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## **Theorising ambiguity: telling deliberately equivocal viral stories**

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## 4. Temporality

This chapter puts forth empirical data to highlight temporarily existing relations, potential futures, and strategic ambiguity.

### 4.1 Non-human actors facilitate cooperation with and without aligned interests

In the beginning of this dissertation, I was concerned with how a company could succeed in making people voluntarily spread awareness of a brand. Including non-human actors added an additional layer to the descriptions of the interactions, which gave voice to otherwise silent actors. Actors interact due to their shared interest in the alliances. Yet, as the empirical material presented in this chapter will illustrate, alliances may hold different interests in place simultaneously. There are many variants and degrees of voluntary participation. Aligned interests need further elaboration and refinement.

For instance, some campaigns involving non-human actors enable people to create awareness of a brand, not because they want to create awareness, but because their participation aligns with their other interests. Through two examples, I will show how non-human actors can bind human actors with diverse interests together. In the first, non-human actors facilitate networks of actors with aligned interests, while in the second, they hold them together despite conflicting interests.

#### 4.1.1 Hashtags fulfilling several interests simultaneously

Empirically, paradoxes became visible during my fieldwork. Informants indicated that they “liked” videos despite not liking them, and they did not consider themselves to be participants in specific campaigns despite sharing ads. As I was trying to understand what was going on, the differences between the people who wanted to create specific awareness and the people who contributed for other reasons, became a subject for further exploration, as informants were both participating and not participating at the same time. As opposed to tricking people into actions, such as click- and like-jacking, SoMe marketing is about making the audience want to engage. This differs from traditional marketing, where people are involuntarily exposed to brands through ads. But what counts as wanting to engage? Analytically, we can use the language of ANT by explaining engagement as translation. This allows us to ask how brands design content through which both brands and potential targets are willing to translate their interests. The concept of obligatory passage points is an obvious place to start. This analytical device enables capturing how mutual actors translate their own interests into engagement in a specific way, e.g., ensuring that the brand becomes an integral part of the content that gets shared and distributed by participants.

We can ask how brands manage to interest, enroll, and enlist others to stabilize their brand as an obligatory passage point (Callon 1986). We can consider cooperation to be successful when there is an obligatory passage point that interests others. Brand-created games on social media are elements that can be seen as obligatory passage points, since they translate several interests at the same time, while both facilitating brand awareness and relying on participants to engage voluntarily.

#### *Gaming social media and brands*

In a campaign from January 2015, Carlsberg wanted to put the focus on the classic beer on tap, while taking advantage of digital opportunities and social media (Carlsberg Digitaliserer Ølhanen 2015). They developed an app that integrated the beer tap, a screen in the bar, free beer, and the hashtag #Barbandits. The Carlsberg beer tap had a sensor that interacted with the screen in the bar. When a beer was poured from the Carlsberg tap, three random pictures were projected to a big screen at the bar, accompanied by the hashtag #barbandits. Inspired by one-armed bandits (slot machines), if the same picture occurred three times, then the person who posted the picture won a free beer. The pictures were randomly chosen among already posted pictures on Instagram that included the hashtag. To have a chance of appearing on the screen, bar guests would have to take a picture of themselves and post it on social media along with the hashtag. Thus, the hashtag would feature a collection of people from all the bars that participated, and the visibility of the bars, the brand, and the happy guests would be featured on social media as well.

#### *Translations and obligatory passage points*

If we are to think about this as a network of actors, specifically in relation to the concept of translation, we can say that Carlsberg attempted to create an obligatory passage point. Through *problematization*, they strived to become indispensable. They tried to *interest* bar owners by enhancing customer experiences. They designed a game which could be shared between several parties. As they engaged, people on social media were exposed to the brand as well. Yet, *interessement* does not necessarily lead to an alliance. Work must be done, roles must be defined and attributed to actors who accept them, before the *interessement* can be successful.

Following the *interessement*, the next phase is about *enrollment*, i.e., defining and coordinating the roles so they fit the alliance. Carlsberg made a brilliant game with a technical setup that potentially provided free beer, raised public awareness of people having fun, increased beer sales at the bars, potentially increased numbers of customers, but that still required active work from all enrolled parties. For instance, that the bar owner installs and maintains the sensor and screen and ensures that

they are not only connected to each other, but also the internet; that people bring their phone, successfully install the app, and post pictures using the correct tag; that people are willing to appear on social media publicly and that their reward is worth the effort of their actions. Simply creating a game does not ensure brand exposure; others must accept their ascribed role if Carlsberg is to succeed.

The final phase is the *mobilization*. The device is made to interest, enlist, and enroll others; however, the purpose is not purely about local bar guests having fun. The goal is also to create brand awareness. Very few bar guests will get a free Carlsberg beer. Yet many more are exposed to the brand through pictures of people having fun in a bar being voluntarily shared on social media. These shared pictures become the official representatives carrying the word of Carlsberg far and wide through the digital infrastructures, algorithms, links, and hashtags.

The logo is made mobile through a series of transformations, which all depend on facilitation by the digital infrastructures. The hashtag #Barbandits holds together the brand, the social activities at the bars, and the people either connected to those posting pictures or exposed to the hashtag through algorithms suggesting the specific content posted along with the hashtag.

Through a game, Carlsberg manages to establish an obligatory passage point for people wanting to participate. The concept of translation helps us to elaborate on how someone voluntarily spreads awareness of brands, even if the brand itself is not part of their motivation. Obligatory passage points make the mutual interests in participating visible, but they also divert our attention from conflicts and resistance. Actors translating their interests to go through a specific passage point become a successful story of the actor who made the passage point, as well as those who have their interests fulfilled through it. Now we shift focus to obligatory passage points and how they facilitate conflicting interests.

#### 4.1.2 Hashtags facilitating conflicts

Hashtags are non-human actors that can, on an intuitive level, be understood as “headlines.” They are used on a variety of social media platforms. Thus, the hashtag #ObamaCare, will act as a link. If one user posts a message, e.g., “Obama lies! No money for handicapped people #ObamaCare” and another writes “best president ever! #ObamaCare,” both will be displayed side by side when clicking on the link. Opposing interests are presented side by side. Some use this strategically to hijack and take over hashtags. For instance, #myNYPD was introduced by the New York Police Department as an attempt to engage an audience and create public awareness about the police work being done. The official Twitter account for the NYPD, @NYPDnews, tweeted: “Do you have a photo w/ a member

*of the NYPD? Tweet us & tag it #myNYPD. It may be featured on our Facebook.*" The tweet included a sample photo of a smiling citizen with two police officers. The message got a lot of attention, but not the kind the NYPD had hoped for. Images of police violence and accusations of brutality filled tweets. For instance, the @OccupyWallStNYC account posted a photo of an officer moving to hit people with a baton accompanied by the message: "*Here the #myNYPD engages with its community members, changing hearts and minds one baton at a time.*" The rise in critical content posted along with the hashtag is an example of the Streisand Effect mentioned earlier. Whenever someone wants to glorify or hide something, or has a strong message, a counter reaction can be expected. Nothing unites people like reacting to a message in protest, either for serious reasons or as a humorous comment. It has become an integral part of how things become viral.

Hashtags are used strategically as devices for connecting people and content. But they do not necessarily facilitate successful cooperation for all. The hashtag is an actor that links, holds together, connects, and juxtaposes content, but it also facilitates conflicts. It becomes an obligatory passage point that enables several parties to attempt to get their interests fulfilled simultaneously.

As we continue to viral reality marketing, non-human actors such as hashtags, slogans, themes, stories, and images, become even more complex. Whereas the challenge until now has been between companies creating content that hold together different interests (#Barbandits) and hashtags used in conflicting ways contrary to how they were designed (#Obamacare #myNYPD), in viral reality marketing the elements that hold interested parties are *deliberately* designed to be ambiguous, spurring conflict and debate. From analytically treating something that holds together by looking at how it is used differently, we shift to something that holds interested parties together *because* it is ambiguous and thus many different things at the same time.

#### 4.2 Viral reality marketing

The necessity of emphasizing differences in interests despite cooperation increases when we look at viral reality marketing. It is pivotal for viral reality marketing that content is deliberately made ambiguous to generate momentum and to interest more people. The continuous growth of these viral campaigns, hinges on conflicting interests, diverse interpretations, missing pieces, and an overflow of loose, disconnected information. Disagreements, conflicts, and diverse interests are the very driving forces.

In the examples we discussed earlier, one actor acts as many and many as one. But sameness and difference in ANT is always one or the other. ANT is about mapping actors and their relations but not explaining them. Therefore, actors such as the hashtag facilitating conflicting messages in ANT still focus on aligned interests. No connections are provided through ANT that address the actors as simultaneously being *both* the same and different. Therefore, the conflicts between competing parties simultaneously trying to claim the hashtag are rendered invisible in the framework on ANT.

In viral reality marketing, it is the content's ability to be both similar yet different simultaneously that keeps the campaign alive. As we shall see, the empirical examples point to the way something is the same *yet* different and different *yet* the same. Paying attention to this ambiguity – not *despite* conflicting interests, but *because* of them – is what allows us new insights into the driving force in such viral reality campaigns. One area where this is explicit is in potential relationships between brands. Earlier I mentioned how brands can be difficult to distinguish from each other. Sometimes they cooperate, like Blendtec and Old Spice. They may also be cooperating in the sense that a smaller brand pays the bigger one to make a reference to them, like eD-FM and Blendtec. Smaller brands may mimic the format of the bigger brands to become recognized, like Wat19.com. However, potential relationships are those that exist between brands through insinuated connections, or when brands explicitly deny a relationship to plant the idea that unofficially it exists. As we have seen between Coca Cola and Mentos, and between Pepsi and Obama these relationships are continuously mentioned; they exist through entertaining fan theories, appear in marketing experts' analyses, and they are kept alive through brands trying to undermine other brands by starting rumors.

Regardless of whether relations between brands are real or have emerged from rumors or insinuations, the reference is made, and it acts as a potential relationship. In the case of viral reality marketing, it is pivotal that we pay specific attention to the role played by potential relations, due to ambiguous stories that are potentially both true and false at the same time, and that potentially come from one brand or another. The blurred boundaries between brands, even if they do not exist from the point of view of the brand but are only suggested by someone's interaction with it, challenge what we define as relations and how we discuss them.

The following analyses take a step back from the minute details of links, tags, and individual responses to content. This means that when referenced content is mentioned, I am aware that for each piece of content there exists data of individuals who perceive those references differently. Further, there are algorithms, links, tags, and other metadata, which could also be highlighted. All of this data

exists through my fieldnotes, but is not included the coming presentations of the viral reality marketing campaigns. This lesser representation of informants and quotations is an explicit choice made in favor of highlighting the crossovers of boundaries on a larger scale than those individual participants. The data representing these stories is chosen to highlight the ambiguous relations and hence the difficulties of boundary making between different media, different professions, and genres; as well as across time between the past's potential futures and the subsequently manifested ones.

