Theorising ambiguity: telling deliberately equivocal viral stories
Toft, D.F.

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5. Making boundaries, telling stories, shaping worlds

5.1 An exercise in ordering

In viral reality marketing, we are dealing with temporary, ad hoc, fleeting relations. Interactions are digitally mediated and thereby both easily distributed as well as distorted. They come abruptly into existence and are short-lived and highly un-orchestrated. While such campaigns play out, they are omnipresent, yet simply cease to be soon after. People forget about them, as data representing the discussions and theories is removed or downranked by algorithms in favor of new trending content. Despite the uncomfortable position of the ethnographer being in an unpredictable, cacophonous mess, where the outcome, extent, and consequences are unclear, it is both possible and extremely crucial to study such phenomena.

Placing oneself in the thick of it becomes essential as more and more trends and movements originate and grow through social media. Capturing and understanding the muddled state of the world, where "local" no longer simply refers to physical distance, is therefore even more relevant today. But how can this be done? This study of viral reality marketing illustrates new insights, when the researcher is embedded in the object of study, i.e., the events unfolding. It explores not only the messy object of study, but also the researcher's shifting positions, thereby pinpointing specific areas to which researchers studying temporary digitally mediated, and dispersed interactions, must pay special attention.

5.1.1 New questions arise

When you, the reader of this dissertation, read this document – organized with examples, analysis, and references – it is the result of an extensive process of in- and exclusions. The work is carefully structured to give a particular understanding of the relationships between viral reality marketing, ambiguity, temporality, analytical concerns, and methodological considerations. It is also the result of choices about what to explain and what to assume as basic knowledge for the reader. It is an acrobatic act of telling what went on in highly intensive settings, while only handpicking a few examples to represent it. Prior to this, before putting together the actual document, it was a process of finding suitable conceptual frames of mind to bring into the field; it was active work to enter the field, consisting of continuous contemplation of different terms and concepts, as well as translation of these terms into useful questions to informants, and iteratively revising everything as required. Practical decisions regarding what pieces of information to save as screenshots were taken – in retrospect, sometimes too few. Throughout the process of creating this dissertation I have put effort

into determining what kinds of information to write down, how to engage and interact with informants, and how to proceed when discrepancies between informants and the imagined project surfaced. The topic of this chapter is how the document you hold came into being, as well as the kinds of work, boundary-making, considerations, and choices that went before it. The questions that will be discussed can be divided into three different types of concerns:

How is it possible for the ethnographer in the field to **study** and conceptualize the highly fragmented and temporary fleeting connections that are everywhere at once, before vanishing just as suddenly as they came into being? Where can the researcher position herself? What should she be looking for? And how does her specific access influence the object of study she is able to grasp and represent?

How, and in what terms, can the researcher **analyze** what is going on, while capturing the ambiguities, incoherence, and conflicts surrounding viral reality campaigns, as well as the cacophony of voices and activities generated by them?

What concerns are there when the researcher attempts to **write** about ambiguous incoherent events, in retrospect, in ways that make the temporal connections, unpredictability, controversies and inconsistencies visible, without explaining them away in a simplified, coherent account?

These main concerns will be pivotal throughout the chapter.

Performing fieldwork results in data that is then processed: categorized, analyzed, interpreted, and presented. Here, a specific focus on different modes of ordering will be provided both while data is collected in the field, as well as when it is analyzed and subsequently converted into a written narrative of the events. These three domains (collection, analysis, and presentation), with their varying requirements and challenges regarding ordering, overlap and influence each other. Discussing modes of ordering across all three highlights challenges that occur when studying ambiguous events and emphasizes the work that must be actively performed. Whereas this is always a matter that researchers must be concerned with, the methodological concerns are highly relevant when studying a phenomenon that shifts from being potential, to various ambiguous versions of stories, to finally being accompanied by a specific brand and message that attempts to rewrite what it was all about in retrospect. These shifts, unique to a phenomenon that strategically uses ambiguity to create brand awareness, emphasize the need for the researcher to contemplate the various positions she is in.

5.2 Temporality and potentiality

The difference between studying a campaign retrospectively, versus being in the middle of things as they play out, directs attention to the non-human actors that play crucial roles in the ability to access data, not only when time has passed, but also while massive amounts of data are being generated simultaneously and ubiquitously across digital platforms, and disappearing just as suddenly as they appeared. In the following sections, temporality and potentiality will be discussed through two types of orientation the researcher can deploy: one of the present and one of futures. Both orientations represent modes of ordering data useful to the ethnographer doing fieldwork. I will then discuss the concept of modes of ordering. The researcher shifting position from fieldworker to analyst and writer will be a recurring theme.

5.2.1 Actor-network theory - orientation towards presents

Communication studies highlight influencers as groups relevant to pinpoint in Word of Mouth (Carl 2008; Griggs and Freilich 2017; Katz and Lazarsfeld 2005). They are assumed to have higher influence on a brand by reaching more people. It may not be the same influencers from case to case, but their role in supplying momentum to the campaign is both predefined and crucial.

As we have seen we need to approach the role of influencers and communities differently. Empirically they may manage to establish themselves as obligatory passage points or as actors strong enough to speak on behalf of many others, but these cannot be pinpointed prior to the campaign. As viral reality marketing campaigns are ad hoc, the connections and the directions in which the debates go are unpredictable. Therefore, the identities of the people who play these influential roles and the connections between content that is made is not a given beforehand.

When using ANT as a frame of explanation, concepts such as communities, users, producers, and online interactions, as well as innovations, are not above the data collected, and can therefore not be used as explanatory factors. On the contrary, any relation must be explained and accounted for. The aim of ANT is to highlight correlations and associations that might otherwise be invisible or preconstructed through categorization. The power, Latour emphasizes, lies in providing connections among unrelated elements, as well as in showing how one element holds many others (Latour 1996:8). The ability of ANT to resist a priori constructions allows for otherwise seemingly miniscule actors to become significant. Analytically, being able to see this distinction is an achievement of having framed actors as neither major nor minor *ab initio,* or the innovation as something that existed initially, independently of those who encountered it (Rogers 2003). ANT does not deny that some actors play

a larger role or influence a great many others, but they come into being through continuous alliances. And they depend on others to be stabilized, temporarily, as such. Using ANT as a mode of ordering data while in the field, we avoid treating concepts such as influencers, communities, and people in important positions in relation to the innovations as pre-existing entities. The boundary-making done by bringing presumed orderings such as users, influencers, or innovations into the field may analytically, and unintentionally, create boundaries that order data according to them, thereby becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy of how the world works. The benefit of insisting on connections without analytically taking influencers or innovations as a starting point, is that the researcher then focuses on unexpected connections, as they come into being, instead of locating pre-defined connections. This makes ANT a highly useful tool to map connections in the present as they occur. When the ethnographer is positioned in the middle of something that is dispersed across domains and not yet confirmed, ANT provides an orientation that disregards assumptions of obvious places, groups, and objects. It prevents a priori filtering and allows the ethnographer to grasp the temporary interactions as they happen.

5.3.2 Expectation studies - future orientation

Whereas ANT is useful in ordering an intensive and temporal phenomenon with multiple actors because of its abilities to map the connections, as they are made, it is not concerned with the future. ANT does not deal with causality; therefore, actions and the consequences they have, are only relevant in this framework when, and if, they happen. However, a present where people struggle to make, connect, and deconstruct elements, in order to come closer to what is going on, generates a lot of potential outcomes. In their attempt to shed light on *what* they are engaging in, people exchange opinions and play detective, thereby generating new references. Subsequently, these new references give rise to new potential outcomes, which in turn generate more curiosity and spur increased participation. The driving force of the campaign is the continuous addition of new elements to the story. Expectations and temporary potential outcomes are essential parts of viral reality marketing. Therefore, another analytical concept in need of attention is future orientation.

Stories that simultaneously hold together questions regarding the potential existence and identity of brands behind them, and the possible messages they contain, generate expectations. This directs attention to a shift from what is in the present, to what exists in that present as a temporary future. Potential future outcomes are the driving forces in viral reality marketing. Expectations make way for, as well as encourage, new stories. Therefore, the relationships between the present and the

temporarily existing futures in that present, need more attention. Analytically, we need to look forward, to see how a version shapes the way future versions *can* be.

Recent studies of expectation and foresights point to the performative role of expectations and plans[36]. They highlight that, when breaking away from promises and futures created by expectations and plans, extra work is necessary compared to simply translating one's action according to the pre-existing expectations and plans. Thus, expectations construct potential futures which, despite never materializing, play a role in the present. One can speak of multiple potential futures, and their tendency can be contested in the present, despite minimizing their importance when analyzed retrospectively, as a materialized future is then known.

