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**A study of viral diffusion/distortion/direction of social  
media content**

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# America first, organic country images second:

## A study of viral diffusion/distortion/direction of social media content

### Abstract

*Even though much has been said and written about viral processes in a social media context, not much is known about what happens to content when it is spread. Theories on networked diffusion typically use the analogy of the spread of infectious diseases, hereby framing diffusion as viruses inflicting large numbers of people during the process and largely assuming that the virus (or viral content) spreads through replication. However, viruses do not just replicate, they are subject to evolution, they mutate and they co-evolve together with their 'hosts'.*

*In the 'America first, us second' case, more than 30 different actors (mostly satirical news programs) joined in by not only sharing the original Dutch video's message, storyline and content, but by producing a series of follow-up videos. Using the 'America first, us second' phenomenon as the case, the fundamental question addressed in this paper is which take on social media communication and viral processes best describes what 'virality' does to social media content. If more traditional takes on viral processes best characterize this phenomenon, the videos following the Dutch one would stay rather close to the framing set by this first video and would probably also explicitly acknowledge and respect the 'lead' set by this video. On the other hand, if viral processes are uncontrollable and messages 'take on lives of their owns', the follow-up videos would probably, to a far greater extent, reconstruct, reenact, redirect and reinvent the storyline presented in the Dutch video.*

*In order to shed light on what virality 'does' to online content, we try to contribute to the answering of the critical questions whether virality is simply a matter of diffusion of original content; if distortion (in the form of more radical alterations) takes places; and how much the original video is directing (or guiding) the content added by the subsequent videos.*

### Introduction and Methodology

On January 20<sup>th</sup> 2017, in the inauguration speech, U.S. President Donald Trump proclaimed that "from this day forward, it's going to be only America first" and on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2017, the Dutch satirical news program 'Zondag Met Lubach' aired the video 'America first, the Netherlands second'. The video mock-beseached Donald Trump and implored him to 'put the Netherlands second'. The video went viral and reached around 20 million views within a couple of weeks and on February 9<sup>th</sup> the video had 179,644 likes and 5,910 dislikes, had triggered 16,778 comments

and was shared on many different platforms and by many different media. Appeals for ‘second place’ did not stop with the Dutch video as a series of other actors (especially late-night shows across Europe) soon responded to the Dutch video by airing their own videos, presenting their specific countries, while – as the Dutch video - using Trump impersonating voice-overs as well as a web of, more or less direct, Trump references, to construct narratives justifying why particular European countries should be second - a trend the New York Times referred to as a rare case of European unity through satire and self-mockery. Later on, videos presenting countries outside of Europe as well as videos presenting cities or regions (and even Westeros from Game of Thrones, Tolkien’s Mordor or the planet Mars,), showcasing why they should be second, were also launched.

Table 1 lists different indicators for videos aired within the first couple of weeks after the launch of the Dutch video (including the Mars video, but excluding videos on cities and regions as well as videos of highly dubitable quality and/or farther from the original Dutch script and storyline).

**Table 1: Overview over ‘America first, us second’ videos per February 9<sup>th</sup> 2017**

Country presentation	Release date	Views	Likes	Dislikes	Comments
Holland second	23-01-2017	21,590,803	179,644	5,910	16,778
Denmark second	02-02-2017	4,593,044	23,678	6,754	3087
Germany second	02-02-2017	6,511,889	80,677	12,778	9220
Portugal second	02-02-2017	3,542,919	32,392	2,763	2,793
Switzerland second	02-02-2017	9,296,872	81,438	6,719	1,109
Belgium second	03-02-2017	237,836	876	192	105
Lithuania second	03-02-2017	2,453,820	15,751	2,393	1,891
Second America on Mars?	04-02-2017	410,283	3,869	902	99
Kazakhstan second	04-02-2017	557,860	3,184	1,430	244
Luxembourg second	05-02-2017	1,019,576	11,665	756	891
France second	05-02-2017	732,337	3,018	2,885	151
Croatia third	06-02-2017	756,073	10,439	927	843
Iran before Iraq?	06-02-2017	216,773	2,953	126	11
Morocco second	06-02-2017	923,380	13,584	1,545	744
Macedonia second	06-02-2017	12,557	51	8	2
Italy second	06-02-2017	1,164,089	17,358	1,603	607
Australia second	06-02-2017	258,934	5,821	304	609
Austria second	07-02-2017	90,188	621	75	96
Namibia first in Africa	07-02-2017	218,615	2,898	171	407
Bulgaria second	07-02-2017	193,885	1,719	119	294
Slovenia sloppy second	07-02-2017	444,395	5,072	461	771
Czech Republic fifty first	07-02-2017	266,471	5,876	298	474
Finland second	07-02-2017	64,875	850	163	179
Spain second	07-02-2017	96,162	4,497	200	483
Moldova second-hand	07-02-2017	224,442	2,726	164	322
Sweden second	07-02-2017	3999	47	14	25
Slovakia second	08-02-2017	495	29	26	10
New Zealand	08-02-2017	3,860	414	22	38
Poland firster	08-02-2017	215,760	28,210	2208	1558

