

# Books, Branding and Boundary Objects: On the Use of Image in Rural Development

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## Abstract

This article addresses the use of image building in rural community development. We see rural image construction as taking place between the need for broadness and inclusiveness to mobilise locally, and the need for narrowness and exclusivity to attract attention from the outside world. Thus, rural images may be seen as boundary objects that need to be both flexible and clear. Empirically, the article presents a case study based on fieldwork, individual interviews and group interviews in a rural community that has used processes of image construction in order to turn depression into vitality. Fjærland, an area on the western coast of Norway, has created the image of a small, quiet and picturesque Book Town: an unlikely cluster of 12 bookshops, combined with remoteness and rurality in a place with only 300 inhabitants. The study concludes with a few core implications of this for future rural development initiatives.

## Introduction

In March every year, Nederland, Colorado, holds an annual 'Frozen Dead Guy Days®' festival.<sup>1</sup> In this community of 1,394 inhabitants a man who died in 1989 'rests in his original steel coffin, which is packed tightly in dry ice in an insulated wooden box'.<sup>2</sup> Bo Shaffer, his 'carer', who is also known as 'The Ice Man', from the Delta Technogroup, replaces the dry ice every fortnight. The dead man's grandson, Trygve Bauge, believes that it will be possible in years to come to bring his grandfather back to life or at least to clone him. Thus, based on these events, every year a 3-day festival with activities such as Ice Queen & Grandpa Look-Alike contests, and a Frozen T-shirt contest takes place in this rural community. During the festival more than 7,000 people meet in downtown Nederland to take part in the parade.<sup>3</sup>

The above case is an odd one. It is an illustrative, albeit unusual example on place promotion or rural community image building. Today numerous contemporary rural development initiatives revolve around rural images, branding and the promotion of rural places. Products and people as well as places are branded to promote or sell an

area. However, in a globalised world the struggle for media attention is intense. The frozen dead guy initiative suggests that peace and quiet in a relaxing and picturesque environment is not the only feature that can be highlighted in rural image creation. Clearly, there are no limits to what kind of things can be used to promote a place. It is not surprising that the more out of the ordinary events receive greater attention. Interestingly, in this case, these somewhat unusual events secured the support of community authorities, with the Nederland Area Chamber of Commerce agreeing to capitalise upon the frozen dead guy to promote their community.

It may be worthwhile to explore further the relation between images and place promotion on the one hand and rural development on the other. There is a paradox in contemporary rural community development: the need for visibility and attention leads to an increased emphasis on the search for impressive, striking or surprising images in rural place promotion. At the same time the very nature of rural community development is to mobilise different people with different interests, identities and ideas to work together. The first requires a certain narrowness and exclusiveness while the latter requires a certain broadness and inclusiveness. The research task of this article was therefore, first, to elaborate on the paradox between broadness and narrowness in the use of image building and place promotion in rural development. Secondly, we explored what is created through the place promotion and place branding initiatives. Is it merely new images – which may be seen as a surface phenomenon – or are deeper changes taking place?

To examine these questions, we present a case study from a rural community, Fjærland, in Norway. Fjærland is a remote area with about 300 inhabitants located beside a fiord in western Norway which has presented itself as a Book Town. The term book town refers to a small rural town or village with a high concentration of secondhand and antiquarian bookshops. In this case, both the processes towards developing a new (rural) image and the results thereof are seen by local participants and outside observers alike as positive and thriving.

The article starts with a presentation of relevant literature and the theoretical foundations of our work, as well as a distinct theoretical approach to the research task. In the next section we present an overview of the case study and subsequent analysis, giving a brief background and a presentation of the brand image and relevant processes related to the rural development initiatives in this community. Thereafter, we analyse the characteristics and features of the development processes as well as the images in light of the theoretical framing. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of our findings. We conclude with some suggestions on the nature of image building and branding as a key aspect of rural development.

### Literature and theoretical approach

Our theoretical approach to rural development combines two distinct areas of literature. Firstly, we build upon literature on place promotion and on branding the rural. However, we observe that the use of metaphors and ideas from advertisements, promotion and image creation in a rural context requires reflections on how diverse interests, ideas and identities actually manage to work together. Therefore, we also make use of theoretical contributions from the field of science and technology studies

(STS), which explicitly addresses what Star and Griesemer (1989, p. 388) define as 'The problem of common representations in diverse intersecting social worlds'. We hold that when they are combined these areas of research can make visible the challenges of rural development in an era of competition over visibility and attraction. These two bodies of literature are used to present a combined theoretical approach to image and branding in rural development.