#### 4.2.1 Library of Svendborg

The viral reality marketing campaign from Library of Svendborg contains little ambiguity and was not driven by potential outcomes discussed on social media. While these themes will come up more explicitly in the following two cases, the Library of Svendborg diverges from the others; firstly, because I was granted unique access to behind the scenes of the campaign, and secondly, because the ambiguity that was meant to generate discussion and increase momentum never reached social media. Instead, it played out internally between employees in Danish libraries. This case therefore serves to illustrate a different aspect of viral reality marketing: that of seeing what the senders see and witnessing their active work in ensuring momentum.

This case is one where I anticipated telling a story as I started doing fieldwork. I imagined having access to those who used viral reality marketing as a premise for knowing what was going on. I also imagined that only with this insider knowledge would I be able to understand how others would be motivated to pass on stories of the brand. Thus, in terms of what I expected as I was in the beginning of my fieldwork, I felt confident that I was in the perfect spot for studying a viral reality campaign. I was an insider, allowed access to those behind the campaign and provided with whatever I requested. I was treated as a guest, and my curiosity was appreciated. Data in this case is primarily based on conducting interviews with people behind the campaign, participant observation, and interviews between the press and Desiree Lenzberg, who actively drew the press's attention to the campaign. There was, however, not a lot of debate on social media as to whether the campaign was true or not. As the story reached the public there was no doubt that it was an ad, and it was made clear from the beginning that it was an ad for a library. Most of the debate and analysis of this campaign was conducted by journalists and marketing experts, discussing and relating it to earlier viral marketing campaigns.

### *The beginning*

I got suspicious from the moment I encountered it the first time: the video featuring black and white recordings mimicking surveillance camera footage of people doing silly things in the library was uploaded to the channel ThePrincessSabine<sup>28</sup>. (Later two more videos appeared.) One of the clues that these recordings were obviously fake was that they did not look like real surveillance camera footage. Another was that the videos were uploaded to a brand new and otherwise empty YouTube channel, except for one other video uploaded a few days earlier entitled “My nephew”, which looked like a test. A final clue was a link to a production company called Bandit Production. This led to a site with slapstick comedy. I emailed the owner of the channel and asked where she got the videos from. I got the reply:

*Hi Filipens. [My YouTube name was FILIHOPSA; and she replied “Hi Filipens” (slang for pimple)]*

*You ask how I got in possession of the videos. Well, it is an ad for libraries; I made the site and uploaded the videos. Kind regards Desiree Lenzberg, Banditproduction.*

At first, I thought she was from the ad agency, even though her reply was a mix of a professional reply and in-character reply from Sabine, the girl who in the story had uploaded the videos from the surveillance tapes.

It turned out from our first phone meeting, that she was working in the same building as the ad agency, and that she had been working on slapstick videos on a comedy character named Natural Disaster prior to the campaign for the library. She told me that she had teamed up with Tegnestuen 1 by agreeing to use her character in the videos. She was very eager to include me in the work done with the campaign, and I was immediately invited to Svendborg to meet her, Tegnestuen 1, and the employees of the Library of Svendborg. Later she sent me a newspaper article where a whole section was dedicated to the fact that a researcher from Copenhagen Business School (me) was involved in the project too. She kept me posted on all the interviews she gave and the people in the press that she had contacted. While following the woman who did intensive work to promote and defend a campaign without using professional seeders, I received internal documents and I was continuously updated on new initiatives, responses, and plans. I had access to mail exchanges, that were not publicly accessible, and I was in the thick of it, even as it happened. However, it turned out that the activities I was in the middle of were initiated and kept alive by Desiree, rather than by a variety of people

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/ThePrincessSabine>



voluntarily creating and sharing content on various social media. There was no ambiguity, as there was not much mystery in the campaign, since it was revealed immediately that it was a marketing stunt, with the Library of Svendborg behind it.

#### *Ambiguity played out internally*

Desiree and The Library of Svendborg chose not to hire a professional seeder. A seeder is a company specializing in placing the first ads publicly and ensuring and monitoring its reach. The work in placing the content according to where it will receive the most – as well as the most relevant – attention serves to ensure that the campaign gains momentum. During fieldwork I was in contact with GoViral, the biggest Danish seeders of viral content. Seeding refers to the targeted distribution of viral information in Social Networks and other media. Their work relies heavily on digital data, statistics profiling, and monitoring of content. If a company pays GoViral, it is not only a matter of highest reach, but also a matter of the specifically desired targets for the specific campaign.

Whereas the two other cases of reality marketing I studied used GoViral, Desiree and the Library of Svendborg had a much smaller budget and decided to take advantage of their own network as a local resource. Despite the fact that the campaign was for the specific library, they reached out to all libraries in Denmark and asked for their help in initiating the campaign. There were 245 public libraries in Denmark as of 2009, which could potentially result in the first 245 videos being seeded. The Library of Svendborg initiated promotion of their video by using their social media, newsletters, and other digital platforms. Along with the video they also asked for a specific text to accompany it.

*As you know for some time the library has been plagued by disturbances. Therefore, for some time we have had surveillance cameras installed. Luckily, no serious assaults happened, nor anything else that could cause concern. But look. Lots of other interesting things happened at the library...*

One thing that separated this campaign from other viral reality marketing campaigns, was the ambiguity that acted as a driving force for such campaigns. In this case most of the uncertainties, debates and controversies played out internally amongst libraries and mostly through private email correspondences. As I had access to whatever material I requested, I had the opportunity to read these reactions that were addressed directly to Søren Lind, director of the library. These replies were similar in character to other campaign contributions in their diversity. Some found them fun, some provocative.

*“I find it exceedingly difficult to see the purpose of the humor in your feature. Especially I think a statement such as “Any idiot can get a job at the library” is incredibly stupid. It seems as if you do not care about our image at all, as long as you are young with the young, but even young people presumably have a sense of quality? Actually, I just started doubting whether our project is not just a gimmick to make someone react, in the same way VisitDenmark did with Karen.” Steffen Nielsen, Library of Skanderborg*

*Try making a video on YouTube with the title: Any idiot can become chief of marketing at the Library of Svendborg. That would be humor!!!” Kind regards, Jørn Lybech, Library of Holstebro*

*“Your videos are great fun. They will be included in our newsletter this Thursday.” Anne Thede, Library of Frederiksberg*

*“How corny! Beneath standards for seriously working librarians. Let us have some more of that!!!” Kind regards, Library of Vallensbæk*

There were more than 50 replies in total. The replies vary greatly in attitude and length. Some consist of fellow librarians who contacted their own network to discuss it, and then returned with feedback. Some refer to other campaigns to illustrate how this one could be improved, or what is missing for it to be in the same league as successful viral videos. Some replies turn into longer mail correspondences back and forth between the libraries and the Library of Svendborg.

Two things are important here. The first is ambiguity and the second, the lack of voluntarily participating audiences external to the library. The ambiguity and uncertainty of what this is supposed to do, and to whom the message is addressed, was there: for instance, the uncertainty of whether a campaign for the Library of Svendborg is or was supposed to be speaking for Danish libraries in general. The second related to the places where these ambiguities are. The Library of Svendborg encouraged all complaints to go directly to the library. Therefore, any comments, reactions, compliments, or protests were encouraged on a private channel of communication, i.e., replies by email, phone, or personal conversations. Therefore, each response did not generate new ones. Most discussions were taking place internally.

Two things that I noticed in this campaign were how it was not driven by uncertainty, doubts, or ambiguity, nor by people who voluntarily shared their insights with their network. It was driven by a very clever woman who made sure to engage the media. Throughout the campaign, Desiree actively tried to make the videos obligatory passage points engaging established media. Yet the very generative aspect where people discuss, debate and are invited to participate to get to know more was

absent. In the private email correspondence, we see the diversity and disagreements and interpretation of the story. But we have a case of discussion where information is not distributed to others. On social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter, algorithms perform active work in distributing content. These digitally mediated displacements of content ensure that people are exposed and enticed to contribute, thereby fueling discussions. This is particularly effective when content is ambiguous, or pieces are missing. The case from Library of Svendborg illustrates how a case with ambiguity and potentially staged stories looks without the distribution provided by algorithms through social media. It also illustrates that ambiguity without the exposure to a heterogeneous audience lacks the generative aspect where people come back again and again to add as well as to learn more. In contrast to this case, the following two cases illustrate the effects of combining ambiguity and potential relations with digitally mediated and highly distributed content.

#### 4.2.2 Speedbandits

Speedbandits is the previously mentioned case where a journalist reported that Denmark had found new ways of creating speed awareness by using topless women to hold the speed limits signs.

Chronologically, this was the first case I studied. As I did fieldwork around this case, the VisitDenmark campaign had not yet come into being, and I had not yet had the privilege of being in the middle of a campaign as it ran. At the time I decided to study Speedbandits, the term viral *reality* marketing did not exist, or at least I was not aware of it. The concept was introduced to me as a term a year later in a newsletter from GoViral to their seeders<sup>29</sup> as a follow up on VisitDenmark's campaign in 2009. Until then I had simply categorized my cases as viral marketing; yet even before encountering the term viral reality marketing, I was attracted to the element of secrecy that had been part of a campaign that gained much public attention. We can rightfully question whether Speedbandits was viral reality marketing, in the sense that it did an extremely poor job in appearing to be real while staged for a Danish audience. The senders did conceal their identity, yet they did not expect to fool the people they wished to target. To the Danish audience, there was no ambiguity when it came to recognizing the video as staged. The Danish Road Safety Council granted their targets a privileged role as insiders who immediately spotted that it was a fake story. It also counted on inclusions and exclusions as mentioned in earlier examples (by being literally unbelievable). By making the story in English, appearing as if it was serious news, those who were furthest away from

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<sup>29</sup> I worked as seeder for GoViral. They provided videos, and suggestions for additional text as well as target audiences. I was therefore positioned where I had access to ongoing campaigns and to the contexts that GoViral provided to guide their seeders.

