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

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## 6. Temporality, potentiality, and ambiguity

From the very beginning of this dissertation, boundaries and boundary-making were flagged as important areas in relation to viral reality marketing. The initial challenge in studying viral marketing emerged from the mismatch between my objects of study: my informants' voluntarily shared ads, but they often did this without being aware of, nor caring about this element. Furthermore, boundary-making was tricky since brands were often related, but those relations could vary and were often disputed from one or more sides. Sometimes brands appeared side by side in ads due to collaborations. At other times, links were made as one brand insinuated a relationship to another or referenced it to emphasize itself as the more important one. Finally, brands would figure as potentially related, when neither would confirm or deny suggestions of joint campaigns.

Questions such as: “*What counts as engaging? And to whom?*” and “*How can relations be captured, when they are not the same from all sides?*” became pivotal for the dissertation, as data increasingly brought to attention such ambiguous relations.

The high level of complexities and nuances in boundary-making encountered in the field were not reflected in previous studies directly concerned with viral marketing. Most of those studies were concerned with boundary-making as a matter of word of mouth, pointing to differences of online versus offline as the crucial boundaries. As technologies have become increasingly integrated in daily life, more recent studies have nuanced this. Attention has been directed at different digital platforms, as well as communities facilitated through the internet. However, it rapidly became clear, that the methods of those studies were not suited for capturing the impromptu, fleeting connections between people and brands originating through ad hoc relations rather than through shared platforms or existing communities. Neither did these studies provide insights into temporality where people were only connected through short-lived stories. This called for new analytical tools outside the direct scope of viral marketing studies.

Fan studies suggested putting an emphasis on the double sidedness of content being both spread globally and adapted locally. It further suggested to treat users and producers as collaborators rather than opponents. Game studies provided a boundary-making that directed attention to the concepts of in- and outside particular spheres, suggesting that games serve to bring order and remove ambiguity. Magic circles, for instance, can be seen as shorthand for the concept of a special place in time and space created by a game. Jokes and irony likewise provide spaces where normal rules do not apply. Here the membrane between in- and outside does not insulate one from the other, it exposes them.

Humor, thus, facilitates an ambiguous space where subjects can be touched upon simply for fun and without consequences. Yet at the same time, humor holds the potential for containing serious messages, and it constitutes a powerful tool for providing heavy criticism.

Boundary-makings that allow ambiguities to be emphasized are not just represented in studies of games and jokes as specific genres of communication. Other studies have been concerned with the strategic use of ambiguity in marketing and politics as well. Public relations studies explicitly exemplify the benefits of strategic ambiguity as means for directing attention away from scandals or for enabling creative engagements. Boundary-making is also touched upon in the relationships between users and procures in innovation studies. Studies of user-driven innovation zoom in on users and the role they play in innovation making. These roles vary from users being resources enabling innovators to innovate, to being the source from which innovations emerge. These different approaches to users are interesting in viral reality marketing, because users play both roles, which adds to the complexity. Independently of producers who want to create brand awareness, users engage in practices of referring between various brands through which they become the source of new content. Producers of viral reality campaigns take advantage of this already ongoing reference making, by creating content they hope users will integrate in their practices. Therefore, users are sources of new content that simultaneously become a resource for marketers, who hope their brand will become part of it.

### 6.1 New achievements

Collating all these types of boundary-makings with the empirical material calls upon new, refined ways of approaching boundaries adapted to intense, un-orchestrated, ad hoc movements. Previous techniques cannot keep pace with the rapid dissemination occurring in highly digitally mediated, short-lived, and intense cases. Rather than attempting to capture the boundaries, we look to ANT, which suggests removing them altogether instead of modelling them. It provides a framework with emphasis on relations and eliminates distinctions between online and offline, platforms and communities in- and outside games, non-human and human, as well as users and producers.

Combining ANT with future orientation provides useful modes of ordering a means for approaching the field. By visualizing connections that happen, as they happen, without attempts to provide explanation and order through a priori concepts for boundary-making, ANT provides new insights on how to position oneself and collate data; an orientation towards the present. In addition to this, an orientation towards the future seen from the presents, has contributed to a better understanding of

how a present, consisting of potentials and expectations, affects what comes next. Yet the dissertation has shown how, even when positioned in the middle of things, the potential futures are fleeting. Potentials crucial to driving the campaigns forward are highly likely to disappear rapidly. As opposed to an orientation towards present and future, fire objects suggest an orientation towards what is necessarily *not* present. This provides an alternative boundary-making that raises the question of what any object is made up of, and what must necessarily be absent for it to be present. Highly digitally mediated, suddenly shifting relations are fleeting yet important to capture. Giving specific attention to the temporal present, potential future, and relationships between absences and presences are powerful tools when approaching quickly changing phenomena.