### *Place promotion and media attraction*

Branding, or cultivating and promoting an image of place is, as Ward (1998) has pointed out, not a new phenomenon. Empirically, much work has been done throughout history by stakeholders in different communities and places in order to develop an image and a strategy to present themselves to the world (Paddison 1993; Skuras and Dimara 2004). The aims are often to attract something, be it pilgrims, patients (Alderson 1973), tourists (Hopkins 1998; Fyall *et al.* 2003), investments (Bukve 1994)<sup>4</sup> or new inhabitants (Holm and Stræte 2006). However, the ways in which places are promoted and sold are also closely related to their history (Ward 1998).

During the last decade there has been an increasing focus on the social construction of the rural. Concurrently, representations, images and myths have become important aspects in analysis and discussions of how to picture the rural, and the people living there, as well as migration patterns in rural areas (Thrift 1994; Cloke *et al.* 1997; Boyle and Halfacree 1998; Villa 1999; Dam *et al.* 2002; Berg and Lysgård 2004). Contemporary rural image creation and rural branding might be seen as a matter of deliberate social construction by which local communities compete, using various means and with different results, to be the most visible and attractive in the global quest for attention. There is considerable competition for this type of attention (McQuail 1994), accompanied by an awareness of how the media engage in this filtering and selection process. Galtung and Ruge (1965) pinpointed this more than 40 years ago: 'the bigger the dam, the more will its inauguration be reported *ceteris paribus*; the more violent the murder the bigger the headlines it will make'. It logically follows, then, that the effective structuring of the surprising, shocking, impressive or otherwise outstanding rural images will gain the required media attention.

Several critical studies have emphasised that contemporary place promoting is strongly related to processes of commodification. Urry (1995), for example, demonstrates how commodification contributes to the reconstruction of places in order to satisfy anticipated gazes on the place (from the outside). This, in turn, sets the stage for what Kearns and Philo (1993) see as a manipulative element of image creation. Strategically, rural image creation might be presented as constructing relatively clear-cut real representations of a place – a centre, community or site. By default, this is a process where multiple identities, realities, meanings, sites and impressions are reconfigured to fit a recognisable, and, for some, attractive image. However, living in a rural community requires neither common goals nor convergent identities (Cloke and Little 1997; Kneafsey 2000; Halfacree 2006). The heterogeneity of rural communities is being increasingly recognised in the literature on rural development (for example, Shucksmith 2008). It might be seen as a paradox, therefore, that rural

image creation seems to be a process by which one object (a rural image) with a common identity is constructed on the basis of multiple and heterogeneous identities, meanings and interests. The developmental challenges that result are to transform several understandings of a place into one coherent and presentable image without destroying prospects of local mobilisation, cooperation and interaction. In a rural development context the processes of developing, extracting or choosing the community image requires an approach that simultaneously encourages the activity and engagement of a large proportion of the inhabitants.

*Diverse worlds, common representations*

Rural people live in different epistemic realities (Kneafsey 2000). Even so, inclusiveness, broad mobilisation, and multi-level cooperation are vital to successful rural development (Borch *et al.* 2008; Shucksmith 2008). It is not unusual, then, for people from different social worlds to criss-cross and communicate in order to work together, create objects or obtain goals. However, as individual social realities vary actors must find ways to integrate these multiple meanings if they wish to cooperate. This integration requires substantial labour on everyone's part. It is necessary to 'translate, negotiate, debate, triangulate and simplify in order to work together' (Star and Griesemer 1989, p. 389). A substantial literature exists in what has been known as STS on issues related to such challenges.

Star and Griesemer's main contribution to the problem is the concept of a 'boundary object'. The term has been used and studied extensively in STS (for example, Star and Griesemer 1989; Henderson 1991; Fujimora 1992), as well as in studies of knowledge work, organisation and management (for example, Brown and Duguid 1991; Carlile 2002, 2004; Sapsed and Salter 2004). Boundary objects are entities that are both

plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. (Star and Griesemer 1989)

Thus, boundary objects serve as an interface between different social worlds in that they are shared by the different social worlds but understood and used differently by each of them. Creating a boundary object requires the existence of a certain degree of interpretative tolerance but also some clarity. Without the clarity and the unity of the boundary object, the social worlds would disperse and diverge. Without the flexibility and tolerance, it would disintegrate due to conflicting and competing meanings. According to Sapsed and Salter (2004, p. 1519), 'It becomes clear in the literature that a boundary object stands or falls on its capacity to accommodate local "dialects" '.