Denmark were the ones that were most likely to believe it and be fooled. Therefore, the campaign did not betray the target audience: instead, it created a sense of community for them, in which they could be in on the joke, at the expense of those who were fooled. Furthermore, the staged news followed a scheme that was closer to humor than to real life stories, in the sense that the story seemed unrealistic; given that people were told it was a joke, they would realize that it was obviously the case. They played with a staged story but did not require people to be too emotionally invested, as was the case with the Dutch television show where people had sympathy with the kidney patients and, as we shall see later, the VisitDenmark campaign where the audience believed that a mother was really seeking the father of her child. Speedbandits played with ambiguity and allowed people to doubt and discuss. Although they managed to use language and the local awareness of Danish culture as in- and exclusion devices, not all was clear to Danes from the beginning. The Danes did not know who was behind the video from the beginning, and when they found out, a new wave of responses came.

Revealing brands after a period of secrecy and uncertainty does not bring closure to the discussion; the participants have a cleaning up job to do in terms of readjusting and reevaluating what they have been engaging with. As the brand, message, and company is revealed, that which holds together the debate shifts from being a humorous story – most likely an ad – from various potential companies to a coordinated attempt at overruling this uncertainty with specific confirmation. Potential versions of what it is about are attempted, then replaced with one specific story that tries to rewrite past events into events that were part of a campaign all along. This means that those who participated are in for another round of debate. They revise their interpretations or defend why their original interpretation was better. This is where things often start to get political. Now that it is confirmed to be from a specific brand with a specific message attached, the debates begin on whether it is ethical, politically correct, or the best way of reaching target audiences.

At this point, the media – which had been reporting about what was on everyone's lips and the story was surrounded with uncertainty – now need to continue reporting the latest development, to contextualize what occurred. They called in experts in marketing, analysts in communication, specialists in traffic safety, experiences from similar campaigns, statistics, etc. to provide follow-ups for their readers. So even though the ambiguity supposedly was put to an end after there were no longer any hidden senders or messages, the clean-up phase caused another round of reconstructions and potentially new versions of what it was all about. For now, let us look at some of the new versions of the Speedbandits that came to life after Danish Road Safety Council revealed themselves as the

senders. Note how the campaign shifted from being a campaign for creating awareness of speeding, to one that is held together by a whole range of new obligatory passage points such as Danish culture, gender, the media, the sender, and the timing.

#### *Campaign revealed but not ending*

Shortly after it was revealed to be a campaign, the ad was shown at a traffic conference in Linköping, Sweden. In this setting, it was considered very controversial and very different from the usual campaigns for speeding awareness. (Hernadi 2007; Bröstchocken Som Får Trafikforskare Att Rasa 2007). People walked out in protest, and the media, which was present, reported on this. Media attention was rekindled. Several headlines<sup>30</sup> during the following days went along the lines of “*Traffic experts and researchers walk out in protest*”. However, another version of the same event was given to me through an interview with Morten Hoffmann, producer and co-founder of Far from Hollywood, the ad agency that created Speedbandits. Morten’s version was that one of their employees attended, and that only a few people – two or three – left the room. At the same time, he stressed that the media is a business too, and that creating an interesting story may involve exaggeration.

Stories travel geographically, but they also travel across several cultural borders. Swedes are more politically correct than Danes in many ways. This often shows in social media debates (TheLocal 2016). Swedes are more sensitive to gender issues, and they do not have the same tradition of using humor in serious matters. These are some of the differences that resulted in even more discussions of the campaign in the news media. Because the video was shown at the conference in Linköping, the director of the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute (VTI)<sup>31</sup> submitted a formal complaint to the director of the Danish Road Safety Council, René la Cour Sell.

Helena Sederström, chief of communication at VTI said to a Danish newspaper:

*“You could say that it got noticeably quiet in the room. We think it is unfortunate that we were not informed beforehand that the Danes would show the movie. Increasing traffic safety with the help of exposed breasts is not a method we support.*”

René la Cour Sell reacts calmly to the protests:

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<sup>30</sup> Here it is necessary to remind the reader that journalists often copy each other’s news. Usually, they refer to the original article, but it is not unusual that five or six media outlets write essentially the same article about a particular newspaper stating such and such.

<sup>31</sup> VTI Väg- och trafikforskningsinstitutet, VTI

*“The Swedes are puritan and politically correct. But we prefer to step on a few people’s toes instead of having young people losing their toes when hit by cars [...]*

*My reply to the Swedish director is that of course we do not do things to portray women offensively, but to be able to reach young people with our message.”*

But not all public figures in Denmark agree with the director of the Danish Road Safety Council. The head of the secretariat of the Women’s Council in Denmark, Randi Theil Nielsen, directs a public critique requiring the Minister of Equal Rights to respond and act. She argues, in an interview with a newspaper, that:

*“A public body should not spend money on having a naked woman as an eye-catcher”.*

The Minister of Equal Rights replies to the newspaper, through her press secretary, that she sees no problem regarding the movie, and that she hopes it will work as intended (Toft 2009).

Ministers are required to respond, because it is communication directed at citizens sponsored by the government. The debate shifts from being about gender to being about the sender and the specific role of the receivers as citizens, not potential customers. Had it been sent from a commercial company, it would be acceptable, according to the Minister of Equal Rights.

Whereas the government in general had never financed this kind of controversial advertising, the Danish Road Safety Council had already built up a reputation for ads with humor and irony. They had a history of controversial content and strong visual devices. For instance, when using close ups of bread with red jam, while playing background sounds of traffic accidents and sirens, to invoke thoughts of both traffic jams and blood without saying it too explicitly. The Danish Road Safety Council was already known by Danish audiences for their controversial and provocative advertisements. Although as a public body they were different from advertisers targeting potential customers, the Speedbandits campaign was consistent with their earlier advertising. Therefore, when they were revealed to be the sender, most people felt less deceived, because the style matched with the source.

Julie Budtz from Danish Road Safety Council emphasized that the video was designed for the internet, which was why she did not find the naked woman offensive or inappropriate.

*“It is not a problem that many, particularly abroad, believed the news to be real. This is exactly what makes it circulate.” (Jyllandsposten.dk 2009)*

Thus, it is not about the video *per se*, but about the video designed for a specific medium; therefore criticism how it appears in political discussions and serious media can be claimed to be invalid.

These different post-revelation responses could easily be analytically elaborated on by the earlier repertoire of literature discussed in chapter one: e.g., elements such as advertising that is inherently ambiguous by nature of being online (Raula Girboveanu and Puiu 2008; Fattah 2000; Xia and Bechwati 2008), advertising that needs to be contrasted as global versus local as it travels across geographic and cultural boundaries (Barra 2009; Cintas and Sánchez 2006; Lu 2008; Mio Bryce 2010), and messages that are different when directed at potential customers as opposed to citizens (van Duivenboden and Thaens 2008; Halvorsen et al. 2005; Kristensen 2007). These analytical framings are all relevant to consider; however, I suggest that we think of these overlapping categorizations differently. Instead of using them analytically to explain what is going on, we can focus on how informants actively use them strategically to create *their* versions of what it is all about. This reveals how informants, just as the researcher, do active work in defining and ordering elements to construct specific versions of what is happening.

The campaign is continuously held together by relations and by different, sometimes conflicting, versions. When it comes to stories that spread globally but are adapted locally, the stories stay the same, only subjected to various interpretations. However, the Speedbandits campaign illustrates how nothing stays the same, and how multiple actors construct new stories by specific juxtapositions. The campaign shifts from potentially acceptable (if it is commercial) to problematic (when it is from the government to citizens). The story shifts from being offensive to acceptable with reference to the media it is designed for. Thus, the inappropriate content is not related to the video, but to the incorrect placement of the video as politicians, serious news media, and researchers include it in new contexts. Paying attention to how these different actors actively attempted to connect and disconnect, we see a complex interaction between various parties who interact out of a variety of different – sometimes conflicting – interests.

Even when feminists do not engage to create brand awareness, their engagement serves both to promote their opposing view as well as to increase awareness of the video. There are various parties that contribute with their own agendas, while at the same time, even if unintentionally, contributing to the campaign: in the campaign of the Danish Road Safety Council, feminists, politicians, and marketing experts all contribute, while still having their own agendas. Therefore, empirically, it becomes clear that we do not want to separate these analytically into those who do the branding on

the one side, and those who engage and thereby create awareness on the other. They are the same since they all ensure momentum in the brand awareness creation. They are simultaneously different since they represent various contributions that may be made in opposition to the campaign. Therefore, the stories need another perspective. We need to focus on how various interests exist simultaneously.

### *Similarities and differences*

We have already established that designers of viral reality marketing use ambiguity strategically to encourage participation. However, ambiguity is also something the ethnographer faces, as an outcome of paying specific attention to non-human actors. Algorithms and digital infrastructures challenge how we treat the relationship between sameness and difference. The ambiguities in being both the same and yet simultaneously different can be consequences of non-human actors displacing and distorting appearances.

The Speedbandits campaign was the inspiration for the subject of my dissertation. Two years separate the campaign as it ran from the campaign I revisited as part of my fieldwork. As I started doing fieldwork, this campaign had been revealed, analyzed, and discussed in the media, yet it was no longer actively discussed. This influenced the kind of access I had. Whereas I was following “Any idiot can go to the library” while it played out, I studied Speedbandits retrospectively. So even though in both campaigns, I was granted access to those behind the scenes, and my interest in the campaign was accommodated, time made a difference between the two cases as far as accessing people’s responses and reactions.

Studying Speedbandits retrospectively, two years after it had run, meant that there was limited access to data on people’s immediate reactions. I was not privileged to be positioned in the middle of things as they happened. And studying things that become viral in retrospect – even if we are talking about months or weeks after they have peaked – can be exceedingly difficult: in the case of Speedbandits, blogposts were removed<sup>32</sup>, and with them the comments posted by readers. The original video and the first few copies featuring the initial reactions from people encountering it were long gone. This video featured topless women, which rendered it subject to deletion by YouTube due to nudity. Whereas there are still plenty of instances of the video on YouTube, they are new copies. This allows “the video” to be there still, even after ten years, but the comments, tags, headlines, and additional information provided in the description of the video are different. Thus, the *same* video appears to be

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<sup>32</sup> Many such posts showed up using Google, and when clicking on the links, either the site did not exist, or the WordPress user had closed down his or her blog. News sites were to be found, but many had been edited.



there as a resource for me to access data and make contact to the audience engaged in commenting and sharing, yet the video was different to the initial versions in terms of the reactions it represented in the comments. “The video” held together a network of people, yet over time those people as well as the comments changed. As the video got removed, so did the infrastructure that kept in place those who saw it, before it was revealed as an ad. The metadata that fed into YouTube’s algorithms, the timestamp indicating when it was posted and by whom, are different. Again, the question of from where and when one can study the video and its viewers’ reactions shifts to questions of whether a researcher can access the video, and to which version he or she engages with. When collecting data on a case that is rich in material, we need to consider to what extent researching the video at that time maps onto the video two years prior. This is one of the achievements of paying attention to the non-human actors and the work they do in keeping other actors in place. Despite the video as well as its relations shifting, it stays stable and recognizable as the same video, and helps keep up the illusion that it has been there the whole time.

