Theorising ambiguity: telling deliberately equivocal viral stories

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3. Viral: Genres and technologies

In the final three chapters, we shall go into detail with the study of things that happen suddenly, that are not orchestrated, that are very distributed, networked and highly mediated, as well as the role of potential futures. We shall zoom in on ambiguity as a driving force in making awareness increase. The ambiguous space between fake and real has become a new temporary area that allows for many voices simultaneously.

These chapters take empirical material gathered during fieldwork from 2008 to 2009 as the starting point, and even though viral reality marketing campaigns have become rare, contemporary movements like Me Too and I Can't Breathe, have received global attention, and changed attitudes and actions regarding gender and race. Attention to issues both originates from and depends on manifold, localized contributions to current events. Similarly, crises like Covid-19 also bear these characteristics, with information and misinformation spreading through digitally mediated settings. Even if the object of study, viral reality marketing, has gone out of fashion, paying attention to things that are both global, temporal, fast growing, and subjected to a variety of different, often conflicting, information remains relevant. Movements increasingly gain momentum and grow in digitally mediated settings, harnessing that viral growth strategically, as it is a powerful device to set new agendas and change attitudes on a global scale. The participation enabling such movements both requires and creates ambiguity. Individuals and groups mold the movement to fit their vision, however, that vision may be at conflict with the agendas and interests of other participants of the same movement.

3.1 2008 - 2021

3.1.1 The potential of something big

When studying a phenomenon that is new, there is no way to say whether it will become the pioneer case of something that will be a well-established phenomenon later. While in the field, there is a potential chance that the researcher, in retrospect, is privileged to have been where it all started, just as there is a potential for the researcher to be where something was, that no longer exists. While in the field, these potential outcomes exist simultaneously. I shall return to the importance of this point later, but for now it provides a context for the setting in which I began my fieldwork.

As I did fieldwork, it was with optimism and hope, that this was the new modern communication between government-financed bodies and citizens. The shift from creating awareness of products to spreading information beneficial for society, with the intent of implementing changes in people's behavior in noncommercial ways, sounded both promising and intriguing. Before entering the field, I had a similar case in mind from the Netherlands, where an attempt to create awareness of kidney transplants was concealed as a game show. Three contestants competed to win a kidney from a voluntary donor. The story, however, was staged, and during the grand finale of the show, it was revealed as such. The participants were actual kidney patients, yet they knew from the beginning, that they were part of a controversial stunt to get people's attention and turn it into awareness of organ donation. It was a type of storytelling where people were fooled to get them interested, but assumed willing to forgive it, due to the importance of the real purpose. This specific type of storytelling, and the shift from increasing profit in favor of changing minds and behavior, intrigued me. It seemed like the success of viral marketing -only better- since the purpose was to spread useful information. This was the starting point of my fieldwork.

The potential of this way of reaching citizens, was backed up by a parallel development within the Danish public sector related to an increased focus on actively including users. User-driven innovation had become a buzzword. The public sector in Denmark, from which all three reality marketing campaigns originated, had already undergone radical changes. An increased focus on user-driven innovation had changed the view of citizens from one of passive recipients to actively contributing users with valuable inputs. Therefore, involving users in this new communication strategy matched with the general trend towards inviting users to contribute and participate.

As I was following this new development, while in the field, it seemed highly that this could be the first of many such campaigns, in which information reached the citizens in the name of socially useful information. However, the potential for a promising new future is just that, a potential. And here is the important achievement from glancing back at these cases from 2021. A study holding the potential for becoming the next new big thing, is a present in which a potential future exists.

In retrospect, I can conclude, that this future never materialized. Viral reality marketing is a type of advertising that is no longer commonly used in Denmark to reach citizens, and only to a limited extent to brand products outside the movie trailer domain.

3.1.2 Embracing ambiguity

The viral reality campaigns I followed during fieldwork resulted in extraordinarily strong reactions from some of the people lured into participating without knowing that they were participating in campaigns. Such reactions are less likely to be seen today. Concrete examples of how it is perceived differently can be seen in the changed approach to extreme stories. In 2013 and after most Danish news media featured "what's viral this week" posts. (Politiken.dk 2014; Danmarks Radio 2013; Mediawatch.dk 2015)

In 2021 they are actively used as entertainment, but they have been moved from the websites of news sites to their Facebook pages. Journalists often pose questions to the reader, as to whether they think it is real or fake, and most news media feature a comment section below their published stories, where they frequently encourage their readers to contribute with their theories regarding mysterious unconfirmed stories. Thus, the Danish news media have changed. Journalists have turned controversial and unconfirmed stories into an advantage, as content produced by others, fake or real, is converted into regular news that invites readers to be cowriters in a joint venture to get to unravel suspicious stories.

That the news media have taken up such stories as part of their news stream, does not make it clearer to people whether to expect something to be real or not; instead, it allows for discussions of it. This means that there is a greater tolerance when it comes to such stories today. More people expect that it could potentially be either fake or real, without the need to decide immediately which it is. The mysteries, and the ambiguous outcome of news are seen through sections like "Weekly viral", "This week's mystery", or "Judge for yourself".

To understand why staged stories are difficult to separate from true stories, we need to understand that these stories are one out of many ways in which controversial content is used to get people's attention. The user is constantly faced with various types of storytelling from people with various agendas.

Controversial content is also generated to lure people to specific sites. When sites have a lot of traffic, domain owners can sell advertising space for companies at a higher price with reference to high exposure. Even though the stories are obviously staged, they serve only to entice people to visit the site, not share the content. These sites may place cookies in the visitor's browser to track and make demographic profiling, to harvest information that has value for brands to target their audience better.

There are staged stories, which are made for the entertainment alone such as satire. These sites often provide clues, and the content is carefully crafted, to reward those familiar with the genre. Yet, often people share without paying attention to sources, and therefore easily mistake staged satire stories for true ones, and hence satire may be shared as facts. Many share contents without paying too much attention. There is also a growing trend to keep trying to fool others *into* believing staged stories, and thus turning fooled people into objects of entertainment. Satire actively used to expose those who do not know enough to spot what they are dealing with, is about in- and excluding people. The Onion is a well-known and well-established fake news site that provides satire news, yet people who do not know it, or do not recognize the small clues that reveal it to be satire, are fooled into believing it. There are even sites exposing such people. This excerpt is from literallyunbelievable.org, where people who by accident, or due to lack of knowledge, take The Onion seriously, and are exposed for it[xxvi].

In June 2014, *The Onion* launched a sub-site shifting from creating fake news to creating fake virals. It is a site that posts the videos, tests, and games that usually go viral, while mocking them. They do so by mimicking the genres of viral content. To mention a few examples that very well captured the genres of many articles and quizzes that go viral in 2015: "*8 Things No Guy Over 25 Should Have In His Apartment*" or "*Which 'Girls' Character Are You?"* (Clickhole 2015b; Clickhole 2015a). The first characterizes a genre of lists of things you should be doing before you reach a certain age, get married, buy a house etc. Such lists go viral still to this day. The capital letters in the headline also indicate a correlation to content going viral. It characterizes a specific sensational style of writing often used in Facebook virals. Games like "Which character are you", have been made in thousands of versions, and often comes in the shape of quizzes that are made to gather demographic data and survey answers from the participants. As output, participants can post on their wall which of the characters, they are most likely to be, according to their replies. It is these well recognized genres of viral content that Clickhole makes fun of. This means that readers of Clickhole will have to possess a certain knowledge and experience to appreciate the satire and recognize that Clickhole's content is fun because it is *not* fun.

Comedy between fiction and facts

In the television entertainment industry, the in-between of fiction, and facts has become an established genre as well. Louise Brix Jacobsen introduces the concept "Fiktiobiografism" an amalgamation of fiction and biography pinpointing a broader international trend where public persons play themselves. (Brix Jacobsen, 2011). To mention a few: The American "Curb your enthusiasm", the German

"Pastewka" and the Norwegian "Hjerte til hjerte". Fiktiobiografism is a new way of narrating. The term covers public figures who play themselves while it is not clear how much is the actual person and how much is fictional.

In Denmark, the trend was first introduced trough the TV series Klovn. It aired between 2005 and 2018 and played a crucial role in challenging the need for determining whether something is fiction, or fact. The series draws on the pictures and stories of the actors, that the audience is already acquainted with through the press, thereby using doubt about whether it is real or rumors, to push limits further. It is a comment on tabloids, and an attempt to further blur the boundaries by using strategic ambiguity. However, such genres require that the audience knows in advance what the press writes about the public figures. This illustrates, that for the genre to become a success, not just any fake story can be included, and not just any viewer will appreciate it.

Fictiobiografism contributes to a genre within entertainment, in which people have become accustomed to appreciating the space *between* fiction and facts, instead of believing it to be one while being disappointed to discover it is the other. Over time viral reality marketing campaigns too have paved the way for a change in attitude and expectations. Stories made up to look like true stories whereas they are actually advertising has become an established and recognized genre. To understand the context in which viral reality marketing played out, it is important to remember that they were pushing the expectations of their audience, since the audience was less likely to expect to move between fiction and facts than comedians. As we shall see in the following chapter, this allowed for several comedians to take advantage of the campaigns and, even, come out of it more successful than the companies did.