The concept of contested futures is introduced in a book by the same name (Brown, Webster, and Rappert 2000). Here, Brown et al. elaborate on a variety of studies of innovation processes, focusing on the various potential futures that exist in the present, as well as the role such contested futures play in constraining and enabling specific developments. The overall aim of the contributions in the book is to shift the focus from looking *into* the future to looking *at* it. This means exploring the future as a temporal abstraction, thereby exploring how it is constructed, by whom it is managed, and under which conditions (Brown, Webster, and Rappert 2000:4). In this framework they elaborate on how the future is actively created in the present through contested claims and counterclaims over its potential. (Brown, Webster, and Rappert 2000:5). In contrast to other similar studies, the contributions in this book all emphasize that the concept of contested futures does not postulate the probability of one future versus another, nor does it attempt to generate normative descriptions about specific futures. Instead, the analytical gaze is focused on the phenomenon of future orientation. The focus is not the future per se, but the real time activities of actors utilizing a range of different resources with which to create direction or convince others of what the future will bring. This analytical shift is a useful tool while in the field, studying intensely orchestrated events involving a high degree of uncertainty and multiple competing contributors. In viral reality marketing – or any field where the ethnographer faces conflicting lines of story development – anticipation of many

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[36] Plans have played an important role in studies of computer software development, in dealing with the difference between intentions embedded in software and outcomes in actual use. More discussions of this can be found in CSCW (Computer Supported Cooperative Work which emphasizes how different kinds of plans may provide different kinds of resources, such as maps or scripts (Schmidt 1999), and which explicitly focuses on how plans are used in action (Bardram 1997; Rönkkö, Dittrich, and Randall 2005). Worth mentioning here is Lucy Suchman's distinction between plans and situated action (Suchman 1995): Plans do not determine situated action but are resources for it. However, concomitant effort is required to deviate from such plans.

potential outcomes result. Trying to rephrase questions and focus on what, if only temporarily, is the expected future, allows for a different understanding of what is going on. It embraces the ambiguity and uncertainty that is deliberately encouraged by such a campaign. Instead of trying to know more about what is going on, one can rephrase questions, and increase curiosity about the various theories and explanations.

Performative role

Futures, *in posse* if not *in esse*, play an important role. In their study of nanotubes as seen from the perspective of research groups, society, and technological fields, van Merkerk and Van Lente introduce the concept of emerging irreversibilities. In doing so, they center their focus on the process by which fluidity and open-endedness are decreased, due to expectations based on the potential futures existing for the nanotubes (van Merkerk and van Lente 2005). These emerging irreversibilities are what constrain, as well as enable, lines of action, thereby having an impact on the future by formulating a range of expectations. In defining the concept, they write that *"emerging irreversibilities make it more difficult (or less easy) for actors to do something else (or easier to do something)"* (van Merkerk and van Lente 2005:1096). This means that actors experience more, or less, resistance for different options they try to explore and develop. These constraints or incentives stem from options that become more dominant over others and subsequently, a technological path emerges. However, van Merkerk and van Lente's explicit goal is to show how such irreversibilities must be located while in the field instead of being constructed, or justified by a narrative rhetoric, retrospectively.

Wilkie and Michael also refer to the concept of irreversibilities. They emphasize the role users play in documents before technologies meet the actual users, an example of such irreversibilities. This role creates an expectation of the future users that then justifies choices made concerning the technology (Wilkie and Michael 2009). Thus, the document has a double role both in making plans for what the users' role *will* be, as well as delineating what those roles *can* be.

Expectation is another concept that helps the researcher towards a future orientation. According to Brown and Michael, in their paper entitled "A Sociology of Expectations: Retrospecting Prospects and Prospecting Retrospects", expectations are not only interesting insofar as they shape potential futures by guiding choices of action, but also because they shape new expectations of futures as the old ones expire, disappoint, or fail to be realized (Michael and Brown 2010). For instance, expectations of specific futures often fail while still having an impact on what is to be expected next.

Sometimes expectations not only affect boundaries for future actions, but also provide boundaries and incentives for new constructions of futures.

Brown and Michael argue that significant patterns can be observed when we compare real-time current expectations with memories of former expectations. Such changing expectations can be understood in two distinguishable ways by which people interpret expectations and change.

> *"The first of these 'interpretative registers' refers to the way the future was once represented, as distinct from the way it is currently represented. This process of recollecting past futures we have called Retrospecting Prospects, or people's memories of the future. The second register refers to what people do in the present with these recollections. That is, the uses that people have for these memories by redeploying them to manage or engage with the future. This second activity we have called Prospecting Retrospects, whereby past futures are incorporated into the real-time constructions of future presents"* (Michael and Brown 2010:3)

Their focus in on how past futures shape present ones. This becomes relevant when expectations are used strategically. The "sociology of expectations" approach is interesting as a supplement to ANT, as it provides a focus that encompasses cuts that were previously made in networks. It allows us to consider the relation between a future that once was, and the future as it is constructed now. In doing so, it highlights alliances that were once made, but are later rendered irrelevant, or are replaced with new ones. Even though these connections are not directly part of the current picture, the remnants of their influences might still be. Therefore, these analytical resources enable us to highlight the defunct potential futures that served to create momentum for campaigns, even if the expected futures never materialized. ANT indirectly includes future orientation through scripting and mobilization. However, a failed network is no longer a network; therefore, in retrospect, it is no longer perceptible even if it facilitates a new network. The emphasis on potentiality is a reminder of the benefits of looking at the future from the present while in the field, and keeping this specific future, even if temporary or later replaced by another, in mind. It also reminds us to contemplate how to account for it later.

Summary

Expectations are a two-edged sword in the sense that they are used strategically. First, expectations are the driving force: as long as people stay curious for new knowledge about the source of the story, the purpose is served. They will keep engaging and exchanging opinions and theories. This leaves

room for flexibility, and it gives a voice to the people involved. Second, as this chapter's theoretical discussion illustrates, there are risks involved in using expectations strategically, as they are constitutive, thereby effecting *and* affecting possible future outcomes. Expectations not only motivate people to act, their interpretation of the outcome may also depend on those prior expectations. For this reason, the variety of possible future outcomes might make it difficult for campaign creators to transform the attention gained into a specific outcome.

Expectations have a performative effect in creating a prerequisite for what is going to happen. They act as driving forces, as the absence of confirmation calls for people to make up their own theories about what they are experiencing. Paying attention to the role of expectations also calls for consideration of how the multitudes of expectations are managed strategically and by whom. And finally, temporality touches on the specific challenge of telling, in retrospect, about events that occurred, that were made and recognized, without rendering important potential futures invisible as a consequence of turning it into a linear coherent story.

5.2.1 Modes of ordering are entwined and nonlinear

John Law, in his book *Organizing Modernity: Social Ordering and Social Theory*, emphasizes how getting from empirical data to the final analytical product is a process with several modes of ordering:

> *"[E]thnography is an exercise in ordering. And that ordering involves interacting before, during and after the process of fieldwork"* (Law 1993:43)

Gaining access is the first example of a situation in which an ordering must take place. This implies contacting the right people, assembling elements of the project relevant to those who decide if they will grant you access, and convincing people that a particular kind of presence is required to conduct the study. This work is one of ordering bits and pieces to create the possibility of a project (Law 1993:35). But there is more to ordering than preparation before being allowed to enter buildings, attend meetings and be in positions where knowledge can be accessed and obtained. As soon as one is granted entrance, there is the question of where to go, where to locate the action and how to make sure to become part of it. Thus, the question of when access is gained is not always easily separated into *before* and *during*. This means that it is both something that must be done before entering the field, and yet also raises the question of when, and whether, the field can be said to be sufficiently entered. Thus, gaining access *before* fieldwork is not a stand-alone task inseparable from gathering data and engaging in the field *during* fieldwork. Choices at one level affect the choices available at the next level. Furthermore, once having gained access, research permissions, as well as promises

made as to future contributions deriving from the research, will later stand as actors from the past. The researcher will thus insure that, as more data is added, the project still has connections back to these earlier agreements. Therefore, as the project progresses, no matter the outcome, links between what was agreed, and what has occurred, will need to be made. The ordering from *before* will have influence on the analysis made *after*. Similarly, questioning informants in the field creates a specific awareness about the project, which makes later questions seem plausible, if not inevitable. Informants may find these later questions confusing, disturbing, or perhaps divergent from what the researcher originally was assumed to be interested in. Such relations between *before*, *during* and *after* are important, since they are the first indicators that something is going on between, as well as across, different modes of ordering bits and pieces.