This may not seem different from a more general issue of studying things in retrospect: for instance, interviewing people about the campaign gave quite a different picture than that of the comments I managed to find from its period of activity via web archives<sup>xxxvi</sup>. All this had to do with time passing, a matter that is not in any way unique to viral reality marketing. But in marketing campaigns that are kept alive by deliberate ambiguity and temporary versions of stories, it is particularly crucial to be aware of time and positioning in time.

The informants I interviewed knew who was behind the campaign and had had time to settle on an opinion. Many did not recall details and found it easier to talk about the campaign in terms of their present opinion, through comparing it to recent marketing stunts. This was an indication of the implications of studying controversial advertising in retrospect. The uncertainty and the surprise effect were no longer represented in the interviews, and the lack of similar cases helped the campaign to gain momentum. Thus, digital traces were removed, had been tampered with, or were blurred by time, and the informants’ memories had changed too. Yet the pertinent feature here is that the digital traces can sometimes keep the illusion alive that things are the same, have been there all along, and represent something stable, even if this is far from the case.

Therefore, we need to be aware of how data is distorted. Attention to non-human agents directs attention to the network of references in terms of metadata (e.g., the original hashtags used, the timestamps telling when the video was uploaded, and the comments that the video held together, but

that are lost as it gets deleted). Discussing the video calls for an awareness of how it is the same and how it is different. This is a concern for the researcher considering data validity but is it also an insight into the field in which the informants face such campaigns. For informants as well as ethnographers navigate in a landscape of displaced information. The ways information is ordered, removed, suggested, linked due to overlapping tags, and suggested as “recommended for you” through YouTube algorithms based on the specific users’ previous activities, are useful to understand what both researchers as well as the informants face.

Different yet the same - Speedbandits vs speedbandit, & speedbandits vs speedbandits

The researcher as well as her informants actively face and deal with ambiguities. The researcher tries to draw attention to examples where one actor may appear as many or many as one. But parallel to this, there are participants who actively and strategically work to conceal these ambiguities. This happens as some participants try to monetize campaigns by deliberately manipulating homepages into appearing as the same despite differences, through typosquatting and domain takeover. Ambiguity is therefore not solely a consequence of non-human actors like hashtags that facilitate both collaboration and conflicts simultaneously. Humans, too, actively exploit ambiguities. Before proceeding it is important, once again, to position myself, due to the different accesses to data I had in the campaigns.

“The video” is often spoken of as one actor, while existing as various copies – dispersed and translated into different networks via changes of tags, headlines, and profiling. It is referred to as one video, despite being featured on different YouTube channels with different subscribers depending on which user uploaded a local copy. The next actor we need to consider is the URL. Here we question how one actor can be several actors simultaneously, but also how different actors, e.g., websites with different URLs, can be made deliberately to appear as the same.

Digital traces and their influence on data gathering make things disappear, due to broken links and content that no longer exists. Websites get deleted, and the content is no longer accessible. But websites may also change domain owners and, despite this, appear as if they are still the same. For instance, the official homepage URL [speedbandits.dk](http://speedbandits.dk) is still accessible, and appears to be the site maintained by the Danish Road Safety Council. However, this is not the case: the domain has been taken over by a company that makes money from generating traffic to specific sites.

As I encountered the Speedbandits site during fieldwork, I discovered that it contained a huge number of ads. The design was the same as the original one made by Far from Hollywood<sup>xxxvii</sup>. Yet the ads made me suspicious, because publicly funded organizations are neither allowed nor interested in

featuring external advertising. By comparing earlier versions, I noticed that the layout and the text were the same.

The version featured on the site I visited during fieldwork introduced the campaign, and it even linked back to the Danish Road Safety Council's homepage. To the untrained eye it might look like the official site for the campaign. However, there were other featured posts on the site, about E-cigarettes (complete with an affiliate link) and a Key Account Management & Development course (also followed by a link). This illustrates the illusion that the page still exists as the same actor, despite changing from representing one business to representing another. In that sense speedbandits.dk 2007 and speedbandits.dk 2009 are different actors, yet they are held together through links pointing to the same URL, the content and layout suggesting the same sender; the audience, not paying attention to the ads, will assume that it is still the same site.

Whereas this was a domain takeover, typosquatting was another phenomenon that challenged what to include as part of the Speedbandits campaign, as another company bought the remarkably similar domain speedbandit.dk (NB: singular, not plural) <sup>xxxviii</sup>. This site had a huge number of posts written in a personal style by someone who recommended several sites he/she had used<sup>xxxix</sup>. Today the site no longer exists, but for many years both domains were regularly updated and kept active<sup>xl</sup>. When determining relevant similarities and differences, these ambiguities add to the challenge in studying actors in digitally mediated settings. It illustrates the complexity in dealing with an actor as fixed without dealing with what work it performs in facilitating conflicting interests. In the final viral reality marketing case, the aligned interests are pushed even further as some participate to distance themselves, and others are lured into participation on false pretenses. These kinds of alliances challenge how we consider actors engaging with the same object. Additionally, as this final case will highlight, the object they engage with changes as well. It is deliberately ambiguous: it changes over time as more information is added.

#### 4.2.3 Danish Holiday Baby, Karen26, Danish Mother Seeking, and VisitDenmark

The first indicator of a changing object becomes clear from the naming of the campaign. As the headline suggests, this campaign went by many names. Originally GoViral entitled it "Danish Holiday Baby". Yet this title only appeared once throughout my empirical material: in the description of the video by GoViral. This description was accessible only to GoViral's seeders, who made money from publishing and distributing it. The section header contains names used to describe the campaign at different times. Whereas Speedbandits was referred to eponymously, and only occasionally as

“bikini bandits”, “Danish Holiday Baby” shifted between names. “VisitDenmark’s campaign” and “the VisitDenmark viral video” only existed after the sender was revealed. However, the campaign achieved extensive attention before it was revealed, and the name that was most frequently used before the reveal was “Danish mother seeking”. This name presumably emerged from Mindjumpers who turned the story of “a mother seeking” into a trend of making counter-replies entitled “fathers seeking”. Others, particularly in the very beginning, referred to the girl featured in the video as “Karen26”, or “Karen26DK”. These names referenced her email address, Karen26.dk@mono.net. The names and the shifts between them will be reflected throughout the story. For now, we need to go back to the point when it had not yet been revealed as an ad. At the time I encountered it, it was a video of a mother seeking the father of her child.

The video was distributed through GoViral. I worked as a seeder for them, and though I rarely posted any videos, it gave me an insight behind the scenes of the campaigns, including who was behind them, along with which countries they targeted, etc. The video was called Danish Holiday Baby. It had a question mark where brands are usually specified, and it had flags indicating the countries in which this ad would provide seeders with money for getting views. This, of course is not what people watching the video see, but illustrates which pieces of information were originally provided to accompany the video<sup>xli</sup>. Curiously enough, out of the very scarce information supplied by GoViral, including the one clue that this had to do with a holiday, the title “Danish Holiday Baby”, did not make it into any of the videos that were published.

#### *The video*

The video is two minutes and 34 seconds long. The camera does not move, suggesting that it is not filmed by a second party. The frame features a tiny portion of a room without many details. Sitting on a sofa is a young woman in her twenties with a baby. Behind her is a shelf and two pictures: one with a mixture of a clock and a sun, and one with some matching yellow colors and two letters A and D. There is also a pillow, but aside from that, there are no more details to catch the viewer’s attention. Below the video there is an email address and a link to a homepage where there are a few more pictures of the woman and her baby, playing and having fun.



The baby is calm and quiet, while the girl looks almost exclusively at the camera, interrupted only by a few occasional glances and smiles at the baby in her arms.

While modestly smiling she says:

*Hi. My name is Karen and I'm from Denmark. And this here is my baby boy, his name is [laugh and smile to baby] His name is August.*

*Yeah. I'm doing this video because I'm trying to find August's father. So, if you are out there and you see this, then this is for you. We met one and a half years ago when you were on vacation here in Denmark. And we met at the Custom House Bar. [pause]*

*I was on my way home and I think you had lost your friends, and then we decided to go down to the water to have a drink, and [pause]*

*Yeah, and this is really embarrassing but that is just more or less what I remember. I do not remember where you are from, or [pause]*

*I do not even remember your name. [pause]*

*I do remember, though, we were talking about Denmark and the thing we have here with "hygge" that foreign people always ask about. And that's [pause]*

*Yeah, you were really nice, so I guess I decided to show you what hygge is all about, because we went back to [pause]*

*We went back to my house [pause]*

*And yeah [pause]*

*We ended up having sex and [pause]*

*The next morning when I woke up, you were gone. [pause]*

*It is not that I blame you for anything. And I am not crazy. Or this is not some kind of obsession that I have with you, I just really, really want to let you know that [pause]*

*That August is here, that he exists. [pause]*

*I feel I owe it to both you and to him [pause]*

*Yeah [pause]*

*And also, I want to let you know that I am not a bimbo or something like that. I know that August is yours because I have not been with anybody else since that night [pause]*

*Yeah, just so you know that. [pause]*

*I know that this is really a long shot but if you are out there and you see this, or anybody else who can help me sees this, please contact me. I will put my e-mail with this video; so, just write me. [smile]*

#### *Potentially an ad*

The campaign of VisitDenmark was not planned to be part of my fieldwork. It began unexpectedly while I was already doing fieldwork on other topics. By this time, compared to most of my informants in the field, I had acquired a good intuition regarding things that were ads in disguise. I had a strong sense that this story was an ad, but no confirmation for my suspicions. Since I did not know for sure, and since I did not have access to any potential company behind it, I was left in a space of uncertainty just as my fellow participants, that is, *if* we even were participating in an ad. The uncertainty lasted only for a couple of days, but it was a highly intense period with a cacophony of voices all guessing, playing detective, making spoof videos, turning the attention into profit, and discussing what it was all about. Being positioned in the middle of things was very insightful in understanding what occurs during viral reality marketing for those exposed to it. I recognized elements that made me think it was an ad. I recognized similarities to previously encountered viral campaigns, and because of my suspicion, I cancelled all other plans and intensively began following something that potentially could be a campaign.

When I tell the story here, it is misleading to tell it as a story of a campaign for VisitDenmark, for that is not what it was at the time. As we shall see there are gaps between experiencing events as they play out and accounting for them retrospectively. When studying a phenomenon that deliberately tries to engage people by concealing information and encouraging ambiguity, the gap between different

versions needs specific attention. The story that I abruptly turned my attention to while in the field, was potentially an ad. But at the same time, to some informants, it was a story of a sincere mother reaching out. Later, it was a story that could possibly have been from a condom company. It then became an ad from VisitDenmark promoting tourism.

