

Louise Hesseldal, Lars Kayser
University of Copenhagen, Denmark
<https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.12.2.05>

Healthcare Innovation—The Epital: An Ethnographic Study of a Unique Way of Organizing Healthcare Innovation

Abstract There is an ongoing debate about how best to organize healthcare innovation. This article introduces and illustrates an alternative way of doing so by studying an emerging informal and inter-organizational network (IION) in practice.

Taking an ethnographic research approach, the authors propose the concept of a *potluck feast* to describe the nature of an IION and the dynamics within it. The relationship between the project and the actors is explored by introducing Steven Brown's reading of Michel Serres' concept of the *parasite*. The unique way of organizing healthcare innovation studied in the article involves an open, sharing approach, where everyone makes themselves an open resource for the project and where the contribution is determined by the actors' own motivation rather than regulated by a formal setup and contracts.

The article argues that the ethnographic research approach is useful to explore the emergence and dynamics of IIONs. In this way, this article contributes to the field of healthcare innovation and how to organize it, and may inspire those who are already in or intend to study this field.

Keywords Healthcare Innovation; Informal and Inter-Organizational Network; Network; Innovation; Organization; Ethnography

Louise Hesseldal has an MSc degree from Copenhagen Business School (2012). She is working in the field of health and qualitative research, and currently works in Novo Nordisk, project managing the development and implementation of a qualitative research framework in five cities in collaboration with local and global academic institutions. The research framework focuses on unveiling social and cultural determinants in diabetes. She has a particular interest in ethnography and the intersection between health innovation and social science.

email address: louisehesseldal@hotmail.com

Lars Kayser, PhD MD, Board certified specialist in internal medicine. Lars Kayser is an Associate Professor at the Department of Public Health, University of Copenhagen where he is the director of Health Informatics study at the University. Lars Kayser is working in the field of Health Informatics and innovation and since 2011 has been affiliated with the Epital project as a research leader. He has a particular interest in health literacy, e-health literacy, and innovative redesign of healthcare provision.

email address: lk@sund.ku.dk

In *Inter-Organizational Networks: A Critical Review of the Literature to Inform Practice* (Popp et al. 2013), the authors reflect upon their six years of searching literature relevant to Informal Inter-Organizational Networks (IIONs) and conclude that this is problematic and messy, just like IIONs themselves: “the literature base and practice experience are wide ranging, diverse, and sometimes difficult to find” (Popp et al. 2013:84).

There is a need for more research within the area of IIONs. As argued by Isett and colleagues (2011), much of the public administration literature focuses on formal or mandated networks, leaving an important class of networks (i.e., emergent and informal networks) underexplored:

Despite the preponderance of informal networks... the gap between research and practice is wider for informal networks than formal networks. There is no distinct body of literature on informal networks. Consequently, there has been very little advancement of understanding of this pervasive mechanism of governance. [Isett et al. 2011:165]

With this article we hope to contribute to the understanding and discussion of how IIONs and their dynamics can be observed, described, and understood in relation to healthcare innovation. This is a particularly interesting field as innovation in healthcare requires redesign and involvement across boundaries (eHealth Task Force 2012). This study uses ethnographic methods and introduces the analytical concepts of the *potluck feast* and the *parasite*, and aims to inspire further investigation within the field.

This article presents an empirical case of an experimental project—The Epital; a living learning lab (see: “Healthcare Innovation—The Epital: A Living Lab in the Intersection Between the Informal and Formal Structures” [in this issue of QSR])—that cannot fully be categorized or explained the way we normally understand setups for healthcare innovation. This article explores the network around this project: an IION that is just as experimental as the project itself.

The point of departure is that we need to pay attention to this messiness as a study object itself rather than as something that needs to be put into order. Inspired by the philosopher Vinciane Despret (2005), this article argues that the study of informal networks can be interesting and can bring new perspectives to our understanding of their emergence and dynamics—if we allow them to be interesting.

Introduction to the Network

The project is not institutionally rooted in the existing healthcare sector (Phanareth K., personal communication) and the project has not been funded in any way. The actors in the IION have chosen to go their own way: they had an idea they believed in and they were willing to try to realize it without any public or private funding. Further, the project is not organized around a formalized setup or materialized in a project plan or a project agreement that outlines timelines, roles, and responsibilities. Likewise, there is no governing contract among the actors within the IION, which is quite remarkable in an era of public-private partnerships, where contracts usually regulate collaboration.

However, the actors in the IION do believe in collaborative efforts and they have some governing *values* for the collaboration, which are documented in the project protocol as a codex for the Epital group:

You share the vision.

You are proactive.

You are a part of the development process.

You contribute with knowledge, expertise, and resources where possible.

You are loyal.

You collaborate and share, whatever your capabilities and capacities are.

You accept that your name may be disclosed in relation to the project.

[Phanareth K., personal communication (translated by the authors)]

All actors in the IION have accepted the above-mentioned criteria as the common and governing rules and values in the established collaboration. Thus, values written on paper are one thing; how they work in practice is quite another.