Thus, from the point of view of writing up the research, earlier pasts (*before*, when preparing to get access), later pasts (*during*, when locating the action in the field), and present (*after*, when presenting earlier events, considering what is now known) allow for different kinds of concerns when it comes to ordering, and these concerns are often entwined.

5.2.2 Ordering in the field

The privilege of defining an order, Law continues, is one that the researcher in the field shares with his or her informants. The field contains multiple, simultaneous orderings. Multiple actors are connected through various networks, each carrying different notions of what the lab, the work, or the research project is. This allows Law to recall a previous concern he had, while in the field: *"where the ethnographer is, the action is not"* (Law 1993:45). In his earlier narrative about being in the field, Law had the feeling that wherever he was, people were talking about other events and meetings. Whenever he was in one place, he was missing out on something going on somewhere else. It was impossible to order bits and pieces by placing oneself where the action was, because doing so instantly raised questions about the boundaries of the action as well as of the object of study. Many of these concerns were in play throughout my process of turning research questions into fieldwork and subsequently into a dissertation.

5.2.3 Ordering through writing

"Writing is work, ordering work", Law states in his chapter on networks and places (Law 1993:31). But what happens when an author moves from a single voice to several, he asks. Along these lines one could further ask: how many can we give voice to? What criteria should guide us? Does giving voice to some over others carry consequences in concealing relevant pasts? These are but some of the

questions one can ask after having read Law's considerations. Prioritizing some voices over others is a privilege of the narrator who constructs a specific reality. Any narrative makes some elements of the past unavoidable, while neglecting others. When writing about innovations, or laboratories, the author has the ability to look back and gather the bits and pieces that support the narrative he or she wants to create, but also the responsibility to do so conscientiously. This raises the question whether it is possible to tell a story without having actively decided which story to tell. Therefore, the writer plays an active, and far from neutral, role.

For instance, Law, in his narrative from the *before* phase, tells how he promised to provide the managerial board of the organization under study with copies of all potential publications before they were released. This agreement indicated the requirement that the organization see accordance between the written words and the past promises. Thereby, this ordering of bits and pieces must encompass several elements. In the *before* phase: the promise to show them the text before publishing. From the *during* phase: relevance to and respect for the laboratory and the maintenance of good relations, so as not to endanger the access gained. From the *after* phase: the potential for the academic audience that will hopefully read the text later. Thus, telling a story about a technology is more than just telling the story that the writer wants; he or she will often be obliged to incorporate elements of a past, a present and a potential future from the point of view from where the narrative is told.

Whereas it might be obvious that modes of ordering from *before* fieldwork might affect modes of ordering *during* fieldwork, another interesting, and perhaps less intuitive, challenge comes when writing. For as we shall see, modes of ordering *after* the fieldwork can also affect modes of ordering *before* it in retrospect. This has to do with the ways retrospective accounts can render past events invisible even if, at the time of fieldwork, they seemed relevant. Thus, modes of ordering, even in the seemingly simple form of *before*, *during* and *after* fieldwork, call for further attention. Just as the researcher should be aware of innovations in-the-making as fragile and temporary, so too should this awareness be present when writing, in retrospect, about them.

In the book *Aircraft stories. Decentering the Object in Technoscience*, Law writes:

> *"I want to imagine alternative versions of what it is to theorize; versions that avoid the hierarchical distribution between theory and data, or theory and practice; versions that instead perform multiplicities and interferences¸ versions that come to terms, in the way they perform themselves, with the postmodern that it is not possible to draw everything*

together into a simple singular account; versions of theorizing that, in other words, are allegorical rather that literary in their form" (Law 2002:39)

Thus, the writer is left with important decisions concerning what story or stories to tell, and which data to give voice to in the retrospective account. This sometimes includes actors, quotes, and interviews that seem to interfere with a coherent story.

In summary, an ethnographic approach to any subject studied provides an extensive amount of material gathered through fieldwork. However, this material may also include informants, and realities that did not fit the initial analytical framing that was brought into the field. Analytical tools need to be revised and adjusted, just as analytical tools emphasize and silence different aspects of the empirical data. It is a continuous cycle between theory and empirical data, which calls for accounts and awareness of the process of reaching the results that provide closure when finally fixed in writing[37]. Yet the translation of empirical data, with all its ambiguities and incoherence, calls for specific attention to the translation into a final text.

5.3 Positioning

John Law's concern that where the researcher is, the action is not, is highly relevant to consider when studying something that happens suddenly, that is dispersed through digital platforms, and that is subject to massive and continuously growing attention and interaction. The challenge of positioning oneself in this alone is difficult, but in addition to this we need to add the aspect of time. When speaking of access as a mode of ordering, it is not only *where* but also to a great degree *when* the researcher is positioned, that is important.

5.3.1 Different orderings: "as it happens" as opposed to "after"

Paying attention to these points in time from which to approach the object of study are consequential for the kind of story we tell. This is highly relevant for stories characterized by a lack of information, that feature asynchronous distorted distribution of information, and where ambiguity is a main driving force. When studying such stories, we need to be explicitly aware of the positions from where we encounter these stories.

An interesting insight related to this appears from comparing data gained in the case of VisitDenmark to that from the Speedbandits campaign. Whereas Speedbandits was studied 3 years after the

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[37] I am aware that readers may open this up again, since the act of writing fixes the meaning only for the *writer* at a specific moment in time.

campaign had run, VisitDenmark was studied before it was confirmed to be a viral reality campaign. Where data was limited due to the passing of time while tracing the stories related to Speedbandits, VisitDenmark provided an excess of data. Stories spun around VisitDenmark's campaign played out in a highly intense and short period of time. These differences highlight how different kinds of access call for different kinds of ordering of data.

Speedbandits was retold by informants who did not recall many details regarding where they saw the video, with whom they shared it, and why they shared it. Informants described it as a fun video but rarely nuanced it in relation to misunderstandings, or to ethical or political discussion. However, newspapers and blog posts illustrated a greater variety in responses. They indicated a more general discussion that reached government officials, and became a topic for discussions on gender, ethics, and differences between nationalities. Time not only changed the level of details remembered by informants directly, but also changed the digital traces still accessible.

The illusion of digital traces

Data represented digitally creates an illusion of being a permanent proof. It gives the idea that data *is* there and *stays* there, while in practice elements are removed. Systems enabling content to remain in place vanish, and consequently, access to those elements disappears along with their systems. Where newspapers were accessible through archives, blogposts were not archived, and many links provided by Google redirected as the blogs were no longer there, or those blogposts Google had registered were subsequently deleted.

In awareness of this, I ensured that I had screenshots, stored videos, and made local copies of homepages, while I was in the intense process of gathering data. However, storing data also created an illusion of intactness. Paying attention to non-human actors has allowed me to be aware that as content travels, it gets displaced. Storing pictures, comments, and videos removes them from the infrastructure of which they were a part. Even though it may seem that having stored a video locally keeps it intact, this is not the case. A video stored no longer has hashtags that indicate similarities to other pieces of content. The timestamps indicating when it was posted, the number of views it got, who uploaded it, which comments and reactions it received, likes and dislikes given by viewers, etc. are all examples of metadata lost in preservation, and by extension, distorting the level of access valuable for later analysis.

The loss of metadata when videos are reuploaded as new copies has impact on informants in the field as well. They may encounter what seems to be the same video, despite being different regarding

context. This too is relevant for the researcher gathering data. In gathering data in digitally mediated settings, we need to pay attention to the work of algorithms, scripts indicating publication dates, and tags connecting content as "similar". Links to those who commented on videos are useful as a means for contacting informants, yet seemingly unimportant technical details such as storing threads as screenshots instead of as web pages prevent the researcher from using those links to reach potential informants. The ethnographer in the field needs to pay attention to the specific network of relations that these actors form, as well as what holds an actor together as one, both while gathering and storing data. Storing data as evidence, or as a means for later analysis, while necessary and useful, nevertheless means removing data from a specific network of relationships.

For the researcher studying what happened as the Speedbandits campaign ran, the illusion of digital traces still being accessible requires an awareness of what kinds of data can be gathered when using digitally mediated settings as a source for data gathering. For instance, the initial comments and reactions to Speedbandits were impossible to obtain, even though the video was still there. Each time the video was removed by YouTube, and reuploaded as a new copy by users, the comments that accompanied the video were deleted, and did not reappear with the newest uploaded version. Therefore, initial responses to the video no longer exist, even though the illusion that the video is there ready to be studied prevails. Since the Speedbandits video contained nudity, YouTube deleted it several times, though of course people reuploaded it again.

