

# Instead of the deliberative debate

How the principle of expression plays out in the news-generated Facebook discussion

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Ida Vikøren Andersen

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)  
University of Bergen, Norway  
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## **Abstract**

Social media have become an integrated part of people's lives and are important communication channels, utilised both for personal communication and public debate. Several studies and theories suggest how the advent of social media impacts the public sphere and the rhetoric embedded in it. Still, we have limited knowledge about how the social network site Facebook facilitates and is utilised for public debate.

This study explores utterances and modes of interaction, as well as the contextual frames that make possible and constrain these, in the news-generated social media debates about immigration in the three Scandinavian nations. The study asks the question: What characterises the rhetorical strategies in the news-generated social media debates about the immigration issue?

The dissertation is a contribution to the already vast and rapidly growing literature that examines digital technology's influence on political debate and the public sphere. The study's contribution to this literature is its rhetorical approach, which implies an orientation to the texts in the debates, rather than the users' experiences of them. Furthermore, it entails an approach to the texts as rhetorical moves in the debates that structure and interact with each other, and that are structured by and interact with the context in which they are embedded.

Theoretically, the study combines perspectives on public debate articulated in the rhetorical tradition and deliberative democracy theory, with a variety of theoretical frameworks and concepts that, in various ways, shed light on social media as discursive arenas. In addition to arenas for political debate and opinion formation, social media are discussed as arenas for vernacular rhetoric and everyday talk, personal and individualised political engagement, epideictic rhetoric, as well as flaming and hostility.

The dissertation's main contribution is a comprehensive study of the rhetorical expressions and modes of interaction, examined against the backdrop of the contextual frames of the debates. Where many earlier studies have produced valuable insights into people's experiences of these debates, the knowledge produced through close examination of the debates offers new ways to understand why people experience these debate arenas as they do.

Through two separate parts, the analysis explores both what types of rhetorical expressions and forms of interaction are made possible by the contextual frames, and what rhetorical expressions and modes of interaction, in turn, prevail in the debates.

The two chapters in the first part demonstrate how both the medium and the issue facilitate a debate characterised by personal engagement and expression, strong emotions and conflict, as well as the fusion of many different rhetorical practices and genre conventions.

Through the four thematically separated chapters in the second part, the analysis demonstrates how the debates are characterised by 1) subjective and “authentic” expressions, rather than debate between conflicting views; 2) epideictic struggles over moral positions, where acts of re-definition, re-evaluation, and re-positioning dominate; 3) expression competitions, in which participants compete in performing the most savage attack on the opponent in order to secure the final say for oneself and, thereby, safeguard one’s authentic expression, and; 4) continuous negotiations of genre conventions and debate norms, whereby two contradictory, yet concurrent, debate ideals manifest themselves. These two ideals are the principle of deliberation, according to which participants should approach each other through argumentation, and the principle of expression, according to which argumentation is illegitimate, as it obstructs the individual from expressing his or her authentic self.

As such, the analysis demonstrates how the debates are not characterised primarily by argumentation, but rather a variety of other modes of interaction and rhetorical expressions. Thereby, the dissertation offers new ways to describe the scope and functions of public debates in digital environments that consider the fusion of different practices, many of them not captured by an emphasis on political rhetoric and deliberation alone.

In particular, by introducing the “principle of expression”, the dissertation offers a way to describe a particular characteristic of these debates that enable us to better understand why and when these arenas fail to facilitate argumentation, what causes an aggressive tone, and why they, by many, are experienced as particularly hostile environments.

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## Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
New arenas – new rhetorical cultures .....	4
Social media as arenas for public debate.....	9
Aim, scope and contribution.....	12
Research questions and research design.....	15
Background: The refugee crisis in the Scandinavian nations.....	21
Political uses of social media in Scandinavia.....	23
PART I: Theory and method .....	26
Chapter 2: Public debate and participatory media.....	27
Political rhetoric and the public sphere.....	27
Rational consensus or reasonable disagreement.....	30
Deliberation and an orientation to the “common good”.....	32
Public debate and participatory media .....	37
Vernacular rhetoric and everyday political talk.....	42
Digital everyday talk.....	45
Public debate in personal media .....	49
An aggressive debate culture.....	51
Epidictic rhetoric and moral positioning.....	54
Negotiations of the genre.....	61
Algorithmic and individual agency.....	68
Chapter conclusion: New practices - new perspectives .....	71
Chapter 3: Methodology and data.....	74
Data selection and collection.....	77
Material.....	81
Data processing.....	86
Two-step analysis of the texts.....	88
Step 1: Categorisation of the texts .....	88
Step 2: Close textual and intertextual analysis of the texts .....	95
Practical and ethical challenges .....	100
Chapter conclusion: What kind of knowledge is produced? .....	106
PART II: The contextual frames of the debates .....	108
Chapter 4: The immigration issue and the Syrian refugee crisis.....	109
The Syrian refugee crisis in the Scandinavian context .....	109
Political and epideictic rhetoric in the immigration issue .....	112
Topoi and commonplace expressions in the immigration debate.....	116



Presentation of the issue in the newspaper articles .....	119
Inciting personal engagement and emotions .....	121
Orientation to controversy and political conflict .....	125
Display and celebration of the community's values .....	131
Chapter conclusion: The social media-friendly issue .....	137
Chapter 5: The technological structure and affordances of Facebook.....	139
Affordances of social network sites .....	139
Affordances of Facebook .....	140
Affordances of the news-generated Facebook debates .....	144
The titles and “pitches” .....	147
“Tagging” .....	150
Affordances that structure interaction in the debates.....	151
Personal profiles.....	160
Chapter conclusion: The technology's influence on the potentials for debate.....	162
PART III: The characteristic features of the debates.....	165
Chapter 6: Personalisation and the ideal of authenticity.....	166
The analysis .....	167
Individualisation and personalisation of politics .....	168
Individualised and personal engagement in the issue .....	170
Anecdotal evidence and self-disclosure .....	175
Authenticity as a communicative ideal .....	185
Personal “truths” and evaluations .....	188
The inauthentic politician .....	194
Chapter conclusion: Personal engagement and authentic expressions .....	197
Chapter 7: Epideictic struggles and moral positioning .....	199
The analysis .....	200
Evaluative definitions enabling moral categories .....	202
Praise and condemnation.....	208
Moral condemnations and positioning .....	214
Accusations of “moralism” and “goodness posing” .....	216
Rhetorical expressions of shame and disgust .....	220
Epideictic struggles as stable conflicts.....	225
Enemy images: traitors and racists.....	228
Chapter conclusion: Epideictic struggles over moral positions.....	237
Chapter 8: Attacks, aggressiveness and expression competitions .....	239
The analysis .....	239
An aggressive argument culture.....	241

Personal attacks and experiences of hostility .....	244
Name-calling and insults .....	247
Ridicule, irony and sarcasm.....	251
Expression competitions.....	257
A logic of expression or invitation to action?.....	267
Chapter conclusion: A logic of expression.....	269
Chapter 9: Norms and genre conventions .....	271
Types of sanctions in the material.....	272
Norms of political debate and the principle of deliberation .....	274
Norms of public debate in social media .....	277
Conventions of sociable conversation and the principle of expression .....	286
The discomfort of debate.....	288
The aversion to listening .....	296
Chapter conclusion: The clash of ideals.....	301
Chapter 10: Discussion, findings and contributions .....	303
The contextual frames of the debates.....	303
What characterises the rhetoric in the debates? .....	306
Implications for viewing social media as arenas for public debate .....	310
Contributions, limitations and implications for future research .....	316
Literature .....	321
Appendix A: Complete list of categories coded for.....	347
Appendix B: Newspaper articles referenced in the analysis. ....	353



## Chapter 1: Introduction

In relation to the United Nation's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020, the organisation launched a campaign called "UN75. 2020 and beyond. Shaping our future together". The campaign was described as the "biggest-ever global conversation on the role of global cooperation in building the future we want". It aims to contribute to tackle fundamental challenges to the global society and to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. One of these challenges is social media, which is also described as a possibility for cooperation and a better future. In the document "The Impact of Digital Technologies", social media is described as follows:

Social media connects almost half of the entire global population. It enables people to make their voices heard and to talk to people across the world in real time. However, it can also reinforce prejudices and sow discord, by giving hate speech and misinformation a platform, or by amplifying echo chambers. In this way, social media algorithms can fuel the fragmentation of societies around the world. And yet they also have the potential to do the opposite (UN, 2020).

Twenty-one years earlier, Darcy Dinucci coined the term "web 2.0" in the article "Fragmented Future" (1999). The term described a fundamentally new form of online technology, characterised by user-generated content and participatory culture. The breakthrough of web 2.0 fundamentally changed society's communication flows, previously dominated by the mass media's one-to-many communication and citizens' one-to-one communication in face-to-face interactions: The new participatory media made large-scale many-to-many communication possible (Jensen, 2009). By many, this was seen as a democratisation of the public sphere, as citizens could now communicate directly to a mass audience without an intermediary, which gave "average" citizens a public stage and a direct line to decision-makers (Benkler, 2006; Hindman, 2009; Shirky, 2008).

The initial celebration of web 2.0 has increasingly been replaced by concerns. Media organisations and journalists, global organisations, national governments and political actors, as well as scholars, have all raised concerns about social network sites' and other digital media's influence on the public debate. Some examples include the Nordic media group, Schibsted, which in the fall of 2019 presented the report "How to

ensure democracy and free speech online?”. Launching the report, Schibsted’s CEO, Kristin Skogen Lund, described democracy’s challenges in the following way:

Our democracies are challenged. The same social networks that have given the voiceless an opportunity to express themselves, and which give us all opportunities for contact and friendship, are also used by those who manipulate millions of people through false campaigns and inciting hatred (Schibsted, 2019).

The report identified several threats posed by social network sites to democracy and freedom of speech. According to the report, democratic institutions, politicians, and journalism are under attack from disinformation and smear campaigns, hatred and threats. Additionally, fake news sites, as well as incitement to terrorism, genocide, violence, and sexual abuse, are raised as problems related to the advent of participatory media (Schibsted, 2019).

The same year, the Norwegian government authorised a new Freedom of speech commission [Ytringsfrihetskommisjon] to review the status of freedom of expression in the nation. The backdrop of this decision was a definition of social network sites’ influence on the public debate similar to the one offered by Schibsted’s CEO:

The opportunities to speak freely have never been greater than today. Media development has given audiences, media and technology companies alike new roles and new responsibilities. Large global media platforms for uploading and sharing content have had a significant impact on the digital public debate. Freedom of expression today is challenged from many angles – including hate and smear campaigns online, threats and harassment of journalists and debaters, the spread of “fake news”, as well as surveillance of communication channels (Kulturdepartementet 2019, my translation).

As the Schibsted-report, this utterance, from the Norwegian Department of Culture, describes a situation in which the possibilities to express oneself publicly have become greater because of the emergence of social media, but where these possibilities are simultaneously threatened by how they are used to spread hatred, misinformation and threats.

Another example from the Nordic context is *Nordicom Information*’s special issue “Agitation and hatred online [Hets och hat online]” from 2015 (Wadbring & Mølster, 2015). The special issue gathered contributions from journalists, editors and researchers. In the contributions, the early optimism of social media’s ability to include

more voices in the public debate is replaced by a concern that hate-speech contributes to self-censorship among journalists, politicians, researchers and other public figures (Gustavsen & Sauer, 2015; Toft, 2015; Wadbring & Mølster, 2015). It forces newspapers to shut down their comment sections, blogs and Twitter-accounts, thus obstructing readers from communicating directly with them (Nilsson, 2015). And, in fear of being the object of hateful comments, “average” citizens, as well as political actors, journalists and public servants – especially women and minorities – avoid voicing their opinions in public (Iversen, 2015; Midtbøen, 2015b).

Digital technology has, without a doubt, increased citizens’ possibilities to express their opinions, ideas, desires, identities and reactions, and has enabled new modes of social interaction. However, the initial belief that this would democratise the public sphere has been replaced by a more nuanced – often also negative – view on the democratising potential of the technology. A vast and still growing body of academic literature examines how new arenas for public debate facilitate, obstruct and change, democratic discussion. Increasingly, attention has been turned to how digital environments shape and influence discursive practices (Bendor, Haas Lyons, & Robinson, 2012; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013).

