BEYOND THE FACADE:

DECRYPTING PSEUDO ACTIVISM

SUPERVISOR: MALIHEH KESHMIRI

GROUP 1

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URMI UUSPÕLD	Adult Education
TAAVI MANDEL	Psychology
ALBERTS BĒRZIŅŠ	Audiovisual media
DARIIA LIAKH	Politics and Governance
KASPER PISA	Physical Education

GROUP 2

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OLIVERS	Audiovisual media
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KATERINA	English Language and Culture
KÄRT HÜVA	Advertising and public relations
AGATHA	Social Work
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INTRODUCTION

"Beyond the Facade" is a transformative project through which we explored the complex world of pseudo-activism, analyzing performative actions that mimic genuine engagement without creating substantive change. This project incorporated a filming component, allowing us to immerse ourselves in role-playing these acts for gathering impressions from the target audiences. By capturing audience reflections, it added a dynamic dimension to the project, enabling us to interpret how the cause captures attention.
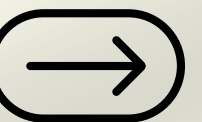
PROJECT REPORT
GROUP 1

AIM OF THE PROJECT

Aim for our group was analysis and understanding of the the public opinion surrounding industrial farming, and how they perceive the activism and pseudo activism in that sphere.

Importance of the project is in that industrial farming is a significant force shaping our food systems, and its effects on sustainability, animal welfare, and public health need to be taken into account in our daily lives.

We decided to approach industrial farming from a different angle. Typically, discussions surrounding industrial farming are framed in terms of conventional activism and sustainability, with movements like "Meatless Mondays" and "The True Cost of Food" highlighting the issues. Our group thought it would be interesting to explore the issue from a perspective of social media influencers and other actors, which do not directly associate themselves with environmental activist groups and see whether and how they affect the public opinion on this issue.

STAKEHOLDERS

This project's stakeholders are in a practical sense - Tallinn University and our supervisor. It contributes to a broader PhD project on the transformative effect of activism, thereby linking the student-led exploration to a larger academic endeavor.

However, we recognize that our project would have a potential impact on content creators, policy makers and other environmental, animal welfare activists. NGOs who are concerned with animal welfare, like Nähtamatud loomad.

Picture 1: Preparations for the filming process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To get a better understanding of the industry and the ways of doing it we started on understanding the different methods of egg production. Barrell's article (2023) gave a good overview of the meaning of chicken farming and animal welfare standards, the difference between cage-eggs and cage-free eggs. For our project it was essential to be aware of these different ways of keeping chickens. MTÜ Nähtamatud Loomad has created an overview about why we should totally ban keeping chickens in small cages. They talk about animal welfare and their natural needs. There are also statistics about peoples opinions about how egg production should be done and they found that 78% of Estonias would like that keeping chickens in small cages would be legally prohibited. (MTÜ Nähtamatud Loomad, 2024) The article from Fischer & Milburn (2019) gave a more philosophical view about animal rights and discussions around anyone's rights really. This article was a good way to start a discussion about what rights chickens should have. What can we as people provide them in order to get something back from them? And do we have to respect their rights as well? A lot to do with morality, humanity, practical mind, prosperity and seeing a bigger picture.

To get a better understanding of activism, what it is and what it is not, we found several articles to get the knowledge we needed. "Activism always involves creating change, but creating change can mean simply intervening when and where one happens to be" (Martin et al., 2007). This article was a good example to understand that activism does not always have to be something that everybody immediately sees or hears, it can be done very quietly and it might help only a small group of people or just one person.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Bishop (2015) pseudo-activism is more about belonging to a group, having the same kind of ideas, the important thing is to Believe rather than to Do. Within our social media setting, where we observe an influencer perform certain acts to leave an impression of their pursuit of an activist cause, we refer to pseudo-activism as a broad term that is characterised by some performance, an act that has the appearance of activism which achieves benefits to the actor drawing attention, but is ineffective in terms of its intent and outcome as, the actor is not, in substance, engaged in the interest of the cause by performance, and collects 'non-deserved merit' (Morris et al., 2014). Specifically in online settings, this is akin to social media hoaxes with similar incentives, where the aim is to obtain maximum amount of attention by way of clicks, referred also to as clicktivism, independent of substance, such as with the use of hashtags (George & Leidner, 2019; Park & Rim, 2019; Jackson & Eaton, 2024). Note there appears to be a lack of alignment for this term in literature, with Cervi & Martin-Llado (2022) referring to performative activism as any activism that utilises performance as a communication tool, while referring to 'playful activism' when describing using social media, specifically TikTok as a new form of activism, characterised by creative and playful content, as an example of successful performative activism consistent with 'activism' rather than 'pseudo-activism'. Nonetheless, for the avoidance of doubt, we rely on the most recent paper by Jackson & Eaton (2024) when referring to 'pseudo-activism' as 'performative activism' or 'empty activism' interchangeably, defined as "a critical label that is applied to instances of shallow or self-serving support for social justice causes. The accusation rests on a distinction between what is said by supposed supporters and what they actually do" (Thiemsen, 2022).