Ambiguity, which is a crucial element in viral reality marketing, calls for specific attention. ANT however, fails to provide nuances on things that are several things at the same time, or are considered the same from one side while different from another. Fluidity provides a different way of thinking about these, as well as about exclusions and relations that contain ambiguity. Boundaries are expanded in this framework as things are considered more loosely connected, since they are practices that do not map on to each other but instead coexist while depending on each other, replace one other, or directly conflict.

The dissertation thoroughly discussed three main areas: positionings in present and future as modes of ordering, ambiguities within the same practices, and concerns for converting things from one time to another when writing. Based on these three discussions, three concepts of importance are emphasized: temporality, potentiality, and ambiguity. They are not concepts that explain what is going on, they are specific areas that need attention. This attention is crucial both while in the field, when analyzing, as well as when translating empirical material into a story.

#### 6.1.1 Temporality

Whenever we speak of something having gone viral, the terms, *shared*, *spread*, and *reaching across boundaries*, become inevitable parts of the description. Boundaries, therefore, are highly relevant since they work as an opposition to something viral, presenting barriers, which must be overcome if we are to understand the viral aspect. As seen in chapter two, in most of the literature, boundaries exist between relatively stable groups of actors and their relations. Such boundaries can be cultural, geographical, or even point to translation between different digital platforms or between online and offline. Groups with shared interests, collaborations between fans and artists, content in need of being adapted as it travels from one culture to another, and practices around a specific diagnosis, are all

examples of areas where specific boundary-making helps explain and order phenomena across which things are shared. However, the empirical data of the fieldwork of this dissertation has shown how content that emerges suddenly is held together by a different type of alliances. These alliances consist of numerous, highly temporary connections between people, who are not necessarily intricately connected on any digital platforms – indeed they may not even know each other in advance.

Analytically capturing these connections is achieved with an explicit orientation towards a present, which occurs without warning and is both fragile and fleeting. If we only look for shared interests or platforms, then we cannot even perceive the people connected through specific combinations of time and references. Real time marketing and viral reality marketing content are driven by such abrupt, brief connections, and the features that manage to temporarily unite people as a group are unpredictable. Not everyone will recognize the beauty or humor of some specific juxtaposition or combination of references. Content is often held together by un-orchestrated, ad hoc relations, existing through strong in- and exclusion. Thus, we must shift focus away from boundary-making between stable, existing categorizations and orderings, if we are to catch those fleeting connections.

#### 6.1.2 Potentiality

ANT is useful in pinpointing relations and visualizing fragile, temporary connections. Its orientation towards the present makes it highly suitable for capturing interactions and short-lived connections as they happen – connections which might subsequently be lost. However, this is not sufficient, and the empirical data calls for yet another orientation: the future as seen from the present. Through studies of future orientation and expectation, I have pinpointed the necessity of paying explicit attention to futures, since they are not only performative, but also accumulative.

By paying attention to expectations and potential outcomes of campaigns, we immediately see a feedback loop. In their attempt to shed light on *what* they are engaging with, people exchange opinions and play detectives, thereby generating new references. And these new references give rise to new potential outcomes, which in turn generate more curiosity and spur increased participation. Potentials serve as a driving force here; they maintain or increase the momentum, thus ensuring the campaign's continuation. The participants add to the ambiguity in their attempt to eliminate it.

Studies of future orientation and expectations provide useful insights into alternative modes of ordering while in the field, but this is not their only contribution. They also provide input to the discussion on how to treat elements that are part of the same practice, while at the same time changing it. Expectations both drive the stories and change them. The specific attention to future orientation

and expectations highlight dependencies between potential futures and new ones. This approach directs attention to subsequent versions. The retrospective linearity of events that are constructed in narratives explaining the success or failure of a given innovation is quite different from the linearity seen when viewing the future from the present. These opposite-directed linearities point to versions sharpening the contexts of succeeding versions. By focusing on dependencies between versions rather than seeing them as coexisting, we can visualize their interdependence and illuminate how one version, which may no longer exist, has given rise to another. In retrospective accounts, unfulfilled expectations and potential futures that did not manifest, may be rendered invisible. Only by explicitly representing the potential futures of a past present, are we able to see how versions accumulate new stories.