Even as the ambiguous space between fake, real, facts, fiction, and satire are appreciated more and strategically used by comedians, journalists, and advertisers today, this was not the case in 2008 and 2009 when I started conducting fieldwork. Today it is expected that people, to a higher extent, interact with content without having to decide. They often appreciate the ride and consider ambiguous stories entertaining more than frustrating. As my campaigns ran, it was primarily comedians and people working with marketing who recognized this genre, appreciated it, and went along for the fun, thereby complicating the discussions further for all those who did not yet recognize the genre. These specific groups of people navigated on purpose in the ambiguous space between real and fake in contrast to most other participants who were not, at that time, familiar with the genres that embrace ambiguity. They did not try to make distinctions and single out content as either true of fake, instead it was the

discord between comedians who recognized the genre and ordinary people who did not, that kept the discussions going.

Embracing ambiguity versus chasing the truth.

A brief example on how people's approach to staged stories has changed, is KIM's chips, a Danish brand that for many years has used a fictional character "Jørgen" for their ads. Recently it was time to make a change. Jørgen was to be replaced with another actor. To make the introduction of a new character interesting, they sent a press release claiming that they had structural challenges in the advertising division. They closed their Facebook page with the announcement that their page was closed due to restructuring[xxvii]. Through videos and updates on their homepage they published a press release and followed up with stories that Jørgen had been violent, and that they managed to get recordings of it as a proof. It was revealed that Jørgen had a son - a son who might take over the business. It was not concluded, only insinuated.

The whole thing was Kim's way to kill off a character with style, and further to get the media's attention. They got it. From going through comments on the now reopened Facebook page, as well as the journalists' continuous updates on the matter, it became clear that no one participating in the discussion, believed it to be true; instead, they played along and discussed what might be the outcome. Years later, Jørgen is still featured by Kim's. Several stories circulate in press releases, fake press releases, Jørgen contemplating press releases, Jørgen announcing he is bankrupt, etc. But what really happened? Did the actor playing Jørgen get sick? Did he plan to be absent? Retire for real? Were there contract issues between the actor and Kim's? Did the marketing division think that the character needed new story development? Was it a test to see if the audience loved Jørgen enough to claim him back? Did they remove him for people to like him more? I do not know the answer. And when it comes to understanding how informants engage with the campaign, it is often neither possible, nor the point, to get to know the truth. Being curious, collating bits and pieces of information is what the stories of Jørgen are made up of.

3.1.3 Navigating in ambiguous territory

Informants and researcher face a mutual challenge when navigating in ambiguous settings. Just as much as I recognize that the campaign is made up for the joy of the ride, when gathering data, I *wanted* to know more, I wanted to be able to tell the reader, what the real story was and measure it up against the creative rumors, to illustrate how this is not visible to those playing along. This was a large and general concern as I gathered data. Often, I asked people responsible for campaigns to tell

me what it really was, or to confirm suspicions. Yet, I was often met with a mysterious smile, and a "what do YOU think?" I was for instance asking serious questions regarding the actor and the production of Kim's campaigns, while I was met with replies from Jørgen in-character. Often, I was reminded that what I considered important information, was not accessible to me. I also had the feeling that things happened elsewhere, and that I was missing out on pieces of the puzzle wherever I went. I experienced how confirming versions of a story as true, mapping the exact timeline, tracing rumors back to where they began, was difficult and often impossible. Answers were almost always surrounded with uncertainty and a need to ask even more questions.

Several things pointed to a tendency to appreciate stories for what they temporarily were, in favor of clarifying and fact checking them: journalists encouraging engagement through generating ambiguous content while laying out the questions to the readers, comedians engaging as an opportunity to provide entertainment. From many different sites, and from various groups of engagers, it was no longer about explaining, but more about advancing on the details that made up another good story. These approaches, from journalists, comedians, and informants who played detectives, bear similarities to the crafting of jokes, in which realism is exchanged for creative, well timed, juxtapositions of a few handpicked elements. One can always go back and decipher a joke, but by then the moment is gone. The joke explained is incommensurable with the joke told or experienced.

Diverse groups of journalists, comedians and people who suggested new potential connections, are all examples of informants who did not try to answer questions and clarify facts but tried to escape them in favor of building upon them. Klovn deliberately used their actor's own characters in an in-between-land, journalists turned unconfirmed stories from failures of journalists that knew too little, to new enticing questions to their readers, and people who played detectives, were approaching stories like entertainment while playing along for the ride. Empirically there tends to be an orientation towards embracing ambiguity instead of deconstructing it. Yet I was faced with a concern for on the one hand attempting to explain what was going on, and on the other hand playing along. I was torn between appreciating the stories, the uncertainties, and the lack of confirmation, and wanting to at least go further than my informants to get to know more. The feeling I had was remarkably similar to deconstructing jokes. Jokes deciphered, explained, and analyzed lose their temporary beauty. I discovered the same when attempting to clarify and chase facts. This difference between going along with my informants and telling the story of what my informants were participating in, turned out to

be an insight, in the process of gathering data and writing about it retrospectively. It made me question whether, and how, it is possible to tell stories that in their character do not want to be told in univocal ways. The storylines of Jørgen and Klovn work because they are not limited to things as either true or fake. Instead, they are positioned in an ambiguous space where both exist simultaneously. I discovered that the frustration faced by not being able to capture it all, was just as much a practical concern for me as it was a premise for my informants whom, just as me, navigated within a cacophony of information.

3.1.4 The field as a temporal reconfiguration

Phenomena that were interesting and new in 2008, have since managed to get names such as newsjacking, spoofing, and brandjacking, illustrating that it is a known phenomenon that some brands take advantage of what others gain awareness about. Here are a few of such categorizations that have emerged in the last decade.

SoMe - Content marketing in social media. This genre of marketing is about creating relevant and valuable content with the intention of changing or enhancing consumer behavior. It represents a new step that marketers, who acknowledge that traditional marketing does not work anymore, have taken to reach their potential customers. Traditional in this context means ways in which people are confronted with advertising without being asked. However, as there have been attempts to force people to see ads without having a choice, so too there have been ways for them to avoid it. Digital video recorders allow viewers to skip ads. Chips in Blu-ray recorders allow viewers to watch blu-rays without the regional restrictions. Ad blockers as plugin in browsers remove advertised content while surfing. Other plugins disconnect surfing from Facebook activity, thus restricting them from learning about the users' behaviors outside the platform, to show directed ads. Alternative search pages[18] allow searching through Google anonymously, without Google learning about search history and pages visited when creating a profile for which ads should be shown.

Social Media (SoMe) and Content marketing is about *not* fighting a battle with customers who have means for winning. Instead, the advertising strategy is to create content that is relevant for consumers. Content that they want to access. This is about communicating with customers and prospects without (directly) selling. Instead of pitching products or services, the marketer delivers information that makes the buyer more intelligent and capable. The essence of this strategy is the belief that if

[18] Startpage.com, Ixquick.com, duckandgo.com, to mention a few of the biggest.

businesses, deliver consistent, ongoing valuable information to buyers, they are ultimately rewarded with their loyalty. SoMe and content marketing represent a new way for businesses to think about the relationship between producers and consumers. It follows the viral idea in ideology, by not aiming to control consumers, but instead by providing them with means for helping themselves, for instance by establishing the basis for the consumers to *want* to be helped and supported by the producers and their products. One might say it is about helping consumers, helping producers, helping consumers. In SoMe consumers would not be forced to watch ads, they would be provided with advertised content that is so interesting that the users *want* to share it.

This new focus on relationships is important to bear in mind when thinking of viral reality marketing. Particularly because it was not common to think like this for the companies that I followed in 2008 and 2009. The fact that participants had their own agenda and turned discussions towards other things than the intended message, was perceived as a threat, and a lack of control from those who used this strategy. Most of today's professional viral campaigns do not try to gain control; they celebrate people's participation and accept that twists and alterations are important parts of the game.

Typosquatting is a well-known strategy to lure people into sites they think is one thing but is something else. Sometimes it is made for porn, but often it is made up to look like the page people thought they were visiting. In the beginning of the dissertation, I mentioned the page Threadless.com where users can make and vote for T-shirts to be printed and sold. An example on typosquatting here is Treadless.com. If you write this address you are directed to ww7.treadless, a page with links to design your own t-shirt[xxviii]. Another similar site is ww11.Treadless.com[xxix]. Today the first two are owned by the same company, but it is a well-known strategy to buy domains spelled close to other domains and take advantage of the similarities in names.

Shit storm is a term often used when a single individual is threatened by a large company, a sort of David vs Goliath scenario. Often such scenarios emerge from the individual posting his or her side of the story to a social media, while quickly gaining sympathy from the public. They also emerge from individuals or companies who do something stupid. This often calls for a storm of negative reactions, often out of proportion to what happened. Companies use crisis management to try to control it, individuals often do not have any other options but to wait till the storm settles down.

Love storm is a shit storm with a positive spin. A Danish blogger's attempt to focus on the positive side of the storms, introducing a counter concept (Muriel Mimoun 2014). A love storm is an

exponentially growing attention to a case, product, or person, in which strangers suddenly declare their sympathy or acknowledgement publicly. A recent example is a couple who visited a restaurant with a poor service. The bad service was not caused by the employees, they said, but because there were too few at work compared to the number of guests. They left a $100 tip and a note saying, "*We've both been in your shoes. Paying it forward.*"[xxx] A waiter took a picture of the tip and posted it on Facebook. The picture and the story received over a million shares within a week.