This dissertation contributes to this still on-going examination of digital participatory media as arenas for public debate. The overall aim is to examine what types of rhetorical expressions and modes of interaction are made possible and prevail under these particular circumstances. I begin from the assumption that societal, cultural and technological transformations necessarily bring about new rhetorical forms, as the conditions for persuasion are changed with them. While I do not view these debates as directly influential on the political decision-making processes, I do see them as embedded in, and contributing to shaping, a rhetorical culture that also manifests itself in other parts of the public sphere. Prominent politicians in many nations actively use social media in their public communication, and their rhetoric in other public forums is also influenced by formal and substantive elements associated with communication in social media.

In the U.S., for instance, President Donald Trump actively uses Twitter in his political communication. Moreover, his speeches and utterances in offline context are

characterised by what I view as characteristic traits of the rhetoric in social media debates, namely subjective evaluations and assertions of highly personal “truths”, an orientation to his own, as well as the opponent’s personal traits, moral positioning, and domination techniques – all of which performed in a predominantly vernacular style.

Similar examples can be observed in many Western democracies, where so-called “alternative facts” (Wikforss, 2017), “alternative”, as well as “fake” news (Kalsnes, 2019; Nygård, 2020; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019) increasingly gain currency in the public debate. An orientation to personalities and subjective experiences is observed in the mass media (Hornmoen, 2015), as well as in the political debate, which arguably suffers from a lack of arguments and counter-arguments (Kock, 2011a, 2018).

To examine the rhetoric in public social media debates is, thus, not only to produce insights about the rhetoric in this specific part of the public sphere, which has little influence on how the political wheels turn; it can also tell us something more general about the conditions for – and functions of – public rhetoric today.

### **New arenas – new rhetorical cultures**

Digital technology has given us new arenas for public debate and participation in the public sphere. With these new arenas, people who were previously dependent on the mass media to be able to convey their opinion to a mass audience are now able to communicate their views directly and unfiltered – and potentially reach large audiences. On the one hand, this has led to an expansion of the public sphere, in which more people can participate as producers of content. On the other hand, this has blurred the lines between private and public, as people can communicate in public about their private life and express their personal opinion, without obligations to making their subjective experiences publicly relevant. This, together with the new action-possibilities and constraints inherent in the rhetorical situations on social media, can be seen as the development of a new rhetorical culture. The cultivation of this rhetorical culture is, I argue, still on-going, apparent both in the concerns frequently raised about the contents and rhetorical styles that prevail in the new debate arena, and in the still on-going negotiation of conventions and expectations that guide actors’ practices in these debates.

Although the discussions and concerns about social media's implications for the future of democracy raise issues particular to this relatively new rhetorical arena, similar discussions and concerns have also been raised with the emergence of other arenas for public debate in other historical periods. In the history of the public sphere, technological and societal developments have created new arenas and shaped new rhetorical cultures that have challenged existing conventions and expectations to public rhetoric.

Here, I understand a rhetorical culture as the configuration of a typical communication situation, world view – including both a view of truth, morality, humanity and language – and a particular rhetorical style<sup>1</sup> (Johansen, 2007, 274; 2019, 20-21). As such, a rhetorical culture is constituted by who speaks and who listens, cultural and technological conditions, the language available under these conditions, as well as the norms and conventions that govern the communication. Necessarily, the rhetorical expression is essential to understanding a rhetorical culture, and it is through examining actual rhetorical expressions that historical ruptures can be observed.

Because rhetorical practice is always governed by ideals of what makes a “good” argument, what a credible speaker is, and what is eloquent, the practice embedded in a particular rhetorical culture can inform us of what is seen as true, trustworthy, natural, credible and morally good, the relationships between rationality and emotions, private and public, in a particular historical context. In other words: The predominant rhetorical forms in a given rhetorical culture, and others' reactions to these, can tell us something about the world in which these rhetorical utterances can be expressed and be effective. As argued by Johansen, to “ask how something is expressed [...] entails asking how it could be possible to express oneself in such a way?” (Johansen, 2019, 21, my translation).

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<sup>1</sup> A definition of a rhetorical culture is also offered by Thomas Farrell in *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (1993, 1), where he defines it as “an institutional formation in which motives of competing parties are intelligible, audiences available, expressions reciprocal, norms translatable, and silences noticeable”. Moreover, a rhetorical “culture offers to those who live in it symbols and families of practices that permit ongoing performances of meaning and value” (1993, 277). In this dissertation, I make use of the definition offered above, where I see the rhetorical *expression* as key to any rhetorical culture, as it makes evident the ideals and ideas – shaped by both societal and technological conditions – that shape and govern the given rhetorical culture.



When new arenas, with new situational demands (including technological and cultural possibilities and constraints), emerge in the public sphere, the established ideals become challenged, and new ways of responding to the requirements in the communicative setting develop. A new rhetorical culture is, however, not established overnight. Commonly, new practices are negotiated and criticised based on previous ideals for ethical and effective rhetoric, before they eventually, through the uptake of others and repeated use, are cultivated and normalised.

The rhetorical culture I examine in this dissertation is still in the process of cultivation, where norms and conventions are continuously negotiated and practices criticised. The technological structure of social media creates a new communication situation with rhetor-audience relationships, constraints and possibilities different from previous rhetorical situations. The medium is, however, not determining practice; instead, I argue, it should be understood as symptomatic of already existing cultural patterns.

To understand how technological and societal developments give rise to new rhetorical cultures, I will draw attention to two historical periods in which similar ruptures as the one represented by social media can be identified: The development and expansion of civil society in the late 1800s, and the emergence of broadcasting media, in particular the television, in the mid-1900s (Johansen, 2002, 2019).<sup>2</sup> The first period represents a similar historical rupture as the advent of the participatory web through a radical expansion of the public sphere to include individuals who previously populated the private sphere. The second period represents a similar wide-ranging technological development that, again, shifted the lines between private and public by moving public persons and matters into the private sphere.

The period between 1870 and 1890 was, in Norway, characterised by the emergence of organisational associations and the printing press. Together these two developments contributed to relocating people who previously had resided in the private

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<sup>2</sup> Johansen describes the development of new rhetorical cultures in Norway. While some of the developments described may be limited to the Norwegian context and, as such, not generalisable across national cases, similar transformations can also be observed in the other Nordic countries around the same time. Still, I argue that the observations from the Norwegian context can serve to illustrate a more general point, i.e. how new rhetorical cultures are shaped, negotiated and cultivated.

sphere into public spaces. The printing press made newspapers more affordable to a broader audience. As a consequence, new groups of citizens could acquire political knowledge. With the associations, the popular meeting developed as an arena for political rhetoric, and this arena was open to all members of the association. In the popular meetings, as well as in the newly established folk university colleges, citizens were given practical rhetorical training. Thus, new groups of citizens gained rhetorical citizenship and agency, i.e. the ability to participate in the public debate and to make their voice heard (Johansen, 2019).

As a consequence of the emergence of popular meetings as new arenas for public rhetoric, new ideals for political rhetoric developed. Replacing preceding ideals of deliberation between pragmatic, educated and independent individuals oriented towards consensus, agitation and confrontation between conflicting views now took place in front of a mass audience who were to operate as judges through voting. New ideals for the public speech, including colloquialness, fervour and strong emotions, stood in stark contrast both to the matter-of-factly and sober deliberation and to the eloquent speech with literary qualities, characteristic of previous times' rhetorical culture (Johansen, 2019, 545-588). The cultivation of these new ideals was, however, slow and not without controversies. Many expressed concerns about the new orators and the rhetorical forms utilised by them. The orators were called "demagogues" and "hooligans", were accused of manipulation and of leading the uneducated masses astray (Johansen, 2019, 696-710). Gradually, however, the new conventions for and expectations to political rhetoric were normalised and became the predominant forms of political rhetorical practice in the public sphere.

While the grand emotions and fervour, expressed through exaggerations with the body and voice, were necessary means for appealing to and arousing the engagement of a mass audience, the introduction of broadcasting media, required a different rhetorical form (Johansen, 1999, 2002). Whereas the emergence of civil society brought people out of the private and into the public sphere, the broadcasting media moved the public into people's private lives. In particular, the television brought public persons and matters into people's living rooms and, thus, contributed to a blending of traditionally private, "back-stage" environments into public, "front-stage" environments (Meyrowitz, 1985).

In front of a mass audience, the orator couldn't appear the way s/he did in private settings. The physical distance between the audience and the public orator on the stage made it necessary to magnify and intensify the expression. Moreover, the orator was previously a public figure that most people never got to observe at a close range and form a personal impression of. By contrast, the television exposes people to public persons all the time, at a close range and in informal, everyday settings. As a consequence, the role of the politician changed – from being a public figure that the fewest knew personally, to being a person that most people felt that they knew (Johansen, 1999, 2002).

Consequently, to be credible, rhetors had to start speaking in a natural, subdued and intimate way. Moreover, the person they were in public had to correspond to the person they were in private. As such, a new ideal for political rhetoric emerged, namely “authenticity”: To be perceived as genuine and true, one now has to “mean what one says”, and to “*really* ‘mean what one says’, one has to ‘be oneself’” (Johansen, 2002, 71, my translation).

As shown by Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1988), with the advent of electronic mass media political rhetoric in the U.S. was also increasingly characterised by a new eloquence ideal, namely of the intimate, narrative, self-disclosive, as well as visual mode of persuasion. What is particular about the new notion of eloquence is, according to Jamieson, not primarily that speakers have adopted and cultivated these rhetorical forms, but that audiences have been cultivated to expect them. Moreover, she views this development, in which personal stories, soundbites, and visual impressions arguably replace sustained argument, as a decay that contributes to creating a mass, uninformed audience. It does so, because the audience's attention is shifted away from reasonable argumentation to irrelevant, visual impressions, and appeals to emotional instincts, rather than rationality (Hall Jamieson, 1988; 1992, 10-11).

The advent of social media can be viewed as another transformation of the conditions for public rhetoric. It represents an expansion of the public sphere, where more people than ever have gained access to a public rhetorical arena. Moreover, it represents an increased blurring of the lines between public and private, as participation in this arena happens, precisely by virtue of being a private – and, I will argue,

“authentic” – individual. What types of rhetorical expressions and modes of interaction that, under these circumstances, are made possible and prevail, is something that I will pay particular attention to throughout this dissertation.

### **Social media as arenas for public debate**

Digital technology, more precisely, the emergence of participatory media represents a development that has changed both who can participate in, and the conditions for, public rhetoric. In the following, I use “social media” as an umbrella term to describe “internet-based services that facilitate social networking as well as creation and sharing of content between users” (Moe, 2016, 1). It entails that social media, in which digital technology is the central defining feature, encompasses a range of different digital media facilitating content creation, sharing and interaction. This definition of social media covers a wide range of different “social network sites”, which should here be understood as:

[...] web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (boyd & Ellison, 2007, 211).

With this definition, I emphasise profile-management and connectivity as defining features of the functional structure of social network sites: They provide online spaces for the creation of personal profiles and for interacting and connecting with others (O’Riordan, Feller, & Nagle, 2011). As suggested by the word “network”, these sites are structured around personal profiles and interpersonal relationships, and their primary function is connectivity. For this reason, social network sites have been understood as “mediated publics”, i.e. as environments where people can come together as publics through media technology (boyd, 2007), contributing to a mediatisation of everyday communication (Finnemann, 2011; Lomborg, 2014, 8).

Social network sites are, however, also arenas for public debate. Today, commenting on news articles has become a widely popular form of audience participation on news websites across Western democracies (Domingo et al., 2008; Reich, 2011; Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger, 2015; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2015; Thurman, 2008; Weber, 2014). The comment sections can be understood

as civic forums, in which audiences can participate by expressing their views on current issues of public concern (Silva, 2015). In recent years, the comment sections previously hosted on the newspaper's webpages have increasingly been moved to the same newspapers' public Facebook-pages (see e.g. Ihlebæk & Endresen, 2017; Larsson, 2018; Rowe, 2015).

This dissertation attends to the public uses of social media. It examines what characterises the communicative setting, the rhetorical expressions, and the norms and conventions that govern these. In other words: It studies what characterises a particular rhetorical culture. More precisely, it studies one particular social network site, Facebook, and one particular use facilitated by it: the *news-generated public debate*. The news providers initiate these debates that take place in the comment sections on their public pages on Facebook. These pages, while sharing the same affordances as individual users' profile-pages, have a "public showcase character" (Rieder, 2013, 3). They are open to all – not only those with a Facebook-account – and are typically used by the newspapers to maintain a presence on the platform and to broadcast their news stories to a larger audience. Through "likes", comments and shares, the content shared on Facebook could possibly reach a much larger audience who – when clicking on the article – will be re-directed to the news paper's website, where they can read the article. Thus, Facebook is used by the newspapers to increase their visibility and to generate traffic to their site.