QUESTIONS IN THE INTERVIEW

The interview was conducted in a text-based form, where the respondents were asked open ended questions and were supposed to answer in the most detail possible. The questions were as follows:

1. Please describe how this video made you feel?

2. What influence could this video have on a larger scale?

3. How would such an influencer make you reconsider/stop using any products?

4. What impression did you get of the influencer's understanding of chicken welfare issues?

5. After watching, do you feel inclined to learn more about free-range versus industrial chicken farming, or did the video seem sufficient as it is?

6. If you could change the behaviour of the influencer in the video to make it more impactful, what would it be?

PERFOMANCE

Our video project aimed to showcase the monetization of environmental activism through the prism of a stereotype of an average English speaking influencer. In the video, the stereotypical influencer was played by one group member and the scrip featured the influencer recording a video, where he would briefly talked about industrial farming, specifically chicken produce and then advertise a café, which used free-range chicken produce. The video was engineered in a way that the genuineness of the influencer character was unclear.

The video is available via this link: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UedGYrebf2MiU_dYaU0sogXndX5wzqx1/view?usp=drive_link

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

To study the audience's perceptions of our 3-minute video related to the cause of free-range chicken farming in industrial farming, we adopted a qualitative method in order to collect more subjective and personal responses to open-ended questions by way of an anonymous online questionnaire via Google Forms that was open for one week. The questionnaire included six questions presented on the previous page. The original sample included 15 Tallinn University students, from MA Adult Education, Sociology and Youth Work Management, and from BA: Public and Business Management. However, for the purposes of our analysis we excluded one respondent on the basis of incomplete responses - answering all but one question with a "-" sign. For each question, we created uniquely assigned code trees to identify patterns and common themes by way of subcategories and categories of such themes, as relevant. Based on the identified categories and codes, we analyzed the responses and present our findings below.

Picture 2: The behind the scenes of filming

Analysis of results

We first asked the audience how the video made them feel. Out of 14 respondents, six referred to being confused or feeling awkward, weird or experiencing mixed feelings, and five identified no or neutral feelings whatsoever. Two respondents suggested experiencing boredom or getting distracted from the content and craving for food. One respondent brought out that they were 'happy that someone with apparently a lot of followers is addressing this important problem' and another suggested that 'The video didn't make me feel any way, it made me think about the world and problems, one at a time'. In the context of studying pseudo-activism, respondents used noteworthy keywords in connection with the mixed or unclear feelings such as 'fake sympathy', 'what was the purpose', 'where is this going', 'this was just an advertising', 'it wasn't quite believable', 'the guy didn't really believe'. Overall, the responses suggest that the majority of students are critical of the authenticity of a message delivered by a stranger online and will make a conscious effort to make sense of the overall degree of trust displayed by the presenter themselves. Hints of ulterior motives of the presenter may have led viewers to identify that the display of activism for a cause may be only performative in nature rather than sincere.