The term boundary object is deliberately loose and flexible.<sup>5</sup> This implies that there may be limits to its usefulness. Fujimora (1992) criticises the term for being too loose and flexible in cases where scientific facts need to be established through the closure of controversies. In such cases it is the establishment of an authoritative joint meaning and interpretation that is needed. Fujimora (1992) suggests a somewhat

more rigid alternative: a standardised package, a term that is defined below. Also in rural development, one might see attempts to establish authoritative interpretations of images – and thereby the suppression of alternative opinions. However, it is an empirical question whether interpretative flexibility outweighs pressures for the closure of controversies, and thereby whether it is more fruitful to talk of the establishment of standardised packages.

In STS the co-operation – or productive co-existence – of different social worlds is a key issue, and has been dealt with in many ways (for example, Callon 1985; Latour 1988, 2005; Mol 2002; Law 2004). Mol (2002) and Law (2004) present an approach based on the observation that the empirical world sometime is messy, meaning that clarity, unity and stringency are absent. There are no hidden patterns. Reality does not necessarily converge into any degree of common and clear image. When there are multiple worlds, different sites and incompatible perspectives, analytical approaches must also be allowed to be messy. Law (2004, p. 2) points out that ‘simple clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent. The very attempt to be clear simply increases the mess’. The social worlds sometimes contain separate objects. When these meet, Mol (2002, p. 46) points out, ‘Their objects may coincide. But this is not a law of nature’.

The literature on boundary objects, standardised packages and on messiness all address diverse social worlds working together and creating actual, functioning realities. However, one can imagine a continuum in terms of clarity and stringency of the objects of study, where standardised packages are located at the one side, boundary objects at the centre and Law’s messiness at the other extreme. On one side, processes end the closure of controversy and the world is being remade with a joint understanding of the facts – a standardised package. In the middle processes go on with co-action between different social worlds around functioning boundary objects. On the other side, joint co-action takes place – or not – depending upon, for example, accidents or power.

There is more to the debate than degrees of order. Because we address images – representations of the world, it is timely to stress that all the approaches described indicate that the world is being remade in different shapes. Fujimora (1992) describes the establishment of new facts and settled negotiations on unified realities. Star and Griesemer (1989) describe the working of the world due to the diligent creation of new actual entities – the boundary objects, while Mol (2002) and Law (2004), drawing their examples from studies in the health sector, describe how diverse social worlds may remake the social worlds of the others without merging with them. The illness experienced by patients, for example, is a different reality (a different object) from the illness (the diagnosis) for the doctors. But they relate to each other and they influence each other substantially. The relationship between illnesses and diagnosis may be seen as parallel to the relationship between the rural and the (anticipated) gaze from outside described by Urry (1995). As the rural changes due to adaptations from outside and vice versa, illnesses and diagnoses are created in each other’s light. Finally, after the gazes, the consultations and the negotiations, the different objects are fundamentally different from the other’s reality and from the previous realities. Thus, images are potentially not just representations or surface phenomenon but expressions of new realities.

## Data

The article builds upon a research project exploring the processes of image creation in rural Norway. In order to identify communities for this study, we asked deputies in the county governor's administration<sup>6</sup> in all 18 counties of Norway to name places or communities in their region that were known for their positive image. We received about 115 reported cases, in addition to several self-reported cases (people contacting us asking to be studied after reading about the project on our home page).<sup>7</sup> Our first examination of the rural communities suggested we chose areas where the promotional process seemed to have started from the bottom up, that is, where the branding of the rural started from the work of rural people themselves. Furthermore, we decided to steer away from rural places whose images had been extensively exposed in the Norwegian public consciousness (Heimtun 1999). In addition, the deputies' way of selling the local places also was taken into consideration when choosing our study areas. We searched for communities that were perceived as creating local enthusiasm.