The communication in public debates in social media can be viewed as *vernacular rhetoric* (Hauser, 1999b). Vernacular language refers to the language spoken in everyday life. It is characterised by the informal style and is, content-wise, based on the citizens' personal experiences and emotions. The lack of a moderator creates a communicative setting that resembles the unmoderated face-to-face conversation. The utterances promoted here, however, has the potential to reach a substantially larger audience. With participatory media, vernacular rhetoric was moved out of the private sphere, onto the public stage – from being located primarily within face-to-face conversations, it became communication that could potentially reach a mass audience.

In public debates in these environments, actors speak *as* themselves and *for* themselves, rather than behalf of, and in the interest of the collective. Their utterances

have little, if any, influence over political decisions, and are most likely not aimed to do so either. As such, it is not surprising that, rather than argumentation about future action, these debates are, as I will show, dominated by subjective evaluations, unwarranted claims, expressions of personal engagement and identities.

Moreover, in the age of information and content abundance, the transgression of social norms for interaction becomes an effective way of getting attention. As audiences' reactions are readily available as "likes", shares and comments – and these reaction are, in turn, what makes content go viral, provocation and strong expressions are rewarded (Hoff-Clausen & Rønlev, 2016, 480, 484-485; Marshall & Neil, 2016). Combined with the lack of eye-contact and, as such, a lack of real, in-life consequences, the logics of social media may foster an aggressive argument culture, where personal attacks and incivilities flourish.

In the dissertation, I will argue that the public social media debates are characterised by utterances that express the speaker's personal engagement and "authentic" self, moral evaluations and stance taking, verbal attacks and domination techniques. The orientation to the "authentic" expression and moral position, and the prevalence of verbal aggressiveness and dominance techniques alike, stand in stark contrast to established ideals for public debate. The public debate, should according to these ideals, consist of arguments and counter-arguments that are universally warranted, and seek to establish mutual respect and understanding, rather than to stigmatise and polarise.

Moreover, I will argue, an aversion to give, as well as to listen and respond to arguments manifests itself, suggesting that these debates are governed by other ideals than an ideal of deliberation. As a consequence, public debates in these relatively new media, cannot, I argue, be understood through an understanding of public debate as opinion formation and argumentation alone. Instead, these debate arenas are characterised by the fusion of a variety of practices, many of them not captured by an emphasis on political rhetoric as argumentation. For this reason, I will in the dissertation, mobilise a variety of theoretical perspectives and, in so doing, offer new ways to understand what characterise public debates in these environments.

### **Aim, scope and contribution**

I examine the conditions for, and characterising features of, public debate in social network sites. To do so, I study the discussions about an issue recognised as particularly “social media-friendly” (Vatnøy, 2017), namely the immigration issue. Not only is the issue found to create much user activity on social media (Larsson, 2018), it is also an issue that is seen as particularly fit for social media debates by active participants, because it is controversial and emotional, and it actualises questions of personal values and morale (Vatnøy, 2017). Moreover, the issue is placed high on the political and media agenda on a regular basis in the three nations studied here.

The study is limited to one particular issue related to immigration: the Syrian refugee crisis. The refugee crisis represents a “peak moment” when the immigration issue dominated the public agenda (Ihlebak & Endresen, 2017). As the formulation “refugee crisis” suggests, the situation was perceived as difficult and urgent. On the one hand, the situation was seen as a crisis for the refugees, who fled for their lives. On the other hand, the situation was viewed as a crisis for the receiving nations, who struggled to cope with the influx of refugees to the country.

The study examines news-generated social media debates, more precisely: the comment sections on newspapers’ Facebook-pages. The newspapers should here be viewed as the initiators of the debates, as they post articles to Facebook, where their audiences can interact with the news by “liking”, sharing and commenting. The participants in the debates are “average” citizens. Generally, the newspapers’ journalists do not intervene in the debates, except for removing comments that violate the law by performing hate-speech or threats.

The debates examined in the study are related to two “key” events in the refugee crisis: the reception of refugees to the Scandinavian nations in the early fall of 2015, and the retrenchments in the asylum policies later in the fall and winter. These two events are included as they present the issue in different ways, thus creating different situational demands upon which the commentators can act rhetorically. The articles about the “reception” presented the refugee crisis as a crisis for the *refugees*, and emphasised the humanitarian response to the situation. The responsibility to act was largely placed on the individual, whose help was both praised and encouraged. The articles about the

“retrenchments” presented the refugee crisis as a crisis for the *receiving nations*, and emphasised the political solutions to the situation. The responsibility to act was placed on political actors, and conflicts and controversy surrounding the political decisions were brought to attention.

The study is situated within three similar yet different cultural contexts: the three Scandinavian nations. The strong position of the press in these three nations, as well as their high numbers of daily Facebook users (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2012), makes them suitable for this study. The three nation-states, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, often cluster together in comparative studies in the social sciences due to their similarities and close ties. The nation-states’ history and culture overlap, as they have been closely related and intertwined in a series of unions. The nations have the same political systems: They are constitutional monarchies and welfare states, influenced by social democratic labour movements from the post-war era. Finally, they have the same media system: the democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

The three nations are, however, also three different nations, as demonstrated by the political handling and public debate about the immigration issue – and the refugee crisis – in the three nations (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2010; Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Hovden, Mjelde, & Gripsrud, 2018). The main aim of the study is, however, not to look for differences in how the issue was debated on social media in the three nations, but rather to identify characteristic rhetorical expressions and modes of interaction that recur across national contexts.

The overall aim of the study is to identify the conditions for public debate about the immigration issue in one relatively new part of the public sphere. It does so through a large-scale close textual analysis (in total 2728 comments to 32 different news articles), with a particular emphasis on how various contextual elements influence the texts’ substantial and formal characteristics.

The dissertation is a contribution to a vast and fast-growing body of research concerned with how digital technology influences and shapes the conditions for public debate. Whereas much of the early work on the relationship between participatory media and the public sphere was theoretical (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2011), there now exists a vast body of empirical research. The question has been examined through reception



studies of users and audiences (Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Brundidge, 2010; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Lomborg, 2014; Lüders, Prøitz, & Rasmussen, 2010; Stromer-Galley, 2002; Vatnøy, 2017, 2018; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), close textual analysis of smaller samples of texts – often combined with qualitative interviews with users (Bakardjieva, 2012; Lomborg, 2014; Vatnøy, 2017), and quantitative content analysis of large data sets, often aimed at measuring the quality of online debates (Ruiz et al., 2011; Santana, 2014; Silva, 2013; Suzuki, 2006; Winsvold, 2013; Wright & Street, 2007; Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008). Some studies have also performed close textual analysis of the entire course of online debates across platforms and media (Howard, 2010; Rønlev, 2014, 2018), and combined quantitative content analysis of large data-sets with qualitative close reading (Wheatley & Vatnøy, 2019).

The benefits of a qualitative approach to texts in digital environments is the ability to provide thick descriptions and in-depth understandings of the often ambiguous and complex nature of each contribution. With a qualitative close reading of a large number of comments and the entire debate course in which these appear, this dissertation's empirical contribution is the "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of both the contextual frames of, and actual texts in, one particular debate – in two stages and three national contexts – on social media.

The study produces insights about both the rhetorical expressions and the contextual features that can help us understand them, in the news-generated Facebook debates about immigration in one particular historical context – Scandinavia in the fall of 2015. These insights cannot be generalised across platforms, historical contexts or issues. Still, the interpretations and the theoretical implications of these, I argue, can inform our interpretation of related phenomena because they describe not just the particular discursive practices studied, but also how these come into being.

Moreover, while Facebook holds a unique position of all the social network sites, both in terms of extensiveness, use and relevance in Scandinavian people's lives (Moe et al., 2019, 73; Werliin & Kokholm, 2016), a limited amount of studies have dealt with this platform as an arena for public debate (as suggested by e.g. Karlsson, Bergström, Clerwall, & Fast, 2015; Larsson, 2018). By comparison, a vast amount of studies have examined the social network site Twitter, despite the site's comparably limited

popularity (Moe et al., 2019, 73; Werliin & Kokholm, 2016). This should probably be seen as a consequence of Twitter being more closely related to the public debate, whereas Facebook has largely been seen as a personal medium. Additionally, while there exist proper tools for collecting large datasets from Twitter, Facebook remains a notoriously difficult medium to study. Given Facebook's popularity and widespread use, it is, nevertheless, critical to examine how it is used and how it facilitates public debate.

### **Research questions and research design**

The dissertation examines what characterises the rhetorical culture of public social media debates. More precisely, the study examines how “average” citizens discuss the immigration issue in public debates on Facebook, how participants utilise the medium's affordances and how practices and interpretations are influenced by conventions and expectations to the debates, as well as the issue discussed.

The research design, through which this is examined, is guided by an understanding of rhetoric as “purposive and effective communication” (Kjeldsen, 2017, 24, my translation). This is in line with how numerous scholars define rhetoric, namely as the strategic use of communication (see e.g. Berge, 2014; Billig, 1991; Hauser, 2002; Kuypers, 2004). This is, however, not to say that the rhetorical utterance is always crafted with a clear aim of what the utterance is to do, nor is it to say that utterances always do what they are intended to do.

That rhetoric is not necessarily intentional is captured in Kenneth Burke's emphasis on *identification* rather than *persuasion* as the key term for rhetoric (Burke, 1951, 203), and on rhetoric as the symbolic use of language that allows human beings to construct and function within a social reality by establishing identification and inducing cooperation (Burke, 1969, 43).

The fact that rhetoric does not necessarily have the intended *effect*, should be understood as a consequence of all rhetoric being situated and contingent (Kjeldsen, 2014). This implies that utterances, and their potential functions should be seen as inextricably linked to the context in which they occur. The situation, involving both the audiences, the issue, the technology, established norms and conventions, and so forth, encourages the rhetor to engage in certain rhetorical practices and obstructs him or her

from engaging in other. Furthermore, it influences and guides the audience's interpretation of the rhetorical utterance.

This understanding of rhetoric implies that communication should be examined by looking both at actual utterances and the context of utterances. The dissertation does so, by asking: *What rhetorical strategies characterise the news-generated social media debates about the immigration issue?* While there exist countless of definitions of the concept of "strategy", when I use it here, it simply denotes an understanding of rhetoric as purposive and effective, as well as situated and contingent (Kjeldsen, 2014, 2017). A rhetorical strategy should, thus, be understood as the interplay of both the utterance's substance and form, and the substance and form's interaction with the context. It entails a combination of substantive and formal elements, the rhetor's stance on the issue, and the utterance's performative functions (Wheatley & Vatnøy, 2019, 13). Individuals' intentions are connected with strategy in the constellation of content and style, and gain an effect in the particular situation. Thus, the textual level of the public debates on social media is inextricably linked to the context, consisting of both the issue and the medium.

As suggested already, and elaborated on in chapter 2, both "intention" and "effect" is here understood broadly. That an utterance is intentional does not mean that it is necessarily crafted with a precise aim of what the utterance is to do, it may, for instance, be expressed due to a perceived need to express an immediate reaction. In acting upon a perceived need, the participants in the news-generated social media debates, perform actions that have an effect. This does, however, not imply that the utterance does what it was intended to do, or that it has real, in-life consequences. Nevertheless, I argue, it has an effect *within* the debate. It can, for instance, function to bring about celebration or condemnation, or to silence an opponent, and thereby secure the speaker the final say.

The analysis of the debates is structured around two parts: One examines the contextual frames of the debates, and one examines what characterises the rhetoric in the debates.

The first part of the analysis is presented in chapter 4 and 5, where I argue that the issue and the medium constitute the two most important contextual frames of the debates studied. In chapter 4, I discuss how the immigration issue facilitates certain

rhetorical expressions and influences how the debate develops. Here, I discuss the immigration issue and -debate in general, as well as the Syrian refugee crisis, in particular, by reviewing existing studies of the Scandinavian immigration debate. Moreover, I identify the dominant perspectives applied in the newspaper articles that are subjected to debate in the Facebook comment sections examined. I suggest that both the issue and the ways in which it is presented in the newspaper articles facilitate a debate characterised by personal engagement and expression, strong emotions and controversy, as well as a fusion of deliberative and epideictic rhetoric.

Chapter 5 examines the affordances of social network sites in general, and the distinct affordances that structure the interaction in the news-generated Facebook-debates, in particular. By the concept of “affordances”, I here refer to the properties of an environment that facilitate certain actions (Gibson, 1979). In this particular case, this is the technological structures of the medium, which encourage the participants in the news-generated social media debates to engage in certain types of rhetorical practices rather than others (Miller & Sheperd, 2009, 281).