The VisitDenmark campaign was introduced earlier in the dissertation, but to recap: the campaign introduced Karen, a Danish mother who searched for the father of her child through a video on YouTube. The simple bullet point summary from the beginning of chapter two, however, was recycled from my conference presentations on the topic. It was a way of telling the story that has worked for me several times: it is brief, structured as a list of events that illustrate how the story gets used in many ways, while suggesting that it develops further and further away from the original story as the list of events progresses. This structure gives the reader an impression of the many actors and their various interests. In short, it has been crafted for the reader in a specific way.

The version from chapter two contains only a few handpicked events, and a specific order to let the reader know only what I needed them to know. I mention it again at this point in the text in case you need to reread or refresh your memory. All this too is a framing of the object of study. It is in- and exclusion, and a juxtaposition of elements, crafted so that a clear, comprehensible, and coherent story can be told.

This is the luxury of the reader, to have the events organized, the variations in engagements emphasized, and irrelevant or confusing details eliminated, so that everything makes sense in relation to the story in time and space. However, the neatly ordered list of events is not granted those who participate while the campaign is running. What I, as well as my informants, encountered was a video of a mother seeking the father of her child: a story that everyone talked about, analyzed, and had an opinion on. It was chaotic and enticing at the same time. My informants and I invested time, energy, and emotion, without knowing exactly what we were dealing with.

These stories are deliberate marketing stunts using ambiguity and mystery as a driving force. They are constructed such that no such official information exists. This is relevant to consider when understanding what participants were facing at the time, but for the writer and reader, it is also a reminder of the difference between telling a story in retrospect “now that we know what’s what”, as opposed to navigating with bits and pieces of information that potentially could be a viral reality campaign. Thus, this is both a single story, told here, but it is also many stories, depending on where,

when, and how it was encountered. Furthermore, it is a story that, as part of a specific marketing strategy, is deliberately made not to be told as a single story. This leaves the writer with the seemingly impossible task of telling a story that does not want to be told.

For now, the important thing is to provide the reader with awareness of the multiple positions from which this story is encountered. I will provide three ways of telling the story, three ways of ordering the empirical material centered around what happened, who became engaged and why, and finally, what they engaged with.

### *What happened?*

As discussed in the case of Marius the giraffe, timelines are devices for sorting, for creating order and for suggesting a relation between elements. By now, it has been established that a timeline is an order created, based on specific parameters. As we have discussed, earlier algorithms too play an active role in organizing elements, defining relations, raking, and in- and excluding things, to make content accessible in a convenient way. Aware of the specific kind of story a timeline represents, while gathering data I used a specific timeline as an anchor. It was continuously updated with new information as soon as new events happened. This is a short excerpt progressing from the time the video was posted until it was first revealed to be an ad campaign.

#### ***Thursday September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009***

23:04 I (Stephan Bøgh-Andersen the creator of the timeline provided). -Discovers the video and tweets: "A kind of net dating - on the wrong side of date" [followed by a link to the video]

The video is sent via GoViral, who has specialized in launching viral campaigns  
I too post the video on Facebook under the headline "for real?"

#### ***Friday September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009***

Twitter. The first uses of #karen26 headline-markings starts appearing in Twitter posts.

22:32: Lively: [discussions on Baby.dk](#)

22:28 EB.dk: [Seeks her child's father](#)

#### ***Saturday September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009***

On the frontpage of the paper version of E.B

11:48 Jp.dk: "where is my son's father?"

12:53 Blog. Inspirationsministeriet: [New viral turns Denmark upside down](#)

13:21 Facebook: [Henrik Føhns'](#) discussions regarding the video.

13:40 Blog, Mindjumpers: [Danish mother seeking \(The Father's Story\)](#) makes ironic video-reply as "the father" of the baby

14:02: Twitter [@MortenSax reveals](#) that it is for VisitDenmark

[...The rest of the timeline can be seen in the appendix<sup>xlii</sup>]



However, there was a 29-hour delay from when the timeline reveals VisitDenmark to be behind the campaign until the media published this information.

Even though this specific timeline suggests that it was officially known from Friday September 12, the news media kept questioning if it was a marketing stunt. It was not until the following day that the media started describing it as a campaign. By then the discussions concerned what it could potentially be a campaign for. One media outlet revealed “Karen” to be an actress named Ditte Arnth, another supplied information that Ditte Arnth did not have children in real life. It was not until the evening of September 13 that a media outlet revealed VisitDenmark to be behind the campaign.

Therefore, when embedding timelines as a device for creating order in narratives, we may see lists of events that occur, suggesting it is already known to the public that it is an ad, yet the mass media kept feeding their readers a different story.

This timeline was made in Danish and was frequently used and referred to by other media as the campaign ran. It was made and updated by a Stefan Bøgh-Andersen of Overskrift.dk<sup>33</sup>. Overskrift.dk had featured timelines for viral shitstorms before, and quickly spotted that the story of “Karen” had the potential to warrant live coverage and a timeline as well. As they provided services for companies by warning them about upcoming shitstorms, their coverage was also used to demonstrate how they were out in front and knew about and monitored the campaign long before it was officially known to be one.

The timeline was in the format of a blogpost. In addition, Bøgh-Andersen had turned on the blog’s ping-back feature. This meant that whenever someone linked to the post, a comment would appear below the text with a link back to that site. This made it clear that many linked to this specific timeline, and therefore in addition to being a tool for me, served to create a context for informing others what was going on. The news media referred to it as well, and it served to be the closest to an overview people could get at the time.

I followed the timeline constantly from an hour after it was revealed by Morten Sax that it was a campaign by VisitDenmark. I was in dialogue with Stephan Bøgh-Andersen, and we joked about what the campaign could possibly be for. Saturday and Sunday, I sat in front of the computer all day, discussing, sharing, and analyzing the story. I took notes, a huge number of screenshots and saved

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<sup>33</sup> A site owned by company offering online social media monitoring.

copies of homepages and videos. This was a highly intense period. I was in a state of constantly wishing I could slow down time, pause the events, be in three places at once. I wished I had more time for sorting things, while instead it felt like a cacophony of voices, pictures, and bits and pieces of information. There was little time for checking sources and facts. There were many things I needed to remember and follow up on, and often I lost track of where I encountered content. Content that was there in the morning was gone in the evening. Many links were broken, comments deleted, and references lost. Tracing things back retrospectively was often not possible.

I followed all links in real time as they were added to the timeline. I also spent a great deal of time watching “fathers’ replies”, which was a growing phenomenon running alongside events in this timeline. This sort of video originated from another marketing agency that made a video in which the ostensible father replied. This specific string of fathers-seeking-contributions engaged a range of people who recognized a new emerging trend and made their own creative videos featuring what a potential father’s reply might have been.

Timelines present a chronology and therefore a specific order, but they also only represent what is included. From being in the field while trying to keep up with all the events, replies, and discussions going on, the elements presented in the timeline stand out as only partly covering what happened. Each new timeline event spun new discussions in blog comments, and various threads on Facebook and YouTube. For each time a link to another piece of news about the video was posted, a new thread started. Some of these threads were juxtaposed by hashtags and therefore held together. Several hashtags were in play: #DanishMotherSeeking, #MotherSeeking, #DanishKaren26, #VisitDenmark, to mention a few.

An event that is growing so exponentially, with so many potential interpretations of what is happening, simply cannot be adequately covered by a timeline. However, an awareness of the timeline as one out of many versions of what was occurring is crucial. I want to tell another version of what went on: this one takes as a starting point some of those who contributed to awareness of the campaign. It explores how and why they participated.

#### *Who got enrolled and why?*

To answer the question of who gets interested, we need to keep the analytical inclusion of both human and non-human actors. Furthermore, we need to consider getting *interested* as being connected, and not necessarily interested in participating. For instance, some brands get connected involuntarily. Yet a relation is made that includes both those who engage voluntarily and those who do not. This focus

enables us to capture alliances without, *a priori*, being concerned with why they are made. This is important because we want to highlight the ambiguity of both being engaged in the same phenomenon, and yet being so for various reasons simultaneously. By doing so, we attend to the dual side of people being connected for various reasons first, before going into the details of why.

The network around Karen expanded further as marketing experts started making connections between her story and other similar stories. The juxtaposition of this campaign to others served to provide a context for journalists and bloggers.

#### HuskMitNavn

A connection made both before the campaign was revealed, *and* revisited after, was a suggested similarity between the story of the mother and a stunt made by Danish artist called HuskMitNavn (RememberMyName) who wanted to create awareness about himself.

At a music festival, HuskMitNavn posted a note from Camilla to Matthias. Camilla was looking for the father of her child, conceived at last year's festival, and this year she wanted to introduce the child to his father. A specific time and place were specified at the bottom of the note. Many showed up to witness the expected encounter between Camilla and Mathias, and the artist then used the opportunity to advertise his name and work to the crowd of curious spectators.



#### Lonelygirl15

Another case which was suggested to be similar was that of Lonelygirl15. This similarity was suggested only after it became clear that the identity of the mother was unintentionally revealed before

VisitDenmark had publicly revealed that they were behind the campaign. At the time this case became related, all that people knew was that the mother in the video was an actress who did not have children in real life. The reference between the two women was meant as an example of how fooling people can be turned into a success, despite being unintentionally revealed.

Lonelygirl15 first came to international attention in 2006, appearing to be a "real" video blogger: Bree, a 17-year-old girl who uploaded videos where she talked about her daily life. She immediately became hugely popular on YouTube; however, everything was staged by the actress playing Bree, two filmmakers, and a former attorney. Three months into the story, keen-eyed viewers identified Bree as Jessica Rose, a 19-year-old American-New Zealander actress. She confessed, but continued posting videos, aware that people now knew her character to be fictional. Despite being later confirmed to be fictional, she attained her initial popularity by appearing to be genuine. "Bree" continued to exist and this led to several spin-offs.



Several marketing experts analyzing Karen26 pointed out Lonelygirl15 to provide a context for "Karen".

#### Australian jacket

References were also made to an Australian ad from earlier that year. In January 2009, a video of an innocently looking girl searching for the owner of a jacket was uploaded. She had met him at a bar

and later that evening discovered that he had forgotten his jacket, so she made a video to try to find him.