Second, we asked the audience what influence this video could have on a larger scale, without further specification, letting the audience decide such scale on their own subjective terms, given that the purpose of the question is to evaluate the degree of impact that the audience may imagine. Out of 14 responses, 10 directly referred to the impact being either minimal, nonexistent, or limited to a smaller, specifically niche scale of an audience already supporting the cause, suggesting that the marginal impact of the video is perceived to be negligible by majority of respondents. Two respondents referred to the informative potential of the video, either by encouraging people to collect more information or simply provide the information directly. One respondent provided a generalized remark about the category of videos about chicken rights in general with potential to have a high impact about the issue, and another highlighted that this video could 'Make animal rights and fight for chicken freedom seem "cooler". One respondent provided a potentially sarcastic answer 'Is this a trick question?', indirectly hinting at a lack of belief that such video could have a plausible impact. A few respondents highlighted familiarity as key to creating an impactful video, either by attracting an audience who values the issue or by noting that less famous influencers have less impact.

Analysis of results

Third, we asked how such an influencer would make one reconsider or stop using any products. None of the respondents suggested that the influencer would have any impact on their purchase habits or decisions, with three respondents referring to a possibility that the influencer could have an impact on groups other than the respondent, e.g. groups who rely on social media as a source of information. In addition, three respondents highlighted the importance of performing independent research and collecting additional information before making a change to purchasing decisions, and one suggested no changes due to already buying free-range eggs. Overall, these answers are consistent with the issues highlighted in the first two questions, whereby lack of trust and familiarity of the influencer do not help contribute to the cause as they will be perceived as performing pseudo activism instead.

Fourth, we asked what impression the viewers got of the influencer's understanding of chicken welfare issues. Out of the 14 respondents, none identified anything encouraging or positive in relation to the perceived understanding of chicken welfare issues presented by the influencer. Prevalent keywords included 'He had no idea', 'superficial', 'basic knowledge', 'minimal effort', 'didn't dig deep'. Three respondents suggested the influencer perform more research highlighting the critical eye of Tallinn University students with respect to providing well-researched back-up to presented statements. One student described their impression as 'Like he just learned this yesterday and someone asked him to share some content, more time was spent on ordering food than making me concerned about the issue.'.

Analysis of results

    Fifth, we asked whether or not the respondents felt inclined to learn more about free-range versus industrial chicken farming after watching the video, or whether or not the video seemed sufficient as was. No viewers considered the video sufficient as it was. Whilst four respondents out of 14 referred to the importance of doing their own research and collecting more information, they continued to be critical of the video leading them to such conclusion, but instead to having such belief or view independently of the video.

    This may either be interpreted as respondents dismissing the information presented in the video either due to lack of trust or familiarity with the influencer, or instead being in someway triggered to seek out more information due to the lack of trust or familiarity itself, to satisfy their skepticism by seeking out information from sources that they do consider trustworthy or familiar. For example, one of those four individuals stated 'I will watch a documentary where there are real facts and people really care about chicken health', another said 'If I wasn't aware of the problem then yes I would find out more, the video itself is superficial', and another adding that 'I would have liked to learn more from this video'.

Analysis of results

Sixth, and finally, we asked viewers if they could change the behaviour of the influencer in the video to make it more impactful, what it would be. Interestingly, all respondents either identified suggestions in relation to the performance of the influencer in terms of their acting skills, e.g. 'bring in the experience and feelings', 'taking a few deep breaths or practicing some relaxation techniques', 'be more serious', 'shouldn't be reading the text', 'calm him down', 'more focused', among others, suggestions for different video-editing decisions in terms of technicalities and video effects (e.g. music, visual aids), or extent of competence of the topic as displayed by the influencer, e.g. 'like he actually cares or knows something','understand what he is promotion and why this is important' - with almost all of them directed at the performance, that is, points relating to the form of presentation rather than substance of a cause. A few exceptions made general references to making use of more updated facts or presenting scenes of caged vs. free-range chickens. Overall, this suggests that instead of being captured with the substance of the presentation, the viewers focused their attention of the form of the delivery, consistent with the notion that the influencer did not succeed establishing trust with the audience.

Many viewers, failing to trust the influencer, focused more on technical details or the presenter's emotions than the substance of their message. This suggests they viewed the act as performative and aligned with pseudo-activism rather than genuine advocacy.