Streisand effect is not a new term, nevertheless, it is included since it describes a phenomenon that from 2008 to 2021 has been more and more present. The term was introduced in 2003. It covers a phenomenon where attempts to hide, remove, or censor a piece of information has the unintended consequence of publicizing the information more widely, usually facilitated by the Internet. It is named after American entertainer Barbra Streisand, who tried to suppress photographs of her residence in Malibu, California by filing a lawsuit. The actual photo had at that time been downloaded from the photographer's website only six times; two of those downloads were by Streisand's attorneys. However, because of the case, public knowledge of the picture increased substantially, and consequently more than 420,000 people visited the site over the following month to see the picture she tries to suppress.

Brandjacking is an activity whereby someone acquires or otherwise assumes the online identity of another entity, for the purposes of acquiring that person's or business's brand equity. It can be difficult to determine whether a brand is brand-jacked or spoofed[19]. Some take advantage of ads that are commonly known to make parodies of them; this is seen as a spoof. Others might make it look like they are actual representatives for a brand, while providing a bad service or a bad representation of it.

Thus, there are names and categories for sorting and interpreting several of the phenomena that I have mentioned so far. In 2021 they are extensively used concepts in the news media. They have become recognized categories and phenomena. But as I did fieldwork, most informants did not know them and did not use them as frames for understanding what was going on.

[19] Spoof is another word for satire, used specifically about brands and ads.

Real time marketing and temporariness

One specific type of brandjacking that I want to bring specific attention to, is real time marketing. This marketing strategy is about making references to things that are happening in real time, as we speak. Some brands have built up a reputation for this type of advertising by linking their brand in creative ways to things as they happen. Real-time marketing requires a local knowledge that is not only tied to geographic, demographics or culture but to time as well. It often makes them difficult to locate and analyze in retrospect since they are part of specific configurations of things. They require awareness about things relevant in a small window of time.

When well executed, they work because they pinpoint what is already on everyone's lips and link these conversations to their brand. This makes a lot of sense in real-time while not so much when removed from its context, i.e., the time when it is published. Take for instance this ad from Carlsberg with the text: "*Carlsberg shows teeth too"*.

Without context it makes little sense. However, positioned in July 2014, and exposed to people who read the news and knew a little about football players, it made perfect sense. During the world Cup in July 2014 a Uruguayan footballer lost his temper and bit an opposing player. This was not the first, nor the second time this player bit other players. The media wrote about the incident because, for some time, it was unclear what consequences it should have. Carlsberg took advantage of the media

attention and references it in their ad. The strategy is to leach on an already existing network held together by a bite. This actor, the bite, might not be strong enough to hold together a network of actors for long, but as long as it does, it constitutes an opportunity for brands to strengthen their position and become part of what is going on.

Another example from the bite-incident was Adidas' poster in South America and Brazil. It encouraged people to post selfies on social media while "getting bit." Adidas had made sure their logo was an inevitable part of the picture and hence was spread while associated with fun.

These examples may be considered global since they spread unhindered by geographical borders on social media, yet they are local in the sense that they make sense only within a specific span of time, just as much as they make sense for a specific group of people who are aware of and interested in football.

Sometimes extremely specific positions are required in order to appreciate specific content. To make sense of the following ad, one would have to know a specific event taking place in Denmark in January 10. 2015: There was a storm and consequently the bridge connecting East and West Denmark was closed. However, Frederik, the Crown Prince of Denmark had official business where he needed to cross the bridge twice during the storm. Both times he managed to get in front of the line of waiting cars and pass the barrier where drivers usually stop to pay. This was for security reasons so that he did not have to wait along with all the others. However, as soon as he had crossed the line, he continued driving. It caused a stir in the Danish media, partly because it took some time to clarify who, if any, had given the permission to drive, and partly because others were offended as the prince could drive when no one else could. For several days, the media tried to unravel why and how this could happen. So did people on various social media. Several brands, experienced with making real

time marketing, took the event as an opportunity for creating entertaining content of course featuring their own brand.

One such example was the beer brand Carlsberg: Their ad said: "*There is a new storm coming up – It's called Frederik, and it's a real media storm*", along with a picture of the bridge, the Tuborg bottle, and a logo.

The ad plays with the ambiguity of the word storm, referring to both the weather and the media storm that were growing increasingly on social media due to the breaking of rules. This requires an additional awareness of another thing that had recently occurred in Denmark. In 2010 Denmark had just begun naming their storms, thus, naming the storm was a time specific reference as well.

Real-time marketing is about temporary, short lived networks of actors that emerge and disappear again. The ads work because people, without explanation, recognize references between the brand and other events. Looking back at such ads later, makes it difficult to see the beauty of these temporary connections, since the network held together by the bite, or the storm, no longer exists. Thus, the network held together by these actors is fragile. It expands, increases, and often disappears again at fast pace. Sometimes one actor can establish itself as an obligatory passage point, while interesting a huge number of other actors. But a continuous effort is needed to keep this actor stable, and particularly with memes, trends on social media, and real time marketing, where the connections are fleeting.

A final example illustrates the temporal aspect while specifically highlighting the role of non-human actors. The prime minister of Denmark Lars Løkke Rasmussen had received a bad reputation for his

activities and appreciation of beer. To take control of his reputation, he created filters on his Facebooks page, so that several words he did not wish to be associated with would be filtered out.[20] Thus, if someone included a word in a public message on his Facebook page, he did not want to be associated with publicly, that message would be visible only to the composer of the content and Lars Løkke Rasmussen. The composer would receive no notice that the message was invisible to anyone else. Therefore, it was difficult for people to notice deletion-work done by the filter. Someone, however, noticed the filter and the list of banned words by looking at the page source.[21] Among other things were the word Fadøl (pint), a connection he did not want to be strengthened more publicly. However, within hours a countless number of people tried to circumvent the filter.

For instance, the filter stops you from writing FADØL, but not:

F

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D

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L

It stops you from writing the exact word, but not from using other words, such as Fad0l or Fadø1. Pictures containing beer are not filtered either, causing a huge amount of people to add pictures of beer on his page.

A Danish radio station quickly picked up on the news of the list and encouraged their listeners to come up with creative ways to write Fadøl on his page. Several other news sites then wrote about how the station was encouraging its viewers, and then the snowball rolled! This was of course a great opportunity for making real-time marketing, and to whom would it be more obvious than the Danish beer brands.

[20] In practice, if people included such words, a security setting would make sure only the person who wrote it would be able to see it. He or she would not receive any notice of this. It would look as if it appeared on the page, however it was invisible to others.

[21] A page is coded in HTML. By viewing the source, anyone can see more details about what and how content is handled.

Carlsberg was playing with the word lykke (happiness) pronounced the same way: "Ren lykke" means pure happiness whereas “Ren Løkke” means Typically Løkke with reference to the prime minister’s middle name.

Cases like this still occur today. They illustrate how the Streisand effect prevails, as nothing engages the internet as intensely as someone trying to hide something. It illustrates a driving force that is strong, and very present in turning things viral. Whenever someone says “*Shhh*” people start shouting instead. These real time marketing campaigns are great examples of what ANT deals with as micro-actors who become macro-actors. It illustrates how something that seems unimportant, can suddenly be turned into a strong actor that holds together a network of thousands of others, but only when the right actors are mobilized. It also directs attention to the fragility in stories, since they are held together by things that makes sense within a short span of time.

These temporary connections are difficult to maintain for long. Consequently, they are also difficult to locate in retrospect, to those who were not positioned when a storm was just raging over Denmark, or when bitemarks and a football player were the most obvious references to make. Time and temporality are therefore both crucial elements of the phenomena of viral content, but at the same time it constitutes a challenge when studying them, if not positioned where and when they happen.

3.2 Genres

“On the internet, everything is accessible, anything is possible, therefore, everyone can make successful viral content.” In later cases of viral reality marketing, we shall see how this claim represents the way some companies, using viral reality marketing, initially thought, when applying

the strategy. Directing energy towards viral campaigns at first glance holds promises of success: It spreads faster, it costs less, and others voluntarily do the work of making sure awareness is boosted. Two things are important to keep in mind here; the first is, that making the right references is an art, that requires awareness and mastering of skills. The second concerns non-human actors who play a huge, yet often invisible, part in challenging the illusion of everything as being accessible to all.

Entering the field and becoming sufficiently native to make and appreciate, subtle cross-references, recognize classics, and even be able to contribute, illustrates that not everyone can make viral content *successfully*. The specific combinations of content and timing serve as in- and exclusions, as they speak only to those who get the reference. So even though digital content, events, pictures, quotes, and videos are accessible to all, making the right connections, in the right style, at the right time, is not equally achievable to all. Having access to content, is not the same as being able to appropriate the right connections between it.

The phenomenon of making viral content, bears similarities to the way Hippel (Hippel 2007; Hippel 2005) describes user-driven innovation, when it comes to portraying users and their role in innovation creation. It allows us to see how innovations emerge dispersed, motivated by independent individuals, who bring things together in new innovative ways out of their own interests. Yet, the empirical data raises questions when it comes to the democratization and the nonhierarchical networks that are also conceptualized in Hippel's approach to innovation, for even if everything may be accessible, not all is *equally* accessible. This has to do with the individual's frames of reference as well as the scripts, hashtags, and algorithms that interfere, amplify, and distort content. Before returning to these non-human actors, we need to understand what kinds of requirements it takes, to be able to make and appreciate references.