Here, I identify affordances that contribute to making the personal engagement and expression easily attended to, as well as to blur the lines between the public and private spheres of communication. This is afforded by the social network site’s use of personal profiles and networks as an organising principle, as well as by features such as the “tag”, which allows participants to invite their “friends” into the public debate. Furthermore, I argue, Facebook is organised after a principle of popularity, which facilitates for hard-hitting, strong expressions and emotions, as visibility depends on one’s ability to get reactions – whether these reactions are positive or negative.

The second part of the analysis identifies the characteristics of the rhetoric in the news-generated social media debates. “Characteristics” here signifies substantial and formal elements that are recurring and typical in the debates studied. These characteristics are identified by studying each utterance both in isolation and as a *rhetorical move* in the debate. That the utterances are seen as rhetorical moves in the debate, implies that they are viewed as part of an interaction with other utterances, either directly, as responses to other utterances in the debate, or indirectly, as responses to the communication situation. As such, the utterances have relational qualities, i.e. the many

individual rhetorical actions interact with and structure each other, and are structured by and interacting with the social structures in which they are embedded (Miller, 1994, 72). This does not mean that the participants in the debates necessarily relate to each other by listening and responding to each other's views and arguments. It may be that they express a reaction to the news article, express something about themselves, or even attempt to silence other participants. Nevertheless, the utterances interact with and structure each other. Consequently, utterances are examined both in relation to preceding utterances, the responses they bring about, as well as the contextual frames of the debates.

The four analysis chapters in this part, each address one characteristic feature of the debates: Chapter 6 examines the personal engagement and expression; chapter 7 examines struggles over moral evaluations through acts of epideictic rhetoric; chapter 8 examines an aggressive argument culture, and; chapter 9 examines the fusion of different norms and genre conventions.

The analysis presented in chapter 6, identifies an orientation to the participants' personal identity, subjective opinion and emotion. This orientation, I argue, does not facilitate debate between opposing views. Instead, it brings about celebration and condemnation. Moreover, it stands in opposition to what we usually understand by political debate, namely argumentation about future action – aimed either at “reasonable disagreement” (Kock, 2008), or moving the participants in the direction of consensus (Habermas, 1972). Instead, what is encouraged is the “authentic” expression. The chapter mobilises theoretical perspectives on personalisation and individualisation of political engagement, in general, and as a feature of political engagement in participatory media (Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Calenda & Meijer, 2011). Moreover, the chapter draws on theories in which authenticity is discussed, both as a moral and a communicative ideal (Johansen, 2002; Kjeldsen & Johansen, 2012; Taylor, 1991).

Chapter 7 examines utterances that are characterised by epideictic rhetoric of praise and condemnation of actions and persons. As such, the utterances discussed in this chapter, are characterised by moral evaluations, rather than arguments about future action. In order to discuss this feature of the debates, the chapter mobilises theories of

epideictic rhetoric (Condit, 1985), which despite being understood as a different form of communication than political rhetoric, is also viewed as an inherent part of all political debate (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, 50; Vatnøy, 2017).

In particular, I examine how “epideictic struggles” develop. With the concept of “epideictic struggle”, I here describe a verbal struggle over moral positions. The concept, thus, has similarities to what Ottar Brox has described in terms of “expression competitions” (Brox, 1991, 33, 53-54), namely a type of discourse in which participants compete in having the strongest possible expression of shared values, as well as their own moral qualities. Brox uses the concept of “schismogenesis” (Bateson, 1935, 1958), more precisely the type of discursive mechanism described by Bateson (1958, 176-177), as “symmetrical schismogenesis”, which refers to an interaction between two parties, where the interaction between them leads both parties to increase the strength of their expression.

Here I will distinguish between a concept of “expression competition”, on the one hand, and “epideictic struggle” on the other hand, and use the first to describe a somewhat different mechanism than the one described by Brox. By “expression competition”, I here understand a form of symmetrical schismogenesis, where the utterances from one part contribute to increasing the strength in the other part’s utterance. One party attacks, the other responds to this with a cruder attack, the first again responds to this with an even cruder attack, and so forth. In contrast to Brox’ conceptualisation, however, the expressions I describe through this concept are not concerned with the participants’ values and moral qualities. Instead, the concept of “expression competition” is used to describe a discursive battle in which adversaries are fighting not over who is “good” and “evil”, but over who is capable of performing the crudest attack and, thereby, secure the final say for him- or herself. As I will demonstrate in chapter 8, the attacks are not concerned with the adversary’s person; they are, all in all, empty attacks.

By “epideictic struggle”, then, I describe a verbal battle over moral position, more similar to Brox’ concept “expression competition”. However, this epideictic struggle does, as I will discuss in chapter 7, not primarily develop as a competition over who can perform the strongest possible expression of his or her moral character. In other words:

It does not hold the discursive mechanisms described as “symmetrical schismogenesis”. Rather, these discursive battles lack progress – the expressions’ do not contribute to intensifying each other. Instead, what characterises the epideictic struggle is continuous re-definitions of who is to be seen as respectively “victims” and “threats”, and who, as a consequence of these definitions, is to be seen as “good” and “evil”. By calling this an “epideictic struggle”, I draw attention to how this discursive struggle over definitions and evaluations, play out through epideictic expressions, i.e. through verbal displays of who “we” are.

In chapter 8, I examine the “expression competition” as defined above. Here I look at utterances and interactions that gain a particularly hostile tone. The chapter discusses this feature of the debates in relation to previous accounts of online environments as aggressive argument cultures created by the lack of social cues online (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2011; Suler, 2004). Moreover, the chapter discusses this feature of the debates in light of the concept of “expression competitions”, where participants fight, not over who is right/wrong or good/bad, but over the strongest expression and the final say.

Chapter 9 examines the prevailing genre conventions and norms in these arenas. It does so by examining meta-debates in the material, more precisely, sanctions of other participants’ utterances. The analysis identifies two contradictory debate ideals: A deliberative ideal, where norms associated with political debate and argumentation (Kock, 2011b, 2018) are rendered visible, and a *logic of expression*, where obligations to argumentation are dismissed, and criticism is sanctioned for violating the individual’s right to express his or her “true” self. This feature of the debates is discussed both in relation to social media as an arena for sociable conversation and pleasant experiences (Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2018), and in relation to the ideal of authenticity (Taylor, 1991), also addressed in chapter 6.

The dissertation, then, identifies and discusses some characteristic traits of the news-generated social media debates. I do not argue that these characteristics are unique to these debates, or that one can lay out a general definition of “the rhetoric of social media debates” based on them. As suggested by the dissertation’s emphasis on the particular affordances of Facebook and the nature of the immigration issue and –debate,

I view these characteristics as a consequence of the particular platform, the particular uses of the platform for debate about the news, as well as the issue. By offering a detailed description of these rhetorical practices and the context in which they take place, the study, nevertheless, produces new insights about these practices and the rhetorical culture, in which they are embedded, that can inform our interpretation of related phenomena.

Together, the six analysis chapters examine the substantive and formal elements that characterise the news-generated social media debates about the immigration issue, and the contextual frames that structure the communication in these. Combined they produce insights into the three levels of meaning that give significance to texts as social action: the form, the substance and the context, the latter “encompassing both substance and form and enabling interpretation of the action resulting from their fusion” (Miller 1984, 159). In doing so, the dissertation provides detailed and in-depth knowledge about the conditions for public debate about the immigration issue in news-generated Facebook debates and, thereby, contributes to informing our understanding of the rhetorical culture in which these debates are embedded.

### **Background: The refugee crisis in the Scandinavian nations**

The immigration issue is an issue considered to be particularly apt to create engagement in public debates in social media. The Syrian refugee crisis represents an event that was not only high on the public agenda but that also highlighted the immigration issue’s immanent character of being, at once an issue of “realpolitik”, and of “idealism” (Brochmann & Kjeldstadli, 2008). As I will discuss more at length in chapter 4, this feature of the issue facilitated a fusion of deliberative and epideictic rhetoric, i.e. it facilitated both practical reasoning about future action and display and negotiation of who “we” as a nation are.

During 2015, the number of refugees crossing into Europe increased dramatically. Countries struggled to cope with the influx and the question of how to deal with the crisis divided the EU. The Scandinavian countries, despite being geographically, culturally, and climatically more distant from the Middle East than the rest of Europe, were also affected by the refugee crisis. However, they were so to various



extents. Between the three Scandinavian countries, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, there were prominent differences in both the number of refugees and asylum seekers coming, and in how the crisis was handled, both politically and in the public debate. Prior to the crisis, the Scandinavian countries – particularly Sweden – had some of the most liberal refugee and asylum policies in Europe. As the number of asylum seekers continued to increase in the fall of 2015, all countries implemented more restrictive immigration policies. General attitudes in the public changed, as well. This was indicated by the increased support for nationalist parties and stricter immigration policies, in Sweden in particular, as well as the change in the media coverage of the crisis from initially being focused on helping the refugees to be more focused on protective measures and border control (Hovden et al., 2018).

In all three nations, the increase in arrivals was perceived to be dramatic. National authorities struggled to cope with the influx, in particular in Sweden. In response to a seemingly chaotic situation with continuously growing numbers of asylum applications being lodged during the fall of 2015, all Scandinavian governments implemented restrictions and increased border control. The retrenchments were most noticeable in Sweden, where what has been characterised as a ‘U-turn’ took place.

In all three Scandinavian countries, Facebook-groups such as “Refugees Welcome”, “Dråpen i Havet [The Drop in the Ocean]”, and “Venligboerne [The Friendly citizens]” were established and rapidly gained many members during the fall of 2015. These groups were citizen initiatives, in which volunteer work was mobilised and organised (Fladmoe, Sætrang, Eimhjellen, Steen-Johnsen, & Enjolras, 2016).

At the same time, the influence of social media on the public debate has been tied to the increase in xenophobic and nationalist sentiments in the public debate about the refugee crisis (Tanner 2016, 5). Immigration critical, nationalist Facebook-groups such as “Slå ring om Norge [Protect Norway]” and “Fedrelandet viktigst [The Fatherland most important]”, that mobilised against immigration, often by spreading hatred, gained increased popularity during the period. Content from so-called “immigration critical alternative media”-sites spread and created much engagement in social media (Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019). Moreover, social media was an important channel for some immigration critical politicians in government, most prominently Sylvi Listhaug (The

Progress Party) in Norway and Inger Støjberg (The Liberal Party) in Denmark – both serving as Ministers of Immigration and Integration during the refugee crisis<sup>3</sup> – and both known for their provocative style. An example is Inger Støjberg’s posting of a photo of what looked like a birthday cake on Facebook. The cake was decorated with the number 50 and the Danish flag. The text accompanying the photo said: “Today I got the 50<sup>th</sup> amendment to tighten immigration controls ratified. This needs celebrating!”<sup>4</sup>

### **Political uses of social media in Scandinavia**

In the Scandinavian countries, most citizens have an account on one or more social network sites. In all three nations, Facebook has the most monthly users, with a national average of 78 per cent (Werliin & Kokholm, 2016).<sup>5</sup> For around half of the Scandinavian population, social media is an important source for news (Moe & Sakariassen, 2018, 92-93; Schröder & Ørsten, 2018, 74-75; Westlund, 2018, 104-105). Social network sites are also arenas for public debate, and in recent years many newspapers have moved their readers’ comments to Facebook, with the argumentation that this is where they reach their audiences (Ihlebak & Endresen, 2017). Research, however, suggests that while social network sites are important sources for information and news, they are less utilised as arenas for public debate (Moe et al., 2019).

In 2013, a study found that a little more than one-third of the adult Norwegian population had participated in at least one debate online, and 22 per cent had participated in at least one debate on Facebook. A similar survey study from the Swedish SOM Institute in 2016 found that 44 per cent of the Swedish population had at least once expressed an opinion on public issues online, 21 per cent of these did so monthly or more often. Important to note is also that 56 per cent of the respondents said that they *never* expressed opinions on public issues online (Arkhed, Bergström, & Ohlsson,

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<sup>3</sup> Sylvi Listhaug served as Minister of Immigration and Integration from December, 2015-January, 2018. Inger Støjberg served as Minister for Immigration, Integration and Housing from June, 2015-June, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Inger Støjberg’s Facebook-post is available on her public Facebook-page, 14 March, 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/IngerStojberg/photos/a.276535912386133/1397458950293818/?type=1&theater>

<sup>5</sup> The study includes Finland, in addition to the three Scandinavian countries: Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Norway has the highest percentage of monthly Facebook-users, with 84 per cent, whereas Sweden and Denmark both have 78 per cent.