Table 1 is no more than a snapshot *indicating* the viral spread of ‘America first, us second’ messages aired within the first couple of weeks after the Dutch video was launched. Indicative as it is, the table may not include some relevant videos aired during this period of time and the numbers of views, (dis)likes and comments do not cover responses to sharing or re-airing of the different videos. However, the table does show that the Dutch video not only became viral itself, but also made other actors actively construct ‘us second’ messages, hereby strengthening the viral impact of the original Dutch idea as well as potentially extending the narrative, messages and storyline introduced by the original video. Denmark and Germany are two of the countries that were directly mentioned in the Dutch video (i.e. the Danish language being a total disaster and German being a fake language), possibly being a main reason why actors in these two specific countries were among the very first to respond to the Dutch video. However, many other videos followed (<http://everysecondcounts.eu/> contains an interactive map with videos from different countries and continents) and within little more than two weeks, more than 30 videos were aired – geographically and possibly conceptually expanding the message, content, connotations, scope and reach of the ‘us second’ message beyond the original video.

From nation branding and destination marketing perspectives, what is particularly interesting about these videos is that even though most of them start with the words “this is a message from the government of ...” (see table 2 for examples), they are *not* official promotional videos presenting national tourism offices’ and boards’ strategic communication, nor do they represent induced country images.

**Table 2: The “sender” and sender of ten of the videos**

Holland second	This is a message from the government of the Netherlands	‘Zondag Met Lubach’ (satirical news program)
Denmark second	This is a message from the government of Denmark	‘Natholdet’ (satirical news program)
Germany second	This is a message from the Federal Republic of Germany	‘Neo Magazin Royale’ (satirical news program)
Portugal second	This is a message from Portugal	5 Para a Mei-Noite (satirical news program)
Switzerland second	This is a message from the government of Switzerland	Deville late-night (satirical news program)
Belgium second	This is a message from the government of Belgium	De ideale wereld (satirical news program)
Lithuania second	No direct mentioning of the sender of the video	Laikykite ten (satirical news program)
Kazakhstan second	This is a message from the government of Kazakhstan	Mr. Kapuzu (type of source not identifiable as such)
Luxembourg second	This is a message from the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg	Studio Ben Iedo.TV (type of source not identifiable as such)
France second	This is a message from the government of France	Valentin Guerin (type of source not identifiable as such)

The senders of the videos are not official tourism organizations promoting the different destinations. Instead, the videos are unofficial presentations of different countries, mock-