3.2.1 Multiple cross references - a genre made from a repertoire of "classics"

When in this section I refer to classics, it reflects references that are generally recognized, and are often made across different content that goes viral. Not all who share or adapt content will recognize these as classics; others will point to other references as being more representative as classics.

Appreciating content that links between different domains simultaneously, such as memes, spoofs, and parodies, requires specific knowledge. An anthropologist entering the field, does not just locate and start mapping out this type of content. Entering a society, culture, group, or practice takes time. To become part of a practice one must learn values, taboos, do's, and don'ts to navigate, and to be granted access. The researcher must acquire knowledge that is considered basic for the specific field.

There are rules, unwritten rules, and access to specific sites, networks and platforms that need to be negotiated. There is an awareness of how to communicate, and how to become familiar with terms, genres. Becoming a local amongst the informants takes time and is not always achievable to an extent where the researcher is considered purely "one of us", as mentioned briefly in the beginning of this dissertation. There are active processes of inclusion and exclusion of people. There are ways of communicating and referencing used specifically to reward those who are familiar with the genre and exclude those who are not.

The first access was given by informants sharing whatever they found amusing as "this is viral" but after experiencing an extensive overload of references to content, while still having a sense of missing out points, or not appreciating content the same way my informants did, I slowly learned that it required a knowledge of a set of classics. Classics can be described as a dynamic repertoire of things that are fun because they have been transformed into several creative outcomes. Recalling my initial reaction to the Hitler video that my husband's colleague showed me, not possessing the knowledge to recognize and place it as part of a genre, turned the Hitler video into a strange story, even though I knew the events that were referenced in the video. Had I instead known the concept of Hitler Rants Parodies without being familiar with the case of the Danish politician who blamed immigrants and their big families for their assumed consumption of cake and juice, that Hitler Rants Parody would not be funny either. I learned that it was the continuous creative interpretations and combinations of content, that kept the Hitler videos alive as classics.

Making a successful viral is about references, but not just *any* reference. This also calls for knowledge of established and temporarily trending genres[xxxi] within the culture of sharing and exchanging. Everyone can make a Hitler Rants Parody, but not everyone can make one that is found worthy of sharing. References will have to be made in a way that ads to both the Hitler video and the specific content or event it was connected to and the audience will have to know and recognize in advance the specific domains that are being creatively joined together.

Across several media - Cleveland meets Hitler

Recalling the initial critique of many studies pointing to the distinction between online and offline (Porter and Golan 2006; Goldenberg et al. 2007; Stringam and Gerdes 2010), tracing viral references reveals a much more complex culture of cross referencing: An art of bringing things from different domains together. References are not limited to the internet, they grow from moving between and

across media, between comedy, politics, movies, and cartoons. They are positioned in the ambiguous space between the political and the parody and are often self-referential and make use of metalevels.

For these references to make sense an audience will have to possess specific local knowledge of genres. To illustrate this, I have chosen to provide an example in which I was familiar with the various genres and the specific humor used. I use this story to exemplify that the reader, who may not instantly appreciate these references, is external to it. Therefore, in order for it to make sense, narrative work must be done to compensate for what is effortlessly and instantly hilarious content to me.

In the following piece of text, the story of the references between Hitler and Cleveland might seem messy to read with several interruptions and explanations of other shows and characters along the way. This is a deliberate choice, to give the reader an idea, of the level of referencing that goes on along with the story. Since this is a story from the Cleveland Show, let us start somewhere else: Family Guy.

Family Guy is a cartoon TV show made by Seth MacFarlane. A spinoff of Family Guy is called Cleveland Show. Both shows make many references without explaining too much, while drawing on specific knowledge on what is going on elsewhere, thereby rewarding those who recognize the references. As an example, on how references are made between these and other genres, the Cleveland Show refers to the Hitler meme mentioned earlier. In the episode named "Wide World of Cleveland Show", Cleveland ponders what his show would look like in different national versions. Germany was featured, by making a parody of the scene used in the Hitler Rants Parodies[xxxii]. In this version of the show, Cleveland played the role of Adolf Hitler, while many of the main, major, and recurring characters played his team of Nazis. Hitler was informed by Junior, (Cleveland's son) that the entirety of the writers of his show, (which is the same writers that makes Family Guy) were Jewish, either racially or religiously. This is a fourth wall joke. To the reader unfamiliar with the concept "the fourth wall", it is a performance convention in which an invisible, imagined wall separates actors from the audience. While the audience can see through this "wall", the convention assumes, the actors act as if they cannot see the audience or the camera. Family Guy very often reference this in its self-referential style, for instance Megan, the daughter in Family Guy, points to the camera (double ironic because cartoons do not have actors and cameras), demanding the cameras shut down, to which her brother Chris shouts: "you are breaking the fourth wall." Self-referencing, referencing to events outside the scope of the story, as well as breaking the fourth wall, occur often in many American

cartoons for adults.[22] This act of drawing attention to the actors as actors, while consciously reflecting upon it, is metatheatrical. It is very frequently used as a way of communicating both in memes, animated television shows as well as in the growing genre of fiktiobiografism.

Shifting back to the Cleveland Show, Hitler was infuriated and demanded that everyone who found Jewish comedian Billy Crystal humorous, was to leave the room, before he would blow up in rage (in the scene from Der Untergang everyone but four were asked to leave after which Hitler was infuriated). As the animated Hitler gets more and more infuriated, he draws the connections of why he ran a deli back on Family Guy (which shares many of the same writers as well as a range of recurring characters as the Cleveland Show). Tim, Cleveland's neighbor, then helped him understand why he constantly used words like "Oy," a Yiddish phrase expressing dismay or exasperation, and "Yarmulke," a brimless cap, usually made of cloth, traditionally worn by Jewish males to fulfill the customary requirement that the head be covered. After this rude awakening, Hitler's only consolation was, that all his writers were at least heterosexual, which unfortunately led Holt, another neighbor, to tell him that the likelihood of them all being gay was highly probable, since they lived in Hollywood. Hitler was quite unfazed by this, and said that he was not surprised, given all the gay jokes that were on his, that is, Cleveland's, show[xxxiii]. Seth MacFarlane, writer, and producer of both shows, often references gays and gay communities. To MacFarlane they are recurring themes throughout the shows, as well as external to it. The reference to gays is a piece of information noticeably clear to those who are familiar with Seth MacFarlane's work across cartoons, entertainment, and activism, yet to those not familiar with these connections, content may seem more offending.

The story of the relation between Hitler and the Cleveland Show illustrates the interconnectedness between various stories, characters, real live persons, and events, both within television shows and external to it. Since Hitler is a recurring secondary character in Family Guy, making a reference to Hitler, coming from Seth MacFarlane, on the topics of writers of the two series, in a setting where the characters have a tradition of being self-aware and breaking the fourth wall, the reference between Hitler and Cleveland is well placed, and, to the regular audience, great fun.

Cleveland Show and Family Guy, referring to Hitler does not escape Hitler Rants Parodies of course. So, he, and, just to clarify, I mean someone using the soundtrack and images of the specific scene in Der Untergang, and not Hitler Himself, responds by calling his animated twin. In a new video he then

[22] It is a comedy device used regularly, for example in Rick and Morty, Simpsons, Futurama, Sponge Bob, Archer, King of the Hill… to mention a few.

claims that Family Guy is crap, and that the only thing worth watching is Cleveland[xxxiv]. He is then informed by his men, that the Cleveland show has been canceled, to which he gets infuriated, and he sends out all but four men[xxxv].

Here ends the example of how the Hitler Rants Parody travels across media into television shows, and how, at the same time, the Hitler Rants Parodies make a reference back to the television shows. It further illustrates how references rely on the audience to have a specific knowledge to appreciate it. In the story of the Hitler - Cleveland references I have explicitly *not* tried to provide an uninterrupted story to illustrate how references take the audience back and forth between different contexts. I have tried to illustrate how it is both a story of an episode of Cleveland referencing the Hitler meme, and a specific Hitler meme referencing The Cleveland Show at the same time. For now, it is sufficient to say, that when locating things that go viral, we must look across various contexts, and look at how they are being connected in ways that mutually contribute to each other simultaneously.

Understanding the dynamics of a meme or genre like the Hitler Rants Parodies requires expanding the field to other media, but also to the interconnectedness between genres, memes and other things brought into play. Whereas everyone can make a Hitler Rants Parody by uploading new subtitles, not everyone can make a *successful* one. This requires skills in making references that contribute to several things simultaneously, while being recognized by an audience for their ability to do so. Understanding and appreciating such content likewise requires an awareness of references that goes across several domains. Studying them therefore requires moving from following one piece of viral content to focusing on how it is kept alive by multiple translations and across various domains, simultaneously.

3.2.2 Nonhierarchical networks, democratization, algorithms

Creating content, is not the same as mastering the right combinations of references between them. The same goes for distributing content. Even if anything is potentially accessible on the internet, not everything distributes equally. For instance, anyone can upload a video, or share a link, but that does not guarantee its reach. The video must get to people, connections must be made in ways that make it travel, and it must be placed where it gains exposure. Here we need to shift focus to networks connections and alliances.