Research Method

In November 2011, the first author of this article (Louise Hesselald) entered the laboratory of the Epital where those who are involved are called *the Epitalists*. Inspired by Latour (1987), the aim was to study an emerging telemedicine project in the making by following the work of the Epitalists in their laboratory. As the background for the study was an interest in practice and “science in the making,” ethnographic fieldwork was chosen as the methodology (the methodology framework

is presented in “Healthcare Innovation—The Epital: A Living Lab in the Intersection Between the Informal and Formal Structures” [in this issue of QSR]). The theoretical basis was from the beginning Bruno Latour and the “Actor-Network Theory” (1987; 2005; 2008) in order to study the interaction between human and non-human actors in establishing an ambitious telemedicine project and the related challenges that occur. However, after some weeks in the field, it was clear that it was not just the object (the project in the form of the telemedicine platform) that was in the making; so, too, were the laboratory and the IION.

The observer realized that she was focusing too much on the technology in the making (the non-human actors)—and less on what was actually even more predominant in the fieldwork: the work on establishing a laboratory and an IION. In other words, when the observer started the fieldwork, she was taking the human actors (the Epitalists) and the laboratory for granted.

The observer concluded that the laboratory and the IION that constituted it were an even more interesting study object, and one that turned out to have multiple facets. In order to cover them, the field study has turned into two articles, of which this is the second. The first article focuses on the laboratory itself (see: “Healthcare Innovation—The Epital: A Living Lab in the Intersection Between the Informal and Formal Structures” [in this issue of QSR]), while this one focuses on the emerging IION and its dynamics in practice. The two articles might be read as one piece in order to capture the multi-facets of the study object.

The study is divided into three main sections:

1. The potluck feast
2. The concept of the parasite
3. Every feast has an end

Each section represents an analytical point regarding the IION and its dynamics. The study builds upon field observations that were conducted as part of the ethnographic field study that took place from November 2011 to September 2012.

Section 1, *the potluck feast*, studies the organization around the IION by introducing the potluck feast metaphor, which is a concept developed by the observer during the coding process. Thereby, the concept of the potluck feast is the analytical conclusion of the characterization of the IION. The observer has chosen the concept as a way to open up the analysis of the observed rather than just characterizing it as an “informal” organization or labeling the observed with other pre-defined organizational categorizations that would have closed the analysis.

Section 2, *the parasite*, studies the relationship between the project, the actors, and the dynamics within the IION, using the theoretical concept of *the parasite* as introduced by Steven Brown (2002; 2013) in his reading of Michel Serres. This theoretical concept is introduced in order to open up the study of the potluck organization and to further explore the relationship between the project and the actors, as well as the dynamics within the IION. Based on observations and the following coding process, the observer chose this theoretical concept. Even though the potluck feast was the analytical concept

that emerged as part of the analytical process, it did not capture the interesting relationship between the project and the actors within the IION, neither did it capture all dimensions of the dynamics within the IION. The observer found the concept of the parasite relevant first, to explain the nature of the relationship between the project and the actors, and second, to shed light on the dark side of the organization, which emerged during the analytical process.

Section 3, *every feast has an end*, studies the potential end or boundary of this endless network, and thereby also of the unique organization, by introducing Marilyn Strathern’s theoretical concept of *cutting the network* (1996). This study builds upon sections 1 and 2 and summarizes the study.

Section 1: The Potluck Feast

From the observer’s point of view, a potluck feast is an appropriate metaphor to describe the environment around the living learning lab and the nature of the IION itself. A potluck feast is a special event—a special kind of organization—where the host is not stuck with all the hassle and the costs associated with a usual feast. Further, a potluck feast can be a cost-efficient alternative for those without money.

The organization around the IION can be likened to a potluck feast, where all the guests bring what they want and are able to bring. The IION is organized around the solidarity principal that people contribute within their capabilities.

As the project has no funding, the actors involved constitute the resources in the project by bringing

what they can to the table, so to speak. Those who are involved contribute individually to the “common goal”: the realization of the experimental telemedicine demonstration project. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) provide the labor hours to develop the technological telemedicine platform in terms of both hardware and software. Patient association consultants and SMEs contribute with new health services that create empowerment. Lyngby-Taarbaek municipality provides access to the citizens/patients and allocates staff to be included in the project. The staff at Section of Telemedicine Research (STR), Frederiksberg Hospital, supports the project as part of their jobs. The University of Copenhagen provides a server for applications and for storage of patient data. Qualified specialists, including healthcare professionals employed in the region and self-employed consultants, make themselves available for the project in their spare time. Also, the patient associations and researchers provide support through their knowledge and their mandate to speak on behalf of the patients’ needs.

This is not an exhaustive list of the actors who constitute the project and thereby the IION. Nevertheless, it illustrates two important points about the IION:

1. It is constructed across sectors and industries (IION and public-private innovation [PPI]) and all actors involved contribute with their own capabilities and expertise.
2. There are many ways in which you can contribute to the project: with labor, materials, technology or publications, knowledge and skills, and personal network connections.