The driving force in viral reality marketing is the continuous addition of new elements to the story. The result of participants trying to create order and closure is simply increased fragmentation. In this setting, the researcher's task of making sense of and ordering the field is no different from that of the informants. Both navigate the stories as they develop. The fact that the researcher is not mapping the network from above but is inside it may be a theoretical point. But it also contains a lesson in the novel insights that can be gleaned when the object of study is made up of potentials, and the researcher must gather data with no clarity on the situation. Performing fieldwork where neither informants nor ethnographer knew what was going on, has been a privileged position for understanding sudden, unpredictable, and intense developments. Being in the middle of it, captures and illuminates how campaigns are strategically orchestrated from multiple sides simultaneously.

Stating the importance of being oriented towards potential futures and the necessity of paying specific attention to potential is easily done. But actually doing so in a field where potentials are the driving force this is not an easy task. It requires the ethnographer to navigate in an overflow of information without knowing what will later turn into more stabilized or agreed upon interpretations and outcomes. This requires a different kind of approach that is both disciplined and yet constantly open to the unexpected and incoherent. The core lessons of performing fieldwork "in the thick of it" with all the ambiguity and lack of clarity of the informants is, not to strive for answers and not to discard unconfirmed, seemingly irrelevant, or disputed relations. Ordering the field in the field requires a shift of mindset. Explicitly seeking out potentials and meeting connections with curiosity, rather than insisting that they are mutually agreed upon, can provide novel and unanticipated insights. This holds for potential futures of any kind; people's dreams, plans and predictions.

### 6.1.3 Ambiguity

Viral reality marketing gives rise to highly intense settings with great, but unconfirmed, potential, or ambiguous positions. When the object of study holds great potential, the subsequent analysis and representation demands attention to ambiguity due to the retrospective nature of the task.

Ambiguity is a recurring theme throughout this dissertation. From the initial data to the analysis and representation, these ambiguous relations play an integral part; these are all ambiguities originating from differing times and positionings. We must pay explicit attention to the temporality in which ambiguous relations exist as well as the fractal positions from which they arise.

If we look at the participants, we see that there are different groups. There are those who passionately believe their specific interpretation, based on their knowledge at the time. Others actively assume ambiguity and play along. Both contribute to the momentum of campaigns, but if treated analytically the same, we miss crucial points in the dynamics between the two groups. Ambiguity is part of the game for those playing along, whereas for those who engage with a clear perception that their interpretation is true, that ambiguity is non-existent. These variations between informants show us how ambiguity may relate to a story being practiced by multiple people, when these people are not analytically distinguished. Ambiguity may not be agreed upon from all sides.

Thus, ambiguity does not serve as an explanatory concept in the dissertation. On the contrary, even ambiguity itself becomes ambiguous when we begin to question when and where something is ambiguous. The picture is different if we view ambiguity as a fluid object instead. Then, in some practices, the analyst may use the concept to illustrate diversity among participants. In others, the brands use ambiguity as the driving force to generate attention. And this is where modes of ordering and ambiguity as part of several practices simultaneously enlighten us.

Consider that some of the ambiguities pinpointed through analysis were not so at the time they were performed; people believing the mother's story was true, people believing it was an actress' self-promotion, as well as people believing it was an ad. If these three versions are analytically juxtaposed as different practices around the same story, we miss that the informants may not have experienced the story as ambiguous. They might individually have been convinced that they engaged with something clearly fake, or clearly genuine, respectively. The version with the actress depended on her being revealed as an actress, which happened at a later point. If these versions are treated analytically as part of the same, this introduces an ambiguity that did not exist. Therefore, when using ambiguity as a mode of ordering, we must be aware that fusing disparate versions into a single "same"

is an analytical achievement that may not reflect the informants' experiences at the time. Thus, the first crucial point regarding using ambiguity, is that **it can be created analytically and projected back in time**, which introduces retroactive ambiguity.

Counter to ambiguities retrospectively made visible through analytical juxtapositions, ambiguities encountered in the field (for example, a story that may or may not be true), are later in danger of being removed. Consider that time has passed, and it has been revealed that everything was part of a campaign. This ambiguity is an achievement of the informants' concerns from before it was known to be an ad, which may not make it into the analyst's accounts. Thus, **we can unintentionally remove ambiguities that existed** but no longer do.