Hippel's approach to innovations, made by heterogeneous people who innovate freely for their own interest (Hippel 2005), is helpful to keep in mind here. Viral as a phenomenon is about heterogeneous

people who all contribute. Yet a crucial thing that the empirical data reminds us of, is that accessibility does not mean that the same action from the user, leads to the same results. Algorithms, scripts, digital platforms as well as digital profiling that ensure customized content based on each user's specific action, all play a crucial role in translating, distributing, and distorting content.

The inclusion of the framework of ANT provides valuable insights when it comes to including the role of scripts, algorithms, and user profiling. Instead of looking at the relation between users and innovations, ANT treats both in analytically equal terms (Latour 1988; Latour 1986). To understand what makes an innovation, we need to focus on how actors, both human and non-human, mutually enlist, enroll, and mobilize themselves through relations to other actors, in order to become obligatory passage points, and be able to speak on behalf of others. Keeping specific references such as Hitler's Rants alive, is done by individual contributors who fill in new details and translate the meme into new versions. Their creative modifications are the driving force. It is un-orchestrated, emerges decentralized, and can emerge from the most unexpected places. No one asks, or pays the contributors, who ensure that the Hitler Rants Parody keep being referenced, to do so. Yet making successful content by timing and mastering the right references is only one of the crucial aspects that is important to the growth of viral content. Another is the non-human actor who makes and breaks connections as well.

Recall Latour's example of authoring a paper. It will only become definitive, if others take it up and use it as a matter of fact later. Any stabilization of fact or statement depends on action; therefore, it is always in jeopardy. Including non-human actors illustrates what kinds of action a video depends on, to shift from a video lying passively somewhere on a server, to traveling through wires, through air, and become a local copy on thousands of digital devices, geographically spread all over the world, as people watch the video. The non-human actors perform work in enabling distribution. The shift from a video being accessible, since everything is accessible on the internet, to the video actively reaching people, is only clear, if we direct attention to the work that non-human actors do. Links, algorithms, and digital infrastructures are an equally important part of the explanation of how something manages to become viral, as the human actors.

The following two examples will illustrate how one actor is sometimes many different locally dispersed ones, and likewise that many different actors can appear as one.

The relationship between one actor and many different actors

Power relations in ANT are achieved by being able to speak on behalf of others. These positions are fragile, and continuously negotiated by actors' actions. By successfully establishing obligatory passage points, that others chose to go through, and by establishing oneself as spokesperson for others, power is, if only temporarily, achieved.

We have already seen how liking a video conceals the action performed by the non-humans silently working in the background. In explicitly including non-human actors we can represent the connections that transform the like given in exchange for getting access to a video, into a personal recommendation of that video, differently. By including the non-human, we can reveal otherwise silenced translations. This allows us to use ANT to tell a different story. This approach can be used to elaborate on a seemingly simple task of sharing a video. Sharing a video is not what the action suggests, for what is shared is not the video, but a *reference to it*, a link. The link becomes the obligatory passage point that connects the video on a server, to the persons geographically and timely dispersed, while watching it. If the link is altered (say by a typo where someone accidentally adds or deletes a letter or number), the video can no longer be watched and does not exist to the user, even though it still may be on a server. But the link is not just a connection between viewer and video. As it is shared, it becomes integrated in specific infrastructures. When sharing a link on Facebook, algorithms distribute the link according to specific criteria. A user with 300 friends, who shares the link, does not provide exposure to 300 people. Facebooks algorithms are continually refined and altered to provide an experience for the user, that ensures that the user stays satisfied with the platform. Therefore, algorithms perform the work of sorting information. Any link posted by a user is actively distributed according to criteria predefined by Facebook. For instance, the algorithms are constructed to guess which relations in the user's network are most likely to find the link relevant. This is done based on an ongoing profiling of both the user and his or her connections through their interaction. Whereas this filtering of information may mostly be useful in providing the user with access to the content the user is likely to find relevant, it also illustrates how interactions are strongly mediated. This mediation and filtering, performed by algorithms, based on the individual user, is not exclusive to Facebook. Almost all online services with user profiles, adjust their algorithms in particular ways, to create an order in the information available to the user. On YouTube, recommended content, based on previous searches, is shown, while cookies keep track of the videos watched, to make it easier for the user to pick up where he or she left. News sites encourage their users to create a profile, so they can provide personalized content most likely to be relevant for the

user, but also most likely to keep them satisfied with the specific site to ensure, that they do not migrate to a competitor. The same goes for Google, Amazon, Netflix, and any other service that asks its users to create a profile. Other pages track the individual users' activities using cookies or third-party profiles, even the ones without a profile on the page in question. Multiple searches performed across different visits can be linked and then used to direct specific advertising content on that page as well as on other pages.

Algorithms serve to order content according to several interests, not necessarily visible, or in accordance with the users' own idea of what they want. Thus, a seemingly straightforward action such as sharing a link, is a highly mediated action. A link is an actor which, along with algorithms, connects people and content, thereby becoming an obligatory passage point. This obligatory point is, if only temporarily, able to hold together other actors and speak on behalf of all the local appearances of the video on digital platforms and digital devices, despite being geographically and temporally dispersed. This network is fragile and temporal. The power that holds the video and the link in a position where it speaks on behalf of millions can easily be lost.

The link might be compromised by a missing letter, or if the user decided to remove the video. But there are other threats as well. As we shall see in later examples of viral reality marketing, elements that a digital infrastructure such as YouTube find undesirable, enables YouTube to delete the video as well, and thereby remove the one video that is locally distributed as many. YouTube has filters registering undesired as well as illegal content. If a radio in the background of a video contains a piece of music that is copyrighted, if the video contains visual material from a copyrighted movie, or if the video contains nudity, the video is deleted by YouTube, and the thousand locally watched videos no longer exist as the links shift to direct to a "the content is no longer available" page.

Thus, sharing a video is sharing a link to it. Sharing a link strongly depends on, and is mediated by, algorithms and profiling. What may be experienced as one specific actor, the video, is a network of other actors enabling distorting and translating actions. Paying explicit attention to the non-human actors highlights how actors play a highly active role in enabling and restricting connections between users exchanging videos.

However, another benefit of paying attention to the non-human actors is equally important to mention: many different actors may appear as one. For instance, I often encountered informants talking about the same video. When paying attention to the specificities of the non-human actors, I realized, that it

was not one by many *different* videos they referred to. YouTube users often take a copy others' and reupload it to their own profile. This means that many copies of the same video exist simultaneously. If someone wants to delete their video, deleting it, does not make it disappear from YouTube, as long as other users feature copies on their YouTube profiles.

Several companies have been known to retract commercial videos from YouTube, if their messages are misunderstood, or if the debates surrounding them turn into undesired critique. In practice however, they often fail in removing the video. Firstly, because many local copies appear on various profiles, and secondly because of the Streisand effect, where people push back at the removal by repeatedly reuploading it. Thus, paying attention to non-human actors creates awareness of one actor as being able to speak on behalf of many, but also of many actors speaking on behalf of one. I will return to these insights later in chapter four. For now, it is sufficient to illustrate how viral content is integrated in highly digitally mediated settings, as well as traveling between several of them. Content is distorted, displaced, and translated. By focusing on how digital infrastructures constantly translate and displace content, it becomes clear that turning content into something viral, is not as democratic and freely accessible to all as Hippel's framework suggests. If we are to understand how these non-human actors affect exchanges of viral content, we must take them seriously, by paying attention to reconfigurations that happen as both humans and non-humans actively translate, disperse, displace, and distribute content. The ambiguities between global and local have shifted from a matter of geography to a matter of pinpointing what local means in specific instances. For instance, smaller groups of people are connected through a mutual recognition of specific reference, yet they may not necessarily be otherwise connected. These connections are highly relevant to study, but their fragile and very loosely connected nature makes them more difficult to specify and characterize by simply referring to geographic, demographic, or cultural boundaries. A single actor may speak on behalf of many silent ones, and many distinct actors may appear as a single one; this requires a revised approach to the non-human actors that are part of these relations. Whereas ANT takes all actors seriously, it does not capture when actors are both one and many at the same time. Nor does it capture that the characteristics of an actor may differ depending on perspective. ANT fails to cover, and thus explain, the ambiguity that roles of actors may simultaneously be the same, yet different.

Until now I have illustrated the environment in which people use references to include and exclude others. I have also illustrated how non-human actors, through digital mediation, play an equally crucial role in distorting amplifying and silencing content. The following example brings these two

discussions together to illustrate a significant challenge in accounting for viral stories. Two elements in particular will be emphasized: the fleeting and highly local reference making and its relation to representing the story in general, and the role of digital timestamps as non-human actors that define a particular relation between content and time. We now move from contemplating how to conceptualize viral stories, to the implications for constructing narratives of them.