The Open Door

The potluck feast is not a closed feast. As the Epitalists put it, “all positive forces and resources are needed in order for the project to succeed.” In practice, this means that everyone is welcome to become part of the IION as long as they respect the ground rules and contribute actively to the project. The IION can be characterized as an open network where everyone who shares the mission and accepts the rules of the game is welcome.

In practice, this openness is reflected in the fact that the STR as a physical gathering place for the project on a daily basis is a revolving door of people entering or exiting. Some of those who enter come for a quick visit and do not return. Some enter several times a week, while others enter just once a month. There are also those who withdraw from the project for a short period, but return again after a while. And finally, there are those who enter almost every day. These are the people who initiated the project and have been part of it ever since. They name themselves “the Epitalists.” Actually, everyone involved, regardless of the extent, is named an “Epitalist,” but it is those who enter very often who began using the term in reference to the IION. To begin with, “the Epitalists” was used casually as a way of establishing the social community of the IION. Eventually, it also became part of the written communication and practice when emails and documents were circulated within the IION: “Dear Epitalists” or, when speaking on behalf of the entire IION: “On behalf of the Epitalists.”

As we have seen, one of the ground rules—in writing and in practice—is that all actors must con-

tribute actively to be part of the network and that there are many ways to contribute. As we have also seen, the degree of involvement varies: some provide a server, while others, all of whom have day jobs in addition to the Epital commitments, contribute with all of their spare time. That is how a potluck feast works: someone brings homemade roast beef while others provide bread and butter. Nobody comes empty-handed to a potluck feast: you simply do not eat what others have brought to the table if you have not brought anything yourself. Moreover, there would not be a feast at all if everyone showed up empty-handed: it is a joint effort. The same goes for the IION: you can join as long as you contribute actively; that is the name of the game. The project can only be kept alive as long as there are voluntary resources contributing to it.

The nature of the IION may sound anarchic—as a never-ending swing-door—and it is actually also what it is. This open and anarchistic organization of the IION is interesting as it constitutes a network that continually creates new connections when new actors and interests enter the project. All actors bring their own resources and perspectives to the project and shape the project in their own particular way.

Thereby, the IION constitutes its own special mini-ecosystem where there is consistency—in terms of a project and a network—because it does not work like other projects and networks: when an actor retires, a new one comes into play instead. Although the new actor does not always continue with what the retired actor has passed on, the actor still constitutes a resource in the project, bringing

something new and creating value by keeping the project and the IION alive.

When the new actor enters, it brings something new to the project and becomes a resource for the project. It is never known who will enter through the door and how long they will stay, and this uncertainty makes the project fragile. However, the anarchistic nature of the IION also makes the IION a dynamic living learning lab and a potluck feast that is manageable to participate in as the actors can decide themselves what they will bring and how long they will stay. They are not bound by contracts to deliver something specific within a certain time frame.

Open Source

The openness is not limited to the human actors who constitute the IION; it also applies to the technology that is brought to the table. The technology—the software—is a crucial part of the project. It is being developed in open source code. To understand why this is important to the ecosystem of the IION, we need to digress to understand the difference between open source and traditional software:

Open source is a term that comprises open standards, shared source code, and collaborative development of computer software. Per the general terms of open source licenses, operating code that is licensed under an open source contact is available for later modification and redistribution, as long as the same licensing terms are made available to later participants. [Einhorn 2004:169]

The term open source is in contrast to the traditional software industry software license structures and

intellectual property (IP) rights. This type of software (e.g., Microsoft products), which is known as proprietary software, is legally protected by the IP rights of the company that has paid for its development. The source code is protected, since the company earns money by selling licenses to it, whereby the customer/user buys the right to use the product. It is thus essential to the business and therefore important to own. In contrast, open source software (OSS) is characterized by general use of the product, which cannot be held through IP rights. The crucial difference is therefore that the source code of open source products is a free and open resource (e.g., Open Office in contrast to Microsoft Office). As one of the Epitalists, who is also an open source supplier, puts it:

It is a reverse IP in the sense that to use it, you should comply with one requirement: you need to share what you are developing. You cannot close the code. You must share it freely within the open source community. There it is a kind of reverse IP: you are welcome to use it and redistribute it to others, but you cannot close it. [Epitalist & open source supplier, meeting June 2012]

Interestingly, openness is the fundamental principle of open source communities, where a group of loosely connected actors in a given network contributes to the development of a code/product. It is thus what allows the system to be an ecosystem rather than a cyclical system. The whole idea is that “one must contribute actively” and “you must give back” in order to maintain the ecosystem. The ecosystem works as long as there are volunteers in terms of developers around the world, developing and improving the code/product.

It should be noted that the ecosystems that characterize open source networks/communities in many ways are similar to the ecosystem of the IION. This also explains why open source technology is essential for maintaining the ecosystem of the IION. If the IION were locked by IP rights and licensing agreements (using proprietary software), the openness and flexibility of the network would be limited—it would simply not be an open potluck feast. If the software were not OSS, it would be attached to the actor providing the software, and if the actor withdrew, the software would also be withdrawn. With open source, the software would stay even if the contributing actor withdrew, and therefore the ecosystem could continue with a new open source actor entering the living learning lab.