beseeking Donald Trump to put them second (or third, or tenth, or first on a continent, or not last, or at least before another specific country) inscribing all videos in narratives with strong references to both the Dutch video and Trump as well as self-ironic and self-critical references to a series of national and cultural elements of each country. Furthermore, the videos are, according to views, likes and follow-ups, examples of relatively powerful *organic* country images that spread through online viral processes. Subjecting these videos to further analysis, the purpose of this article is to identify and discuss elements emphasized in the 'America first, us second' organic presentations of country images, hereby pointing to what and 'how much' happens to the content, structure and framing of an original narrative, as more and more actors chip in to tell the 'us second' story. Berger and Milkman (2011) asked the crucial question, why certain pieces of online content are more viral than others, hereby pointing to research saying little about *why* some content spreads throughout the blogosphere while other content is hardly shared at all. Many different types of research need to be done in order to establish the first contours of an answer to this question and in order to make their small contribution to the answering of the question, Berger and Milkman (2011) study how content characteristics affect 'virality'. However, as most studies of online viral processes, their study relies on a fundamental assumption of content being 'fixed', set, static and stable, thus ignoring another important puzzlement when it comes to online viral spread; i.e. what virality does to content. In order to add to the answering of the critical question pertaining to online spread, this paper discusses *not* possible reasons why the 'America first, us second' content went viral, but what virality does to the original content as more and more actors contribute with content on more and more countries' reasons to be second. Accordingly, the key contribution of this paper, incremental as it is, is that it adds to our knowledge on viral processes by analyzing a case where people not only (dis)like, share or comment on a piece of online content, but where the original content becomes the starting point for a sequel of videos with no definitive end.

The aim of this paper is *not* to assess the credibility, correctness or 'trueness' of the images presented in these videos or to pinpoint differences between these images and images promoted by official channels such as national tourism boards. Nor is the aim to analyze the political viewpoints voiced through the mocking of Donald Trump in these videos. Instead, the aim is to examine what viral processes 'do' to the 'America first, us second' narrative, hereby adding to existing knowledge on such processes. By doing so, the contribution of the analysis is twofold. First, the analysis advances understandings of destination branding by focusing *not* on promotion, communication or marketing officially promoting different countries (what Gunn (1972) labelled induced destination images), but images constructed by more satirical and informal representatives from the different countries (what Gunn (1972) labelled organic destination images). As such, the analysis emphasizes less rosy and self-ironical connotations and associations that are presented by a series of informal destination representatives, who are important for the formation of brand images, but usually neglected when analyzing destination images (see e.g. Lawson and Baud Bovy, 1977). Secondly, and most importantly, the article contributes to

extending and nuancing understandings of viral processes. On the one hand, traditional perspectives on viral processes define these as processes by which messages are passed on and consequently spread like a virus through social media, presupposing that messages are simply passed on, shared and spread, but do not change during these processes. On the other hand, recent research suggests that viral processes are not simply a matter of original messages being reproduced and spreading like a virus, but an issue of messages being subjected to far more complex processes of reinvention, reconstruction, reenactment and redirection – a discussion started by Blichfeldt and Smed (2015) in their article on the ‘Do it for Denmark’ video. However, whereas Blichfeldt and Smed’s (2015) analysis focuses on comments posted by viewers of a promotional video (or in their words, “consumers”), the analysis presented in this article adds an additional layer to the understanding of viral processes as it focuses on an “intermediary” (in the form of satirical news programs), with the budgets, competencies and skills to air videos of a quality superior to that of “ordinary viewers”. Focusing on this layer of actors and how they contribute to viral processes, this article nuances and refines understandings of viral messages as it digs into whether the ‘America first, us second’ message is co-constructed and further developed by multiple actors to such an extent that viral messages “take on a life of their own” or whether the additional actors stay closer to the original message and story-line.

Although a full analysis of all the videos could be relevant, the analysis presented in this article only covers the original video and the first nine ‘copycat’ videos. The reason to only include these videos is, first and foremost, pragmatic, but is reinforced by the author’s wish to do a deeper analysis of a smaller number of videos instead of a more shallow analysis of 30 or more videos. Furthermore, the choice to focus the analysis on the first ten videos accords with the intention of the paper not being to offer a full account of the viral processes characterizing the ‘America first, us second’ phenomenon, but to discuss whether viral processes contain more unpredictable and subtle elements than spread of original messages from the original sender to an ‘end’ audience. Viral processes may continue forever, but the most activity is usually seen in the beginning and this seems to also be the case for the ‘America first, us second’ phenomenon. As an example, one month after table 1 was produced the ‘video top five’ remained unchanged even though numbers of views for these five videos had increased with between 11 percent (the Netherlands) and close to 50 percent (Germany). In addition, the number of new videos being launched dramatically decreased after three to four weeks, corroborating that viral processes are better described as fads than as trends and consequently, it seems more appropriate to study viral processes by focusing on elements introduced very early on during the process, and before the fad fades, than to do longitudinal research covering everything from innovators to late majority and laggards as we would when studying traditional trends or product life cycles.