3.3 Ordering and boundary-making in viral stories

Telling a story of something viral illustrates the ongoing work and challenges in creating order, both when encountering events and accounting for them retrospectively. Viral stories are often chaotic. They are everywhere at once yet fleeting. They are shared by many yet made up by multiple references that make sense in various local settings but not necessarily outside them. Most references require specific knowledge to appreciate the references, just as they may only temporarily constitute relevant references. Unexpected references suddenly become related by well-crafted and well-timed juxtapositions, and the time in which these references are relevant, is short-lived and highly temporary. They constitute unpredictable connections that are made ad hoc, across various platforms, and between individuals that are not closely related. To illustrate this, the following example concerns a giraffe named Marius, who was euthanized in Copenhagen Zoo during my fieldwork. While accounting for these events I will illustrate the complexities in explaining what went on.

In the following story of Marius, the references made, and the excerpts provided, are the ones I find relevant for you, the reader, to know. I have organized the story according to digital timestamps, thereby presenting a chronological account of what went on. However, many elements of the story were not encountered in the chronological order that the timestamp presents. Furthermore, references, as they occurred according to the chronological order, did not always make sense, were not visible, or did not become related, until at a later point in time. To illustrate the complexities emerging from attempting to encounter, as well as tell, such stories, I will give voice to two versions of myself that supplement the story. The purpose of the additional voices is two-fold: Firstly, I want to draw specific attention to the way time-stamp chronology, used to sort the list of events, is a specific order, among others. Secondly, I will illustrate how references that are relevant to some informants might not be, or might not yet have become, relevant to others.

One voice is positioned in the timeline presented, as I encountered content related to the giraffe Marius, this voice is based on fieldnotes featuring my initial reactions. It represents all the reactions and questions that emerged at that specific time when I encountered the events. The other voice

represents me in the role of analyst and writer, reflecting on what needs to be added for the reader, who was not there, and who may not have recognized or appreciated the specific references that were clear to me.[23] This last voice is eager to add extra information, ensuring that the reader has the proper background knowledge. It tries to compensate for the references that are no longer obvious to the reader. It fills out gaps by providing context, explanation, and attempts to make the reader appreciate the references. These gaps are both due to the passage of time, and to the assumption that the reader is not part of the same networks as the writer.

Ethnographer: This is me as ethnographer in the field. This voice represents doubts and critique that came up in the encounters with the events, even when they often later became irrelevant, when doubt was replaced with explanations and certainty.

Writer: This is me as the researcher looking back, while explaining and providing relevant context for the reader. This voice represents me being explicitly aware of, and accounting for, several things: My position in time, being different as I tell the story, from when I encountered the events, the reader's position in disposition to the time in which events occurred, and finally the reader in disposition to the specific references that made sense to me as I recognized specific cross domain references.

29. June 2013: The headline of the online news magazine Rokokoposten announces. "*Food is made from animals that were killed*!"

Writer: Wait for it, it will become relevant…

Summer 2013: Top Gear drives a Zenvo sports car on a test track.

Writer: At this point it was not relevant to note that the color is orange, that it is produced in Denmark, or that it caught fire. These elements are not yet relevant connections to make. But read along for the chronological story of Marius, and 5 months later in the timeline it will become so.

February 9th, 2014: Copenhagen Zoo chose to euthanize one of their young male giraffes. The argument for the euthanasia was that the giraffe had a DNA too close to other giraffes.

[23] Based on my specific knowledge of, and specific interest in certain TV shows and internet memes.

"Copenhagen Zoo's giraffes are part of an international breeding program which aims at ensuring a healthy giraffe population in European zoos. […]

[…]When breeding success increases it is sometimes necessary to euthanize." (Copenhagen Zoo 2014).

Since the animal was too big for an autopsy to be performed indoors, the zoo announced a public autopsy in the zoo, so that interested guests could learn more about the animal from watching and asking questions. The news of the plans for euthanasia, however, traveled worldwide.

Writer: This could be where it all started. Our main character of the story Marius enters the story here.

February 10th, 2014: A video featuring Hitler being informed that the Danes have been executing a giraffe while displaying it to the public is published. Hitler rages at his men for bringing it up, since they had all been to the canteen earlier that day and ate meat without complaining. They are portrayed as hypocrites. (The Death of Marius the Giraffe 2014)

February 10th, 2014: (Originally posted 29 June 2013):

The online news magazine Rokokoposten featured an article with the headline: "Food is made from murdered animals"

Ethnographer: The link to this news is shared by two of my friends, independently, on Facebook. I notice that is a post originally published by Rokokoposten in June 2013.

Writer: Yes, you saw this in the beginning of this timeline. Chronologically, according to time stamps, it fits twice. It fits when it was published by Rokokoposten in 2013, but it also fits when it is

published by users on Facebook in 2014. Therefore, it is included twice in the timeline presented, since it reappeared as a new post to those who shared it.

February 15th, 2014: Mads & Monopolet discusses an incoming letter from a mother. She has a son, who is one-year old, who is going to be dressed for Fastelavn[24] in his older brother's costume. There are only two problems: 1) it is a giraffe costume, and 2) the boy's name is Marius. She asks if the panel thinks she should proceed or abort.

Writer: Mads & Monopolet is a weekly radio podcast dealing with moral dilemmas submitted by listeners. The panel is known to consist of public figures, and it reaches between 600.000 and 900.000 weekly listeners. All dilemmas discussed are open to comments on Monopolet's Facebook page, meaning an even greater reach (Mads og Monopolet 2014).

The panel finds it hilarious. They call it a one-time opportunity to create a good story, and even suggest that the mother, in addition, might go dressed as the vet, or that Marius carry a lion to illustrate a friendship between the animals. They agree that it is a nice way to make the whole thing more unpretentious. They suggest that she contacts the press to tell the story, because, as they reply: "This is the way Danes deal with these kinds of things." However, it is not necessary to contact the press, they have picked it up by themselves, as have a lot of people on various social media. The panel mentions how the zoo director, in an interview, was very honest and very sober in his argumentation for the killing of the animal. This made him a likeable man that people sympathized with. They claim that the interview managed to change a lot of people's minds to support the acts of the zoo, because it seems fair. Therefore, they suggest that the mother does likewise. A regular storm, a sort of mix of shit- and love storm, starts on various social media platforms. Some find it hilarious; some are truly offended.

Ethnographer: Why should Marius carry a Lion?

Writer: Did not notice at the time that after his death, Marius was fed to the lions, even though the timeline has already revealed this to the reader.

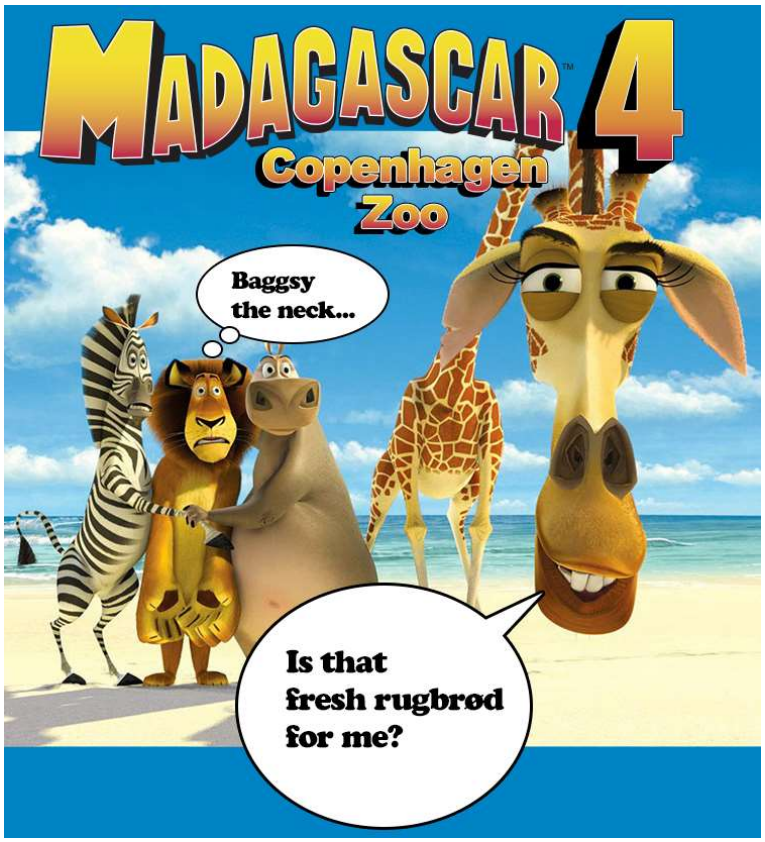
[24] The Danish equivalent to Shrove Tuesday and Pancake Day.

February 15th 2014: Rokokoposten, a Danish satire news site, writes under the headline: "Danish "High-school-male" euthanized in Czech Zoo" (Rokokoposten 2014).

Writer: This is satire, and the news plays on various other stories, including Danish high school students who go to Prague with their teachers, while often ending up so drunk that they are sent home, or sometimes even falling off windows in hotel rooms or being hit by cars. Recently several such stories of drunk Danish teenagers in Prague have been covered by the press. The satire news narrates, in a language remarkably similar to the serious news media, while describing how the male student did not feel anything. This last bit is a clear reference to the vet who described the euthanasia and emphasized that Marius was distracted and "did not feel anything" when shot.

February 15th, 2014, A blogger posted two humorous pictures linking the giraffe to the brands Madagascar and Carlsberg.