Following the selection of our four case study areas we visited the places with the aim of identifying potential informants and inviting them to discuss their images of the place at a later date. A second visit was then made to conduct two focus group interviews in each of the locations, as well as a numerous individual interviews and participation in local events such as festivals, market days and football games and so on. The focus groups consisted of between five to six individuals each, recruited on the basis of our first field trip and with the help of local people identified in the first trip. In each community one group consisted of those who were engaged in community development and the other group consisted of people who did not to have any particular community development role. In practice, this division regarding engagement became a bit blurred as the supposedly unengaged individuals sometimes were found to have an earlier direct or indirect involvement in community development.

In this article we present the findings from one of these four case studies, Fjærland, the Book Town. The study that is presented here is selected because we see it as illustrating our research theme especially well and as being particular useful for our task of theoretical development.

## The case study: Fjærland, the Book Town

### *Background*

Fjærland has always been a place where agriculture and tourism have been the major sources of income. A narrow fiord, high mountains and a well-kept cultural landscape meets spectacular glaciers. Fjærland was one of the first places in Norway to develop a tourist industry. The obvious and immediate first image of Fjærland is a picture postcard image of the rural idyll. However, today, neither agriculture nor tourism is able to maintain a viable population, which has steadily decreased throughout the last decades to around 300 residents.

Transport and communication have been recurrent themes for the development of Fjærland. Until 1986 the only way to reach Fjærland was by boat and ferries brought

travellers into the centre of the village. Since then, it has become possible to drive there by car and by 1994 a new road also connected Fjærland to the rural city of the municipality. However, these new roads bypassed then centre of Fjærland, to get to the town centre requires making a detour. At the same time, apart for a daily trip in the summer season, the ferry was decommissioned and the numbers of people passing through the town decreased. Paradoxically, these improved access routes placed Fjærland in a peripheral position. As the population decreased institutions such as the local food store, post office and school were either closed down or at risk of being closed. Hence, a feeling of crisis spread.

### *Images and rural development*

Several steps to stop the decline of the town were taken. The two initiatives that are best known to the outside world include the Norwegian glacier museum (established in 1991) and the Book Town (established in 1996). These initiatives offer very different images. Due to its location near the large Jostedal glacier, Fjærland has a natural advantage for hosting a glacier museum as well as for tourism. However, it was the image of Fjærland as a book town that caught our attention as researchers. Imagine the fiord with boat-houses on one side of the road and houses and a hotel on the other. In the hills there are a few farms. The road through Fjærland ends at the dismantled ferry quay. There is only one grocery store but there are 12 bookstores. One is in the former post office; one in the former ferry waiting room; one in an old barn; one in a small boat-house and one in the hotel. Part of the original idea was to fill the empty houses with something. In one group interview the following conversation took place:

Mads: The ferry disappeared from the town centre and then it became empty of people. The tourists went along the road [outside the centre] – but didn't drive out here. To make something that drew people into the centre, we had to find something, and then it became this with the Book Town.

Hanne: And there were a lot of empty houses we didn't know what to do with – if they were to stay or if we would have to demolish them.

Mads: Yes.

Hanne: Fill them with books: boat-houses, barns, shelters, everything.

Bjørn: New and old houses.

Hanne: Yes. Every spare room and house goes to the Book Town.

However, the establishment of Fjærland's Book Town can be traced to a longer history or rural development, linked to the international book town movement. Currently, the homepage of the International Organisation of Book Towns (IOB) lists 11 towns that use the label Book Town. The first book town was established in the Welsh town of Hay-on-Wye by Richard Booth in the late 1970s (IOB 2007). This started to spread in the beginning of 1990s. The IOB define a book town in this way:

A book town is a small rural town or village in which second-hand and antiquarian bookshops are concentrated. Most Book Towns have developed in villages of historic interest or of scenic beauty. (IOB 2007)

Nonetheless, in an international comparison of Book Towns, the Fjærland Book Town stands out as an unlikely setting due to its awkward location and minor size. In the case of Fjærland there was no obvious comparative advantage. Its locality and size both indicated severe challenges to starting a Book Town. Thus every advantage had to be manmade. However, one informant made this observation:

Janne: But the Book Town has been helped by the dramatic natural landscape. Many coming here express their astonishment that they get here by driving through a hole in the mountain [the tunnel]. And then, suddenly there are 300,000 books. And they can walk in peace and quiet and read a book among these mighty mountains.