2017).<sup>6</sup> A study conducted in Denmark in 2015, showed that Facebook is the online platform where Danish citizens are most likely to discuss politics. Ten per cent said that they discussed politics with strangers on Facebook often, and 31 per cent did so seldom. 59 per cent also said that they never discussed politics with strangers on Facebook (Rossi, Schwartz, & Mahnke, 2016).

Most people do not engage in political debates on social media regularly, but primarily utilise social media for personal purposes – something which has led some to question the democratising functions of the participatory web (e.g. Dahlberg, 2001a; Davis, 2005; Jankowski & Os, 2004). Still, compared to how many who previously expressed their opinions publicly, for instance through letters to the editor, the numbers outlined above, seem to be relatively high. Put differently, it seems as though more people than in previous times are engaging in public debates that, at least, have the potential to reach a mass audience.

On that note, it should also be added that we do not know exactly what people are responding to when asked how often they express *political* opinions or engage in *public* debates in social network sites. Do people consider expressing support for a campaign for helping refugees or discussing measures to assist refugees a political expression? What about opposing attitudes expressed by others through a simple evaluative comment such as “How sad”? And what about stating about oneself that “I share the faith in human compassion and humanity”? If we understand these practices as political rhetoric – that is, political in a broad sense, which also encompasses discussions of political identities, morality and what constitutes a good life – then, possibly, the numbers of those who participate in political debates on social media are higher than assumed.

This does, however, not imply that all who express their views, thoughts, desires and reactions publicly in social media are heard by a mass audience, nor that their utterances impact how the political wheels turn. While the increased possibilities for participation can be viewed as an expansion of the public sphere which includes more people in the public debate, this is not synonymous with democratisation entailing that more *voices* and *perspectives* are included in the public debate. In the following chapter,

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<sup>6</sup> The SOM-study did not have separate numbers for Facebook.

I outline and discuss different theoretical assumptions about what political rhetoric is and what participation in the public sphere entails, and connect this to what previous studies can tell us about the democratic potential of participatory media.

**PART I:**  
**Theory and method**

## **Chapter 2: Public debate and participatory media**

In this chapter, I account for some key assumptions about public debate and the functions it serves in the public sphere. The chapter begins with a discussion of political rhetoric and deliberation. The discussion sets out from theoretical perspectives articulated in the rhetorical tradition and theories of deliberative democracy. The theoretical framework discussed has been central in shaping how the scope and functions of the public debate have been viewed, and have informed much previous research on studies of debate in online environments. The chapter proceeds to review existing literature on political debate and deliberation in participatory media and outlines some essential assumptions about the conditions for public debate in the digital era.

Although an approach to these debates as deliberation and political rhetoric may be instructive for describing some of the practices in and functions of these debates, I here propose a broader theoretical framework that may better equip us to describe the many different types of rhetoric and modes of interaction that characterise the public social media debates. For this reason, a variety of different theoretical approaches that, in various ways, shed light on social media as discursive arenas are introduced in the chapter. In addition to discussing social media as arenas for political rhetoric and deliberation, they are, in the chapter discussed as arenas for vernacular rhetoric and everyday talk, personal and individualised political engagement, epideictic rhetoric, as well as flaming and hostility. The chapter, thus, offers a theoretical framework that allows us to gain a better understanding of the functions and scope of participation in public debates in these, relatively new, media.

Finally, the chapter includes a discussion of how rhetorical practice is governed by genre conventions informed by individual actors' prior experiences and use of the genre, as well as the material structures that afford certain practices while preventing others.

### **Political rhetoric and the public sphere**

Throughout the rhetorical tradition, political rhetoric has been understood as argumentation about the political community's choice of future action (Condor, Tileaga,

& Billig, 2013; Kock, 2009, 2018; Kock & Villadsen, 2012). The understanding of political rhetoric as communication oriented towards decisions about future action originates from Aristotle's classification of the three speech genres: deliberative, forensic and epideictic. The three speech genres were defined by the situation and the audience's role; in the Greek polis, there were three speech situations, and thereby also three genres. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle writes: "The species [*eide*] of rhetoric are three in number; for such is the number [of classes] to which the hearers of speeches belong" (Aristotle, 2007, 47, 1358b).

*Forensic* speeches were held in court. Here, the audience was to pass judgement on past events. The *epideictic* speech was held on ceremonial occasions, such as public funerals or the Olympiad. The role of the audience of epideictic rhetoric was to be observers of the orator's skills, as he praised and blamed things in the present. The *deliberative* speech was the political speech held in the assembly. The orator was to instruct the legislative assembly in matters of the state, upon which the audience was to decide.

The classification of the three speech genres was made in a society that is very different from ours. Political institutions and media technologies are fundamentally different today than they were in the Greek *polis*, which was a homogenous and stable community oriented towards unity, rather than diversity. Moreover, antique rhetoric was developed in a period of time when neither technological nor material developments significantly changed society's flow of communication, by contrast to contemporary society's rapid technological developments (Miller, 1994). Finally, political rhetoric and public debates are today not confined to the legislative assembly. Whereas political rhetoric is still, in most definitions, understood as directly or indirectly related to processes of collective decision-making, these processes are more widespread both in a temporal and spatial sense. Matters of public concern are not debated only by the people who have access to the decision-making arenas; instead, all citizens living in democracies can participate in debates about future political action. This does not imply that all *do* participate, or that all who do are heard. It does, however, imply that there exists a public space, in which citizens can come together and engage in debates about

collective decisions, and that these debates have the potential to influence political decisions.

The expansion of the realm for political rhetoric is reflected in how political rhetoric today is anchored in theories of the public sphere and includes notions of “rhetorical citizenship” (Kock & Villadsen, 2012, 2014), “vernacular rhetoric” (Hauser, 1998, 1999b; Hauser, 2007), and political “everyday talk” (Mansbridge, 1999).

Moreover, deliberation is at the core of theories of (deliberative) democracy and the public sphere. Here, deliberation is understood as “a process whereby groups of people, often ordinary citizens, engage in reasoned opinion expression on a social or political issue in an attempt to identify solutions to a common problem and to evaluate those solutions” (Stromer-Galley, 2007, 3). Deliberation is thus not confined to the legislative forums; rather, the term describes communication oriented towards future action, including among “ordinary” citizens in the public sphere. Deliberative discussions, it is argued, “involve matters of common concern and have a practical orientation”; they “involve[...] an element of the question ‘what is to be done?’” (Mansbridge et al., 2012, 9).

The notion of “the public sphere” describes the public space where citizens can come together to discuss societal problems freely and try to influence political decisions. The public sphere is an area of social life, and thus separated from the formal decision-making forums. Nevertheless, what characterises a well-functioning public sphere, is that the exchanges among citizens can influence political decisions. These decisions gain their legitimacy only when they are anchored in the will and priorities of the public, which is expressed in the public sphere (Benhabib, 1992). While this does not imply that public debates necessarily result in agreement about the decision, it implies that those who disagree, can accept the process by which the decision is reached. This requires both that the process is open to all, and that the public sphere manages to sort and transform individually held preferences and attitudes into “focused opinions” (Habermas, 1996, 362).

In Habermas’ model of the public sphere, the mass media serves as a mediator between different parts of the public sphere – between the informal parts and the formal decision-making arenas. The mass media sorts and filters the many expressions



articulated in the periphery of the public sphere, where opinions are expressed in “average” citizens’ everyday talk, as well as in leaflets, demonstrations, popular culture, entertainment, and so forth, and channels these opinions into the centre, where political decisions are made (Habermas, 1996, 2006). In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas describes this complexity and argues that the mass media plays a vital role in bringing together the multitude of episodic, arranged and abstract publics, spread across vast geographic distances:

[...] from the episodic publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through the occasional ‘arranged’ publics of particular presentations and events, such as theatre performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the abstract public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through the mass media (Habermas, 1996, 374).

The legitimacy and quality of decisions are, in Habermas’ view, largely dependent on the mass media’s ability to sort and filter input from the citizens and convey it to the decision-makers. The public sphere is, in contrast to the legislative assembly in the Greek *polis*, relieved from the burden of decision-making. Nevertheless, it serves epistemic functions in society, as it “[exerts] a rationalising pressure towards improving the *quality* of the decision” (Habermas, 2009, 143, it. in original). It does so by serving as a “sounding board” for the citizens’ needs and desires and, at the same time, as a “discursive filter-bed”, broadcasting these back to the citizens and setting them on the formal agendas of the decision-makers (Habermas, 2009, 143).

### **Rational consensus or reasonable disagreement**

In classical rhetorical theory, as well as deliberative democracy theory, *deliberation* is, broadly, understood as the careful consultation of arguments both in favour of and against a proposal. This understanding originates from Aristotle’s definition of the deliberative speech as argumentation concerned with weighing up alternative future courses of action for the *polis* (Aristotle, 2007, 48, 1358b). However, there are important differences between the rhetorical tradition and the deliberative democracy tradition’s view on the procedures for, and the preferred outcome of, deliberation.

Broadly speaking, theories of deliberative democracy have often been concerned with the citizens' participation in democracy through deliberation. Deliberation is aimed at producing better decisions, anchored in knowledge and in the will of the people. Consequently, procedures should ensure that the deliberation is open for all to participate in, that there is mutual respect between the participants, and that claims are anchored in knowledge, as well as justified by reference to the common good. Ideally, these procedures shall lead the citizens towards a rationally based consensus (Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steiner, 2003).

This view of deliberation is found in Habermas' work on the public sphere (Habermas, 2002[1962]), and the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1972, 1987, 2004). Central in Habermas' view on deliberation is the idea of the ideal speech situation, in which the force of the better argument will lead participants in the direction of rational consensus (Habermas, 1972).

Although "ordinary" citizens' participation in democracy through rhetorical practice has increasingly become a concern also in rhetorical studies, evident in the advent of theoretical concepts such as "rhetorical citizenship" (Kock & Villadsen, 2012, 2014), "vernacular rhetoric" (Hauser, 1998, 1999b; Hauser, 2007), as well as "rhetorical working through" (Kjeldsen, 2016, 2018), political rhetoric has primarily been approached as the decision-makers' communication to the citizens. In contrast to deliberative theory, deliberation is here not viewed as conversation aimed at rational consensus, but rather "reasonable disagreement" (Kock, 2008, 2016).

Central to the concept of reasonable disagreement is the understanding of rhetoric as concerned with *choices*. Choices will necessarily involve conflicting views, interests and values that make pursuing consensus, not only impossible but also undesirable.<sup>7</sup> Usually, there will be good and legitimate arguments both in favour of and against a proposal. The purpose of exchanging arguments through debate is not, however, to move the participants towards an agreement about the best of these arguments, but rather to

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of "reasonable disagreement", then, implies a Rawlsian understanding of democracy as characterised, not merely by pluralism, but "reasonable pluralism" (Rawls, 1993).

make these arguments explicit and thus enable citizens to make informed, albeit usually conflicting, choices (Kock, 2008, 2009).

### **Deliberation and an orientation to the “common good”**

Political rhetoric, understood as practical reasoning about what to do, should ideally ensure the legitimacy of the decisions made. Decisions are legitimate when anchored in the community’s will and priorities. Consequently, arguments should be universally warranted, i.e. they should be grounded in the common good, not in self-interest.

In rhetorical theory, this can be found both as a piece of practical advice and an ethical requirement. In classical rhetoric, the orator was advised to cultivate goodwill between himself and the audience (*eunoia*). This was necessary to succeed in persuading the audience: the orator had to show that he shared the audiences’ desires and goals (Aristotle, 2007, 113, 1378a) or, in other words: that what he is proposing is not out of self-interest, but of general interest to the public.

This is also central in modern rhetorical theory, evident, for instance, in Perelman’s concept of the universal audience. In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca promote the idea that “since all argumentation aims at securing the adherence of those to whom it is addressed, it is, in its entirety, relative to the audience to be influenced” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, 19). Thus, argumentation must proceed from the point of agreement between the rhetor and the audience on the presumptions and values upon which the argumentation relies (Perelman, 1982). There must be sufficient agreement on two levels: 1) on the facts, truths and presumptions of the issue, and 2) on the values, hierarchies and loci of the preferable. Although argumentation is always directed to a particular audience, i.e. a specific individual or group, the rhetor has to decide what approach will achieve the highest adherence to his or her views according to an ideal audience. This ideal could be “all reasonable men”, “all Norwegians”, and so forth. The universal audience should thus not be understood as a fixed size, but as relative to the rhetor, the purpose of the argument, and the particular audience to whom the argument is addressed, i.e. on the situational demands.