As we have seen, openness is at the center of this living lab and an essential driver for the maintenance of the ecosystem:

1. All actors commit themselves to contribute actively and be an open source for the project by sharing knowledge, time, labor, and technology freely and transparently within the IION. The collaboration is not bound or regulated by contracts or formalized papers outlining roles and responsibilities
2. At the same time, the project is also an open knowledge source—a non-committal living learning lab—in which the actors can join as long as they find it relevant.

This first section has presented the IION as constituting its own unique ecosystem around “open-

ness,” both in terms of being open to anyone who is interested in being part of the IION and contributing actively to the project, and in terms of the open knowledge source: it is a non-committal living learning lab where everyone shares openly. This open, temporary, and non-committal network constitutes a certain resource in the project and further constitutes a unique ecosystem where the project and network reinvents itself every time a new actor enters the network.

Section 2: The Concept of the Parasite

Above the IION has been described as an open potluck feast—open for all who are willing to contribute to the project. In the following section, the theoretical concept of the *parasite* will be introduced as a way to open up the analysis of the dynamics within the IION and of the openness as something unique that, nonetheless, has a flipside.

The concept of the parasite was developed by the philosopher Michel Serres (1982). The following section builds primarily on the social psychologist Steve Brown’s (2002; 2013) reading of Serres’ work. Brown (2002; 2013) introduces how the concepts of Serres’ work can be used to describe social relations and the dark side of them. His approach is interesting as it opens up for an analysis and exploration of the transformation and dynamics of the IION as a social system: its openness and uniqueness, but also its dark side.

What characterizes the parasite is that it lives to consume resources without giving anything back. As Serres points out, the parasitic relationship is al-

ways specific: there must be a host—something or someone that is being consumed (Brown 2002; 2013). However, as Brown points out, it is not entirely true that the parasite takes without giving anything in return:

Although the parasite appears to take without giving back, this is not strictly accurate in most cases. Consider the uninvited guest who draws up their chair to the dinner table. They “pay” for their meal not with coins, but rather with their conviviality and fine storytelling—“he obtains the roast and pays for it with stories.” [Serres 1982:36]

This is an exchange of sorts, albeit an apparently unequal one. This raises the obvious question of why a host would tolerate such a deal? Serres explains this by making a distinction between production and information. Unlike predators, who consume their prey whole, the parasite does not exhaust production. [Brown 2013:89]

Unless it is an unbalanced exchange, where storytelling pays for food, it is an exchange of sorts. Serres illustrates his point further with the story about a meeting between a disabled man and a blind husband.

A paralyzed man crawls on his hands and knees. He spies a blind man. The blind man stumbles over every obstacle and seems in all likelihood to be liable to injure or kill himself by accident. The paralyzed man offers him a deal: carry me on your shoulders and I will be your guide. Together, Serres states, the two make a new kind of whole. The paralyzed man provides information, the blind man provides force.

Each parasite is then highly specific, dependent upon a particular kind of host. [Brown 2002:15-16]

Here, information is exchanged for energy in terms of manpower, and together they create a new system. This story illustrates the specific nature of the exchange, since it depends on a particular host: the paralyzed man needs energy and legs, not information and guidance. The paralyzed man, who is basically the parasite, does not drain the blind man of energy. Instead, he changes the way energy is produced and moves it in a new direction favorable to himself and the blind man. Although it is the paralyzed man who spots a potential resource in the blind man, he still provides information that benefits the blind man, as well.

This leads to another important point about the parasite, as Brown (2002) also observed in his reading of Serres. The parasite creates renewal as it invents a new logic that transforms relationships between systems. To illustrate this point further, we need to introduce another of Serres' stories. In this tale, a poor and starving man passes the kitchen door of a restaurant and smells the food inside, which sates his hunger somewhat. In the midst of this act, an angry kitchen hand shows up and demands payment from "the uninvited guest" who is consuming his food. At the same moment, a third person shows up, and introduces a (new) solution to the conflict that has arisen:

Give me a coin, he said. The wretch did so, frowning. He put the coin down on the sidewalk and with the heel of his shoe made it ring a bit. This noise, he said, giving his decision, is pay enough for the aroma of the tasty dishes. [Serres 1982:34-35 as cited in Brown 2002:16]

Note that in this exchange coins are transformed into sounds, which are exchanged for food transformed into smell. Although it is an unbalanced exchange in a system where food is usually exchanged for money, it is still an exchange. The parasite has thus introduced a new system and a new type of exchange, which was not previously possible.

The parasite invents something new. Since he does not eat like everyone else, he invents a new logic. He crosses the exchange, makes it into a diagonal. He does not barter; he exchanges money. He wants to give his voice for matter, (hot) air for solid. [Serres 1982:35 as cited in Brown 2002:16]

The parasite is, in other words, a catalyst for renewal, innovation, and creativity, since it does not eat like everyone else.

In the following section, the relation between the actors within the IION and the project will be analyzed. Other relations could have been chosen. However, as the purpose is to illustrate a certain kind of organization—and its dynamics and boundaries—this specific relation has been chosen.