"So, I had a little fun. Apologies to the companies involved. Please get in touch if you want this content removed. And thanks to my friend Brian Erritsø Olsen for allowing me to use his genuine photo from the lions eating Marius the giraffe."(Cameron 2014).

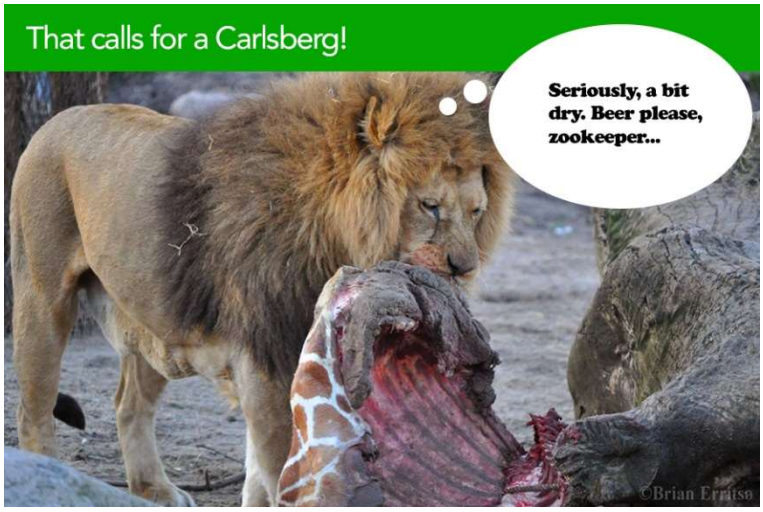


Writer: "Rugbrød" is the Danish name for rye bread.

Ethnographer: RYE BREAD?!? Two references to it by now! Why? Have I missed some other big parody, or is rye bread just recognized as typical Danish and therefore referred to?

Writer: I only got this a week later, after watching an interview on CNN with the vet telling what happened prior to the euthanasia:

"He walked out quarter past 9 this morning. Then there was a zookeeper with some rye bread. He really likes rye bread. And I said: here you go Marius, here is some rye bread. I stood behind him with a rifle. And when he put his head forward and ate the rye bread. Then I shot him through the brain. It sounds violent, but it means Marius had no idea it was coming. He got his bread, and then he died. I think this is very important. This is about HOW this is taking place" (CNN 2014))



(Cameron 2014)

Writer: "That calls for a Carlsberg" is the slogan of the Danish beer Carlsberg [25]. even though it may be confused with real time marketing made by Carlsberg, which they often practice, here it is not.

February 15th 2014: Another meme found by Google image search on Marius, giraffe, and memes (The Retriever, Dog, & Wildlife Blog 2014).

[25] Note, that this is not real-time marketing coming from Carlsberg, it is a spoof. However, to the audience they work the same way.

Ethnographer: Laughs [contemplates sharing it on Facebook].

Writer: The evil Facebook giraffe refers to an otherwise unrelated game circulating on Facebook, in which users post a riddle. Their friends then try to answer it, and if they fail, they must post the riddle on their wall and change their profile picture to a giraffe for a week. Even if not participating the number of people who suddenly had giraffes for profile pictures were hard to miss for Facebook users in Denmark in spring 2014. Yet to people outside this platform at the specific time, the reference made no sense.

February 16th 2014: The weekly car show Top Gear (Top Gear Episode List 2014)) reviewed a car produced in Denmark. The test-drive had been filmed months before the air date. However, during the first test the car broke down. A new one was sent, and it too broke down, while bursting into flames.

Whereas the filming of the Danish test car had taken place long ago, the show where it was mentioned, was recorded shortly before airing, and shortly after the story of Marius had been featured in several international media. One of the hosts, in his review of the car, made a reference between the car and the newly killed giraffe. "*This is Danish, and its orange, and it's genetically flawed. I'm surprised they haven't called it giraffe, and shot it.*" (Jeremy Clarkson Tests the Zenvo ST1 (Top Gear Season 21 Ep.3) 2014).

Ethnographer: Laughing. Posting on Facebook. Appreciating the reference between the car and the giraffe. I love references that are subtle and not spelled out or explained too much. I get it! Most of the audience may not!

Writer: This was Top gear's semi offensive comment to Denmark. Viewers who are familiar with the show know that they often make references to events that are not related directly to cars. These references are often offensive, for instance, when one of the three hosts, Jeremy Clarkson, claimed

that in the US one needs a permit to do anything, except for purchasing weapons (The Times 2006). In another episode, he mocks a BMW Mini by claiming that BMW should build a car that is "quintessentially German". He suggests that Hitler salutes should be displayed, and that "a sat-nav that only goes to Poland" should be included. Very often, cars from one country while having motors from another are commented upon. Not so much because of the different countries, but because they think that a car that is not an Audi but has an Audi engine is cheating. A car being genetically flawed may refer to part of it being produced by other car producers. The program has made jokes about Muslims, Mexicans, gypsies, handicapped, and gays, (BBC News 2006; Mediafax 2009; Metro 2010; Reuters 2014) thus making the show about cars as well as about relations and attitudes toward particular groups of people and nationalities. It is this context that enables us to make sense of Clarkson's comment about the Danish car (The Scotsman 2005). Just as viewers familiar with Seth MacFarlane are aware of the way gays and Jews are portrayed as part of a recurring joke, so are regular Top Gear viewers aware of the recurring negative comments considering other nationalities and the references to specific events in these countries during the show. Recognizing the genre while also the specific event with the giraffe, provides a context for understanding the relevance of mocking Denmark.

February 14th 2014: Berlingske brings the news that a radio program has made a tribute to the giraffe (Berllinske, Nationalt 2014) [26]

Writer: This is an example of how a satire becomes translated into regular news.

February 23rd, 2014:

In a Top Gear Episode, the car journalist Richard Hammond is teased by his co-hosts because his favorite car ignited. They strap a pizza to his crotch and heat it with a blow torch. They then tell him that the pizza could be heated on his car instead.

[26] A category of data has been excluded here: the whole, *serious*, media debate of whether it was humane to kill the giraffe or not. As such, this cannot be separated from the satire, for the satire makes sense only due to knowledge of the debate. Yet it is excluded here. The purpose here is to illustrate timeline complexity alone. The serious debate would have added a complexity of ethics, racism, euthanasia, animal welfare, which of course was also related and brought to life by the story of Marius.

Writer: You must know how Richard Hammond, in the episode following the one with the Danish Zenvo, too, had a car bursting into flames. Not his own, but the new Porsche GT3 he just bought, was called back due to problems with the GT3's igniting. You also need to know how the co-hosts continuously mock him with his favorite car brand: the Porsche. As a consequence, his co-hosts decided to make a gimmick. (Jeremy Blowtorches a Pizza Attached to Hammond 2014).

If we are following a timeline here, this has not yet become relevant to the Marius story. What makes it relevant, does not happen before next month, when someone makes a drawing that connects the Danish Zenvo with the British journalist who loves the Porsche. Furthermore, it only becomes relevant to those who have seen two distinct episodes of Top Gear mentioned and are familiar with The Danish company Zenvo's immediate response to Top Gear's critique, as they responded by emphasizing how they were proud of their product despite the ignition.

Thus, the event with the burned pizza is not related to Marius directly, but it is a part of the story that cannot be left out if we are to account for the events that will later follow when a Countryball comic enters the timeline.

February 28th, 2014: Mads & Monopolet posts a link on Facebook to their 157,219 followers. The link refers to the serious media now discussing the ethics of Marius (Mads og Monopolet Facebook page 2014).

March 2nd,2014: A user on Reddit submits a drawing mimicking the difference in response between Denmark and Britain in the format of a meme called Countryballs.

Writer: Countryballs, is an art style occasionally used in online comics, in which countries are typically personified as spherical characters decorated with their country's flag. The characters poke

fun at national stereotypes and international relations, as well as historical conflicts. The corresponding reactions from Denmark and Britain respectively refer to Richard Hammond being ashamed that his car ignited, while the Danish car company Zenvo responded to Top Gear's review and the car igniting, by stating that they were proud of what they had achieved with their sports car.

Ethnographer: This is awesome! Top Gear, Marius, *and* memes. This is interesting. Better take a screen dump.

Writer: the drawing indicates a difference between Danish and British pride. This is a cross reference to two cars both tending to ignite. Whereas the Danish company behind the Zenvo tested in Top Gear is proud and defends it afterwards, Richard Hammond, the British TV host of Top Gear, reacts with shame as his favorite Porsche bursts into flames.

The drawing additionally refers to a genre within Memes known as Draw Ball and a subgenre; Poland Ball, that later had a spin off: Country Ball. It is a user-generated cartoon that follows the lives of ball-shaped creatures representing different and international drama, surrounding their diplomatic relations. If the audience does not possess this knowledge, the drawing becomes irrelevant to the Marius story and takes with it the event of Hammond getting blowtorched as well.

Here, specific knowledge about several events is required. Ones must know that: Top Gear made references to Marius and the Zenvo, that the Zenvo ignited, that Hammond loves Porches and is continuously mocked for it, that Hammond's new Porsche was called back due to ignition problems, that Country Ball is a genre that deals with differences between nationalities in a satirical way.

March 26th, 2014: A creative combination of Copenhagen Zoo's logo and crosshairs

Ethnographer: Nice! Screen dump!