In practice, each of the first ten videos was gone through scene by scene several times and for every scene (160 scenes in total) the key elements presented in each scene were coded. However, as this paper emphasizes the destination perspective, the coding focuses on the presentations of

the different countries in the videos, not on the Trump references that would have been central to a more political analysis of the videos. As an example, the very first scene in the Dutch video was coded with elements such as landscape, fields, flat, water, canal and windmills. Hereafter, national elements were cleaned for self-references (e.g. words such as Holland, Dutch and the Netherlands were substituted with the word 'national' for all scenes in the Dutch video, but *not* in the other nine videos) in order for specific country and nation codes to be only included insofar these are references to other countries than the one presented in that nation's specific video. This allows for the analysis to also uncover the extent of referencing to other countries and especially, referencing back to the original Dutch video. Hereafter, the revised list of themes and words was subject to thematic analysis and themes were combined in order to both saturate them and generate themes at higher levels of abstraction. As a last step of this inductively grounded analysis (Buyatzis, 1998), and in order to visually present themes to the reader, data was fed into a program that generates word clouds where sizes indicate frequency of words in the text. The results of the analysis are thus threefold; allowing for in-depth analysis of individual videos, analysis of 'progression' of themes over time and analysis of construction and saturation of themes across all ten videos.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Within tourism research, much has been said and written about destination images, simply because it makes much sense that people need to have some sort of idea, beliefs and/or impression of a certain place before they would consider visiting it. Crompton (1979:18) defined destination image as "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination", whereas Lawson and Baud Bovy (1977: xx) defined a destination image as "the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imagination and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place". What these two definitions have in common is that they see images not as some 'ultimate' or 'general' truth about what a destination 'is' that exists independently of individuals, but as the sum of associations to a destinations held by an individual (or groups of individuals). Furthermore, both definitions point to such associations originating from all sorts of sources, regardless of the 'objectiveness' or 'quality' of these sources. As a result, 'official' information about a certain destination is but one of the sources of destination images, and potentially not the most credible or trusted one. In 1972, Gunn introduced the notions of induced and organic destination images. He defined the former as images presented by, and formed on the basis of, tourism organizations' promotion and communication about the destination. Organic destination images, on the other hand, he defined as information transmitted *unintentionally* by representatives of a tourism destination. Most research focuses on induced image formation processes, although the latter type of processes might have much stronger impacts. Furthermore, although the 'America first, us second' videos are not communication from tourism organizations or authorities in the respective countries and consequently, have nothing to do with induced destination images, they cannot be reduced to



*unintentionally* transmitted information. On the contrary, as the videos play with a format that resembles that used in many official nation branding videos, they deliberately reframe this format to one that includes a series of elements that would typically not be included in official videos without the adding of such elements being reducible to unintentional acts. Consequently, apart from adding to the answering of the fundamental question on what virality 'does' to original content, the paper also adds to understandings of organic destination image formation by analyzing the voices of a series of powerful, but largely overlooked, contributors to organic destination images.

Traditionally, communication has been conceptualized as a message flow including a sender, receiver(s) and a mediating channel (Gyimothy, 2013), reducing all other communication to 'noise' and/or feedback. Appealing as the simplicity of such conceptualizations are, they do not take into account the processes that may be triggered when multiple layers of actors, multimodal networks and chains of referrals actively engage in co-producing, creating, changing or in other ways contributing to messages that 'go viral'. Furthermore, traditional communication models do not align well with research that shows how many different actors create, comment on, change and contribute to social media content (Bowman, 2011; Brown et al., 2003; Shau et al., 2009), nor do they align with the assumption that social media communication is interactive and non-linear. Some researchers (e.g. Blichfeldt and Smed, 2015) suggest that it would be naïve to assume that original messages simply spread online in infectious manners without new meanings being added or original meanings being altered or perhaps even being 'buried' underneath the additional layers of meaning that are added as multiple actors contribute with content. From this perspective, in a social media context, meaning is negotiated in dialogues between actors, hereby opening up for more chaotic and less linear communication flows and constructions (Miller and Lammas, 2010). This entails that meanings and messages are not only passed on through viral processes, but may take on new meanings, directions and forms as more actors get involved in the construction of content. Using the 'America first, us second' phenomenon as the case, the fundamental question addressed in this paper is which of these two takes on social media communication and viral processes best align with online viral processes. If a more traditional take on viral processes best characterizes this phenomenon, the videos following the Dutch one would stay rather close to the framing set by this first video and would probably also explicitly acknowledge and respect the 'lead' set by this video. On the other hand, if viral processes are indeed uncontrollable and messages take on lives of their own and go in directions that could not have been anticipated from the beginning, the follow-up videos would probably, to a far greater extent, reconstruct, reenact, redirect and reinvent the storyline presented in the Dutch video.