The Parasite That Creates Renewal

Let us return to the project and the relationship between the project and the actors who constitute the IION. As described earlier, one of the basic rules is that everyone contributes actively and voluntarily brings their capabilities to the table. This is not just a ground rule on paper but also a ground rule which is carried out in practice—in order to maintain the ecosystem of the IION. All of the actors make them-

selves open resources for the project: they provide their time, knowledge, skills, labor, and their image without any guarantee that they will ever get anything in return, as the collaboration is simply not governed by contracts.

Although the project can be viewed as a parasite—eating voluntary resources—it does actually pay the actors back with learning and experiences and, most importantly, the potential of being part of something innovative that may bring change, renewal, business potential, and acknowledgement. It is no doubt an unequal exchange, where the *smell* of a ground-breaking and disruptive telemedicine platform pays for the free knowledge, skills, and labor that are brought to the table. The actors in the IION can *smell* the potential—the potential telemedicine success—and they are all eager to do something differently when it comes to healthcare innovation, but none of them knows how the project will actually evolve. This is the price of being part of an innovative and experimental project. In the IION, it is the sound of the coin that pays for the *smell*, so to speak. It is the *smell* that brings volunteer resources into the project. Even though the level of engagement varies among the actors in the IION, this does not drain the project as long as everyone contributes to some extent and a balance between retiring and new resources is maintained.

From this perspective, the project constitutes a particular kind of parasite, namely, a parasite that nurtures creativity and ensures renewal. The project draws our attention to a different kind of organization because it cannot be explained by referring to the well-known forms of organization and

mechanisms, such as formalized public-private partnership setups (including their financial and contractual settings). The uniqueness of the project is exactly that no money, contracts, or formal structures are involved. These are all well-known organizational mechanisms, which usually bring order to things by drawing boundaries between who is in/out and who owns / does not own and by defining the positions of and expectations towards the members of a given network. This informal network, where the actors are neither fully inside nor fully outside, constructs its own space *in between* and is thereby able to short-circuit the existing mechanisms and ways of organizing projects. The project introduces a new logic of organizing healthcare innovation by experimenting with new kinds of resources and relationships, and in this way crosses the boundaries for how things are usually done. Instead of securing the individual actors within the IION through formalized cooperation materialized in contracts and project descriptions, the focus is on experimenting and developing the project and ensuring that the project is kept alive in the name of reaching a common goal. It is an experiment in between space—a certain kind of living learning lab—where the focus is on experimenting in order to create something unique. This parasitic system invents something new—a new way of organizing healthcare innovation.

The Fear of the Parasite Is the Parasite

The open organization also has a dark side: there is always the risk of a parasite sitting at the table. The unique ecosystem can only be maintained as long as everyone contributes actively and accepts

being part of this parasitic system, where they make themselves an open source for the project in the name of developing something that is potentially ground-breaking.

The fear of the parasite is that another parasite will replace it (Brown 2002). Of concern for the project are those actors who are just part of the network in order to gain knowledge that can be used elsewhere or actors who are just trying to jump directly to the table. To further illustrate this point, two field extracts will be presented. The following two extracts shed light on the dark side of the organization and at the same time on why the parasitic relationship between the project and the actors is so unique.

The Fear That There Is a Parasite at the Table

In the following, an extract from a field episode will be presented. The field episode took place in December 2011 when the Epitalists met with an actor, more specifically a potential vendor, who was interested in being part of the project. The actor had a product that could be integrated into the Epital solution. In other words, the actor could bring the product to the table and thereby be part of the project. The field episode is particularly interesting as it illustrates the concerns of one of the actors who was actually inside the IION for a short while, but left again.

“Let’s just put it on the table.” The actor went straight to the point: it was the non-existing competition clauses that were the concern. He continued, “We would like to offer our product, but we

would like some kind of security for doing so.” The actor stressed that it was general practice to create some kind of competition clause when parties enter into a partnership. The competition clause was an assurance, he emphasized. As a solution, the actor suggested that all actors within the IION could sign a binding document in which they committed themselves to *not* share knowledge and experiences beyond the IION. In other words, what was shared and created within the IION should be kept there and not cross the boundaries of the living learning lab.

It was the unequal exchange that was an issue for the actor. He stressed that by entering into the network and contributing actively, he would be sharing a great deal of knowledge and experience he had gained from all the “teething problems” encountered in creating a unique product. Further, the actor emphasized that the organization he represented was a small player and had a lot at stake: “It might be swallowed up by a larger player.”

This episode provides an example of resistance against the organization and sheds some light on the concerns of one of the actors who came and left again shortly after. The actor was concerned about not having any security or guarantees, but what is even more interesting is why: 1) the knowledge and experiences might travel beyond the boundaries of the living learning lab and 2) his organization might be swallowed up by a bigger player in the IION. In other words, he was reluctant to make himself an open resource for the parasite (the project) and even more concerned about other potential parasites that sit around the table—ready to absorb the knowl-

edge and apply it outside the living learning lab. In this connection, he was worried about the lack of formalized contracts, which meant that the actors’ positions were not fixed. In other words, there is always the risk of a parasite sitting around the table, and the potential risk of a larger player absorbing a smaller player.