Fleeting connections such as deleted blog posts or videos, as well as the content they facilitated, are not solely relevant to pay attention to when studying older cases where time had passed. Even when positioned in the middle of campaigns, data disappears; this calls for awareness of storing and ensuring the preservation of material for later analysis. The homepage on Mono.net, featuring the mother's pictures and contact information, was deleted after a few days. It had a comment section to encourage participation. This comment section was pivotal for many contributors who tried to help the mother and show their sympathy. The comment section held together the various types of reactions, from people talking to the mother, to the actress, to Ditte or to various potential brands presumed to be behind the, also presumed, ad. As I read through and replied to these interesting comments, I managed to take a screenshot, but as the webpage was deleted, the direct line to those who replied was no longer kept intact. The site disappeared even before it was officially revealed to be a campaign from VisitDenmark. Using ANT highlights that an object of study may seemingly be one thing but turn out to be multiple things via looking at actors.

5.3.2 How to order things before they come into being

Just as the researcher should be aware of innovations in-the-making as fragile and temporary, so too should this awareness be present when writing retrospectively about them. However, the two do not necessarily map onto each other. Therefore, the act of studying something as it happens, as well as before it has manifested as a campaign, requires a forward-looking orientation towards futures that are only potentially materializing, whereas analysis and representations done in retrospect tend to neglect such potentials. Awareness of the different modes of ordering throughout the process are crucial to account for. As with the retrospective account of the Hitler/Cleveland references, we have seen how stories detached from their context, both in time and relationships, require a new ordering. This also means that the modes of ordering in retrospect may miss or distort elements. One example – that of how modes of ordering during the process of writing affect earlier modes of ordering from the stage of gathering data – becomes visible when it comes to unfulfilled expectation. Many of my informants reacted positively to VisitDenmark's Campaign at one point in time, as they assumed it was an ad for condoms and safe sex. In the light of another video that was suggested as similar to this one, Spies Rejser (a Danish travel agency that had had success with several controversial television ads that mixed humor, sex, and travel), VisitDenmark's story was deemed cool. It generated a great deal of buzz, not only digitally mediated and in personal conversations, but also via mass media coverage. However, as the story was later to be revealed as "the campaign of VisitDenmark", these people no longer reacted positively to it. It shifted from being a potentially cool story, to one that was disappointing.

There are different modes of ordering here to consider in the writing process. Data gathered from the time when the story was a version potentially about safe sex, and with a great potential for success based on other similar stories, tells the story of a successful campaign. This temporary promise of success ensured that it was spread and shared, surrounded by positive remarks and anticipation. Now that we are able to tell the story in retrospect, we know that the video was a viral reality marketing campaign for VisitDenmark, which was finally withdrawn from YouTube. Ultimately, the campaign was criticized on national television for using a lie to represent Danish tourism, which cost the director and several others their jobs. In retrospect, the positive, anticipatory, and excited comments were invalidated. They were no longer relevant to it, since they concerned a version of the future now rejected. These temporal and potential future outcomes and the discussions they keep generating among participants creates a challenge while in the field: because the relevance of data changes, it sometimes becomes irrelevant or even disruptive for the story in retrospect because potential brands

that temporarily were presumed to be behind the campaign did not fit into a retrospective elaboration of VisitDenmark's campaign. The question is how to encompass different modes of ordering in a way that does not exclude instances that, while writing, might be irrelevant but, while in the field, had an important impact on the awareness surrounding the campaign.

Collating data in retrospective accounts such as that of Speedbandits, highlights the fact that sometimes details are left out if they do not fit with the story (now) told. However, an awareness of what might be excluded from linear retrospective stories allows for contemplating different ways of writing, and different ways of giving voice to actors of the past. It calls for an awareness of the data that may later be rendered invisible. While in the field, we need to direct attention to such data with the mindset of connections as fleeting. This is particularly crucial when studying campaigns that have not yet come into being.

5.3.3 Ordering what is potentially connected

A final challenge in ordering data while studying viral reality campaigns is potential connections. I had followed many curious stories before the story of the mother, because I was certain that I had recognized a campaign, however, later realizing it was not. One such example is Debbie the Cat Lover, which turned out to be a real story where Debbie had made a video for her sister. As it went viral and had the hallmarks of an ad, it seemed obvious that it was marketing for eHarmony, the dating site to which she uploaded the video.

Not all viral reality marketing campaigns end up being revealed. Sometimes the strategic ambiguity is what keeps people busy, while confirmation contributes to closure. Morten Hoffmann from Far from Hollywood emphasized the Cola-Mentos connection: videos where Coke and Mentos are mixed, resulting in an explosion. Coca-Cola could be behind such videos; however, admitting that this as a campaign would ruin its value. The whole concept of such a campaign hinges on uncertainty, and some successful campaigns might only remain so if people speculate – but are not able to prove – whether it truly is a campaign. Coca-Cola has tried to stop the trend, claiming that it damages their brand, yet marketing experts suggest that this too could be an attempt to boost brand awareness. Most likely, we will never know the truth. Similarly, there is still the possibility that Debbie's video was

commissioned and that she was paid for making it. However, its popularity would diminish, and its element of authenticity would be lost if this were ever confirmed.[38]

During fieldwork, I often encountered videos that I had seen years earlier, yet had never known were advertising. I presume that many such campaigns are still unknown to me and that I simply failed to recognize them when I first encountered them. Thus, being in the field while studying a phenomenon – whose very premise relies on not being captured, described, or confirmed – requires constant and repeated reordering. Content encountered may or may not be advertising, and the researcher must approach it without assuming that it is one or the other. Entering the field requires an open mind, but in a field where strategic ambiguity is a deliberate strategy, potential connections are modes of ordering that serve to enlighten us. The modes of ordering here are counterintuitive, as ordering connections by not ordering them is the way to allow for the ambiguity. Yet explaining what is deliberately ambiguous has the danger of removing what drives the phenomenon.

In summary, modes of ordering serve to create awareness of the many instances in which ordering is going on, as both ethnographer and informants actively navigate in digitally mediated settings with different kinds of access and at different times. The translation between the different modes of ordering is pivotal. Without specific awareness of how the researcher moves between different modes throughout the process, we may incidentally turn incoherent data into a story as if it had been a campaign all along. Doing so is a misrepresentation of what went on as it happened.

To illustrate the implications in using ambiguity to explain what went on in retrospect, let us look back at the case of VisitDenmark. In doing so we saw several versions simultaneously:

- *It is a campaign* – but only to VisitDenmark and GoViral.
- *It is potentially a campaign* – to the researcher dropping everything at hand to attend.
- *It is not a campaign* – to those speaking to the mother telling her not to listen to the negative comments.
- *It is a campaign* but *could potentially be from multiple brands* – to those who recognize signs and references to similar campaigns.

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[38] There is an interesting strand of literature within public relations, dealing with companies using strategic ambiguity to keep people interested, as well as to lessen doubts that could damage the brand. Thus, ambiguity is known and used in brand communications (Eisenberg 2006; Paul and Stribak 1997; Sellnow and Timothy 1997).

- *It is not yet a campaign* – to the analyst as well as writer.

All these versions exist simultaneously from the point of view of the researcher trying to tell the story of what happened. Yet the ambiguity of all the multiple versions does not contribute to explaining why the individual actors did what they did. To borrow a formulation from physics, seen in retrospect, these variations are in a state of superposition in which they all exist simultaneously. This mode of ordering allows us to highlight the ambiguities in discussing a campaign, by asking when and where the campaign is. This is a benefit of being positioned where we *know* it is a campaign. Attention to modes of ordering and the gaps between them helps us to keep in mind what was known to whom, and at what point in time. This insight requires navigation when analyzing and writing retrospectively, if we are not to misinterpret what people did, by retrospectively bringing concepts into the story that did not exist at the time.

5.4 Spatiality

Through the various empirical examples discussed so far, it has become clear that ambiguity, battles of meaning, deliberate play on words carrying multiple meanings, and strategically blurred lines between fake, real, humor, satire, and controversial content, all play crucial roles in viral reality marketing. Not only are boundaries difficult to define, as informants often disagree on how and where to draw them, but they are also deliberately blurred, since the format of viral reality marketing is to create stories that *lack* information and, thus, are open to conflicting variations. Therefore, we must consider additional theoretical approaches to ambiguity as well as to boundary-making. In the following sections, different types of spatiality are introduced and discussed with focus on their distinct features in grasping stability achieved through ambiguity. These new concepts highlight the duality between things changing while at the same time keeping specific elements in place.

