vázsonyi refocus folklore studies from our usual objects of examination, the things themselves and the people who say/use them, to the act of procession: how and why objects pass through people and how people transform them in their passing. Whereas others regularly imagined homogeneity, a sameness we still project with notions of "culture" or "society" or "community," Dégh and Vázsonyi focused our attention on the matter of message velocity and distortion through a course of variable individuals. The problem, as they understood it, was the impossibility of studying the conduit itself. "There is," they observed, "no way to follow the progress of oral transmission in society" (1975, 214). While oral transmission remains difficult to document, digital

transmission practically documents itself. This focus on the conduit and how it affects the nature and meaning of a given form have proved to be quite prescient, where Dégh and Vázsonyi had to be somewhat speculative when they later noted: "The legend might, for example, be developed into another genre; it might be shaped into a *Marchen* or a joke; it might be reduced to a rumor. Wandering from conduit to conduit, eventually the legend may retrieve its lost track as likely as it might become mutilated and distorted or wither away into nothingness" (1976, 96). We can now track the transformation of legends into jokes as they pass from one network into another.

5. The complete corpus, as well as the computational notebooks referenced in the discussion, is available as a GitHub repository (http://github.com/johnlaudun/CLC2016). In addition to the 180 news reports and social media posts discussed above, there are also two fictions—there are many more such texts, but for the current project I decided to focus on the nonfictional texts.

6. Regarding retweet networks, see Brady et al. 2017; for text reuse, see Smith et al. 2014a; for Twitter topic networks shares, see Smith et al. 2014b.

7. There are a number of approaches to topic modeling. Here, nonnegative matrix factorization (NMF) was chosen because of the quality of its results when treating small corpora. Readers may also be familiar with the more widely known and used topic-modeling algorithm LDA. Both approaches assume that any given document is simply a product of a set of topics, and that the likelihood of one word occurring with another is a function of them being a part of the same topic. Both approaches also take a document to be simply a "bag of words," such that a word's position within a text or in relationship to other words is not considered. There are ways around this lack of concern with word position—by breaking documents into smaller sections so that a document's beginning, middle, and end, for example, may be taken as different in nature—but such an approach was not used here: given the size of the texts and my interest in discovering word associations, the documents, both news reports and social media posts, were taken as the units of analysis. The top three topics for each of the 180 texts is outlined in a CSV file in the GitHub repository. Finally, it should be noted, for those less familiar with topic modeling, that the number of topics is something the analyst provides to the algorithm. The number chosen here, twenty, reflects a number of trials as well as prior experience with corpora of various sizes: it is an outsized number for a corpus this small, but the model of analysis used here was that first demonstrated by Ben Schmidt (2015) in his work on plot arcs and then further explored by Archer and Jockers (2016) in their examination of best sellers.

8. Poor Mountain is a location within Roanoke County, Virginia.

9. https://www.facebook.com/melissa.dooley.397/posts/10210653052873261. The complete post with comments is available as an image in the repository.

10. One lengthy comment offers the following rebuttal: "This is not real. My nephew shot the video. I called him out on it Sunday after I saw it. The costume belonged to my son. We still have the package it came in from spirit halloween 2 years ago. They took it from my in-laws house. Aaron sent me a message telling me it was a prank wanting me to go along with it. He has taken this way to far. I can tell you exactly where it was recorded. That is his brother in the costume. I nor my son had anything to do with this. This is completely ridiculous what Aaron has done. All to get attention. He blocked me and from what I can tell he has now deleted his Facebook. I do not uphold what he has done."

11. NLP, or Natural Language Processing, is an outgrowth of corpus linguistics and an integral part of machine learning in particular and artificial intelligence in general when

it comes to handling actual discourse, which tends to be, from the point of computation, extraordinarily disorderly and messy. The most successful uses of NLP in the current moment assume larger data sets, or corpora, such that an algorithm can be trained or the larger semantic matrix can be discerned. Tangherlini and colleagues' approach uses thousands of instances to discover a generalized narrative kernel which largely holds true for their corpus. Individual examples, however, may or may not agree with that generalization. (For a more detailed description of the methods involved in Tangherlini's studies, see Tangherlini et al. 2016.)