Theories on networked diffusion typically use the analogy of the spread of infectious diseases in order for readers to comprehend the idea of the spread of 'something' (e.g. innovations, ideas, products, trends, norms, behaviors or online content) through processes of diffusion, hereby framing diffusion as epidemics inflicting large numbers of people during the process (e.g. Rogers,

1962). Although cumulative adoption curves have proven to be “consistent with the hypothesis of “viral”, disease-like diffusion, [...] the extent to which prevailing models accurately describe online diffusion is unknown” (Goel et al., 2012:1). What is particularly interesting about the use of viruses as an analogy in online contexts is that it is largely assumed that the virus (or viral content) spreads through replication, implying that the original content remains much the same as it is diffused. However, viruses do not always simply replicate, sometimes they are subject to evolution, they mutate and they co-evolve together with their ‘hosts’. Studying diffusion patterns arising from seven different online domains, Goel et al. (2012:1) conclude that “the bulk of adoptions often takes place within one degree of a few dominant individuals”. Nevertheless, in the ‘America first, us second’ case, more than 30 different actors (mostly satirical news programs) joined in to not only host the original message, storyline and content, but actively contributed with content, hereby adding a layer of very active and influential hosts inviting the content to be ‘star guests’ in their own shows and storylines and acting in ways potentially contributing to evolution and mutation of the original content. In order to shed light on what virality ‘does’ to online content, in the subsequent section of the paper, we first introduce the Dutch video and the story told in this video and thereafter, we compare this narrative and storyline to what is presented in the next nine videos. By doing so, we try to add to the answering of the critical questions whether virality is simply a matter of diffusion of original content; if distortion (in the form of more radical twists or alterations of the original Dutch content) takes places; and how much the original video is directing (or guiding) the content added by the subsequent videos.

## **Findings**

The original Dutch video was aired with the title “The Netherlands welcomes Trump in his own words” and in the satirical news program, the video was introduced with the wording: “Because we realize it’s better for us to get along, we decided to introduce our tiny country to him - in a way that will probably appeal to him the most”. The video features a Donald Trump vocal impersonation and while satirizing Trump’s use of rhetoric and political views, the video gives a tour of the Netherlands, introducing a series of (not necessarily ‘noteworthy’) Dutch attractions, traditions and characteristics. The video borrows many of Trump’s favorite phrases and his speaking style. As an example, the video starts with the declaration that it is “going to be a great video”. The first scene depicts a landscape with flat fields surrounding a canal with picturesque buildings and a traditional windmill located at the banks of the canal. The next part of the video is dedicated to Dutch history in the form of William of Orange and his wars against the Spanish. The next section introduces the Dutch language as “the best language in Europe” and proclaims that “all the other languages failed” (including that the Danish language is a total disaster and German is a fake language). The next clips take the viewer to Ponypark Slaghaven (a theme park and resort dedicated to children’s interactions with ponies), to the Afsluitdijk dike (which protects the Netherlands from floods (and water from Mexico)), around the Dutch singer Lee Towers, to the

attraction Madurodam (a 'great' miniature town), mentioning of the reporter Gerry Eickhof, point to the Black Pete celebrations in December (and its racist connotations) and introduce the disabled politician Jetta Klinjsma as associated with the 'Ministry of Silly Walks'. The next section points to the Netherlands having "the best tax evasion system". Finally, the video – before being ended by turning back to the idyllic scenery it started with – points to Holland as part of NATO and Trump's potential to make Holland's problems "great again". The video ends with pleading Donald Trump to supplement "America first" with "the Netherlands second".