Universally warranted arguments are not only viewed as the most effective means of persuasion but are also promoted as ethical requirements. In normative accounts of

political rhetoric, it is emphasised how arguments should be based in the common good. Charlotte Jørgensen (2011) argues that argumentation that is only accepted by the particular audience the rhetor aims to persuade in the particular situation is “irrational argumentation”, whereas argumentation that can be accepted by the universal audience is “good argumentation”. Jørgensen writes:

If the argumentation can only be well received by the particular audience whose adherence the rhetor seeks in the particular situation, it is irrational argumentation; if, on the other hand, the argumentation is also acceptable to the universal audience, it is rational, and the more convincing the argument will be for other relevant, competent and rationally set audiences, and the better it meets the ideal for good argumentation (Jørgensen, 2011, 109, my translation).

While arguing that political debate is concerned with *choices*, and necessarily will involve conflicting views, interests and values, Christian Kock also argues that arguments in public debates should be concerned with the common good, rather than with special interests. Kock writes:

Arguments that are performed in public debate shall be about the common good. Arguing from the common good can also be defined as arguing from values that – perhaps on an abstract level – are common. There must be values that others share, including those who disagree with the proposal you promote. That a particular group or party wants to take care of its special interests has nothing to do with common values. And thus, those kinds of arguments have no place in the public political debate either. [...] One must argue on the basis of one or more values that all (or most) share, e.g. reasonableness (Kock, 2011a, 28-29, my translation).

The content of these shared values – or communicative norms – can, however, not be universally established, but are as argued by Gerard Hauser, decided after “local conditions of reasoning applied by stakeholders” (Hauser, 1999b, 76). This means that universal discourse ethics cannot be established after which all public debate, in all parts of the public sphere, can be evaluated. Nevertheless, debates must start from a point of agreement upon the communicative norms between participants. This implies, not that one must be “disinterested”, i.e. that participants are required to abandon their special interest, but that arguments for any particular interest should be promoted in a way that others can adhere to: the arguments must have a certain “weight” (Kock, 2011a, 21; 2016, 2018). For instance, the argument “We should do so because it will benefit me”, is not weighty, because it is warranted in a person’s self-interest. A “weighty” argument,

by contrast, is warranted by reference to shared values. For example, one could argue that “we should do this because it will produce the desired outcome” (“consequentialist” reasoning) or “because it is the morally right thing to do” (“deontic” reasoning).

Deliberation, understood as “reasoning that seeks to “weigh” *reasons for and against* a decision”, requires that one is to consider reasons that speak for a proposal against those who speak against it (Kock, 2018, n.p., it. in original). As such, anyone who wishes to make him- or herself heard by participating in public debate, should be required to give reasons for his or her claims.

In contemporary media society, these deliberative ideals are often said to have weathered as attention is increasingly given to individuals’ private experiences (Hirdman, Kleberg, & Widestedt, 2005, 110-111). The development is, by many, viewed as a sign of decay. Goodnight (1982, 205) argues that the public sphere of argument is “being steadily eroded by the elevation of the personal and technical groundings of argument”. The influx of personal arguments and the celebration of personal lifestyles, he argues, undermines the public sphere of argumentation, in which identification should be invoked, not through identification with the speaker’s personal interests and experiences, but rather through partisan appeals (Goodnight, 1982, 200). He writes:

As arguments grounded in personal experience (disclosed by averaging opinion) seem to have greatest currency, political speakers present not options but personalities, perpetuating government policy by substituting an aura of false intimacy for debate. Thus privatism is celebrated and the discourse continued (Goodnight, 1982, 206).

With this formulation, Goodnight pins the problem of the public sphere to the blurred lines between personal experience and display of personal identity on the one hand, and political opinions and public argumentation on the other.

A similar argument can be found in Richard Sennett’s *The Fall of Public Man* (1977). Sennett describes a “tyranny of intimacy” that has led to a disintegration of the public sphere. The boundaries between the public and the private sphere have dissolved, Sennett argues, causing citizens to seek for personalities in areas that should be impersonal, such as in the political. The celebration of individual personalities makes all views and choices into a question of authenticity: “Is this what I really feel? Do I

really mean it? Am I being genuine?" (Sennett, 1977, 267). As a consequence, public discourse is paralysed, and replaced by self-disclosure and a search for speakers' psychological motives, leaving citizens incapable of forming political opinions unless the issues can be made personal.

An orientation to the individual's authentic self may also stand in the way of public debate in another way, as I will discuss in more detail in the analysis of the news-generated social media debates (chapters 6 and 9), namely that it hinders argumentation. To arrive at this argument, I draw on Charles Taylor's (1991) discussion of the development of authenticity as a moral ideal, as well as Allan Bloom's (1988) discussion of a relativist view that arguably has become, not only a position within epistemology but also a moral position.

Whereas many have discussed the development of an individualism of self-fulfilment in contemporary Western societies in terms of a decline in morality (e.g. Bell, 1976; Lasch, 1991), Taylor (1991) argues that this should be seen not as a loss of morality, but rather as a new moral vision. The ideal of authenticity implies a moral obligation to be one's true self and seek self-fulfilment. Moreover, it requires a relativist view of morality rooted in a principle of individualism, which suggests that everyone has the right to develop their own way of life, founded on their own perception of what is important and valuable (Bloom, 1988). As such, moral relativism implies that there does not exist any moral criteria after which it is possible to say that anyone is right or wrong about their way of life. Not only is it impossible to criticise others' way of life because there exist no standards by which one can do so, but it is also immoral, as it violates the individual's possibilities to be his or her authentic self (Bloom, 1988; Taylor, 1991).

In the analysis of expressions of the individually held and "authentic" political opinion (chapter 6), as well as the examination of negotiations of genre conventions and debate norms (chapter 9), I discuss how this ideal of authenticity materialise in a principle of expression. The principle of expression, I argue, directly counteracts a principle of deliberation because it implies that argumentation and criticism violate the individual's possibilities to express his or her true self. As such, obligations to give

arguments and listen and respond to counter-arguments must be dismissed, thus obstructing debate between opposing views from developing.

Finally, the elevation of private experiences in the public sphere is seen to transform active citizens into passive consumers. Rather than deliberation about future choices of action to secure the common good, public debate gains the character of staged displays of opinion, in which the role of the audience is not to consider the arguments, but rather cheer on the side to which one belongs (Habermas, 2002, 148). Thus, an orientation to private experiences and emotions happens at the expense of attention to political processes, economic development and social change, and creates a society of private, passive and fragmented individuals. According to Habermas, then, public debates should be concerned with the public good, rather than prioritising private experiences, needs and concerns. This implies that claims made in the public debate should ideally be universally warranted, rather than concerning what is good for the individual or particular groups (Habermas 1990, 65, Habermas 2004, 285, see also Farrell 1993, 193).

The Habermasian understanding of deliberation suggests that public opinion, while developing out of the informal parts of the public sphere, must undergo a process of sorting and filtering that secures its rationality and universal validity. While Habermas acknowledged that processes of opinion-formation could not be “separated from the transformation of the participant’s preferences and attitudes” (Habermas, 1996, 361), he maintained that the procedures, by which input from the citizens is channelled into the centre of the public sphere, must secure rationality and disinterest in order to secure the legitimacy of decisions informed by public opinion. Or, as Habermas himself put it: The processes of opinion-formation “can be separated from putting these dispositions into action” (Habermas, 1996, 361-362). The responsibility to do so is primarily that of the mass media, who sorts and filters the individually held opinions of the citizens before broadcasting them to a mass audience.

On several occasions, Habermas has expressed concerns about contemporary mass media’s ability to perform its role as the disseminator between the centre and the periphery in the public sphere. Habermas’ concern is that the asymmetrical nature of the mass media gives way to staged display of opinion, rather than facilitating rational-

critical debate. As a consequence, deliberation in contemporary society may fail to secure epistemic functions of political decision-making, i.e. to bring about decisions that are informed by and anchored in knowledge, as well as in the will of the people (Habermas, 2006).

### **Public debate and participatory media**

The breakthrough of online participatory media fundamentally changed society's communication flows, previously dominated by one to one-communication in face to face-interactions, as well as one to many-communication in the traditional mass media. With digital media, many to many-communication was made possible (Jensen, 2009). This led scholars to speak of *another* structural transformation of the public sphere (Bruns & Highfield, 2015), and in the early days of academic interest in participatory media, digital technology was often envisioned to facilitate “virtual”, “digital” or “online” public spheres (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Loader, 1997; Tsagarousianou, Tambini, & Bryan, 1997).

The initial celebration of the new participatory digital media should be understood against the backdrop of Habermas' critique of contemporary mass media for failing to facilitate deliberative processes of opinion formation. It should also be understood against the backdrop of an observed crisis of Western democracy. Participatory digital media emerged around the same time as an erosion of democratic deliberation in electoral politics and declining trust in, as well as support for, democratic institutions were observed in several societies (Castells, 2010). The new possibilities for participation afforded by digital media were for this reason welcomed by many, and envisioned to restore democracy.

The new digital media were, by many, viewed as a democratisation of the public sphere, as it created new possibilities for citizens to make themselves heard by the decision-makers (Hindman, 2009, 6). The positive view of the digital technology was based in observations about online media's ability to facilitate discussions about issues of common concern that are open to all who wish to participate, and also visible to all (Schäfer, 2015). Debate forums and comment sections online are generally open for a broad array of citizens to participate in, and thus offers “possibilities for formation of



productive enlightening and public opinion on a much broader scale than previously seen in history” (Rasmussen, 2009, 20).

From previously being the receivers of one to many-communication from the mass media, citizens can now also be on the sender side of this communication model. Audiences are no longer given a role as passive consumers but rather active participants. Concepts such as *active audiences* (Bruns, Enli, Skogerbo, Larsson, & Christensen, 2015), *prosumers* (Bruns, 2008b) and *user-generated content* (Singer, Paulussen, & Hermida, 2011; Thurman, 2008), describe this new audience, which is at once a consumer and a producer of media content. The interactive nature of much online communication, for example in online comment sections, has been said to facilitate “deliberative interactions” between citizens (Springer et al., 2015), and enable new and alternative voices to be heard by many (Loader & Mercea, 2011, 760; Papacharissi, 2010).

The direct communication between citizens and decision-makers made possible by digital media was believed to enable average citizens that are not rhetorically privileged to express their opinions in public and, thereby, make journalists and moderators superfluous (Bro & Wallberg, 2015). Thus, digital media could potentially facilitate virtual public spheres in which all possible views are represented, which would have a positive impact on the processing of the issues and viewpoints, and the quality of the public opinion generated through these processes (Springer et al., 2015, 799).

In the early days of research on social media and online discussion forums, empirical studies commonly set out to measure the quality of rational-critical discussion (see e.g. Bimber, 2003; Brants, 2005; Brundidge, Bimber, Rice, Jennings, & Metzger, 2008; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlberg, 2004; Ruiz et al., 2011; Santana, 2014; Silva, 2013; Suzuki, 2006; Winsvold, 2013; Wright & Street, 2007; Zhou et al., 2008). Many of these studies took normative public sphere theory as their starting point. While the operationalisations of “deliberative quality” often differ between different studies (Berg, 2016, 38), these are often based on various operationalisations of Habermas’ prerequisites for the “ideal speech situation”, and emphasise deliberation over other forms of communication (Freelon, 2015; Neuman, Bimber, & Hindman, 2011, 5). Some have focused on the degree of critical reflection, the use of supporting evidence, types

of argumentation, and thematic consistency. Others have focused on reciprocity and inclusion, by examining to what degree participants read and respond to each other's comments, as well as the diversity of voices and perspectives represented. Others, in turn, have been concerned with social norms, examining whether participants show each other mutual respect, acknowledge a better argument, and abstain from posting abusive comments.

While studies conducted in different national contexts and different discursive arenas have reached different conclusions, the general picture is that debates in online environments are of low discursive quality (Neuman et al., 2011, 5). They have been found unfit for promoting mutual respect and understanding (Dahlberg, 2001b; Strandberg, 2008), and for argumentation based on knowledge, as participants more often than not advance their claims without giving arguments and supporting evidence (Coleman, Hall, & Howell, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001b; Hagemann, 2002; Strandberg, 2008).