12. This legend struck close to my own home in Louisiana, with the girls on my daughter's soccer team claiming that this or that school had been closed or that students had been huddled into a gym or some other communal space, while deputies came to search the school.

13. Some sense of the geography of American legendry is captured by Bill Ellis in his examination of the Satanic cult legends of the late 1970s and early 1980s (1989), which featured southeastern and midwestern states that were also active in the 2016 clown legend cascade—and, interestingly, the history of Satanic panics has also become part of conventional wisdom (Romano 2016).

# REFERENCES

Archer, Jodie, and Matthew Jockers. 2016. *The Bestseller Code: Anatomy of the Blockbuster Novel*. New York: St. Martin's.

Bikhchandani, S., D. Hirshleifer, and I. Welch. 1992. "A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades." *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (5): 992–1026.

Blank, Trevor J. 2015. "Faux Your Entertainment: Amazon.com Product Reviews as a Locus of Digital Performance." *Journal of American Folklore* 128 (509): 286–297.

Brady, William J., Julian A. Wills, John T. Jost, Joshua A. Tucker, and Jay J. Van Bavel. 2017. "Moral Contagion in Social Networks." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114 (28): 7313–7318. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114.

Brezina, Vaclav, Tony McEnery, and Stephen Wattam. 2015. "Collocations in Context: A New Perspective on Collocation Networks." *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 20 (2): 139–173. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.20.2.01bre.

Campbell, E., and M. Salathé. 2013. "Complex Social Contagion Makes Networks More Vulnerable to Disease Outbreaks." *Scientific Reports* 3: 1905.

Cedrone, Tony. 2016. "Fleetwood Manor Residents Claim Poor Living Conditions." *WSPA/7News*, July 22, 2016. http://wspa.com/2016/07/22/fleetwood-manor-residents-claim-poor-living-conditions/.

Dégh, Linda, and Andrew Vázsonyi. 1975. "The Hypothesis of Multi-Conduit Transmission in Folklore." In *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, edited by Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein, 207–252. The Hague: Mouton.

Dégh, Linda, and Andrew Vázsonyi. 1976. "Legend and Belief." In *Folklore Genres*, edited by Dan Ben-Amos, 93–123. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Ellis, Bill. 1989. "Death by Folklore: Ostension, Contemporary Legend, and Murder." *Western Folklore* 48 (3): 201–220.

Faraci, Derek. 2016. "When Pennywise Was Real: The Phantom Clown Scare of 1981." *Blumhouse.com*, January 4, 2016. http://www.blumhouse.com/2016/01/04/when-pennywise-was-real-the-phantom-clown-scare-of-1981/.

Fox News. 2016. "Creepy Clown Sightings Expand to Second South Carolina City." September 5, 2016. http://www.foxnews.com/us/2016/09/05/creepy-clown -sightings-expand-to-second-south-carolina-city.html.

Geoghegan, Jemma L., Alistair M. Senior, Francesca Di Giallonardo, and Edward C. Holmes. 2016. "Virological Factors That Increase the Transmissibility of Emerging Human Viruses." *PNAS* 113 (15): 4170–4175. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas .1521582113.

Grider, Sylvia. 1984. "The Razor Blades in the Apples Syndrome." In *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend: Proceedings of the Conference of Contemporary Legend*, edited by Paul Smith, 128–140. Sheffield: CECTAL.

Heim, Joe, and T. Rees Shapiro. 2016. "Scary Clown Rumors, Threats Feed Hysteria, Leading to School Lockdowns, Arrests." *Washington Post*. October 5, 2016. https:// www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/scary-clown-rumors-threats-feed -hysteria-leading-to-school-lockdowns-arrests/2016/10/05/1adf27c4-8b0b-11e6 -bff0-d53f592f176e_story.html.

Howard, Robert Glenn, ed. 2011. *Network Apocalypse: Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media*. London: Sheffield University Press.

Jakobson, Roman, and Petr Bogatyrev. 1980. "Folklore as a Special Form of Creation." *Folklore Forum* 13 (1): 1–21.

Kates, Graham. 2016. "Creepy Details Released in South Carolina Clown Sightings." *CBS News*. August 31. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/clown-sightings-south-carolina -creepy-details-released/.

Krueger, Sarah. 2016. "This Is Where Clown Sighting Was Reported." @WRALSarah. September 5, 2016. https://twitter.com/WRALSarah/status/772706941034459137.