The Parasite That Tried to Jump Directly to the Table

The only fear of a parasite is the one (parasite) who can replace him in his position of parasite (Brown 2002). There is always a risk of uninvited guests trying to jump directly to the table and reap the rewards of all the resources that have collectively been brought to it.

Serres (1982 as cited in Brown 2002) calls this “to stand last in the chain,” a notion that is related to his concept of *parasitic chains*. The tapeworm can illustrate Serres’ point. The tapeworm is the last in the chain as it can benefit from a long chain of resources, without giving anything in return. In a parasitic chain, it is all about being the last one:

The game they play is to always come last, to be in the last position in the parasitic chain. And thus to stand, open mouthed, ready to absorb all of what flows down the chain. The last in line collects all. [Brown 2002:15]

The advantage of standing at the end of the chain is that one can consume resources without giving something in return. The risk for the ecosystem—and thereby the project—is if the project itself becomes a resource for an expanding parasite.

To illustrate this point, an extract from another field episode will be presented. This episode occurred when a curious supplier from a hardware and software company visited the Epitalists in December 2011. The supplier could *smell* the potential success of the project. However, as we will see, he was not willing to play the game of the IION. This field episode is interesting as it further illustrates the dark side of openness.

The supplier kicked off the meeting by talking about all the telemedicine projects he had been involved in over the years, not just in Denmark but also abroad. The Epitalists were well aware of what was happening outside their living learning lab and the parties quickly came to the conclusion that there was a lack of ambitious telemedicine projects and the Epital project was one of the few promising projects that stood out from the crowd. In other words, the parties indeed shared interests.

After a short conversation, the supplier asked how the Epitalists intended to move the living learning lab into society. He was eager to learn more about the project and the future plans. The Epitalists replied briefly that they had discussed various possibilities, but they did not know yet and it was not the main focus at that point in time. It was evident that the Epitalists did not want to talk in detail about the subject. Instead, they invited the supplier to become an active part of the network (IION). In the same sentence, they emphasized the ground rules of the IION about everyone contributing actively and openly sharing knowledge and resources within the IION.

One of the Epitalists went straight to the point and asked the supplier: “What is your interest in this?” and “What can you contribute?” (Epitalist, meeting December 2011). Obviously, they wanted to know what the supplier could bring to the table before they shared more. In other words, they would not accept small talk in return for knowledge.

The supplier responded hesitantly that he was involved in other projects around the country and he could try to pull some of these in the same direction as the Epital and thereby extend the ideas and values behind the Epital concept to a wider network outside the living learning lab of the IION.

One of the Epitalists interrupted the supplier and asked directly, “Why aren’t you interested in being more directly involved in the project?” (Epitalist, meeting December 2011).

The supplier responded promptly, “Because we don’t run a philanthropic business” (Hardware and software supplier, meeting December 2011).

The supplier thereby made it clear that he represented a company whose purpose was to make money. He was not willing to make himself—and the company he represented—an open and voluntary resource for the project without some kind of guarantee of what he would get in return. The supplier was interested in neither a partial existing object nor in being part of an anarchistic network. Apparently, he was interested in an equal exchange and some form of contractual arrangement to ensure a return on investment.

Section 2 has shown a parasitic relationship between the project and the actors that constitute the IION. It introduces a new logic to organizing healthcare innovation by experimenting with new kinds of resources and relationships, thereby crossing the boundaries for how things are usually done. Instead of securing the participation of individual actors in the IION through formalized cooperation, focus is on developing the project and securing that the project is kept alive—in the name of reaching a common goal. It is argued that the parasitic system invents something new: a new way of organizing the IION and healthcare innovation. On the other hand, this section has also shown that the unique openness of the organization has a flipside. The concept of the parasite opens up for studying the dark side of openness, namely, that also it attracts actors that try to get a seat at the table without contributing to the project and the common goal.

Section 3: Every Feast Comes to an End

From time to time, some of those who came through the door frequently and who uploaded documents to the Dropbox folder in the late evening began to worry. This worry lurked below the surface and occasionally surfaced, as it did at a meeting between some of the Epitalists and a lawyer that took place in December 2011. The lawyer was a close friend of one of the Epitalists and he had been invited to an informal meeting as the Epitalists began to realize that they had something unique with great potential that they did not want to lose.

In the following section, extracts from this meeting will be presented. This field episode is inter-

esting to consider as it illustrates the paradox of the anarchistic and open organization around the IION: it constitutes at one and the same time the possibilities and limitations of the IION and the project.

The lawyer could hardly believe his ears when he was told that there was not one single contract in place between the actors in the IION. Completely baffled, he asked, “Well, you must at least have some kind of confidentiality statement/agreement?” (Lawyer, meeting December 2011).

The Epitalists explained that it might sound a bit naive from a legal perspective, but “equality” and “openness” had been the basic rules from the beginning, and these ground rules had been the driving forces behind the project. They explained that these principles were actually what made the project unique: an environment where no one is legally bound. As one of them put it, “We wouldn’t be where we are today if we had not done it the way we did—they have been the drivers” (i.e., openness and equality) (Epitalist, meeting December 2011).