5.4.1 Boundary objects

We have seen how ANT is useful as a mode of ordering while in the field, because of its removal of a priori assumptions. However, as a mode of ordering when analyzing, ANT is less helpful. For instance, it may point to the way hashtags hold together many actors, but it does not enlighten us on how and why people engage for conflicting reasons simultaneously. As an analytical counterproposal to ANT, Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer have suggested the term boundary object to elaborate on cooperation between parties *despite* different interests.

"The problem of translation as described by Latour [...] is central to the reconciliation described in this paper. In order to create scientific authority, entrepreneurs gradually enlist participants from a range of locations re-interpret their concerns to fit their own pragmatic goals and then establish themselves as gatekeepers [...] Yet a central feature of this situation is that entrepreneurs from more than one Social World are trying to conduct such translations simultaneously [...][This] n-way nature of the intersegment cannot be understood from a single viewpoint" (Star and Griesemer 1989:389)

With boundary objects, Star and Griesemer try to analytically escape the one-way perspective that ANT provides, when it focuses on the role of the entrepreneurs and fact-builder attempting to enroll other actors as allies around the stabilization of obligatory passage points.

Star and Griesemer emphasize that there are several actors, who all simultaneously try to stabilize their facts. Boundary objects are defined as: *"[...] objects that both inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them."* (Star and Griesemer 1989:393). They are sufficiently malleable to adapt to local needs, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. The concept of boundary objects is a response specifically to the concept of interessement (Latour 1988; Callon 1986) where entrepreneurs gradually recruit allies to stabilize their ideas or inventions. However, according to Star and Griesemer, total alignment of interests is not necessary. Diverging interests can coexist (Star and Griesemer 1989:339). Where Callon elaborates on translation as something enabling alignment of both fact builder and various interested parties, Star and Griesemer emphasize that their interests are aligned only to the extent that they agree to engage with the same object, but not necessarily the motivations.

Boundary objects allow us to question the required extent of alignment for a cooperation to be successful for the participants. For instance, we can ask: "Must the motivation for sharing a video involve it being part of a campaign to promote some specific product?" In ANT's view, people sharing the video have aligned interests, whereas Star and Griesemer would say that they may engage in the same boundary object, but it is the mechanisms of the boundary object that allow them to engage while maintaining their own interest.

ANT is a field researcher's tool, allowing relations and connections to be mapped as they are made. Boundary objects, on the other hand, is a tool that allows the analyst to explain collaboration despite differing interests.

Boundary objects allow the analyst to highlight complexities of collaboration and produce an explanation of successful collaboration. However, this aligns various coexisting interests even when

participants themselves do not acknowledge their shared interest in the object. Thus, using boundary objects to analyze collaboration does not provide insights into the internal disagreements of those held together by the boundary objects, nor into how they may actively and strategically try to alter, hijack, or affect the boundary object in order to increase their own interests or to exclude others. Disagreements and deliberate acts of resistance are rendered invisible when the analyst uses boundary objects to describe the events and situation.

Strategy disagreements and ambiguity

Star and Griesemer provide no focus on those who create these objects nor on what strategies are put to use when some try to shape them in specific ways. The analyses of Callon (Callon 1986) and Latour (Latour 1988) provide a specific perspective from where to approach interaction: that of the fact builder. Callon's analysis suggests an analytical starting point in the obligatory passage point, whereas Star and Griesemer take the multiple interests as theirs. However, both pay little attention to the strategic creation of mechanisms that are shared. Callon and Latour are not concerned with the strategic creation of an obligatory passage point from a specific point of view, as agency is distributed to each actor, and each actor translates its interests to be aligned. Star and Griesemer do not disregard strategy, politics, or battles over what the boundary object should represent, but neither do they address it.

Joan Fujimura has criticized boundary objects for not acknowledging disagreements. She argues:

> *"[…] while Boundary objects can promote translation for the purpose of winning allies, they can also allow others to resist translation and to construct other facts. They have a wider margin of negotiation." (Fujimura 1992:174).*

Fujimura attempts to find a middle ground between the boundary object and the stabilization of facts that ANT speaks of. Whereas boundary objects serve to describe collaborations, there is active work going into designing, changing, and engineering them. This involves actions on the part of multiple people who do this simultaneously during the collaboration.

One particular study that has addressed the active work going into designing boundary objects is "Engineering Objects for Collaboration: Strategies of Ambiguity and Clarity at Knowledge Boundaries" (Barley, Leonardi, and Bailey 2012). In this study, strategy does not emerge from a single entrepreneur. Instead, the emphasis is on how multiple people all strategically try to design boundary objects as means for collaboration.

This study attends to objects *as they are created* as opposed to locating already existing boundary objects in cross-boundary collaborations. Barley, Leonardi, and Bailey put specific emphasis on individual agency and strategic action in shifting between strategic ambiguity and strategies of clarity. They spent three months observing car manufacturers from three different divisions and followed three groups of engineers with diverging objectives such as frame and body, noise and vibration, and crashworthiness. These different areas required different expertise and implied the potential for conflicting interests. To be able to collaborate on the overall solutions, the groups actively used representations, graphs, and images as boundary objects to coordinate collaboration. There was a high degree of active work in *designing* the boundary objects before presenting them to the others. In contrast to the way Star and Griesemer introduced boundary objects as means for collaboration, Barley, Leonardi and Bailey highlights how individuals deliberately design boundary objects in specific ways. They refer to the boundary object as a tool in the hands of those who collaborate, where Star and Griesemer use it as an analytical tool to explain collaboration.

Callon's elaboration of translation touches on some of the same issues that boundary objects do, but the focus is different: Callon is concerned with the obligatory passage point and how actors align their interest with it. Actors' multiple interests are a consequence of the translations necessary for the relation to be kept. Callon's elaboration of translation and the different phases it consists of is an elaboration of ANT. Star and Griesemer on the other hand take the multiple interests as a starting point and use them as a critique of ANT. Star and Griesemer use the boundary object to avoid the n-way perspective that they criticize ANT for producing. Their approach however, raises a methodological question; if an object cannot be understood from one single viewpoint, then which perspectives should be considered? If boundary objects are tools of the analyst, then the analyst has the power to determine the degree to which an object is the same, even though those engaging might be doing so for different reasons.

Boundary objects are concerned with actors who engage with the *same* boundary object with different interests. But as we have seen in the empirical examples, participants in a viral reality marketing campaign may also be engaging with *different objects* while considering them the *same*. Using boundary objects to analyze viral reality marketing is one step in the right direction in highlighting differences despite cooperation, yet analytically it ascribes a fixedness to the boundary object as a mechanism holding it all together. This approach produces similarities in the boundary object as a mechanism that ensures stability despite different interests. However, we have seen empirically, that

this way of approaching the phenomenon does not highlight the dynamic that is driven by the ambiguity, nor the stability and continuous growth of campaigns that cause conflicting stories.

One characteristic of viral reality marketing stories is that they often make radical shifts. The analytical use of boundary objects conceals how one story is used as bait for another; a person's interest and motivation in the boundary object may likewise shift radically as the brand is revealed. This raises the question of whether and when the analyst violates informants analytically when concepts are assigned to them. For instance, the analyst may juxtapose participants as part of the same campaign even though they may not be aware of or care about their participation, or they may participate in order to direct the brand's attention towards a different matter or as a protest.

Similarly, the analyst's presentation may clash with an informant's understanding and view, when fixing the campaign as taking place during some time span. The campaign will exist and not exist simultaneously for different informants. In the field during the roll out of a campaign such as the one for VisitDenmark, the researcher gathering data may *not yet* suspect that it is a campaign. To Mindjumpers, it is *potentially* a campaign, but the brand is not a crucial feature. It only matters that it is *not a campaign from Mindjumpers*. At the same time, to some participants it is, potentially and *temporarily an ad for condoms*. Finally, to VisitDenmark it *is*, and *always has been* a campaign for tourism.

These different, yet simultaneously existing, framings of what "it" is, are crucial as they generate momentum. Yet analyzing what is going on using obligatory passage points and boundary objects does not highlight these inconsistencies. They miss how incoherence and conflicting potential versions keeps a viral reality marketing campaign alive. Therefore, we must analytically apply focus on the multiple interests that drive participation, the simultaneously existing yet conflicting objects, as well the ambiguity that unites the participants.

5.4.2 Fluid objects

John Law and Vicky Singleton refer to the boundary object in their study of alcoholic liver disease, as a potential way of approaching phenomena shared by multiple groups of patients, practitioners as well across several physical locations. Though they do not criticize the concept of boundary objects, they suggest an add-on to it. *"We want, that is, to conduct an experiment that moves us from multiple interpretations of objects [...] to thinking about multiple objects themselves"* (Law and Singleton 2005:333).