What is particularly interesting about the Dutch video is that it does not simply introduce things that would be emphasized in official tourism communication (e.g. windmills, wooden shoes, tulips, Dutch painters, cathedrals, canals or the color Orange) or other issues that Holland is known for (e.g. coffee/cannabis bars or the Red Light district). Instead, the video mixes stereo-typical images of Holland (e.g. canals and windmills) with self-deprecating humor and 'uncomfortable' truths such as the Black Pete celebrations and tax evasion issues. Furthermore, self-mockery and self-irony are central issues throughout the video, starting with the introduction of the Netherlands as 'our tiny country', followed by the emphasis on elements that do not necessarily qualify as the strongest and/or most favorable associations to Holland, and ended with humbly asking to be second.

In order to discuss the cumulative content of the first ten videos, figure 1 (to be found at the end of the paper) visually presents main themes and concepts identified across all ten videos, including both the ones introduced in the Dutch video and those added by the nine subsequent videos.

A central theme across the videos is 'language' and this includes statements that follow up on the Dutch video's self-ironic reference to Dutch as 'the best language' by mocking the Dutch language and/or by pointing to characteristics of own languages; statements that stay rather close to the self-ironical direction set by the Dutch Video. As mentioned previously, all national self-references were eliminated before generating the word cloud presented in figure 1 and consequently, the second most dominant theme in the figure, 'national' represents instances where the videos emphasize a national element such as national flags, national dishes, national sports, residents etc. (elements that are also visualized by the prominence of the codes 'parks', 'people', and 'flag'). As for the Dutch video's section that introduces William of Orange and wars 'against the Spanish', the follow up videos include sections on 'history', but many of them expand the historical dimension beyond medieval times to also include more recent events such as WW1, WW2, the Berlin Wall and contemporary military forces (including Danish self-mocking the Queen's guard and Swiss self-ironical comments on the Swiss guard). Furthermore, the videos continue the path set by the Dutch video in terms of promoting their countries by introducing both contemporary cultural elements (e.g. music, football, heritage sites) and nature-based attractions such as landscapes, waterfalls, seashores, lakes, mountains, canals etc. As for elements introduced by the follow-up videos, that are not directly addressed by the Dutch video, the most prominent is that whereas the Dutch video's mentioning of the Black Pete celebrations and a disabled politician

introduce the themes racism and discrimination, the follow up videos expand these themes to also include sexism (e.g. Switzerland having 'the best women') as well as discrimination against women, homosexuals etc. Moreover, an element that was not included directly in the Dutch video, but grows in importance as more videos aired – and one that is also fundamental to the 'everysecondcounts' site - is visual displays of the exact geographical position of the countries (or pretending to be positioned elsewhere, mostly in neighboring countries in case Trump would take 'retaliatory actions' because of the videos). This element of visually mapping the different countries relates very much to a key element that characterizes the web of content across the ten first videos, namely that they include many references to other countries as well as a fair amount of mockery across countries. The most prominent reference to other countries, regions etc. is the reference to Holland (presented by the codes 'Netherlands', 'Holland' and 'Dutch', followed by references to 'America' and 'Mexico, different European countries such as Spain, German and Danish, Russia/USSR and finally EU/European/Europe.