Arguably, while digital technology has lowered the threshold for expressing one's opinion to a broad audience, the need for professional journalists and moderators has not disappeared (Gripsrud, 2009, 10-11). Despite the possibility to express one's opinion directly, average citizens have not gotten a "direct line" to the decision-makers. Instead, journalists, politicians, as well as organisations and "expert citizens"<sup>8</sup>, are rhetorically privileged, i.e. they have ready access to the podium and the mass media and therefore hold discursive power. The communication taking place in participatory media is seldom found to succeed in communicating between informal and formal spheres – and thus rarely manages to influence the public agenda and political decision-making processes (Rønlev, 2014, 2018; Winsvold, 2009). Whereas journalists follow so-called "expert citizens" on Facebook and Twitter, and frequently use them as sources (Vatnøy, 2017), they show little interest in interacting with the "average" citizens, who contribute in their comment sections (Herrera-Damas & Hermida, 2014).

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<sup>8</sup> "Expert citizens" should here be understood as active participants in the public debate, who view themselves as an autonomous part of the political system and as capable of articulating and doing policy as well, or better, than politicians and other professionals (Vatnøy, 2017, 26-27; see also Bang, 2003, 2004, 2005)

Issues, opinions and arguments raised in these comment sections are seldom picked up by the journalists, and generally, the participants in the comment sections are rarely allowed – or able – to set the agenda (Rønlev, 2014). Instead, when debates among average citizens, taking place in participatory media, get the attention of the public sphere through mass media reports, they are subjected to the journalists’ interpretation. In this process, the debates often become reduced to the “worst” utterances, while the diversity of opinions and ways of promoting them are overlooked (Rønlev, 2018).

Another critique of digital technology’s ability to constitute virtual public spheres, is concerned with the implications of increased participation in public discourse, as this necessarily makes the discussion more fragmented and divisive (Galston, 2003; Jenkins, 2006, 216; Peters, 1994). Digital media drives fragmentation in two interrelated ways: it creates an “economy of attention” (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Webster, 2011), and affords “sphericules” to form (Gitlin, 1998). The first of these two concepts describe how the abundance of content and information, made available to all through digital technology, has made it ever-increasingly challenging to catch and hold the attention of audiences. The latter concept describes how digital media affords the establishment and maintenance of many local publics rather than bringing large and diverse groups of citizens together. Establishment and maintenance of local publics are afforded through hashtags (e.g. #metoo), lists of friends and followers, issue- or views-specific discussion groups, as well as algorithms that tailor content to users’ interests. Consequently, local publics are established around particular issues, views, interests and people (Bruns, 2008a).

The fragmentation of audiences has been problematised in at least two ways: the fragmentation obstructs a functioning public sphere to be constituted, as citizens do not come together to discuss the same issues, and it can increase polarisation in society, as citizens have their opinions echoed back to them. Many, including Jürgen Habermas, have raised a concern about this increased fragmentation, as the existence of a public sphere requires that individual citizens pay attention to the same issues and come together to form opinions on them (Jeffries, 2016). In an interview with Markus Schwering for the *Feuilleton* of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Habermas said:

[...] the classical public sphere stemmed from the fact that the attention of an anonymous public was “concentrated” on a few politically important questions that had to be regulated. This is what the web does not know how to produce. On the contrary, the web actually distracts and dispels. Think about, for example, the thousand portals that are born every day: for stamp collectors, for scholars of European constitutional law, for support groups of ex-alcoholics. In the *mare magnum* of digital noises these communicative communities are like dispersed archipelagos: there are billions of them. What these communicative spaces (closed in themselves) are lacking is an inclusive bind, the inclusive force of a public sphere highlighting what things are actually important (Schwering, 2014, it. in original).

Although digital technology has democratised the access to public deliberation, it has arguably done so at the expenses of a functioning public sphere, which requires dispersed individuals to come together. The bourgeois public sphere emerged because the public’s attention was concentrated on the same political issues that called for change. By contrast, social network sites create fragmented publics consisting of individuals who, although they are engaged in one particular issue, fail to bind these engaged citizens together in communicative communities that constitute a public sphere.

In academic literature, as well as in the public debate, concerns have been raised about how fragmentation can create and increase polarisation between groups, captured in the two related concepts “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles”. Both concepts relate to how individuals seek information and opinions that support their current convictions. More precisely, the concept of echo chambers rests on the premise of selective exposure, i.e. it refers to the overall phenomenon of individuals in online environments avoiding opposing arguments and thus are exposed only to information, opinions and arguments from like-minded individuals (Sunstein, 2001). Filter bubbles, by contrast, are created by algorithms that suggest and promote content based on individuals previous online behaviour (Pariser, 2011). Both phenomena are believed to promote group polarisation, as actors constantly have their opinions “echoed” back to them, reinforcing their belief systems and steering them in the direction of more extreme opinions.

While the empirical research is inconclusive (see e.g. Brundidge, 2010; Stromer-Galley, 2003), there are indications that – at least explicitly political – discussion groups facilitate little contact between opposing ideas and opinions (Galston, 2003; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2001; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). However, research also finds that citizens, in their online activities, are exposed to information and opposing points

of views – both by accident and through their efforts to seek out information and opinions that contradict their beliefs (Brundidge, 2010; Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

Still, the effect of encountering and seeking out opposing views and arguments is found not to be that participants change or modify their views, but rather that they reinforce their original opinions and beliefs (Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, Wollebæk, & Enjolras, 2017). Consequently, the concept of “trench warfare” has been suggested as a more accurate metaphor than “echo chambers” to describe the mechanisms of polarisation in online discussion forums. These mechanisms create a double effect of reinforcement, as both interactions with like-minded people and confrontation lead the participants to believe more strongly in their initial view (Karlsen et al. 2017, 270).

The predominantly negative image of online arenas’ ability to form a functioning public sphere has led many scholars to dismiss the potential of deliberative theory to explain the discourses taking place online (Chadwick, 2009; Janssen & Kies, 2005), and to call for alternative understandings of political discourse and engagement (Coleman & Moss, 2012; Dahlgren, 2005). It has been argued that the transformation of the public sphere driven by digital technology, is so radical that it represents not a transformation of the public sphere, but rather something entirely new that the concept of the public sphere cannot account for (Webster, 2013).

Others have argued that digital media has not radically changed democracy and democratic practices. Instead, the new media technologies are likely to be shaped by the social and economic interests of contemporary societies (Hill & Hughes, 1998, 182). Neither the democratic potential nor the dangers to democracy commonly associated with digital media, are seen as features novel to the digital era. Indeed, digital technology has made these features of society more easily attained (Gripsrud, 2009, 6). But rather than changing democracy, it is argued, the advent of digital media is likely to amplify existing forces in society (Schudson, 2006).

### **Vernacular rhetoric and everyday political talk**

In recent years, scholars have increasingly moved away from an understanding of digital media as constituting a “virtual public sphere”, and advocated structural and systemic

approaches to these new communicative environments as an infrastructure for public communication – communication that can take on different rhetorical forms and be oriented towards different ends. It is not *the* infrastructure for public communication, but rather a complement to traditional mass media and face-to-face interactions, and issues and perspectives circulate between different arenas both offline and online (Graham, 2015; Rasmussen, 2016).

Moreover, to conceptualise the communication taking place in digital environments, some have suggested that it should be understood as a digital form of “everyday talk”, i.e. communication that lacks other purposes than “talk for talk’s sake” and is not aimed primarily at informing and influencing political decision-making processes (Graham, 2015; Graham & Wright, 2013; Wright, 2012; Wright, Graham, & Jackson, 2016). The concept of “everyday talk” is usually defined in broad terms, with an emphasis on the spontaneity and informal character of this type of conversation. It is the “ordinary political conversation” that occurs within everyday life – for example, at the workplace, at home, or in social media. Here, the political conversation becomes intertwined with people’s everyday lives and is often without any explicit purpose besides talk for talk’s sake (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). As such, it will be carried out through a “vernacular” form of rhetoric (Hauser, 1999b), where utterances are based in the citizen’s personal experiences and emotions, and are characterised by an informal style.

Over the past decade, both the deliberative democracy tradition (e.g. Mansbridge, 1999), and the field of rhetoric (e.g. Hauser, 1999b) has experienced an increased interest in this form of communication, which is not clearly political, but nevertheless seen to be democratically important. This interest is based in an understanding of such conversation as capable of increasing the participants’ political knowledge (Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000; Eveland, 2004; Jackman & Sniderman, 2006; Lenart, 1994; Scheufele, 2000), as well as engagement and interest in matters of public concern (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Klofstad, 2007; Mcleod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). Moreover, participation in political everyday talk is found to increase exposure and tolerance to different perspectives, as well as to facilitate preference change (Bennett et al., 2000; Coleman & Blumler, 2008; Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Mcclurg, 2003;

Monnoyer-Smith, 2006; Price & Cappella, 2002). The non-purposive conversation taking place between “average” citizens in everyday settings may, thus, have essential agenda-setting functions, produce legitimacy for decisions, create mutual understanding and present people to new perspectives (Mansbridge, 1999). That issues of public interests are discussed in a vernacular language is, furthermore, viewed as crucial for democracy, as this secures that all are able to participate in the discussions about decisions that bear on people’s lives (Hauser, 1999b; Hauser, 2007).

What follows from this, is that scholars should pay attention to the conversations among a public’s engaged citizens, together with the political debates in the institutionalised parts of the public sphere. If one wants to know what publics “think”, and how they come to think this, Hauser argues, one is required to study utterances from those who have the leading seats of power, as well as average citizens’ everyday rhetoric (Hauser, 1999b, 85).

The insistence on the democratic functions of citizens’ everyday conversations has, however, also been criticised. According to Schudson (1997), such “sociable” conversations do not serve democratic purposes, and a democratic state is not a prerequisite for them to take place. The democratic conversation is truly public, civic and rule-governed, as well as oriented towards problem-solving. Mutual understanding and respect, while being an aim of the sociable conversation, is neither a requirement or aim of the democratic conversation. It is, for these reasons, not open to all but will necessarily exclude some from the conversation, either for lacking the ability to engage in critical discussion or due to fear of criticism and ridicule (Schudson, 1997, 300).

As Schudson, I caution against ascribing significant democratic and political functions to everyday talk. That people speak together is, naturally, important for society’s cohesion, but it does not necessarily entail that people acquire political knowledge and cultivate rhetorical citizenship. Neither does it entail democracy: People engage in sociable conversation also in non-democratic states (Schudson, 1997, 303). Still, the non-political conversation can create pre-political conditions for political debate and contribute to the development and maintenance of democratic infrastructures. A historical example of this can be found in the book discussion clubs for women, as well as the missionary society, in which women were given important

organisational responsibilities in the period leading up to the implementation of universal suffrage for women in Norway. These non-political associations preceded the political associations that worked for women's rights and universal suffrage (Johansen, 2019).

The book clubs gave women access to democratic training and personal development, not merely through the books but also through the social gathering and discussion with other resourceful women. The women were given the ability to share their thoughts in these semi-public groups – thoughts that they previously had held to themselves and been insecure about. Now, these thoughts became acknowledged by others who shared them. Thus, the thoughts materialised; the conversations made them real (Johansen, 2019, 827-829). Also the missionary associations created important pre-political conditions for the realisation of political women's rights organisations. Women held positions in these associations' boards, carried out organisation work, arranged charity bazaars, led meetings, and they engaged in sociable conversation with other women. Whereas neither the conversations they carried out, nor the organisational tasks they performed, were directly political, they nevertheless prepared the women for the political by allowing them to develop self-confidence, organisational skills, as well as an understanding for the rules of democracy (Johansen, 2019, 845-846).

While everyday talk does not necessarily actualise pre-deliberative questions that are politically significant, such as over values, social identity and morale, or give citizens democratic training, it sometimes can. Everyday talk can be entirely without political implications – it can be about cooking, knitting, gossip, fishing trips and other everyday activities. But in some cases, it can also create a space in which citizens can express who they are, their values, needs and desires. In doing so, they may perform and develop their identity, position themselves to others, create salience and significance for issues and positions, and negotiate social relations. Thus, sociable conversations can – but must not – function as preparation for the political.

### **Digital everyday talk**

Today, social media has, to a large extent, taken the role of the organisations as the public and semi-public spaces in which “average” citizens can share their thoughts and



seek others' recognition of these. In many respects, the public and semi-public discussions facilitated by social media resemble other unmediated spaces, in which people can gather to engage in informal and non-purposive talk, which to varying degrees may involve pre-political questions and function as preparation for participation in the political. As in face-to-face encounters, instant feed-back is possible, creating a dialogue-like situation. The tone is informal, and usually, the discussion is not oriented towards collective decision-making or any specific purpose besides the talk itself. As such, social network sites have been described in terms of "mediated publics" (boyd, 2007), and a mediatisation of everyday communication (Finnemann, 2011; Lomborg, 2014, 8).