The alcoholic liver disease is both a disease and yet it is practiced as several versions by multiple people in multiple locations. But the disease is not *a* fixed phenomenon performed differently; it is several overlapping, yet distinct, versions performed simultaneously, - and they change as well.

Yet the disease is relatively stable as it progresses and changes slowly over time. We need to consider objects of study that are practiced by several groups of people, dispersed across various locations while *also* abruptly shifting shape from being a potential campaign to being multiple, and later one brand confirmed over others as the one behind the campaign.

An analytical shift from boundary objects to fluid objects turns things upside down by questioning the acts of analytical boundary-making. It focuses on the practices in which different versions of the objects coexist. There is no longer a shared mechanism, or a single shared obligatory passage point that holds together different actors despite differing interests. Instead, it is held together by several coexisting, sometimes conflicting versions. Fluidity, as introduced by philosopher Annemarie Mol, suggests that new questions emerge as the objects handled in practice are not the same from one site to another: *"If practices are foregrounded there is no longer a single passive object in the middle, waiting to be seen from the point of view of seemingly endless series of perspectives."* (Mol 2002:5). Instead, she argues that objects come into being – and disappear – with the practices in which they are manipulated. As such, objects of manipulation tend to differ from one practice to another as reality multiplies. Therefore, she suggests specifically attending to the multiplicity of reality. This makes it relevant to shift from a focus on objects, to one of coordination between differing (versions of) objects. It allows asking whether, and how, objects that go under a single name can avoid clashes and explosive confrontations. Mol suggests that despite tensions between various versions of an object, these sometimes depend on one another (Mol 2002: 5-6). For instance, fathers' responses, Hitler Rant Parodies, and the Onion's story of Lars von Trier may not be related. Using boundary objects as a concept, these pieces of content will be excluded if the boundary object is the video featuring the mother. If the boundary object is instead the campaign, then the fathers' responses, Hitler Rant Parodies, and the Onion may contribute to it, but none of the three have interests that are aligned with the boundary object. If we switch to fluidity, the fathers' replies are related, but do not require mutual relatedness. The fathers' replies depend on Mindjumpers' response to VisitDenmark's. The stories coexist.

Another example where fluidity highlights differences that the concept of boundary objects will miss is in capturing ambiguity without distinguishing between whether something is different or similar.

it can be both simultaneously. Consider the question of how to analytically capture the relationship between speedbandits.dk and speedbandit.dk, and between speedbandits.dk and speedbandits.dk with shifted domain owners as well. Are the two URLs connected, or are they different? This can be solved by asking who is behind them. Then speedbandit.dk at one point in time, and speedbandits.dk, at another, are different, because they are owned by two different people. Yet they feature the same content, so from the perspective of visitors, they may be the same. As boundary objects, speedbandit.dk, as well as Speedbandits.dk with new owners, are disconnected. Danish Road Safety Council is not interested and does not engage with it, therefore, from their perspective they are not connected. Yet informants may see them as the same, just as search engines might see speedbandits.dk as the same despite changing domain owners. Therefore, from the point of view of site visitors, and search engines, they may be the same. By adding fluidity to the analysis, we can view both URLs, as well as the URL with changed ownership, as the same, yet fluid, actor, since all versions are part of the same practice. Thus, if they are included, referred to, or informants associate them, they are part of the same fluid object, while also different versions simultaneously. Focus shifts to the coordination between versions that are enacted. Summing up, using fluidity as an analytical framing, we can see the object as various versions that coexist without labeling them as either cooperation or conflict. We are free to include several versions, and instead focus on their conflicts and interdependencies as we foreground practices. Connections hold actors together, while simultaneously allowing a wider range of variations to be captured and included.

In their study of the Zimbabwe Bush Pump, De Laet and Mol show how the pump has fluid boundaries: *"We want to analyze the specific quality that attracts us to the ZBP. This turns out to be its fluidity. So in what follows we lay out the various ways in which this piece of technology, so advanced in its simplicity, is fluid in its nature"* (de Laet and Mol 2000:225).

Asking the question of whether technology works the way it is supposed to can only rarely be answered. Instead there are many grades or shades of 'working'; there are adaptations and variants, yet *"it's not clear when exactly the pump stops acting, when it achieves its aims, and at which point it fails and falters"* (de Laet and Mol 2000:227).

The achievement of the pump being fluid is that "it" is enacted as a strong object due to its many variations. Their approach is in many ways in line with the ANT way of thinking. However, for the analyst, there is a difference. Mol and De Laet celebrate the strength that lies in analytically

juxtaposing variations as the same, yet fluid, actor. The researcher plays a highly active role, just as the informants do, in enacting different versions of the fluid object.

Mol and De Laet position themselves in relation to the concept of the boundary object as well. The boundaries of a boundary object are interpreted differently in the different worlds it inhabits, but the boundaries for the object stay firm, the boundary object remains the same. This is not the case with a fluid object, which changes over time.

Fluidity is an analytical concept that allows for comparison of a variety of versions. Fluid objects are analytical modes of ordering that focus on differences being strengths for the object(s) success rather than being problematic. Labeling something as fluid to expand borders is of course a theoretical contribution. It does not consider how versions of object(s) in some empirical setting might locally be perceived as much less fluid. The concept of fluid object helps to create awareness of two aspects: Analytically we may treat an object as fluid, but at the same time empirically it may be perceived or experienced as much less fluid.

Comparing boundary objects to fluid objects reminds us, that there is a power in analytically defining an actor as fluid, since it allows for various variations to be analytically included and juxtaposed. But including versions as similar, may differ from what those whom the analysis speaks of considers similar. Therefore, conflicts still call for attention to the difference between an analytical achievement, and the analyzed subjects who may perceive similarities and differences differently.

5.4.3 Fire objects and spatialities

A final analytical concept worth adding is the fire object. However, to understand the differences between the different types of objects presented here, we dive into a methodological discussion on how to use topologies as analytical tools for treating, grasping, understanding, explaining, writing about, and enacting ethnographic objects within science and technology studies.

Through their paper "'Situating Techno-Science: an Inquiry into Spatialities'" John Law and Annemarie Mol build up the argument that spatialities deserve attention. Summing up various previous works of theirs, they emphasize four such spatialities: region, network, fluid, and fire (Law and Mol 2001). These spatialities account for different kinds of stability. For instance, Law refers to a previous study of long distance control of vessels traveling between Lisbon and Calicut (Law 1986). The point is that it takes effort for something to hold shape as it travels. The vessel becomes immutable because the different components held one another in place. However, Law emphasizes,

that there is a double production, because while this explanation concerns network spatiality, the vessel moves physically in Euclidian space as well. These two should be considered different, yet overlapping, topologies that are used to describe aspects of the vessel successfully holding together as stable despite, as well as while, traveling. The immutability in network space affords both the immutability and mobility in Euclidian space. Thus, it is the interference between the spatial systems that affords the vessel its special properties. And this is the very core of Mol and Law's argument: we must pay attention to such spatialities and their overlaps and interferences.

We have already learned about the concept of fluidity. But along with the specific attention to overlaps and interferences between spatialities, fluidity once again becomes interesting. Fluid spatiality is both non-Euclidian and non-network; it is an *other* to the network. Talking about a fluid object in terms of network would amputate it and miss connections that are only made visible by shifting spatiality. For instance, the bush pump changes shape from place to place. Thinking in terms of network spatiality one would approach this as a failed network, as the network comes with configurational invariance. But the pump, described within a fluid spatiality, shows configurational variance. Hence, it is a mutable mobile. But what allows it to travel and stay stable then, one might ask? The answer is that whereas objects in networks hold their shape by freezing relations rather than fixing Euclidean coordinates, fluid objects hold their shape by *shifting* their relations. They do so, slowly, gradually, and incrementally. Law and Mol describe it as a process of gradual adaptation with no great breaks or disruptions.

 Law and Mol illustrate the extent to which an object can hold stability despite changing relations as something that flows, playing with the analogy of water or something that steadily and – to a certain extent – predictably changes. To provide an intuitive understanding they refer to Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance: *a sameness, a shape constancy, which does not depend on any particular defining feature or relationship, but rather on the existence of many instances which overlap with one another partially.* (Law Mol 2011 p.614). This spatiality puts an emphasis on temporarily overlapping elements such as videos that are recognized for their reference to the story of the mother seeking a father in a more loosely related way. Without the story of the mother, they would not make sense, therefore they depend on it, yet they vary. They are similar enough to be recognized as spoofs, even though the elements differ.