CONCLUSION

The responses overall indicate a consistent pattern of lack of trust and familiarity achieved by the video with viewer base of Tallinn University students and that the video is perceived as an act of pseudo activism with perceived negligible impact neither upon an audience who already believe in the importance of the underlying cause such that their purchase decisions align with the cause, as well as audience whose decisions do not. Instead, Tallinn University students highlight the importance of relying on information from credible sources collected by their own independent research. For a video of this form to be more effective, Tallinn University students suggest that the influencer requires greater familiarity (e.g. more thorough and trustworthy sources), greater degree of competence, and lack of conflicting self-interested motives to help establish trust with the audience.

References

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PROJECT REPORT
GROUP 2

AIM AND IMPORTANCE OF THE PROJECT

Aim: analyzing and understanding the phenomenon of pseudo-activism, particularly in the context of anti-immigration sentiment.

Importance: pseudo-activism is growing phenomena and can mislead the public, compromising genuine social change

We decided to make our pseudo-activism from a different perspective. Generally when pseudo-activism is seen/ represented in media it tends to be left leaning, the most well known movements are those in support of climate change reform such as Just Stop Oil and its spiritual predecessor Extinction rebellion.
Our group thought it would be interesting to create the same type of feeling but from a conservative perspective, showing the limits of what people will perceive as offensive and how common/effective this rhetoric is.

STAKEHOLDERS

This project's stakeholders are in a practical sense - Tallinn University and our supervisor. It contributes to a broader PhD project on the transformative effect of activism, thereby linking the student-led exploration to a larger academic endeavor.
However, we recognise that our project would have a potential impact on local activists, content creators and policy makers.

Picture 3: the filming process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before starting to film and analyse our project we conducted a literature review based on relevant materials. These helped us to create a theoretical framework and understand the topic (pseudo-)activism and anti-immigration activism more deeply. (Auers & Kasekamp, 2013; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2022; articles 79, 77, and 78 of TFEU; article 20 of CFR, Dublin Regulation)

QUESTIONS FOR THE TEXT-BASED INTERVIEWS

1. How did seeing those videos make you feel?
2. Did the scenes in the video make you recall some situations you have had in your life or you have heard of ? Please share
3. What would you do as a bystander if you witnessed these acts in the video in real life?
4. How do you think these actions might change society and their views about migrants?
5. How likely are you to change your opinion about migration if you were to witness this activity in real life?
6. What would you do differently if you were the landlord / torch carrier / politician?

PERFOMANCE

Our video project aimed to showcase the escalation of anti-immigrant rhetoric through different stereotypes. We presented three levels:

Level 1: A landlord expressing prejudice against tenants based on their background, a scenario common in everyday conversations.
Level 2: A politician delivering an anti-immigrant speech, subtly framing it as an economic and cultural issue.
Level 3: A pseudoactivist in a racist protest, shouting "If it's black, go back!", a blatant expression of xenophobia & racism.

We intentionally omitted labels for these levels to observe viewer reactions. Before creating the project we had a few relevant activities to complete and help gauge our understanding of the topic, we started with a literature review in which the goal was a deeper understanding of the topic, talked within our group about our concept of anti-immigration activism. We also prepared a script & storyboard for our video ahead of time.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

The research methodology was designed based on the literature review to analyze audience reactions to a staged video about three scenes depicting anti-immigration acts that could be considered as pseudo-activism. We sent the video and questionnaire to 10 students in Tallinn University studying in different fields. The questions allowed us to conduct qualitative research. After watching, participants answered open-ended questions about their emotional responses, personal experiences, hypothetical actions, and perspectives on societal implications. It was possible for the respondent to not answer all the questions. The questionnaire was anonymous and before proceeding with the project informed consent was received from the participants.

Picture 4: group 2 doing analysis.

To analyze the data, we used a thematic data analysis method where responses were reviewed to identify similar quotes and recurring themes. These were grouped into categories (such as emotions and opinions) and subcategories (specific responses). The process involved identifying patterns in the responses, quantifying the frequency of recurring themes, and dividing the data into thematic groups. This approach allowed us to understand the respondents' perception of different anti-immigration sentiment, its potential impact on society and whether they consider this (pseudo-)activism. In the analysis three subcategories are brought out: feelings (based on 1st and 2nd question), creating change (based on 4th and 5th question) and personal actions (based on 3rd and 6th question).