Finally, we need to remember that the ethnographer's practices in pinpointing ambiguities as well as **creating order is an enactment**, just as the informants create order and determine what is clear and what is ambiguous. The researcher may have privileged information and be in a position to say that engagements with a story are all part of a campaign. But at the same time, the differing, incorrect interpretations, and thus ordering of informants must still be taken seriously. Directing attention to those who believe in the story of the mother, through the analytical lens of it being a practice around a campaign, is not only an issue of informants not fitting in, but also an insight in their different boundary-making that may be crucial as a different order.

A disciplined lack of clarity may be to treat the recurrent theme of ambiguity as something consisting of many practices throughout this dissertation. In treating ambiguity as a fluid object, we can focus on where ambiguity is practiced, by whom, and at what times.

Methodologically, this ambiguity provided a position from where things that are both the same yet different simultaneously became relevant. Thus, ambiguity as a mode of ordering while in the field allows for seemingly incoherent practices to be juxtaposed and included. The intriguing achievements of methodologically exploring ambiguity do not only concern modes of ordering in the field, or in contemplating methods. They reveal a gap between being able to retain openness in which things may potentially be multiple versions, and the dissertation where a story is temporarily fixed and fitted into a narrative with a beginning and an end. Here, ambiguity also emerged from the concerns when writing as a story consisting of multiple stories ordered chronologically according to a particular timeline, when informants experienced events asynchronously, or when stories were attempted to be explained and narrowed down despite the fact that they multiplied and grew because of this feature.



The importance of avoiding cleaning up all the achieved fluidity into a fixed and coherent narrative needs attention. Therefore, writing as a mode of ordering, and the gap between disciplined lack of clarity around data and methods, get closure in a chronological text. This requires awareness too, to make sure we are not unintentionally cleaning up all the mess by turning it all into a coherent story.

## 6.2 Future work - Approaching the field from elsewhere

More and more movements arise from decentralized, temporal networks made up of ad hoc relations that unite people in joint causes. Alliances made around Me too, I Can't Breathe, doubts about the legitimacy of voting systems, or the effects of face masks, social distancing, or vaccines during a pandemic, demonstrate the power that lies in these temporary networks that facilitate large scale changes in attitudes. It also shows how attention to ambiguity, temporality, and potentiality are useful ways of approaching such phenomena. Yet, specifically in these fast emerging, intensive, and often short-lived cases, we need to be oriented towards the temporal as well as spatial position of the researcher as well as informants. We must not unintentionally erase ambiguities where they exist nor create them where they do not. We need to ask: *Is the ambiguity a construct made by the researcher? Is the ambiguity something that is perceived by all participants? Are ambiguities lost in translation in retrospective accounts?* The researcher must be conscious and cautious of not accidentally introducing non-existent order by pointing to ambiguities without orientation in time and place.

Following the new contemplations of ambiguity from where, and to whom it exists paves the way for another question: *From which position are these claims made, and which opportunities are there for positioning oneself differently?* Despite just having claimed that more and more movements arise from social media, critically we need to ask whether this is actually the case. We need to ask how one gets in a position to make such a claim.

Firstly, do I see a growth in such movements because I become more experienced and know what to look for? As an ethnographer gathering data, I have increasingly experienced that I recognize more and more elements, which my informants do not notice or are not acquainted with. I recognize patterns and have become more sensitive to new tendencies. This raises the question of how to determine that a claimed increase in movements is not simply an increased personal awareness. Secondly, to what extent am I able to be positioned elsewhere, outside my own network of relations? This is partly a matter of the omnipresent digital mediation and algorithmic ranking of all my activities, and partly due to the kinds of relations in my personal network that I create intentionally.