Le Duc, Shelby. 2016. "Creepy Clown Was Marketing Ploy." *Green Bay Press Gazette*, August 10, 2016. https://www.greenbaypressgazette.com/story/news/2016/08/10 /green-bays-creepy-clown-marketing-ploy/88527696/.

Peck, Andrew. 2015. "Tall, Dark, and Loathsome: The Emergence of a Legend Cycle in the Digital Age." *Journal of American Folklore* 128 (509): 333–348. www.jstor.org /stable/10.5406/jamerfolk.128.509.0333.

Peck, Andrew. 2020. "A Problem of Amplification: Folklore and Fake News in the Age of Social Media." *Journal of American Folklore* 133 (529): 329–351.

Pelisek, Christine. 2016. "Reports of Creepy Clowns Spread to More Cities: 'It Is Not Funny,' Police Say." *People*. September 7, 2016. http://people.com/crime/creepy -clowns-reported-in-more-cities-in-north-carolina-south-carolina/.

Phillips, Martin. 1989. *Lexical Structure of Text: Discourse Analysis Monograph 12*. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.

Romano, Aja. 2016. "The History of Satanic Panic in the US—And Why It's Not Over Yet." *Vox*, October 30, 2016. https://www.vox.com/2016/10/30/13413864/satanic -panic-ritual-abuse-history-explained.

Sadikov, Eldar, Montserrat Medina, Jure Leskovec, and Hector Garcia-Molina. 2011. "Correcting for Missing Data in Information Cascades." *WSDM 11: Fourth ACM International Conference on Web Search and Data Mining*, 9–12. New York and Hong Kong: Association for Computing Machinery.

Schmidt, Benjamin M. 2015. "Plot Arceology: A Vector-Space Model of Narrative Structure." *2015 IEEE International Conference on Big Data (Big Data)*, 1667–1672.

Shaw, Amanda, Sierra Hancock, Shale Remien, and Dal Kalsi. 2016. "Deputies Called to Investigate Another Clown Sighting." *Fox Carolina*, August 26, 2016. http://www .foxcarolina.com/story/32852558/residents-anxious-after-clown-sightings-letters -received-at-greenville-co-apartments.

Smith, David A., Ryan Cordell, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Nick Stramp, and John Wilkerson. 2014a. "Detecting and Modeling Local Text Reuse." *Proceedings of the 14th ACM/IEEE-CS Joint Conference on Digital Libraries*, 183–192.

Smith, Marc A., Lee Rainie, Ben Shneiderman, and Itai Himelboim. 2014b. "Mapping Twitter Topic Networks: From Polarized Crowds to Community Clusters." *Pew Research Center* 20: 1–56.

Tangherlini, Timothy. 2017. "Toward a Generative Model of Legend: Pizzas, Bridges, Vaccines, and Witches." *Humanities* 7 (1): 1.

Tangherlini, T. R., V. Roychowdhury, B. Glenn, C. M. Crespi, R. Bandari, A. Wadia, M. Falahi, E. Ebrahimzadeh, and R. Bastani. 2016. "'Mommy Blogs' and the Vaccination Exemption Narrative: Results from a Machine-Learning Approach for Story Aggregation on Parenting Social Media Sites." *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* 2 (2): e166. http://publichealth.jmir.org/2016/2/e166/.

Tribune Media Wire. 2016. "Three More Creepy Clown Sightings Reported in North Carolina." Tribune Media Wire. September 7, 2016. http://fox8.com/2016/09/07/three-more-creepy-clown-sightings-reported-in-north-carolina/.

Van Dyke, Michelle Broder. 2016. "Another Clown Was Spotted in the Woods and Police Say This Needs to Stop." *Buzzfeed*. September 6. https://www.buzzfeed.com/mbvd/stop-clowning-around-police-say.

Wagner, Laura. 2016. "Are the Clown Sightings in South Carolina Real?" *Atlantic*, August 30, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/08/are-the-clown-sightings-in-south-carolina-real/498059/.

Widman, Alissa. 2016. "Teen Reports He Was Chased by Clown with Knife." *The Columbus Dispatch*. August 31, 2016. http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/08/31/Police-investigate-clown-scare.html.