Analysis of results

FEELINGS

Watching the videos sparked different negative feelings like anger, being uncomfortable, annoyance, sadness, and irritation in the respondents. Although all the feelings were initially negative it didn't transfer later to action. Watching the videos made the people recall some situations as well. One said that they were themselves victims of racism from their landlord. Another said, "One time in a boys scout group some major officers were speaking about their travel to Bolivia and how all the people in there had an awful smell and were ugly, just because they were not white." 4 out of 10 recognised these situations from the media.

PERSONAL ACTIONS

A wide range of possible reactions to the scenes are reflected in the responses. Some saw these actions as something to oppose answering "would say the people doing this to stop" and " if there was a counterprotest movement going I might join it." A common theme was that it's not safe to act alone and it's better to (if needed) stand against the people in the video in co-operation with others. One said: "I would want to make them shut up or kick them, but realistically it would be more wise to organize and not act alone." Still only 3 out of 10 expressed an explicit wish to personally act against the people in the video and others either didn't know if they would act, didn't think acting against those people was possible/useful or just didn't want to oppose. Another common theme was distancing from the problem by saying that they wouldn't be in the same situation in the first place and they avoid people depicted in the video.

Analysis of results

CREATING CHANGE

Creating chnange is the goal of activism and through the answers we can see how activists are made. In several questions the answers reflected how the acts witnessed would inspire the respondents to create change to stand against the people depicted in the video. Still - out of 10 respondents only 3 expressed any wish to actually create change. One said: "I'd try to organize with some friends and people from the political parties and unions I know and try to build a protest against the right wingers." The respondents saw differently wether these actions would create change so be classified as activism if carried out in real life. Answers varied from opinions like "These actions might be contagious and spread throughout society", "It definitely affects negatively, and oppresses the migrants and makes them feel unwanted" and "it could lead to mob lynching" to "it likely doesn't change much". Overall 5 out of 10 saw that these actions could lead to differences in societies and change their views about migrants.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the analysis were very contradictory and several interesting findings are worth mentioning. Although all the responses recongnised that video sparked negative feelings not everyone perceived the severity of not acting in return the same. Some brought out several things they would do while others didn't think they should create change. Still we can tell by the answers that mostly these actions were understood as activism and people see how this can change the individuals and society as a whole. Still the question remains that why there is such a gap between understanding the problem and acting out against it. This could be a possible thing to research in the future in the same anti-immigration context.

References
GROUP 2

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ACTION PLAN

GROUP 1

Tasks	Deadlines and approximate timelines	Contributing student(s)
Action plan drafting	25.09	Leon
Literature review	01.10	Urmi, Taavi
Registering for mid-term report session	18.09	Everyone
Script writing for project's video fragment	14.10	Dariia
Finalizing the mid-term report	15.10	Leon
Mid-term report session	18.10	Everyone, but only Leon could participate
Filming the video fragment	27.10	Alberts, Daria, Urmi, Taavi
Acting	27.10	Kasper
Editing the video	5.11	Alberts
Organize viewings of the video	27.11	Everyone
Feedback interview	27.11	Dariia, Taavi, Urmi
Final presentation	12.12	Everyone
Portfolio	12.12	Everyone

ACTION PLAN

GROUP 2

Tasks	Deadline	Student(s) responsible
Make Action Plan	26.09	Olivers, currently
Register Mid-Term slot	–	Olivers
Finalize Performance Idea	16.10	All
1st Project Report	10.10	Katerina
Read research material	6.10	All
Find topic specific research	6.10	Sanne, Refika, Agatha
Conduct literature review	6.10	Sanne, Refika, Agatha
Storyboard	13.10	Olivers
Plan out performance location	16.10	Olivers, Kärt
Mid Term report	16.10	All (Katerina)
2nd Project Report	18.11	All(Katerina)
Book equipment for performance	3.11	Olivers, Kärt
Write script for performance	16.10	Agatha, Kate
Costume planning	25.10	Kärt
Plan out forms for performance	30.10	Refika
Film performance	6.11	Olivers, Kärt
Analyze performance results	25.11	Sanne, Refika
Edit performance video	12.11	Olivers
Presentation of performance results	16.12	All
Portfolio and Final Project report	10.12	All