Writer: Here is the original

March 28th, 2014: Nationens Øje announces that three employees from Copenhagen Zoo were fired, and then fed to the lions this morning. They were too old, and did not manage to fulfill their job descriptions well anymore (Nationens Øje 2014).

Writer: Nationens Øje is a Danish satire site.

March 28th, 2014: Monopolet published a new post on Facebook to tell their followers that the news media continued discussing their dilemma of Marius.

Writer: Here, it is particularly interesting to note where the information from Monopolet's post travels. Firstly, the post, and the link to the news media telling the story of how Monopolet went viral, appears on the followers of Monopolet's Facebook page. But this is not all. It also gets distributed

through the newsfeed of the 3702 people who clicked the like button below the post. This click indicates an activity on Facebook, which Facebook then passes on to the friends of 3702 people.

76 people shared the link. This means that they posted a copy of the content on their own wall. Their friends are informed that they shared it. 394 people wrote comments, and likewise this activity gets automatically distributed to their connections. Thus, information gets distributed far and wide. All these activities further contribute to the spreading of the story of Marius. Serious ethical discussions, promotion of a radio broadcast, and entertainment, are mingled and dispersed simultaneously through one obligatory passage point: The post where Monopolet illustrates what they had started.

This of course raises the question of whose story we are following. Is this the story of Marius, or the story of Monopolet being able to create viral fuzz from their dilemmas? The answer is that it is both, but awareness of whose story is told, plays a role is which pieces of information should be included.

It is interesting to look at the comments on this post. A huge number of the comments provided the first three weeks after the post was uploaded go something like, “stop this discussion. Why do you keep continuing. It’s just a boy who by coincidence has the wrong name!” Such comments, despite suggesting that the discussions should stop, act to fuel the debate and ensure that the posts stay alive and continue to pop up in participants’ feeds. This contributes to the earlier mentioned discussion of linking and hijacking, where people participate for one reason, while, due to the work of algorithms, contributing to something quite different.

March 29th, 2014: A twitter user makes a comparison of death penalties in the US as opposed to the giraffes and lions.

Ethnographer: Better take a screenshot. Otherwise, I will never be able to find this again.

Writer: Good thing I saved this. It would be difficult to find now.

April 1st, 2014: Jobindex, a database for job advertisements in Denmark, advertises a job in Zoo as chief of marketing for their new collection of bags, accompanied by this picture, and signed by Copenhagen Zoo.

On a meta level, it encourages people to share the positive sides of animals being killed by converting dead animals into beautiful and positive stories (Jobindex 2014).

Ethnographer: Stunt of some sort? [Later the same day] …Of course, it makes sense. It is April 1st. This gets removed by the end of the day. Get screenshot!

Writer: It was an April fools' joke. The very date is what allows a serious site like Jobindex.dk to make fun of the Marius incident. Just as in real time, marketing timing plays a crucial role. This joke was a result of the temporality in which the date, the incident with Marius, and the already ongoing trend of creating new content referring to it, existed simultaneously.

Here ends the story of Marius. Or does it? The timeline chosen here stops, but events referring to it may continue[27].

As a device for highlighting the work that goes into turning viral events into narratives, I have given voice to two different versions of myself as I did fieldwork as well as when trying to translate the events into a piece of text. The first voice illustrates how I was positioned in relation to events as they occurred chronologically. It highlights a challenge in chronological narration, since some things are not related to the campaign as they happen (according to timestamps), even when, later, they *become* related. Furthermore, events are not necessarily experienced in the same order, meaning that some recognition of references does not happen as they are encountered. I, for instance, had no clue about the relevance of rye bread, despite encountering it. I noticed it while assuming the reference must have meant something, but I did not recognize it yet.

Timestamps as devices for telling a story, serve to create an overview of the elements it consists of. However, from this way of ordering the story, two obstacles emerge. The story is experienced in many different orders, and the boundaries for what counts as part of it, are varying depending on the local recognition of references. Thus, plural versions of stories exist simultaneously. Telling the story of Marius, as it happened, according to timestamps, is one way of creating order, but as we have seen, the material does not always fit this order. The same becomes visible with the story of the Hitler Rants Parodies references in the Cleveland Show. Here, to tell the story, in a way that makes sense to the reader, the narrator must jump back and forth too. This is a move, not in time, as in the Marius story,

[27] See for instance these examples spanning from research to cultural analysis to sites that provide writing services (papersOwl.com 2019; Borsje 2014; Hanson 2016; Dailyhive.com 2017; Bardram 1997; The Guardian 2015).

but between domains, genres, and platforms, while actively directing the reader towards the pivotal connections between American pop culture, and the background of Seth MacFarlane, as well as the practice of cross-referencing. Marius, as well as Hitler, illustrate the challenges in translating past events of briefly made connections into a coherent story to someone external to it. They also serve to highlight and illuminate the partial perspectives of those who encounter it.

While the voice of the ethnographer tried to bring into the story my initial reactions, the second voice illustrate the gaps between, and in- and exclusions of, what is related to the story, depending on what is known, and to whom, at a specific time. It highlights the work that needs to be done to convert the story into a coherent and relevant one. This also emphasizes that the content presented tells *a* story, not *the* story. Many of my informants, just like the reader, did not get the references related to specific TV shows or internet memes. Similarly, I may have missed many references that others, with a different repertoire of things fit for reference, have made. This second voice highlights additional information that is required for the story to make sense to you, the reader, who may not be familiar with Draw Ball, and its sub-genre of Country Ball, Rokokoposten, Monopolet, Top Gear or many of the other elements included. Boundary-making, in terms of what is part of the viral story of Marius, is very global in that the story spreads across country borders, as well as media genres such as regular news (CNN, Berlingske), TV entertainment (Top Gear), branding (Job.net), Satire (Rokokoposten, Mashable, Nationens Øje), Memes (classic picture with text meme, Draw Ball). The themes of animal rights, Nazis and Jews also act as catalyst for bringing into the debate more serious matters that serve to boost awareness of the story in mass media. Yet, despite the story spreading globally and across geographical boundaries; across differing genres such as satire, memes and news; and across different media platforms, it is also very local with respect to the specific elements that are recognized and considered relevant to the different people involved.

The timestamps as actors provide an explicit, universal order of events and content. They often tend to suggest a neutral order, and when reconstructing what happened, timelines and chronological accounts are often used to indicate what *really* happened. They can then be used as a fixed ordering, highlighting how informants encountered them differently. Their asynchronous responses can then be mapped against them. This is one way of telling stories. It provides a handy tool for comparing data, but another may be to disregard timestamps as privileged actors; an approach I will go further into in chapter five.

3.3.1 Time, temporality, and its challenges

The story of Marius illustrates inherent complexities in accounting for something going viral. Two important challenges need highlighting: firstly, handling inconsistencies between different versions during spatial and temporal boundary-making; and secondly retrospectively weaving highly fragmented stories into a single, coherent narrative.

Boundary-making for the fluid elements of viral content is difficult. The connections, i.e., the references between content, is highly temporary, which means that things often only make sense in a certain temporal context. Yet at the same time, they can reach across "borders" and transcend perceived timespans such as that of an individual campaign. When it comes to space, references are recognized as such in highly local contexts. These should neither be thought of as "physical space" nor "platforms," as such contexts can equally well exist as fragile, temporary relations between people with no a priori links.

Earlier I showed how becoming a local amongst the informants takes time. However, a counter concern may emerge from the instances where I had become local to a degree where I could appreciate references that most people aware of the Marius story, including the reader of this dissertation, would miss. To grasp the classic meme references, one had to be locally positioned in time and space. Participants held together by specific references at a specific time cannot easily be located by pregiven boundaries such as platforms, communities, or demographics. Such relations are rarely as stable or well defined as longer lived contexts. Previous studies using key concepts such as online or on the internet (Raula Girboveanu and Puiu 2008), local, national, and cultural contexts (Cintas and Sánchez 2006; Lu 2008; Mio Bryce 2010), and influencers (Katz and Lazarsfeld 2005), consider relatively stable boundaries, which do not cover the above brief, ad hoc relations.

Viral content is generated by references between content, more than the content itself. The impromptu connections between people who share and appreciate specific references, originate through ad hoc relations between those who recognize specific juxtapositions of references, more than through shared platforms or existing communities. Therefore, diving empirically into content, be it Hitler, Marius, a picture of a beer alongside bitemarks, or the creative spellings of the word "fadøl", illustrates how the practice of viral content calls for different measures, when trying to capture what is going on, and how to account for it.

These analytical challenges in defining and presenting boundary-making, are the crux of the second methodological challenge: How does the writer construct narratives of transpired events when these are dispersed in time, highly local in their relations, and almost always in disposition to the reader?

However, before returning to this crucial matter, in the following chapter we need to move from viral stories, such as Marius, to campaigns that try to take advantage of these already ongoing practices of reference making. As we shall see, this takes the discussed challenges to the next level. For where the example of Marius increases awareness of the differently encountered chronologies, as well as dispersed fragile and highly temporary connections, viral reality marketing pushes both issues even further by deliberately encouraging stories to develop inconsistently with each other to increase momentum. For what people are connected to is deliberately designed to be ambiguous. Therefore, studying it becomes a matter of both considering the fleeting connections and the fact that what holds them together does so *because* it is ambiguous.