When referring to the lack of contracts as the driving force for the project, it points to the fact that due to the legal openness, the project has been in a contractual “no man’s land” where the actors have not been bound via contracts and they thereby have not had any formalized position in the IION. Even though this openness has involved the risk of parasites entering through the door, the open organization has been seen as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Interestingly, as the meeting proceeds, the Epitalists indicate that they are beginning to doubt their basic principles. From defending the ideology of equality and openness, they raise concerns about whether the very same openness could be the end of the IION and the project. As one of the Epitalists puts it:

Proof of concept has been driven by idealism, but we must figure out what we will do when we get to the next stage...we risk someone stealing what we have fought so hard for. [Epitalist, meeting December 2011]

This shift is interesting as it illustrates something essential about the nature of the project. The project is in the making, as is the technology. The risk of moving from being in the making to something more tangible is that the object becomes a materiality and not just an idea on paper. The openness of the project makes it possible for someone to steal not just the idea but also the concept/technology, since it is developed in open source.

This episode shows that the perception of risk—the risk of someone reaping the rewards of the efforts made within the IION—increases as the project proceeds. In other words, the Epitalists began to fear that an uninvited guest could enter through the back door and be the one who stands last in the chain.

The lawyer ended the meeting by saying:

It’s easier to get these formalities in place while you are all friends; it will become more difficult the (potential) day when you are no longer friends. [Lawyer, meeting December 2011]

This episode shows a paradox of the open organization: the project would never have come as far as it has if it had not been organized openly, and it is doubtful that it would have been possible to create a unique object if the project had been governed by contracts. As a partial existing object—and a legally unfixed object—the Epital has created a network and friendships. The perception of equality and openness has created this never-ending anarchistic network of actors who all *smell* the potential and justly claim a position in this open community. However, the episode also points to the potential end or boundary of this never-ending network and thereby the boundary of the unique organization of this IION.

Whereas this article has mainly focused on the creation and emergence of a certain kind of network, the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1996) has focused much more on the issue of *cutting networks*. She has addressed how ownership in terms of patents and IP rights cuts endless networks, drawing the boundary between who is in/out and who owns / does not own. She stresses her point in the following:

The extent of a homogeneous network...appears to be bound by the definition of who belongs to it. However, the divide, created for the purposes of the patent, between those who did and those who did not belong, is established not by some cessation of the flow of community but by a quite extraneous factor: the commercial potential of the work that turned a discovery into a patentable invention. We could say that the prospect of ownership cut into the network. The claim to have done the research that

solved “the problem” justified a deliberate act of hybridization: co-operative or competitive, the scientists’ prior work could now be evaluated by criteria from a different world altogether: that of commerce. [Strathern 1996:524]

Interestingly, Strathern draws our attention to a certain aspect of this network: all actors within the IION have a position within the network—and they can claim so—as they all contribute actively. Thereby, they can all claim ownership. At this stage, nobody needs to claim ownership because there is nothing to own. However, as indicated in the field extract above, one day contracts might be brought to the table to cut the endless network in the name of protecting the object from parasites. In other words, it would be the end of the potluck feast. The boundary of this never-ending network might be its own success.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the study has not been to show an example of the best practice in organizing healthcare innovation; instead, it has been to show an alternative way of doing so. The study shows an emerging IION and its dynamics and points to a unique ecosystem and living learning lab constituted by openness.

The observer joined the IION and the project in its emerging phase, when the IION was establishing the living learning lab and building the object: the telemedicine project. However, this process started a long time before the observer joined the IION and continued after the observer left the field and

turned off her computer. One could argue that the study offers a snapshot of a project and the network around it in a certain phase of its life cycle. This might be true, but it is not the interesting part. What is interesting is to see how the success of the object (the telemedicine network) might be the boundary of the IION itself. As we have seen, the Epitalists are considering introducing contracts in order to protect the object and the resources that have been brought to the table.

Contracts would not necessarily mean the death of the IION, but they would transform the IION into something more formalized. Some researchers have argued that networks tend to emerge informally and then over time become more formal (Popp et al. 2013:27), just as others have argued that grass roots movements become more formalized over time, moving from playing the game from the outside to playing the game from the inside or partly inside (Bonde 2012). This may also be true, but it is not the interesting part. What is interesting is this in between space—temporary or permanent—which fuses new inspiration on how to organize innovation and points to a unique way of doing so. This study shows an organization that is built on openness and temporality; it is a unique ecosystem that reinvents itself every time a new actor enters the project. This is captured in the concept of the potluck feast—this anarchistic organization that constitutes a living learning lab, where the individual actors decide themselves what they will bring and how long they will stay, as long as they contribute to the IION and the project. The ecosystem is kept alive as long as everyone contributes actively, which

makes everyone an open resource for the project. This parasitic relationship between the project and the actors draws our attention to another kind of organization that is not organized around contracts and equal exchanges: the actors openly bring resources to the table and therefore always run the risk of a parasite trying to get a seat at the table. The potluck feast continues as long as the project remains the only parasite.