### *The image as boundary object*

Today, the book town in Fjærland constitutes an image, a concept, an idea, a phenomenon that can be analysed as a boundary object. It is a relatively clear image of a beautiful scenic little place full of bookshops of different shapes and sizes. This image, in combination with the uniqueness, surprising character and beautiful surroundings is distinct enough to be recognised both in Fjærland, in Norway and internationally. Media attention and numerous press notices confirm this. Thus, it is definitely 'robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites' (Star and Griesemer 1989, p. 393). But is it elastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties involved? Is the book town an interface between different social worlds?

Let us start with the core, the original idea of the Book Town. One could say that the authorised image of the book town is the one that corresponds with the self-presentation of IOB and the central actors in the local project. For them the book town is a concept for acquiring and distributing secondhand books and at the same time a development project. The original idea of a book town in Fjærland illustrates this. A soon-to-retire couple from Norway – both with a background in school and education administration – went to Hay-on-Wye for a vacation in the first half of the 1990s.

Dorte: The really important moment was when Janne and Julius had been on holiday (Hay-on-Wye in Wales) and become enthusiastic about the book town concept, and came back here and told people. And there is an openness here in the community that makes a lot of people think, 'we should try this out'.

Julius: Yeah, but remember that the starting point was that we sat there talking of what we could do to drag more people to Fjærland.

Since the book town was established the daily work has consisted of getting books in, sorting, distributing and selling:

Julius: And then, when we retired, my wife and I spent so much time working with the Book Town that we thought we might as well move in here. We had a cottage here from before, so we expanded it to have enough space, and then we moved here. I am a bit involved in local politics, but except from that it is mostly the Book Town that takes my time.

The rural development aspect – the internal mobilisation – was a part of the rationale for establishing the Book Town. Even so, the initiators did not expect the high level of

popular support it was given by the residents. Partly because of the general oddity and surprising features of the Book Town, a rather narrow audience – and interest – for the concept could be expected:

Julius: We had to get more capital in, and we went out with equity issues. And there were a lot of people who came and wanted to buy shares because they observed that the Book Town created so much life and activity throughout the community ... so this was a kind of evaluation of the project. And we had not thought in the beginning that it would have this internal effect. And that it created a feeling of wellbeing. That was a bonus.

Also we researchers, as outsiders, questioned the possibility of gathering broad support for this kind of project. Since not everyone shares the interest for the worlds of literacy and books, did the locals really believe in selling of books as a way of rescuing their community? When we confronted the residents of Fjærland with these kind of questions, three main themes emerged. Firstly, people in Fjærland in general, we heard, were very interested in books and reading. It is a part of their self-presentation that Fjærland has supplied Norway with school teachers for decades. This suggests that establishing a book town was not such an alien concept to these residents:

Jon: The most important export from Fjærland used to be the teachers, you know.

Lise: A writer said that it was Fjærland that kept Norway with teachers and potatoes during the tough 1930s.

The explanation given to us was that the farmers of Fjærland became rather wealthy due to income from transporting tourists to the glacier around end of the 1890s. This, combined with few opportunities for further development locally, led the sons and daughters of Fjærland to leave the community to pursue academic studies and work which, at that time, was generally teaching.

A second response was that the book town idea was so odd that one had to support it. Other unlikely or spectacular projects also had been initiated in the community. This included a round bale<sup>8</sup> festival, where visual art made from the farmers' round bales was presented;<sup>9</sup> a tractor-with-round-bale ballet, in which tractors moved round bales around a field accompanied by ballet music (*Swan Lake*), and a support-a-sheep project where people from the outside were invited to be involved in the sponsorship of a particular sheep.<sup>10</sup> A young farmer who participated in it commented on how he became involved in the tractor ballet:

Bjørn: She called me and asked if I wanted [to join]. And I thought: round bale what? I completely ... what is this? I wanted to know what it was, and then I thought I better come along. And they didn't have a finished idea, so we thought more on it ... well, it was a bit weird, but we were anxious about how people – the audience – would take it, but then ... it was very positive, so it was rather amusing.