Some days later, after massive media attention, she released a new video entitled “Are you the man in the jacket REVEALED.” In this video, she confessed that the story was a hoax. Marketing experts who drew parallels between the mother seeking the father and the girl seeking the owner of a jacket emphasized that even if ads were used to fool people, honesty in a follow up story could contribute to successful closure and to forgiveness by the audience. These connections were made after it was revealed to be a campaign for VisitDenmark, and after VisitDenmark had withdrawn the campaign and removed the video. The reference was suggested as a possible opportunity for VisitDenmark to save face and reach a successful completion.



### Are you the man in the jacket revealed



FILIHOPSASA

Subscribe 143

589 views

+ Add to   ← Share   ... More

👍 0   🗨️ 1

Uploaded on Sep 14, 2009

This is the reply to "are you the man in the jacket."

It reveals that the whole thing was a media stunt, whilst still paying respect to the viewers who believed the story in the first place.

*Hey again you guys. It's me again.*

*Well, I guess you all know why I am posting this video – I am coming clean [pause]*

*Yes, I am an actress. Yes, I was employed by WITCHERYMAN, and yes, I even managed to get my face on national TV. [Smiling]*

[...See full transcript: <sup>xliiii</sup>]

Connections were made between Lonelygirl15, HuskMitNavn, Australian jacket, and Karen, yet none of these brands actively tried to become related to the story of the mother. They became related by being juxtaposed as similar. They contributed to the campaign, yet they did not to support it, and perhaps they were not even aware of the relation. Furthermore, as these campaigns were revisited after the reveal, they shifted from being compared as *similar to* to being *different from* (what was now known to be) VisitDenmark's campaign, since they featured honesty in the end.

#### Mindjumpers

Before the video was revealed to be an ad, Mindjumpers uploaded a video response: a story of the (obviously fake) "father" declaring that he was indeed the father and that Karen's story scared him, because if what she said was true, he could potentially have many babies by now. Twenty minutes later, the first revelation that VisitDenmark was behind the video appeared on Twitter (Mortensax

2009). Thus, Mindjumpers probably did not know for certain who made the video, but they assumed that it was an ad, and they made their response to signal that *they* were not behind it. They participated specifically to distance themselves. They took the campaign as a chance to promote themselves as experts<sup>34</sup> in analyzing – as well as encouraging – the debate about it. (Danish Mother Seeking – Revealed in an Hour and the next Mystery Can Start 2009; Danish Mother Seeking – What Do You Think? 2009)

Thus, Mindjumpers engaged to disengage. They used the network of actors held together by the story to hijack it and turn it into a different story about how *not* to make advertisements. “*We hope to start a debate about how Social Media can be used wisely in the future. Should you have an opinion then visit our blog*”. This piece of text is still added as a layer over their video in 2021, illustrating another interesting point: when does a campaign stop? Today Mindjumpers use the reference as a case study on what not to do, and by doing so they actively contribute to the continuation of the story. Despite distancing themselves from the campaign as an unwise use of social media, they used it to position themselves as experts. They kept following up on the story as it went along, providing expert insights and analysis. They made several guesses as to who was potentially behind it.

*“After I was interviewed by a journalist from [Sydsvenskan.se](http://Sydsvenskan.se), my best guess right now is [FINDIZE.COM](http://FINDIZE.COM). Why? FINDIZE.COM launched their web product on the 8th of September, 2 days prior to the campaign, and 11 hours ago they opened a channel on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...), called [Findize](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...) with the Karen26 video on it. Now from what I have picked up on Twitter, Karen26 is an old flame of someone who can confirm that she is an actress. Furthermore, the Swedish journalist who called me had sent a mail to [danishkaren26@gmail.com](mailto:danishkaren26@gmail.com) and got a standard reply saying something like “Stay tuned to [Youtube.com/user/findize](https://www.youtube.com/user/findize) for more info”. Findize.com’s slogan – ‘Get Found – Get Findized at Findize.com’. Pretty apt for a story about a mother seeking the father of her son” (Klit Nielsen 2009)*

As they discovered that the woman was an actor, they posted the name of the actor followed by an encouragement for others to play along at guessing who was (now) behind it. (Danish Mother Seeking – What Do You Think? 2009). They suggested that it could be an ad where the actress attempted to promote herself, or a campaign from Mono.net, the site that featured her homepage. Mindjumpers

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<sup>34</sup> Five years later Mindjumpers still refer back to the campaign, this time as a case study about a shitstorm that was not properly handled. (How to Handle a Shitstorm – Before, During and After 2014)



played an active role in engaging people to keep up the momentum, while at the same time strongly disagreeing with the execution of the presumed ad.

Mono.net

Mindjumpers, in one of their many updates as events occurred, suggested Mono.net, the site facilitating the guestbook, as the company behind it:

*“Karen looks like a legitimate new mum, but there’s no doubt that this whole thing could be a scam. It would be a fairly good way for the web hotel Mono.net to create publicity and traffic to their site. And in my opinion Karen does look a little bit like one of the partners behind Mono.net, Louise Lachman...”* (Anders Colding-Jørgensen 2009).

Mono.net was an actor who got enrolled since Grey and VisitDenmark chose to make a website using their service. However, they would also have been categorized among brands who took advantage, for they played along and turned their involuntarily involvement into awareness. They never claimed in so many words that they were behind it, but they did not deny it either. Instead, they allied themselves with non-human actors via Ad-words, (a pay per click service Google provides, where companies indicate specific keywords, and as these come up in Google searches, the ads emerge side by side with the search results).<sup>35</sup> This is an example of their exposure when searching on Google for “danish mother seeking”



The text in the ad says: *Do as Karen from Denmark... and make a free homepage with mono.net.* Mono.net as a potential brand behind the video existed as one version of what held the network together for a few days, as people thought it was a campaign illustrating how easy it was to find

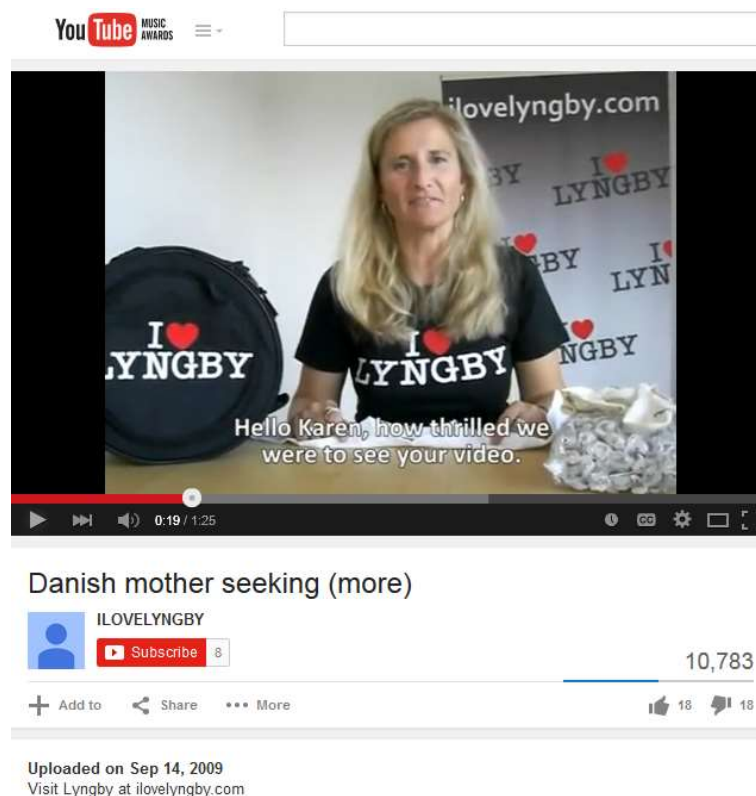
<sup>35</sup> In a normal Google search, these will show up as the “sponsored links” right above the list of other links that Google has matched with your search words. Usually there are one to three sponsored links for each search.



people and get connected. Several independent marketing experts pointed towards Mono.net as the company potentially behind the video. (Anders Colding-Jørgensen 2009; Mono.Net Høster Trafik Fra Karen26 Videoen | Podii.Dk – Christian Buch Iversens Blog 2009). The message from this potential campaign was suggested as: all it takes is to set up a homepage, and your messages can reach everywhere. Even though it was later revealed that Mono.net was not behind the campaign, they took advantage of the temporary attention and their (temporarily existing) successfully executed campaign as an opportunity to promote themselves.

VisitLyngby

VisitLyngby, an organization for citizens living in the city of Lyngby, turned the story into an ad for themselves.



(I LOVE LYNGBYs profile on YouTube 2009)

After it was revealed to be from VisitDenmark, they uploaded a video in which there was a reference to the original one.

Firstly, a short clip of the original Karen-video was shown.

*[Man, voice over]*

*We all know the story of Karen. A young strong Danish woman who seeks the father of her child. [pause]*

*I LOVE LYNGBY thinks that Karen searches for much more than that. [pause]*

*[Woman, appearing on the screen]*

*Hello Karen, we were thrilled to watch your video [pause]*

*You say you are looking the August's father, but what you are really searching for Karen, is a place to live. [pause]*

*For you are a strong woman who does not even need a man [pause]*

*[...See full transcript:<sup>xliv</sup>]*

This video not only referred to the original video, but it also relied specifically on the audience's awareness of an interview in which the director of VisitDenmark had defended the woman as “[...] a modern grown-up woman, who made her own decisions in life.”<sup>xlv</sup> It depended on the audience's knowing about and recognizing the references to the strong modern woman made in the specific interview, in order for VisitLyngby's attention hijack to make sense.

#### DR1 debate and its fallout

Poul Madsen, chief editor of one of Denmark's largest tabloid presses, did not participate in the campaign knowingly from the beginning. He was drawn into it believing it was a true story. His journalists had therefore continuously written about Karen as more and more information was revealed. Therefore, he was upset to discover that his journalists had been fooled, and that his paper was used in a marketing stunt without consent. Nine days after the first article was published (Rohde-Brøndum 2009), he was invited to a debate on national television together with Dorthe Kiilerich, the administrative director of VisitDenmark. (This is the interview that VisitLyngby's video refers to). The debate lasted for fourteen minutes and, as a kickoff, a marketing expert from an unaffiliated ad agency explained the concept of viral reality marketing campaigns. His stance is that this type of storytelling is a consequence of an ad-blindness where people are no longer affected by traditional ads. He describes the genre as an alternate reality game, where several realities are at play. Despite the uncertainty that the audience experiences, there is a thorough choreography for the story. It relies on advanced and refined storytelling that has a beginning, middle, and end, planned from the very beginning. In the case of Karen, he explains that we are in the middle part now. Lastly, he explains that for people to accept being drawn into it without knowing for sure what it is, it is important for

the brand to have their heart in the right place. However, as the interview progresses, the debate centers on the ethics of fooling people, and of branding Denmark based on a lie.