Further, the purpose of the study has been to introduce an alternative way of studying the IION, which allows it to be more interesting. The study shows how the IION and its dynamics can be studied using ethnographic methods and by introducing the analytical concepts of the potluck feast and the parasite to open up the analysis rather than close it down. In this study, the methodological starting point is complexity, mess, and disorder rather than order and simplicity. It is argued that we need to allow the IION to be messy and to acknowledge the messiness as the research object itself and not as something that needs to be disciplined as a starting point. If we want to understand informal and experimental networks and their nature and dynamics, we need to go beyond the focus on dividing them into explanatory categories (e.g., formal structures, forms of governance). Rather, we need to focus on the messiness and the dynamics of disorder/order—just like this article does with the potluck concept. Also, we need to go beyond explanatory categories when describing the dynamics within these informal networks. For instance, “trust” is often highlighted as an important factor in the growth and development of networks and it has also long been described as critical for successful collaboration (Popp

et al. 2013). This article has also touched upon trust, without using the actual word. The ethnographic approach taken in this article sheds light on the informal process and allows us to go beyond explanatory categories such as trust and instead explore practice and how trust and distrust are played out in practice.

This article showcases the usefulness of ethnographic research in analyzing these kinds of emerging informal networks and understanding some of their underlying mechanisms. In particular, this approach is relevant when the study object—like the IION—is a network that cannot be explained in other common ways. However, the approach might also be used to study more formal network formation and dynamics, including research networks that are in the intersection of formal and informal networks. As pointed out by philosopher Vinciane Despret (2005), interesting research is research into the conditions that make something interesting and that make someone or something else capable of becoming interesting. Her point is that those who study and observe the social should allow the study object to add something new to our understanding, that is, allow the social to be interesting—instead of predetermining the social. As she asks: “Do we prefer the predictable object or the object that surprises us and that adds other definitions to what ‘being social’ means” (Despret 2005:367). This detour around Despret is relevant as it points out why it might also be relevant to adopt an ethnographic method when studying more “formal networks.” Maybe the more formal networks are just as interesting as the messier and informal networks—if we allow them to be.

In summary, we can learn from these kinds of untraditional and informal inter-organizational networks if we allow them to exist and emerge in an interesting way. Their existence is linked to whether we, as a society, allow these independent innovation spaces—living learning labs—and untraditional IIONs to emerge in the intersection between existing ways of organizing healthcare innovation across sectors and other organizational boundaries. Whether or not they are interesting is linked to whether we as researchers allow these kinds of networks to appear as interesting study objects instead of forcing them to be like the other networks we are familiar with. This study has developed a new analytical concept: a potluck feast to introduce a new kind of organization. This IION and project are interesting and unique, but even the most interesting and unique case can become boring and predictable if we do not allow the field to be interesting.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the Epitalists for sharing their impressive work, passion, and thoughts on how to change the healthcare system and for showing us an alternative way of organizing healthcare innovation, which has only been possible due to their dedication and hours of volunteer work.

Special thanks from the first author, Louise Hesseldal, to Birgitte Gorm Hansen, who was the supervisor of the Master’s thesis, for teaching how to look beyond the boundaries. Thanks to Ms. Lena Sundby Jensen for assisting in editing and setting up the paper.

References

- Bonde, I.E. 2012. “Efter besættelsen: Occupy – Hvad nu?” Retrieved May 11, 2014 (<http://magasinetkollaps.dk/?p=1258>).
- Brown, Steven D. 2002. “Michel Serres: Science, Translation, and the Logic of the Parasite.” *Theory Culture Society* 19(3):1-27.
- Brown, Steven D. 2013. “In Praise of the Parasite: The Dark Organizational Theory of Michel Serres.” *Informática na Educação: teoria e prática* 16(1):83-100.
- Despret, Vinciane. 2005. “Sheep Do Have Opinions.” Pp. 360-368 in *Making Things Public*, edited by B. Latour, P. Weibel. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- eHealth Task Force. 2012. *eHealth Task Force Report – Redesigning Health in Europe for 2020*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Einhorn, Michael A. 2004. *Media, Technology, and Copyright. Integrating Law and Economics*. Cheltenham, Northampton: Edward Elgar.
- Isett, Kimberley R. et al. 2011. “Networks in Public Administration Scholarship: Understanding Where We Are and Where We Need to Go.” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21(1):157-173.
- Latour, Bruno. 1987. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 2008. *En ny sociologi for et nyt samfund – introduktion til aktørnetværk-teori*. København: Akademisk Forlag.
- Popp, Janice K. et al. 2013. “Inter-Organizational Networks: A Critical Review of the Literature to Inform Practice.” Retrieved September 17, 2014 (http://www.businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/Inter-Organizational%20Networks_0.pdf).
- Serres, Michel. 1982. *The Parasite*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1996. “Cutting the Network.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropology Institute* 2:517-535.

Hesseldal, Louise and Lars Kayser. 2016. “Healthcare Innovation—The Epital: An Ethnographic Study of a Unique Way of Organizing Healthcare Innovation.” *Qualitative Sociology Review* 12(2):82-99. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php).