A basic – and apparently successful – mind-set in the village seems to be an openness to suggestions even if the residents do not necessarily think it is a good idea. The person behind the idea of the round-bale ballet offered this reflection on the general attitude:

Dorte: It's important [to say] that this is an attitude here. People may say 'I don't believe in this, but I will not be the one to stop it'. This attitude is shared by many.

The third response was that even though some people did not really care too much for the book town concept as such it was considered to be a good thing as it attracted people and activities to the place. And certainly, wholehearted enthusiasm was not present among all. In a group interview among locals with no particular attachment to the Book Town, the young farmer (Bjørn) told us that:

I think I have bought one book in the Book town – and then it was my sister who forced me to. I read very few books, so it is actually a bit outside my field of interest. I have been in the shops, of course, and I do know the people working there and so on, but it's like ... I don't go there buying books. I don't.

Nevertheless, Bjørn was positive towards the book town concept because it led to more young people and more activity in the community during the summer. During fieldwork and interviews we found no-one who was hostile to the project or to the idea of the book town. Though, less enthusiastic views were found:

Ole: I don't have strong opinions on this. But it's positive. It creates life and activity here.

Hanne agreed:

Hanne: Me? I just walk around in the Book Town having a nice time. I have nothing to do with it.... It is an attraction – and it's not that it is high culture or something. The Book Town is for everyone.

### *The quiet boundaries of the image*

The book town as a concept and image is narrow enough to be presented as a common image and identity among people. Yet, it is flexible enough to tolerate and incorporate different attitudes and people. Nevertheless, this flexibility does not indicate that anything goes. During interviews with people who were essential to keeping the Book Town going, as well as with ordinary people, the boundaries of the boundary objects quickly became apparent. It turned out that peace and quiet is a central element of the book town image. The peaceful concept includes walking between and in the bookshops to look into books and feel the particular atmosphere of peace and quiet. As such, the characteristics of a library expand to the whole community. In recent years two initiatives related to the glacier have been seen to collide with the image of the Book Town. The first of these initiatives was the establishment of helicopter tours for tourists to see the glacier from above. This project was not meant to disturb the villagers but, as it was initially practiced, it did:

Lise: I told Jon that it was OK that it [the helicopter] goes on in there, but under one condition: that they don't call it anything that has Fjærland in the name.

Janne: Yes.

Lise: The helicopter trips must not disturb the image that we have created of Fjærland as a quiet and peaceful place.

Jon: And that's why we want it up there, but nowhere else. I agree. And it must not whirl down here!

After some complaints and adjustments the helicopter routes were changed and agreements on new routes were made, so that today people in the village centre are not disturbed by the helicopters. These reactions however, made it clear that even though the helicopter tours were related to the important glacier-based tourism, and even though it can be seen as a natural continuation of traditional transportation activities in Fjærland, the activity was interpreted as being contrary to the image of Fjærland as a peaceful and quiet place.

The second problematic initiative was the proposed establishment of a cruise quay to take better advantage of the fiord cruise tourists. This, however, would draw a lot of buses into the town, a prospect that people seemed to be rather unhappy about:

Randi: Well there are some people that want a cruise quay in Fjærland... That will mean a lot of people and buses in the summer, huge numbers of buses through the centre here....

Hanne: And that will destroy the image of Fjærland as the quiet and peaceful place we try to promote it as.

As it is, the value of peace and quiet has become central to the Book Town, and people act to protect it. This was also the case for people who might be described as being relatively indifferent to the Book Town, as well as those who reported being sceptical of the helicopter and fiord quay initiatives. The quietness has seemingly become a part of the rural identity of Fjærland and constitutes the boundaries of this particular boundary object.

## Discussion

### *Visibility and branding*

The development of Fjærland is, in terms of marketing endeavours, a success story. The town has sought to be recognised as a creative and positive rural community locally, regionally, nationally and, to some extent, internationally. The images associated with Fjærland are surprising, impressive and consequently visible and attractive. A somewhat exclusive and narrow image has been created that attracts people from the outside to the local community. It is definitely a place where image construction through the branding processes has had an effect on how the place is perceived. At the same time, locally, there is a sense of optimism and positive local mobilisation.

### *Mobilisation between standardised packages, boundary objects and messy realities*

Theoretically, we stated that broad mobilisation in support of a narrow image is a paradoxical challenge. It is an example of the problem of creating common representations from the meeting of diverse social worlds. This problem may be analysed as lying in the space between the creation of a standardised package (Fujimora 1992) through collaboration around a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989; Brown

and Duguid 1991; Carlile 2002, 2004; Sapsed and Salter 2004) and the more or less accidental convergence of divergent identities and interests in a messy reality approach (Mol 2002; Law 2004).