The day after the interview, VisitDenmark withdrew their campaign, the director was dismissed, and both VisitDenmark and the ad agency they were collaborating with remained silent.

According to the analysis provided by the marketing expert, this was the middle part of the storytelling, and an ending is still to come. His description created expectations that shaped the responses of many people, as, a few days later, the woman reappeared in a new video.

Same girl, new “baby”, new ad?

A new video emerged a few days after the original was revealed to be from VisitDenmark. No explanation accompanied the video. The content was new, yet remarkably similar: the same actor, nearly the same background behind her, and the background images were new, but still featuring the same images of a sun, and the letters A and D. This time, however, the baby was replaced by a fish.



The reappearance of the actress caused people to believe that VisitDenmark had regretted its mistake and returned with a properly humorous reply. Many reposted the new video, relieved that VisitDenmark had learned from campaigns like Lonelygirl15 and the Australian Jacket, and at least showed a sense of humor. Others said that *this* time it was not VisitDenmark, it was the actress herself, illustrating that *she* had a sense of humor and dared to play along, while brilliantly distancing herself from the campaign.

For a few days, no one knew much about the new video. The words from the girl in the new video were almost identical to the ad for tourism, except for the newly defined purpose: to find a home for the fish Snæbel. Towards the end of the video, she shifts to a slightly more serious voice, while saying that in Denmark there are only 7000 of these fish left, so if anyone can help, she encourages them to do so. The video spawned new theories regarding whether she was hired to do another ad for nature conservation, while taking advantage of the already gained awareness, or if this was her own initiative to shift the focus onto something that she found important.

After yet another round of ordinary citizens, media, and blogs trying to fit this new information into the story, it becomes clear that the video was made at the behest of Anders Lund Madsen, the comedian mentioned earlier for his creative ways of promoting his talk show with a sign in India. The video was yet another stunt to advertise his show. It is a weekly entertainment show which mixes fun and silliness with serious content, the latter still presented with humor, though. Since Anders Lund Madsen had persuaded the actress to come by and tell him how it was to be at the center of massive public attention without being able to confirm or deny anything as it ran, he asked her if she could make a new version, just for entertainment. This time there was no payment involved, and she said she was in on it, because it was a great stunt. The show also featured another story that evening, regarding a threatened fish – the snæbel (a fish of genus *Coregonus*). Therefore, Anders Lund Madsen had suggested, that the actress sitting with a fish, would be two teasers for the price of one, and since it did not cost him anything in the first place, this cheap advertising trick became part of the story. It all fed nicely into the stream of other similar tricks he has used such as the cheap sign in India.

These are all examples of brands, individuals, artists, journalists, experts, and companies who got enrolled, some on their own initiative, some connected by others. Their motivations for being there varied greatly: some engaged to play along without requiring confirmation, some participated in the belief that it was a true story, some took the opportunity to promote themselves, and some deliberately engaged to distance themselves. They all engaged in the same viral reality marketing campaign, yet for various often conflicting reasons and with various types of commitment.

#### *What did they engage with?*

We may say that VisitDenmark's campaign is all about a video featuring a story of a woman seeking the father of her child, intended to create awareness and signal abroad that Denmark is a nice country to visit with strong independent women and lots of "hygge". But this is one out of many simultaneously existing interpretations. We may say that it is the story of the mother, a tourism ad, a

story of a strong independent woman, and a lie. The empirical material suggests that we need to extend our conceptualization of what it is that people engage with. If we cling to the relatively fixed definition of the campaign or the video as being what everyone engages with, most of the story should have stopped as soon as the video was removed, and the campaign was claimed to have been withdrawn. However, as we have seen, people were engaged with more than just a campaign and a video featuring the mother. For instance, there were more loosely related elements that, from the point of view of VisitDenmark were not related yet depended on and built upon the campaign: e.g., Mindjumpers' spoof, and the growing number of videos imitating it.

#### Boundary-making and ambiguity

Viral reality campaigns are made up of stories that do not want to be told, in the sense that they exist because they are different things to different people at different times. They change, and yet it is because they change, and because they are not the same from all sides to all participants that they maintain momentum. The story of the mother is a story of an actress, an independent woman, a talk show, a lie, and a steppingstone for others to promote themselves. If we fix the video analytically as an object of study, we might be able to portray the many ways in which people interpret it differently, but challenges emerge when the video is suddenly removed, after which it is no longer needed, because the story is kept alive by people who post other videos with fathers seeking mothers.

The following video replies were different. For instance:

A Danish comedian who went on tour, did some foolish things, and now seeks the mother of his child. The baby is replaced by a Smurf. The comedian serves it beer and claims that he might need help because it turned blue.

A clip from the movie Star Wars in which Darth Vader says, "I am your father", followed by five seconds of the mother sitting with the baby. Her voice is replaced with the theme from Star Wars.

A Danish actor who reminds us that this is not the first time an actress has fooled people. He reveals himself as the comic actor playing Kurt Westergaard (the Danish political cartoonist who drew the drawings of Muhammed that sent Denmark into an international diplomatic crisis). He admits that he, too, was hired by VisitDenmark to play this character to promote Denmark as a liberal country where you can have a lot of *hygge* and draw whatever you want.

Hitler, in another Hitler Rants Parody, is informed that Karen, the girl he met in Copenhagen, was looking for him on YouTube<sup>xlvi</sup>.

The Onion posts a video while informing readers that the controversial Danish film producer Lars Trier is to make a new ad for tourism in Denmark using his signature elements of drugs, rape and incest<sup>xlvii</sup>. The video features the text: *“Tourism officials hope the acclaimed Danish director's bleak vision of unsettling sexuality and brutal violence will attract more visitors to their country.”*

What connects all these references? They are not held together by a shared video. They may be held together by a shared reference to the VisitDenmark campaign but is it not the reference but the cross-domain references that makes these contributions entertaining. Just like real time marketing, they rely on specific references across several domains such as The Smurfs, Star Wars, Hitler, and The Onion that, when put together for a short span of time, add something new to several domains simultaneously. They depend on an audience to recognize references. Even though the fathers' responses refer to the video of Karen, these depend on Mindjumpers' version of fathers responding to make sense.

Questioning what it is that people engage with in viral reality marketing campaigns raises concerns regarding boundary-making, ambiguity, and positioning. How much needs to be similar for it to be considered part of the same story? How do we treat relations that are not the same from all sides? How loosely related can elements be, while still being considered part of the campaign? Who gets to decide what is part of the campaign? These questions need to be discussed further, as they call for additional theoretical as well as and methodological concerns.

Boundary-making, potentiality, and temporal connections

Viral reality marketing consists primarily of temporarily – as well as simultaneously – coexisting, often conflicting, versions of stories: they exist momentarily. These somewhat messy collections of highly temporal and semi related content came to my attention as a direct result of the unique positioning I was granted when doing fieldwork. Even though I was provided access and time with both Far from Hollywood and GoViral when studying the Speedbandits campaign, I was positioned at a point in time where uncertainty of what was occurring was no longer reflected in the data I was able to collect. However, in the campaign of “Danish Mother Seeking”, I was surrounded by uncertainty and provided with no confirmation of what it was all about. By dint of my being in the field at that exact time, when the situation was highly ambiguous, the concepts of potential futures

and expectations emerged as a logical result. Being positioned in the middle of a viral reality campaign as it happened, I became aware of how difficult it can be to order messy, inconsistent, confusing, and contradictory data. Decisions on what to include, and which elements to consider part of the campaign, were often difficult. Furthermore, informants disagreed on whether specific references were relevant parts of the campaign or not, depending on whether they recognized the specific domains that references combined. I, too, missed references such as the Hitler parody before becoming familiar with the specific domain, and surely more references were lost when made in domains that I was not familiar with. These concerns add to the awareness of complexities in boundary-making. Positioning, even at the point in time where everything happened at once, was not adequate to ensure that I did not miss references. Neither did it ensure that I was able to be in the right places, as cross-references did not play out solely on specific platforms where I could position myself. They appeared across domains and were impossible to predict beforehand.

The temporarily existing versions of what was happening, and the continuous connections made between brands, events, and memes, played a huge role in ensuring momentum. If we only look for shared interests, or groups of users and producers, then we cannot even perceive these brief and temporary connections between people connected through:

- a VisitDenmark video, an interview, and VisitLyngby;
- Lars von Trier, The Onion, and VisitDenmark;
- VisitDenmark, an actress, a threatened fish, a talk show and a comedian;
- Marius the giraffe, Top Gear, and Countryball;
- Carlsberg's tradition of making real time marketing, a storm, a new Danish tradition of naming storms, Frederik, the Crown Prince of Denmark who crossed a bridge that was closed due to the storm.

Such "groups" are inherently *ad hoc*, coming into existence through specific combinations of time and references.

### 4.3 Issues and challenges

In the case of VisitDenmark, I initially centered the story around three overall questions. They were : what happened, who got enrolled and why, and what did they engage in? Whereas the questions are generic and simple, it is the specific reason *why* these questions are difficult to answer when it comes



to viral reality marketing campaigns, that is particularly interesting. Once again, we need to revisit these questions while collating the empirical material presented in this chapter with the previously discussed theoretical frameworks. Collating the theoretical approaches to innovation, actors, and relations, with the empirical examples of viral reality marketing brings forth new issues, problems, and challenges.

Theoretically, the empirical material calls upon new ways of conceptualizing something that is held together by many actors/actants simultaneously while engaged with by many, for many different reasons. Through revisiting and contemplating the two questions: who got enrolled and why and what they engaged with, I will first signal needs for new theoretical concepts. I will then take up ambiguity and its challenges when it comes to methodologically addressing something that is made deliberately ambiguous. The question that asks what happened may always leave gaps between what was encountered in the past and how it is later represented retrospectively. Yet the deliberate ambiguity that is the very driving force in viral reality marketing further challenges telling a story in retrospect.

#### 4.3.1 Temporarily and loosely connected, multiple agendas, ambiguous content, and potentials

Those who get enrolled may be part of the same campaign, but they are not necessarily connected through communities, and they do not know each other. They are loosely and highly temporarily connected through specific content and references. Often, they do not have interests that are directly aligned with the brand. Despite supporting the brand by ensuring its momentum, they act out of their own interests with their own often conflicting agendas in mind. They may act out of opposition and resistance thereby engaging to disengage. They may be competing brands attempting to hijack attention and direct it to themselves. Therefore, collaboration must be revisited theoretically to address how participation in campaigns can both contribute and oppose at the same time.