GROUP 1
SELF REFLECTIONS

DARIIA

From the beginning I found this project interesting and got an amazing team of motivated people. I am a politics and governance student but I also enjoy writing, so I decided to do something else for a change and was responsible for creating the script which turned out great! As the project intended, I also learned a lot about different kinds of activism

URMI

My responsibilities included literature review, creating a questionnaire, putting it to Google Forms and getting replies. I also did the first part of the data analyse. I took the raw data, cretaed codes and categories for a written analyse and conlcusions. Overall I would say my contribution was considerable and I am happy I was able to be part of this project.

ALBERTS

As a audiovisual student from BFM I saw that my input would be valuable to this project because of the skillset I have, which is filming, editing and directing from the script that had been made. I am happy with the way the video turned out and enjoyed working with my team because they did their part perfectly which made the whole production process efficient and smooth. This project was valuable for me to learn how to communicate technical and creative choices with other students from whole different disciplines of work .

LEON

As a law student and an avid internet user, I was no stranger to activism when I joined the project team, since as I believe, the ultimate goal of almost any campaign is policy change, and I am a future policy/law specialist. I also have a good oratory skills.

I acted as the group representative and the "point man" in our public presentations, as well as made our mid-term report, though unfortunately the only one, who could present at the session and was the main editor of this portfolio on our group's side.

TAAVI

Decrypting pseudo activism was a fascinating project in a completely different and new domain to me.

My primary contribution was documenting the theoretical framework based on a review of academic literature, a process that provided a number of insights in terms of how to describe and decrypt pseudo activism. Based on this work, I also contributed by ensuring alignment between the script, execution, analysis and narrative remained consistent with the theoretical framework. Finally, I drafted the qualitative analysis write-up drawing insights and conclusions from our collected survey responses.

I appreciate the opportunity to participate and contribute to this ELU project alongside our inter-disciplinary team.

KASPER

As a physical education student who has been an athlete most of his life the project and activism was totally new to me. I enjoy working with a group although i had a little different expectations for this project. Since I have no problem acting and public speaking, it was logical for me to take the actor role. I appreciate to be part of this awesome team, although my effort could have been a lot better.

GROUP 2
SELF REFLECTIONS

OLIVERS

I was responsible for the filming process, planning out the activities and coordinating the work. It took more time than I expected to finish the script, film and edit but in the end it was all worth it. I learned a lot about planning my time and communication. It was really interesting to work with people from different majors and it was first time for me just as for them. So it was an opportunity to learn from each other.

SANNE

Being part of the literature review and analysis team I was deeply invested in the deep understanding of the topic. It was fascinating to read the responses and to see how the video spoke to the people. I think the responses gave a good overview of several processes in the society like how (extremist) sentiments grow and spread, how are activists born and how people explain their distancing from the problems they percieve as negative.

REFIKA ÇİTİL

I'm glad I joined this project since it allowed me to meet new people from other fields and hone my analytical and collaborative skills. I was fascinated by the idea of pseudo-activism from the start and was resolved to emphasize its subtleties in our film. A lot of individuals don't realize that some types of "activism" might be detrimental and ineffective.
The literature analysis taught me a lot, and I'm excited to put that information to use in the future. I began to consider myself an activist as a result of the investigation.

KATERINA

While I am not going to lie and say I was not initially worried about how this project would go, it turned out to be an illuminating and rewarding experience. I initially joined hoping to hear many diverse and colourful perspectives, and this is exactly what I got on the very first meeting. As we all did more research and engaged with our project activities, everybody seemed to have more and more things to say. Teamwork in this particular format was refreshing, even when not always convenient due to scheduling concerns.

KÄRT

This project really gave me a deeper understanding about activism, especially pseudo activism. The process made me realise the importance of details and different methods that are used, to make a change. It is already been very useful experience. As an advertising student I see a lot of potential using pseudo activism as a form of propaganda/ marketing/ advertising .

AGATHA

This project initially crumbled all my hope for finding any kind of activism that actually works and then litttle by little built it up again and reconstructed my understaning of it. It was an useful experience.

THANK YOU!