The work with the Book Town in Fjærland seems to fit well with the description of a boundary object. It is a visible, clear, surprising and attractive image. In the same time, it manages to mobilise broad and active support. Even so, it must be stressed that there are distinct boundaries to the boundary object. Activities violating the image of a quiet book town are not welcomed. This does not indicate a closure of the debate on the nature of the book town and arguably, the image is not a fixed, standardised package (Fujimora 1992). There is still room for a wide range of attitudes towards the book town image. Conversely, it seems that the image is distinctive enough to be more than an accidental co-existence of actors in Fjærland. There are diverse identities and meanings but it seems to us that the idea of a boundary object is more fruitful than the concept of an empirical mess, not least because the locals themselves act as if the image is a single reality. The image has showed its capacity to accommodate local 'dialects' (Sapsed and Salter 2004) although not unfamiliar sounds, such as the noise made by a helicopter.

### *New realities*

The place has developed an image – a brand – related to the community, and this has occurred as an element of a community development process, or interest. This suggests that the community enthusiasts in Fjærland have been interested in more than developing a new representation. Image development and promotion is not just about remaking representations. Although the image is a part of a regulated reality, it is an element of a configuration of power (Vik 2006). Images are regulatory in the sense that they make some actions possible, plausible and cheap and others difficult, unlikely and expensive.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article we have presented findings based on fieldwork, and individual and group interviews in a rural community that has succeeded (in the view of locals as well as to outside observers) in turning depression into optimism and vitality through processes of image construction. Fjærland has created an image of being a small, quiet and picturesque book town.

What implications for rural development may be drawn from this case study? Does successful rural image construction require either a picturesque oddity or bizarre events such as the frozen dead guy festival? There is little doubt that oddities attract media attention, but our point is not related to the outside effect of such an attraction. Rather, we have addressed the effect of working to bring it about. Here, the stories told about Fjærland and the book town reveal that even though the image of Fjærland as a book town is clear, the interpretation of the image differs considerably from person to person. In fact, there is a high degree of interpretative flexibility associated with the image. We believe this is a precondition for a broad mobilisation around a narrow image. We therefore suggest that image building initiatives emphasise that images

should be flexible and versatile enough to contain numerous interpretations. The implication is the somewhat counter-intuitive idea that to facilitate rural development through image building, the image should be visible and attractive but not too clear and unambiguous. The other main implication to consider for actors involved in image-based rural development, as suggested by our case study, is that images alter realities. Therefore, it is also necessary to consider carefully the images' effects on possible future realities.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the research project Branding the Rural, funded by the Research Council of Norway, 2005–2008.

<sup>2</sup> See Nederland Chamber of Commerce (2007) for information on Nederland, Colorado. See also Wikipedia 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The number of participants is from the 2005 festival. Updated numbers have not been presented.

<sup>4</sup> Bukve (1994) describes how Norwegian municipalities in the period between the 1960s and the late 1970s used acquisition as a main strategy for developing and attracting industrial development and investments.

<sup>5</sup> A boundary object is a flexible entity that may contain rather different things that may be categorised further. Star and Griesemer's (1989) original works include an empirically based typology of boundary objects. However, these are based on a very distinct empirical context (a museum), and therefore we do not include it in our work.

<sup>6</sup> We asked deputies in three separate departments in the county governor administration to suggest places to focus upon. These were the department of agriculture and rural development, the department of environment and the department of local government and emergency planning.

<sup>7</sup> Self-reported cases were not considered for the case study.

<sup>8</sup> Large balls of ensilaged grass wrapped in white plastic.

<sup>9</sup> In the first year of the round bale festival the farmers made paintings on the round bales themselves. The second year a land art artist worked with the farmers to create art in the landscape by placing the round bales in certain patterns throughout the village and its surroundings.

<sup>10</sup> Sponsor a sheep (n.d.). Through this sponsorship you can help the farmer look after a sheep in the mountains during the summer, and buy wool or meat in the autumn. The purpose is both to add to the farmer's income and to build links between farmers and the world beyond the farm.

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