This brings us to a final spatiality I want to emphasize, conceptualized as fire objects. Here constancy is achieved in several ways: in a relation between presence and absence, continuity as an effect of

discontinuity, continuity as the presence, and the absence of otherness. Once again, this spatiality is different from network and Euclidian spatiality, as well as fluid spatiality. Constancy is not achieved by freezing, fixing, or shifting relations. Constancy is achieved by relations between similarities and differences. Continuity and stability are described as an effect of discontinuity. Fire objects deal with breaks, things that are absent or cease to exist, and where their absence makes other presences possible. This spatiality embraces abrupt and pivotal shifts. They are no longer an analytical threat that messes or confuses the picture of what is going on but the very essence of it. The constancy in campaigns is produced in abrupt and discontinuous movements. This topology can be considered a call for attention to discontinuous transformation, as a flickering relation between absence and presence. It achieves its constancy in relations between presence and absence. Thus, there is a focus on what must be absent for an object to be present. This spatiality brings forward how a campaign can continue to grow by the absence of verified facts and confirmation. The lack of known guidelines and modus operandi avoids that the absence of a brand becomes a challenge. Instead, it becomes the very core that holds the campaign together in all its localized, unpredictable outbursts.

It is this absence of brand that keeps people engaged initially. The absence of clarity permits the presence of various potential campaigns simultaneously. The various semi-related events, dramatic turns of events, ignited debates, and controversial interpretations are the drivers that keep viral reality marketing alive. Using fluid spatiality, we can describe how campaigns develop in unforeseen and unpredictable ways with the inclusion of conflicting versions simultaneously. This way of describing fluidity enables us to capture the otherwise messy empirical data, and answer questions differently. However, using the fire spatiality, we can highlight how they depended on the absence of any comments from VisitDenmark for Anders Lund Madsen's fish version to work. In both spatialities, the connection between the first and the second video, featuring the actress, is considered relevant. However, in fire spatiality the focus is specifically on role that absence plays in keeping the campaign growing.

This shift is pivotal when it comes to converting ambiguous, conflicting, and controversial data into analysis. Instead of analytically cleaning up mess and removing data that confuses the story, it shifts to emphasizing constancy as an effect of discontinuity and relations between absence and presence. Ambiguity is an *other* to certainty. For people to keep engagement, the absence of a clear explanation must be present.

5.5 Representation

Being in the middle of things while not knowing for sure whether it is a campaign, and hence the brand behind it, highlights a multitude of stories and potential futures. This is not only the case for the participants of viral reality marketing campaigns. It was also the case for me as an ethnographer. while I was doing fieldwork around the VisitDenmark Campaign. The unique positioning in the middle of something that potentially could turn out to be a campaign had two consequences: it provided me with a unique access to the experience, by being in the same boat as my informants. But it was also a challenge to retrospectively write about a campaign that only became so after some time.

Regarding access, I shared an experience with my informants in which we all navigated without knowing for sure what we were dealing with. This access highlighted the role of incoherence, uncertainties, and of multiple potential, yet temporary future outcomes. These aspects were not visible to me in the case of Danish Road Safety Council, even though it too ran for some time without confirmation that it was an ad. However, when trying to retrospectively tell the story, many of these potential outcomes and potential futures seem to disappear, since they never materialized. There is a great chance that many such potentials, yet never materialized outcomes have existed too, and that they have been rendered invisible over time. Firstly, as Morten Hoffmann, mentioned, people forget about it. Secondly, as my fieldwork around Speedbandits showed, digital settings make initial reactions – and thereby also the assumptions of potential future outcomes, as they temporarily existed – vanish, as videos featuring reactions are continuously deleted. When thinking of the data as fluid, we acknowledge that there are various versions, and that one may depend on another. In fire spatiality, we embrace the relation between absences and presences. However, the various potential futures and expectations likewise need to be accounted for, even if only temporarily existing. Expectations and potential futures coexist only temporarily, yet I will argue, that their impact remains. When converting data into writing, we need to contemplate how to give voice to these temporalities.

5.5.1 Narrative infrastructures

Temporality highlights a gap between being in a field at a specific time, while writing about it in another. This calls for considerations of how to account for the difference between potential futures, and never fulfilled ones. This is particularly relevant in viral reality marketing as data collection must be performed on something that is not yet a campaign. Therefore, it is not only the participants of a campaign for whom the challenge of managing expectations and continuously rewriting the story as new information is added. The writer faces analogous challenges when translating these temporarily existing futures into a coherent, often linear story without rendering them invisible.

Returning once again to studies of future orientation, Deuten and Rip take up this issue while contemplating narrative structures and the role of expectations (Deuten and Rip 2000). They raise the issue of linearity and how it comes about in innovation processes. They argue that stories of successful innovations are often retrospectively told in a linear way, with the first plans leading "naturally" to the eventual outcomes. In such accounts, the eventual achievement functions as a goal to be reached. It lays out the stages of a journey along the path, as though it was visible from the beginning. The point for Deuten and Rip is to illustrate how actual journeys are much less linear than these retrospective accounts lead us to believe. Linear accounts will often end up as a simplification and distortion of much more complex processes than the retrospective narrative represents (Deuten and Rip 2000:66). What can be learned from this is that accounts are being produced all the time, by a multitude of actors, not just by one narrator, and not just after a journey has ended. Deuten and Rip's point is to highlight that journeys, and their endings, are rhetorical contributions, constructed and shaped in particular ways by such retrospective accounts. A more nuanced picture can be gained by paying attention to the narrative structure as ongoing and everchanging.

When it comes to linearity, it either does not exist, as multiple actors have various interests for engaging, or linearity exists as a direct consequence of the retrospective account. Deuten and Rip have a solution to this. They emphasize narrative infrastructures as ongoing interactions that are created by an always heterogeneous mosaic of multi-authored stories but linearity, or more precisely direction, is created through future orientation. Whereas linearity made retrospectively through narratives simplifies the processes, it does not imply that linearity does not exist. The point is to realize and illustrate how linearity emerges *from* such exchanges. Despite the multiple contributions, Deuten and Rip's interests lie in is how one master story may evolve from this mosaic. They elaborate on this by referring to narrative building blocks that are taken up again and again, thereby becoming more widely accepted. Concurrently with an increasingly wider acceptance, they start orienting action and interaction. The building blocks and their linkages constitute a narrative that enables as well as constrains. Consequently, when a narrative infrastructure evolves out of the multiple stories, actors become characters that cannot easily change their identity and the role they are able to play through their own initiative (Deuten and Rip 2000:68). This implies a narrative reduction of complexity, not one made from retrospective accounts, but from the presence and from the narratives of futures existing in this present (Deuten and Rip 2000:78). Thus, there *are* closures. There will always be bits and pieces of stories that will be left out, however, by paying attention to presents and their possible futures, we can understand such processes differently.

5.5.2 Modes of ordering in retrospective accounts

Specific modes of ordering that focus on the present and the future seen from that present are useful in shedding light on temporality and potentiality. However, writing is a change in the mode of ordering. Rather than being concerned with presents and futures, it is an orientation towards the past. This retrospective mode of ordering that comes from writing and accounting for what has occurred, may render uncertainties and potentials invisible. We must be aware of the translations and transformations of stories as we shift between different modes of ordering, and that a priori assumptions, especially implicit assumptions, influence the narrative. A methodological concern here is that the clarity of hindsight can alter or eliminate the ambiguity of the past.

So far, we have considered how to analytically capture fragile shape-shifting objects. We have directed attention to how they serve as modes of ordering of a seemingly incoherent field. It allowed us to put in focus temporarily existing futures and highlight expectations without excluding the ones left unfulfilled, and we have discussed how we may account for these in writing. Now we need to bring everything together. We have established that there are modes of ordering throughout the process of turning research questions into specific interests in the field, and further to convert empirical data from the field into writing. In the final section we shall zoom in on the methodological concerns. The analytical contributions do not only concern how to conceptualize what is going on in the field. They also contribute to awareness of modes of ordering in translation between data gathering, analyzing, and writing. Furthermore, the benefits of paying attention to temporality as well as performativity are useful to remember when telling the story of viral reality marketing, that is, in the writing process.

This analysis, i.e., my story told about the viral reality marketing campaigns, is a fractal, temporal version of what happened. At the same time, it is also a story with an impact. It has a performative role in focusing specifically on studying sudden, uncontrolled, disperse, ambiguous and unpredictable events, as well as the complexities of being positioned in the middle of things without trying to create order and closure methodologically that is not reflected in the field. Disciplined lack of clarity is suggested as a mode for ordering.