But not only those who engage are difficult to grasp analytically. What they engage with is equally difficult to capture. Trying to pinpoint what the participants agree on is challenged by the way they all refer to different explanations regarding “what it is all about”. They do not just label it differently, such as “entertainment”, “a true story”, “an ad”; they actively try to convince others of *their* version. Therefore, the participants are held together by different versions such as true stories, potential ads, and confirmed marketing stunts. In time their versions change too as more information is added. There are simultaneous versions, coexisting, running in different timelines that do not map onto the actual time of publishing. These different positions generate further discussion and uncertainty as



participants are positioned differently, both when it comes to what they consider part of the story and what they have so far come to know.

But the inconsistencies and frictions between different coexisting versions, are not just a result of a story shared by many with differing knowledge and interpretations. Nor are the different versions simply a result of the non-human actors or the digitally mediated setting distorting and displacing them. The ambiguity is not an outcome of studying something complex. Ambiguity is a *deliberate* strategy to keep participants engaged. Inconsistencies and friction are also results of deliberate choices by the campaign designers in order to engage the audience. Ambiguity becomes the force holding participants and elements together, thus allowing the campaign to grow.

Viral reality marketing campaigns raises new challenges because the “who”, “why”, and “what”, are all analytically challenging to grasp. Those who engage are loosely connected, they have various, often conflicting agendas, and the setting in which their references make sense is highly temporal. What they engage with is ambiguous and it is the absence of confirmation and the temporal potential versions that keeps it stable.

If we relate this to actor-network theory and particularly to the model of translation, we have a fact-builder who manages to create an obligatory passage point successfully enough to enroll others, and where all participation is considered a result of shared interests. There are no distinctions between users and producers. They are analytically treated as actors despite whether they make campaigns or participate in others’ campaigns. The shared interest in a common obligatory passage point is what connects them. However, those who participate out of protest, or with the intent to hijack attention and to keep--yet redefine-- the passage point, is not analytically visible.

We have already seen how multiple actors contribute. Some participate to promote themselves and some to distance themselves from these various connections. Some *become* related as they actively relate themselves, others *get* related through comparisons, juxtapositions, and analysis. But those who enroll themselves and those enrolled by others are different unless seen through ANT. If we analytically treat these connections as valid connections while removing motivation, we see how both matter. Even though neither Australian jacket nor VisitDenmark have made the connection between the two, the connection has been made. Just as the connections between Pepsi and Obama exist. ANT provides a framework that is oriented towards relations as they are made. It treats those who participate, and what they participate with as equal. It includes connections while disregarding

intentions. It does not distinguish between whether a brand participates to promote or hijack attention; it directs attention to the relation that is made.

Where ANT may allow us to highlight a range of actors that are both human and non-human, while highlighting the interplay between these, the deliberate ambiguity requires different analytical tools if we are to capture these dynamics. Informants participate both in creating awareness while at the same time, they participate for conflicting reasons. For instance, some are not aware, some do not care, some use the campaign as steppingstone for their brand promotion, and some participate specifically to object.

The specific reason why the question “who got enrolled and why” is difficult to answer is because people who contribute to creating awareness do not necessarily consider their actions to constitute a contribution. They may participate only to promote themselves; they may do so out of protest; they may do it unknowingly. Therefore, we need to shift from dividing the actors into producers, defined as those who want others to promote their brand, on the one hand, and users, defined as participants engaging with the brand, on the other hand. ANT provides a framework that includes relations irrespective of the number of agendas, as it emphasizes only those relations. Therefore, ANT provides an interesting way of mapping who gets enrolled as well as what they engage in. The ‘why’ is simply assumed to be sufficiently similar interest. Empirically, however, it becomes clear how some actors are both similar, yet different, simultaneously. Additionally, it becomes clear that interests in participation may hold conflicts, as people may participate to betray or convert what an actor represents. ANT does not cover these ambiguities in actors and relations. Thus, we need to conceptualize ambiguity differently.

#### 4.3.2 Ambiguity and the shifting positions in time and space

Events are dispersed in time, asynchronously and between otherwise unconnected people. Timestamps indicating the time of initial digital appearance do not reflect the time that content is encountered. This is an important observation since informants still spoke of the mother as if she were real, despite the already published information that she was an actress featured in a campaign of VisitDenmark. Such differences between actual publishing of information and its specific reach to informants created frictions that spurred discussions among participants.

When a story is accounted for according to timestamps, this reconfigures elements, as some elements may exist early in the account, while only at a later point in time become relevant to the story. We have seen this with the retrospective reference to a Zenvo igniting, Lonely girl15, HuskMitNavn, Are

you the man in the jacket, and Rokokoposten. This illustrates that stories are encountered in a different order. Further, there is also a temporality that enables connections to be obvious at certain points in time, while diminishing as time passes. For instance, the short time span in which everyone thinks about a specific football player when hearing the word bite makes some references obvious as they are made but may require additional explanation at a later point in time.

The analytical framing of innovations in-the-making in diffusion theory seemingly supports the work of retrospective accounting for what went on because it fixes innovation. However, it is crucial to emphasize that the reason for this is that the innovation is *analytically constructed* as a starting point for the analysis. The campaign coming into being is not the outcome of the occurred events. It is produced by the narrator to account for an already, analytically existing phenomena. Actor-network theory on the other hand abandons the concept of innovation as privileged. Any actor continually makes and breaks connections. Therefore, the innovation is temporary and fragile. It exists in a present, always in-the-making, and only through a network of others who actively stabilize it through alliances. However, when it comes to relations between elements that change while keeping some relations intact, the framework of actor-network theory does not deal with ambiguities. It is concerned with how an actor, like the message of Denmark as a nice place for tourists to come, travels from one version to another: a video of a mother, to a video of a father, to a growing number of other videos of fathers, to a video featuring a woman speaking as an actress. Yet the message that Denmark is a nice place to visit is both part of the *same* from one side (a campaign for VisitDenmark), and at the same time different things: Mindjumpers attempt to distance themselves, various comedians, and bloggers' opportunities to create real time entertainment, the actress's opportunity to feature herself, a talk show host's opportunity to promote his show etc. Viral reality marketing campaigns feature a high degree of content that is between parties but not the same from all sites simultaneously. ANT does not have concepts for capturing these nuances.

Boundary-making is a challenge because it is simultaneously the same thing that people engage in, yet different. What happened, and what was part of the story, changed as well. The story of the mother was once potentially an ad for condoms, at another point a campaign for tourism. Telling what happened calls for consideration of how both stories existed at different times. Telling the story of what happened further requires accounting for the relation between these different temporarily existing versions. Telling of the story without making this ambiguity invisible, requires awareness of how to tell the story and what to include as relevant. Thus, telling a story of what happened requires

elaboration of what happened to whom and when. In viral reality marketing these inconsistencies constitute a crucial part of the story.

Telling a story of what happened, requires prerequisites in creating successful memes: it requires that the audience knows a repertoire of the references for them to appreciate it. Likewise, the researcher trying to convey in writing the complex reference-making across media must make present such prerequisites as well. For instance, to account for how references go back and forth between Hitler and The Cleveland Show, the narrator must go back and forth in time, while jumping between different contexts, to tell a story that illustrates the beauty of these brands and the beauty of these references from both sides.

Likewise, telling a story of what happened, requires the narrator enacting a specific order. This is done by reordering and rearranging elements for the story to make sense to the reader positioned externally to what went on. There is invisible work in recreating past networks. The researcher, who attempts to transport temporarily entertaining references into the context of a linear written account, to readers who were not there in time, and who did not share awareness of the specific domains the references came from, performs work in accounting for what happened. Providing answers to what happened therefore becomes a task of rearranging elements to give the reader a sense of coherence.

#### 4.3.3 The shifting position of the researcher

The discussion in this chapter, of being where a campaign has not yet been confirmed, has directed attention to the positioning of the researcher. It is a privileged position for the researcher to experience the same uncertainties as the informants and encounter ambiguous stories as they play out instead of studying them retrospectively. Yet it is also a reminder of the shifting position of the researcher in the field, where things are still uncertain, and of the writer trying to account for what went on at a later point in time, where they may be confirmed or altered due to the course of time.

In the beginning of the VisitDenmark case, I was positioned in the middle of things as the campaign ran. This meant that as an **ethnographer** doing fieldwork, I encountered the campaign *before* it became confirmed as such. My positioning was the same as my fellow participants. We were involved in something that was not yet a campaign, although it had the features and potential for being one. Together we tried to make connections and create order to understand what was going on. The ambiguity held us together due to uncertainties and potentialities.

Our attempts to create order and coherence were directly opposite to the campaign designers' attempts. As their campaign grew, the more ambiguous it became. The ambiguities and uncertainties deliberately chosen to encourage new stories, theories, and competing interpretations, were both what ensured growth in awareness, while at the same time the biggest challenges for the ethnographer trying to get a grasp of what it was.

In the position of a **writer**, accounting for what had happened, I faced a different challenge. What appeared ambiguous when in the field had often settled when looking back at it. Most things in viral reality marketing campaigns are highly temporary. Therefore, as time passed, references that were so obvious while in the field vanished or became less obvious when writing about them retrospectively. Many potential outcomes depended on an absence of a confirmed brand. As the brand got revealed, the story shifted. The expectations to potential outcomes of the stories and potential ads that existed in the field, had been exchanged for confirmed stories and publicly claimed ads, when I was writing about them retrospectively. Therefore, as a writer I tried to bring into the story the incoherence, the multiple stories and the potential outcomes that kept the campaign alive. This conflicted with the campaign designers' version of what had been going on. They tried to order the story as well. They tried to retell it as if had been about their specific brand all along.

Thus, as an ethnographer I tried to delimit ambiguity while campaign designers encouraged it, while as a writer, I embraced and tried to highlight the ambiguity, while the designers tried to delimit it and reduce all the mess into a matter of a single campaign with a clear message. I faced a methodological challenge in being aware of, and accounting for, my shifting positions as well as those who also try to tell the story simultaneously. Telling a story of what happened requires awareness of shifts between the ethnographer's position in the middle of things and the writer's position when accounting retrospectively. But it also reminds us that telling the story is a joint venture of informants, campaign designers and researcher. Furthermore, the writer trying to address the question of what happened, directs attention backwards, whereas the ethnographer and the informant in the field address a "what happens" that directs attention forward, into potential futures. Awareness of such shifts and what objects they each construct, is an insight into studying campaigns that grow because they change.

Summing up, three areas have been emphasized until now. First, what holds the campaign together changes and is ambiguous. Those who engage do so for various conflicting reasons. The writer, accounting for it, must contemplate how to speak of what happened as she shifts positions, while also accounting for the way stories are simultaneously told by many.

In the following chapter I will provide new ways of approaching these areas.