On the basis of the many references to other countries and regions, the videos not only present individual countries, but inscribe themselves in webs of national and regional positions, relationships, inter-dependencies and linkages. Furthermore, the Dutch video remains a central node across these webs of significance and meaning-making. For example, the Danish video mocks the Dutch language very directly, the German video mocks Holland for the Black Pete celebrations and connotations to the color orange, the video presenting Portugal mocks Holland for being 'more orange than you', the Swiss video mocks Holland for being flat, Belgium settles for being "second, or tenth, we don't care" and Lithuania suggests "US first, the Netherlands can have their second place and we shall take the third". The many direct references to the Dutch video as well as the fact that the subsequent videos follow the direction set by the Dutch video and do not distort the original storyline (although they do add content) suggest that, in this particular case, virality does not 'do' as much to the original narrative as could be expected.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Discussing symbolic convergence in social media communication, Gyimothy (2013:70) points out how 'anyone' can contribute with content and she continues to conclude that "power structures are ephemeral, emerging, and disappearing in fleeting alliances". Looking across the ten 'America first, us second' videos, they do represent some form of alliance being formed between the senders of the different videos and the compilation of all videos on <http://everysecondcounts.eu/> does point to attempts to 'combine forces' of the different videos. Nevertheless, the power structure is not ephemeral, nor does it disappear in fleeting alliances as the follow-up videos stay remarkably close to the content of the original Dutch video and the central messages are not changed as much as could be expected. Although the follow-up videos extend the narrative from the original 'America first, the Netherlands second' to a story of 'America first, us second' that includes a series of countries, they do so respecting the direction set by the Dutch video and, in almost all cases, include very clear references to the Dutch video.

Both the Dutch video and all nine follow-up videos analyzed in this paper stick to a format that resembles that used in many official nation branding videos. Furthermore, the nine follow-up videos follow the Dutch lead in reframing this format to one that includes self-mockery as well as elements typically not included in official videos. Compared to Gunn's (1972) definition of organic destination images as information transmitted *unintentionally* by representatives of a tourism destination, there seems to be nothing unintentional about these videos. On the contrary, the use of a format resembling that used in relation to induced destination image formation, combined with the inclusion of events, people and attractions not traditionally included in such image formation strongly indicates that the videos are everything but unintentional.

This paper tried to contribute to a better understanding of viral processes in an online context by addressing whether more traditional takes on communication or more interactive approaches that embrace collaborative and co-productive formations of content align best with the very viral case at hand. Although the mere existence of follow-up videos indicates that viral processes are uncontrollable and unpredictable and although the follow-up videos contribute by expanding the 'us second' storyline to a series of additional countries, the original messages do not take on lives of their own and do not stray in directions not guided by the original Dutch video. Consequently, contrasting e.g. Blichfeldt and Smed's (2016) findings, although the follow-up videos extend the original message to include a series of additional destinations, they do not reconstruct, reenact, redirect and reinvent the storyline presented in the Dutch video as much as would be expected on the basis of more interactive communication models.

In regard to the virus analogy used in diffusion models and viral marketing theory, the paper gives a more nuanced understanding of diffusion processes as the 'America first, us second' content neither simply spreads through replication (which would simply mean that the Dutch video was liked, shared and commented on), nor are the original messages subject to dramatic evolution or mutation. The original messages do co-evolve as more and more 'hosts' join in to not simply spread the original message, storyline and content, but actively contribute with content. Goel et al. (2012:1) argued that "the bulk of adoptions often takes place within one degree of a few dominant individuals". However, the 'America first, us second' case differs from Goel et al.'s (2011) findings as diffusion takes places within more degrees as actors not only diffuse the original Dutch video, but produce and air additional videos. Nonetheless, these videos stay rather close to the framing set by the Dutch video and many of them explicitly acknowledge the 'lead' of the Dutch video. In practice this means that the follow-up videos do not simply diffuse the content of the original Dutch video, but they do not distort that content either. Instead, the follow-up videos extend the original content while staying true to and following the 'lead' and direction of the original videos.

This paper does no more than add a tiny piece of knowledge to the answering the critical question on what virality 'does' to online content and its main contribution is that it suggests that linkages between online content and viral processes are far more complex than it simply being a matter of

infectious spread of original messages. On the other hand, to define viral processes as inherently uncontrollable and messages as entities 'taking on lives of their own' seems to be too drastic - at least when it comes to the 'America first, us second' case. Consequently, further research is needed in order to better understand more precisely when virality is a rather straight-forward matter of diffusion of original content, when virality distorts original messages and which factors are decisive for the extent to which original messages direct (or guide) the generation of additional content. The paper furthermore contributes to understandings of place and country branding as it points to ways in which a hitherto under-researched group of actors contribute to the formation of organic country and destination images, hereby hopefully inspiring other researchers to pursue lines of research that focuses less on induced destination images and more on the subtle and complex formations of organic images.

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