Even though I have shown how digital mediations are far from neutral, there are ways to actively take control and advantage over them. If I were to do this study anew, I would try to access data differently by not only interacting in settings strongly affected by algorithms that take my personal relations as input for content exposure. I would actively consider IT tooling, such as scripts or monitoring devices, allowing a different access to data. This is not a new idea: Parallel to this dissertation, a 2-year masters in techno anthropology has been offered in Denmark since 2011, with specific emphasis on solving complex socio-technical problems with multiple stakeholders from private, public, and civil organizations in different professional areas. Out of this came TANTlab<sup>39</sup>, a research group of techno anthropologists with specific attention to science and technology studies. These techno anthropologists have been concerned with the use, as well as visualization, of digitally driven data gathering. These institutions already engage experimentally with tools and methods for harvesting and analyzing messy social data online, to provide various types of visualizations. Yet, whereas these researchers are still concerned with exploring the everyday life of people, using technologies as tools, and reinventing and adapting tools like ethnographers have always done, this dissertation brings a different scope in directly chasing phenomena that emerge unexpectedly and through short lived connections. Using tailored programs to collect and collate data is an extension of doing ethnography and requires rethinking as well. One requirement is knowing the local language, which here may be the programming language. Being able to understand web technologies provides some clarity into the inner workings of webpages, and may reveal information, such as filters that conceal particular words or block users.

In addition to this already established work in the space between retooling ethnography, STS, and visualization, this dissertation makes way for adding a specific focus on suddenly emerging movements, and an opportunity to study the unpredictable and the incoherent, while drawing upon a lab with resources, access to digital tools for mapping, monitoring, and visualizing, as well as software expertise.

Another intriguing move would be to ally with a company like Overskrift.dk that makes a living out of the unpredictable, by providing services that mitigate the risks of shit storms and cyber bullying. These companies monitor emerging trends, thereby quickly noticing the unpredictable. They provide advance warning and advice on actions before things grow and get out of hand. Such a collaboration would provide access to emerging trends external to the researcher's own network while allowing for

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.tantlab.aau.dk/>

an earlier access to unpredictable events. This access would go beyond my personal relations in capturing things based on increased use of hashtags and locating trending terms used across several social media platforms independent on my specific position and connections.

Actively using software tools for monitoring and mapping tendencies and upcoming trends on social media represents a new promising way of transgressing the inherent boundaries that limit the researcher's personal sphere of specific network connections and interests. Technology may capture and analyze more data from alternative sources where the researcher otherwise has no access. This can shed light on patterns that the researcher could never find and is an obvious next step. Retooling ethnography with digital monitoring to approach emerging trends may be promising. Yet this approach will also require awareness of what is being monitored, as well as how, and positioning would need to be questioned. Monitoring will reflect what it is designed to map. Therefore, careful consideration of the technical design is pivotal.

Whereas ANT suggests that no one is ever outside or above any network, there *are* ways to be elsewhere. There are ways to be outside one's personal position. Yet, this does not provide a neutral position, simply one that is different. The question is not a matter of which method is best, but a matter of exploring the worlds that each of them produces. Monitoring data across social media or in specific times and places using software are not *better* ways to get to know what is going on. They are *different types of access* that can highlight patterns otherwise inaccessible or hidden to the researcher deeply integrated in her own network. Likewise, potentiality, ambiguity, and temporality are not *better* areas than diffusion or translation. However, in highly mediated settings with cacophonies of voices and no overall orchestration from a single site, they provide new insights. These concepts enable us to *shift to new practices* that take the chaos, the resisting informants, and the conflicting objects, without a priori making things absent to create an order.

Novel insights may be uncovered through the use of ambiguity, potentiality, and temporality. Having these concepts specifically in mind encourages attention to phenomena and interactions that are difficult to grasp and might otherwise be seen as uncomfortable inconveniences when focusing on the object of study. Like disciplined lack of clarity, deliberately looking for temporalities, potential, and ambiguity helps to have a focus while at the same time encouraging uncertainty, open ends, and multiple possible versions. This is useful when attending to matters that are both sudden, intensive, highly digitally mediated, and subject to massive attention. It is a methodological move towards

embracing messy, ambiguous data, a pivotal shift from analysts and writers fighting against data; incoherent data as well as data resisting the narrative can be explored and give rise to new insights.

In conclusion, this dissertation has demonstrated the challenges in telling a story that does not want to be told. The contribution of this dissertation is to show how it is possible to study things that happen suddenly, that are not orchestrated, that are very distributed, networked and highly mediated. These results are more and more relevant, despite the practices of viral reality marketing having become rare. We increasingly face situations, in which researchers along with journalists, comedians, politicians, and advertisers drop everything to attend to a specific reconfiguration, in which things run out of hand in accelerated, unexpected, and completely unpredictable ways, in which things explode. This dissertation is a methodological as well as practical contribution for people whose object of study is brief but intense, including the retrospective representation of it.