5.6 From objects to practices

Recall fire objects and how they were made up of fluid, coexisting versions (Mol). They consisted of similarities, differences, presences, and absences (Law), juxtaposed, and ordered to enact a temporary whole. We continue from this line of thinking to a more reflective level concerning methods. Mol

and Law continue along the same lines of thinking when it comes to methods in focusing on practices, including conflicting and ambiguous versions side by side. For them, contemplating analytical objects and methods are two sides of the same coin. They highlight the performative role in practicing such objects. Therefore, when it comes to methods, both Mol and Law explicitly take a stance that moves us away from describing objects, and closer to shaping worlds. They provide inspirational insights that exceed modes of ordering as something belonging to gaining access, being in the field, analyzing and writing *about* the world. They point to the *active* role the ethnographer, analyst, and writer has in shaping worlds, but also to his or her fractal positioning in it.

5.6.1 Turning mess into disciplined lack of clarity

While linking focus on fluidity and fire objects to method, Law, once again, directs attention to absences and presences, by asking what is left out when telling a story. Methods, he argues, act as cleaning mechanisms, sorting out data to create coherence and order. More specifically he asks: "*What mess is left when analytical order is created*?" He argues that methods do not just describe social realities but are also involved in creating them. Methods are always political, and it raises the question of what kinds of social realities we want to create.

> *"Sometimes I think of it as a form of hygiene. Do your methods properly. Eat your epistemological greens. Wash your hands after mixing with the real world. Then you will lead the good research life. Your data will be clean. Your findings warrantable. The product you will produce will be pure. It will come with the guarantee of a long shelf-life"* (Law 2006:2)

Hygiene and cleanliness are used here to illustrate how methods sometimes sort out and provide neat and coherent pictures of things that are not necessarily so in practice. The clean pictures are *an effect* of the methods used. Things are *"distorted into clarity"* (Law 2004:2). In practice, he argues, research needs to be messy and heterogeneous, because that is how most of our world is. An important nuance here is that whereas clarity does not always help, a disciplined lack of clarity might. The argument is that clarity is sometimes imposed to create a simple, coherent picture. This is done at the expense of a reality behind it, that is less clear, messier, and often contradictory. Therefore, when social sciences try to describe things that are complex, diffuse, and messy, they often make a mess out of them, and… *"the very attempt to be clear simply increases the mess"* (Law 2004:2). This is because simple, clear descriptions do not work when the object of study is incoherent.

John Law and Vicky Singleton link these methodological concerns specifically to fire objects. Their article "Object Lessons" (Law and Singleton 2005) is as much about methods in general, as it is about

illustrating how the empirical data intervenes, resists, and creates challenges in the encounter with methods. Their task seems simple: to map trajectories of typical patients of alcoholic liver disease. At first, mapping the trajectory proved difficult, because the informants and their descriptions created a mess. Trajectories offered by one interviewee did not plug into trajectories suggested by another. Further, their research object was a moving and shapeshifting target. For example, issues such as liver disease, alcoholic cirrhosis, and alcohol abuse, all became part of the research. This raised the question of what they were *actually* studying. They asked themselves why they were not able to get a proper set of focused interviews that could be easily mapped. Their first reflections on method were directed towards whether they were asking the wrong questions, whether they were accidently misleading the interviewees, or if the interviewees were simply talking about the wrong things, due to their way of conducting research. Soon, however, they turned this challenge into an insight: the object of study was less coherent, and therefore it clashed with their attempts to map versions onto each other.

Mol provides another example in which she illustrates how to think of methods differently. Drawing on Law's disciplined lack of clarity (Law 2004), she argues that this approach can provide new insights. In a presentation of what methods do she refers to a fieldwork she did regarding taste (Mol 2009). She spent time at a nursing home but felt uncomfortable about not doing anything but observing and talking to informants. She therefore started participating in daily activities such as helping with minor practical things. Entering *this* practice enabled her to access a different type of data. It created new roles, and, consequently, new insights into the object of her study emerged.

She was considered one of the helpers, while gathering the used plates and cutlery. When taking the soup cups, she asked, as servers do in restaurants: *"Was het lekker?"* (was it good?). One woman replied while smiling "Yes, dear". The way she said it, Mol explained, showed that the woman was the one caring for Mol, appreciating the gesture. Continuing, Mol explains that the soup became *an object* enabling the old woman to care about the one who took the used plates. She continued to the next lady, who replied in a somewhat different tone *"You don't hear me complain!"* This lady was older, and presumably never going to be anywhere else. She was qualifying her life and herself in saying *"I am not a complainer"*. Thus, the soup was practiced as an object, that allowed her to define and describe herself. The taste of the soup, and whether it was good or not, was no longer the actual issue. The overflow of qualification that could now be ascribed to the soup was the issue. In this case, asking about the taste of the soup is a bad method to learn about the taste of soup. The soup, so to

speak, overflows. However, asking what practices surround the soup, by focusing on how it is enacted, allowed for something else. Her example underlines the argument that methods deserve attention continually and specifically in local settings, and should not be considered neutral, well tested, and known tools for mapping the world.

Mol suggests two approaches in illustrating what might come out of different methods for studying the soup. Two types of critique could be raised: the reductionism critique versus the "*you are not scientific enough*". Scientists would argue that to be scientific, Mol's example fails, and that she does not capture *real* taste – just old people babbling a bit. A researcher doing fieldwork while following informants, on the contrary, might reply to scientists in laboratories "*You don't have real taste, not lived taste*". But Mol's point is not concerned with determining which approach is more correct than the other. The lesson here is that the question is *not* which is more real. The question is which methods get to know more about the world. By shifting terminology, subjects change as well.

This serves as a small example of disciplined lack of clarity. The choice of changing the scope from the soup to what different data it enables, illustrates the benefits of both holding on to something, ("the soup") while allowing for several stories. In a way, this lack of insistence of coherence moves focus away from or confuses what "it" is all about – taste. Especially in cases of viral reality marketing, the challenge is to capture and analyze an object that resists because its very premise is to stay ambiguous and unconfirmed; many analytical and methodological approaches may simply fail. Instead, we should *assume* incoherence and look for overlaps, negotiation, and conflicts between different versions of it. The benefit of a disciplined lack of clarity is that it allows us to include and visualize incoherencies and ambiguities. But this approach is not only advantageous in the field. Disciplined lack of clarity is a mode of ordering that can be used throughout the process of turning empirical data into a story about it. Methods are not only an afterthought on how to account for data gathered in the field. They are continuous modes of ordering and continuous awareness of the interferences between modes of ordering and the in- and exclusions they produce. Thus, similarities pointed out by informants in the field may be valuable, even when the ethnographer does not see the connection. Recall my informants' responses to my request for examples of viral marketing. They pointed to videos shared because they were entertaining, irrespective of whether they were part of a campaign. And even when so, they could not necessarily point out the associated brand or message. The overflow of qualifications of such videos serves to highlight and illuminate the practices in which viral content flow.

Navigating in viral reality marketing campaigns has taught me the value of a disciplined lack of clarity as a method for gathering data. It has made visible the way informants refer to and engage with viral content in many contradictory ways simultaneously. It has enabled many variations and versions of what is going on that did not match my initial understanding of viral reality marketing. Including the direction my informants pointed me – whatever it was – allowed for an understanding of *their* boundary-making.

The inconsistencies between my boundary-making and that of my informants, also contributed to considerations regarding my role when telling the story. Is striving to tell the whole story even a relevant ambition? How can one present what happened when the informants do not agree on it? Why is that story relevant when it does not represent the stories that informants encountered and described? The disciplined lack of clarity allows for including, and taking seriously, such incoherence.

Disciplined lack of clarity calls attention to the conversion of mess into stories. To the writer, the story is a fixed enactment of what went on. In that respect, as I write my story, it is with the awareness that it is one specific version out of many, coexisting ones. As with the overqualification of the soup, we can shift from viral reality marketing as a thing, to practices that enact it. As we have seen throughout the empirical material, practices surrounding viral reality marketing conflict, informants resist, relevance differs depending on informants' knowledge or entertainment preferences, algorithms influence whether videos are considered "the same," and the passage of time distorts any attempt at telling the stories. The question is, how do we *not* make a mess of such things when imposing specific modes of ordering? How do we avoid unintentionally translating chaos and cacophony into coherent stories of viral campaigns, when they are not? Disciplined lack of clarity does not imply an absence of discipline and ordering. It simply means that fractal perspectives or versions can be emphasized as they should. This is a matter of specific kinds of modes of ordering – in the field, in the analysis, and in the writing.