Given the vernacular style characteristic of much of the rhetoric in social media, as well as these environment's weak ties to formal decision-making processes, it is not surprising that many scholars have approached communication in digital environments as everyday communication (Graham, 2015; Graham & Wright, 2013; Wright, 2012; Wright et al., 2016) and vernacular rhetoric (Hess, 2009; Rønlev, 2014, 2018)<sup>9</sup>. Such approaches to communication in online environments have, however, resulted in somewhat different arguments about the democratic and pre-political potential of social media conversations.

One strand of research has produced results and arguments that propose that these environments facilitate democratically valuable sociable conversations. Stromer-Galley (2002) argues that it is "vitally important for democratic government" that people engage in political "talk", not only with close friends and family but also with acquaintances and strangers (Stromer-Galley, 2002, 36-37). Digital media provides communicative contexts for such conversations, and may, she argues, enable people who are not normally comfortable talking about politics in social settings to do so.

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<sup>9</sup> A scholar who has produced several influential texts about the "vernacular web", is Robert Glenn Howard (2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). He defines vernacular rhetoric, not as "everyday talk" but rather as appeals non-institutional authority, and describes how social media allows institutional actors, such as politicians, to utilise vernacular forms to their discursive ends. Thus, Howard is not primarily interested in how "everyday talk" in online arenas can come to be oriented towards political issues and how this type of talk can be politically and democratically important, but rather in how formal elements associated with the vernacular can be used for persuasive means by institutional actors (e.g. Howard, 2010).

Digital environments may reduce social cues and create a distance between the interlocutors that “may liberate some people to express views and ideas that they would not do face-to-face because of the perceived risk of social repercussions” (Stromer-Galley, 2002, 36).

Wright (2012, 7) argues that everyday political talk is “crucial for civic life and democratic health”, and suggests the concept of “third spaces” to describe non-political online venues in which such talk occurs. Although such conversations are often not explicitly “political”, they can arguably produce democratically significant political and social changes in society. This is the case as people, through everyday conversations, may construct their identities, achieve mutual understanding, form considered opinions, and produce public reason, as well as rules and resources for deliberative democracy (Wright, 2012).

Empirical research suggests that these, initially non-political conversations in so-called “third spaces”, are reciprocal, reflexive and deliberative. The type of talk identified in these arenas, holds the potential to mobilise citizens into political action (Graham, 2010, 2012; Graham & Hajru, 2011; Graham & Wright, 2013). Moreover, everyday talk is not necessarily about political issues, but the conversations “become political through the connections people make between their everyday lives and the political/social issues of the day” (Wright et al., 2016). Thus, it is argued, everyday political talk is both an important “expression of political participation” and “an essential lubricant to other forms of engagement” (Wright et al., 2016).

Another strand of research has produced results and arguments that dismiss digital environments’ suitability for the vernacular public debate. Studying the social network site Youtube, Hess (2009) argues that the arena’s at once playful and dismissive atmosphere, and its primary purpose of entertainment, makes it an unenviable environment for democratically meaningful everyday conversation about political issues.

Studying the comment sections of online newspapers as a medium for rhetorical citizenship, Rønlev (2014) finds the “average” citizens’ vernacular expressions to have limited ability to influence the public agenda, as an interaction between them and the elites seldom occurs. When it does, the communication is characterised by

misunderstandings. This, he argues, is a consequence of the vernacular character of the debates itself, more precisely the participants' lack of debate skills, the journalists' poor utilisation of their privileged position as moderators, as well as the online newspapers' structural limitations as arenas for focused and intelligible debate.

Studying the everyday political talk among "expert citizens" in social network sites, Vatnøy (2017) by contrast, finds the discussion to have the ability to impact the political decision-making processes, the political agenda, and the political community's on-going negotiations about the values and beliefs that shape the political community. Despite being characterised by vernacular rhetoric and a lack of orientation to the outcomes of the decision-making processes, these conversations distinguish themselves from the everyday conversations among "average" citizens, by taking place among a limited segment of the public. This segment of citizens views themselves as active and competent participants in the public debate – as suggested by the phrase "expert citizens" (Vatnøy, 2017, 26-27). The debates are, as such, not inclusive to a variety of voices, rather access is often strictly regulated.

Previous studies of digital environments as arenas for politically relevant everyday talk, then, provide us with an ambiguous image. The discussions I examine in this dissertation, are all about issues of public concern, more precisely the nation-states' handling of the refugee crisis. In this sense, they are political debates. However, political rhetoric, understood as argumentation oriented towards collective decisions about future action, cannot fully account for the rhetorical practices found in these debates that lack a clear purpose and political function. As the analysis will show, the political debate is, in these arenas, carried out in a vernacular language, characterised by an informal style, as well as opinions that are based in the participants' personal experiences and emotions. Rather than argumentation about future action, utterances often concern personal and collective identities, values and moral positions.

It is possible to envision that participation in such debates can function as rhetorical and democratic training, through which new groups of citizens can acquire political confidence and rhetorical agency. When one expresses one's thoughts, these thoughts are made real. The consequences and significance of one's thoughts become evident when others recognise or condemn them. One can come to realise that others

also carry these thoughts and opinions, or that they are at odds with the majority opinion. Thus, one can gain an understanding of how others in the community think, and one can become accustomed to being opposed and having to defend one's views. This way, participation in public debates on social media can have pre-political functions, through which political and social identities may be established and rhetorical skills cultivated.

In contrast to the cultivation of democratic and rhetorical skills that previously happened through non-political organisations, for instance in the women's book clubs and missionary associations, participation in social media is characterised by the absence of moderation and management. Citizens now communicate their views and thoughts directly, without an intermediary or moderator to manage the conversation and to guide and train participants in the rules of democracy and democratic conversation. Thus, it is also possible to envision that these ungoverned conversations may counteract the cultivation of rhetorical citizenship among participants. The great amounts of hostile, abusive and uncivil utterances in the public social media debates, can function to discourage people from expressing themselves publicly, not only in social media but also in other, edited media. It is well-documented that people who express themselves publicly often receive hatred and threats by e-mail and through social media. This leads many – politicians and journalists, as well as “average” citizens – to self-censor or refrain from participation in the future (Gustavsen & Sauer, 2015; Iversen, 2015; KS, 2019; LDO, 2018; Toft, 2015; Wadbring & Mølster, 2015).

In what follows, I discuss three characteristic features of digital environments as discursive arenas, all of which indicated above, namely the personal nature of these media, the aggressive argument culture associated with them, as well as their orientation to discursive practices commonly associated with epideictic rhetoric, namely the verbal display and negotiation of community's values. These three features of the debate arenas are discussed in light of the two modes of public debate discussed thus far in the chapter, namely through deliberative and vernacular rhetoric.

### **Public debate in personal media**

Social network sites are structured around users' personal profiles and relationships, and are primarily sites in which people display their identity through the sharing of personal

stories and opinions, as well as interact with people in their pre-existing network through comments, likes and shares. As such, social network profiles are in their nature closely interlinked with our everyday lives and identity; thus our social media activities are closely connected to our personality, personal preferences and identity (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Casale, Fioravanti, Flett, & Hewitt, 2015; Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014; Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, & Dennis, 2014).

These media are often described through terms that underscore how they are primarily used for personal purposes, and how the personal form and content dominate: “personal media” (Lüders, 2008; Lüders et al., 2010; Rasmussen, 2014), “me-centred networks” (Castells, 2001, 128), and “personal publics” (Schmidt, 2014). Moreover, they are associated with the functions self-expression and self-disclosure to a mass audience (Miller & Sheperd, 2004), i.e. a form of “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2009).

Whereas many citizens use social network sites for accessing news and information, few view it as an important and well-suited arena for public debate (Moe et al., 2019). Rather, most people view these arenas as arenas for self-display, entertainment, and sociable conversation (Kruse et al., 2018; Lomborg, 2014, 175; Moe et al., 2019, 75), and most are more likely to participate in online discourse about “leisure activities”, than in debates that are explicitly political (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Sharing content on social media has been associated with a perceived need to share one’s opinion with others, to signal something about one’s personal identity, and to feel part of a community (Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Rojas, 2010; Springer et al., 2015). Moreover, people are found to share, due to an altruistic wish to share information that they believe can be useful to others (Moe et al., 2019, 90).

Political engagement online is commonly motivated by emotions and personal engagement, and the style of communication resembles private communication more than public (Rasmussen, 2016, 68). Political engagement becomes individualised and personal, i.e. political issues are approached primarily through individual’s personal experiences, hopes and grievances (Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Calenda

& Meijer, 2011). As such, political participation in online environments is, commonly, carried out through vernacular rhetoric, i.e. rhetoric that starts from people's personal experiences and emotions. The individualised and personal political engagement is, furthermore, emphasised as most suitable for public debate in social media, where the individualised and "authentic" political expression is expected and encouraged (Vatnøy, 2017, 237).

In the analysis of what characterises the rhetorical strategies in the news-generated comment section, I will show how the actors engage in the public debate by promoting their subjective evaluations and personal engagement. Moreover, an aversion to give, listen and respond to arguments manifests itself in the debates (see chapters 6 and 9). As such, many of the utterances in the debates oppose an ideal of deliberation, which requires that participants approach each other through argumentation and that this argumentation – whether aimed at reasonable disagreement or rational consensus – has an orientation to the "common good" (Habermas, 1996, 2004; Jørgensen, 2011; Kock, 2011a). Instead, many voice a principle of expression, which favours the "authentic" expression, and seeks to protect it from the interference of others.

### **An aggressive debate culture**

As suggested in the previous section, most people do not view social media as particularly good arenas for public debate, and few utilise them for this purpose. In particular, the aggressive argument culture associated with public debate in social network sites, lead many to abstain from participating (Kruse et al., 2018; Lomborg, 2014, 167; Thorson, Vraga, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2015; Vatnøy, 2017, 213; Vromen, Loader, Xenos, & Bailo, 2016).

Previous research on debates in digital environments has often identified a particularly aggressive argument culture, dominated by incivility, personal attacks and hate-speech (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014; Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Davis, 1999, 2005; Edström, 2016; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Jankowski & Os, 2004; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Wilhelm, 1998; Zhang, Cao, & Tran, 2013). These features of the debate culture have often been called "flaming", which is understood as uninhibited, hostile and aggressive verbal behaviour, manifested in swearing, insults,

ridicule, name-calling and ad hominem attacks. Flaming is viewed as an intentional transgression of social norms and has been associated with hostile emotional outbursts aimed at and functioning to harm the target of the emotion (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996; Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992).

Many studies have examined the causes and effects of these features of debates in online environments (e.g. Cicchirillo, Hmielowski, & Hutchens, 2015; Kayany, 1998; Sternberg, 2012). Whereas some have discussed flaming primarily as a phenomenon within text-based communication in digital environments and related it to the lack of eye-contact, social cues, as well as real, in-life consequences of what one says (Kayany, 1998; Lapidot-Leffler & Barak, 2011), others view it as a “communicative episode fundamentally independent of, although possibly shaped by, the communication channel” (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003, 76).

Independent of the reasons for why online debates tend to become hostile and aggressive, we know that these are features of these environments that lead many to evaluate them as poor arenas for public debate, and to abstain from participating. These features of public debates in social network sites violate the expectations many have to these arenas as personal media and, thus, sites for sociable conversation, entertainment and pleasant experiences (Kruse et al., 2018; Lomborg, 2011, 2014; Moe et al., 2019). As such, they violate an expectation to these debates as a digital form of everyday talk. As suggested in the discussion of everyday political talk, such conversations, while actualising political issues, are not characterised by the confrontation of conflicting interests, but rather by an orientation to mutual understanding and respect.

To understand the hostile tone of debates in social media, I suggest that it is not sufficient to view social network sites as arenas for a digital version of everyday face-to-face interactions. Instead, these debates are characterised by their *publicness* and that they are about political issues. As political debates are about deciding society's future course of action in issues that bear on our lives, and there exists a pluralism of opinions on what is the best decision, public debate will often be uncomfortable and lack an orientation towards mutual understanding and respect (Schudson, 1997). Society consists of disparate collective identities, interests and values, and this necessarily leads to confrontation and conflict (Mouffe, 2005, 6). Political rhetoric is concerned with

choices, and thus “requires both agreement and dissent, shared understandings and novelty, enthymematic premises and contested claims, identification and division” (Miller 1994, 74). As “choice is not true or false”, and different individuals will usually arrive at different conclusions of what is the right choice, political debate is characterised by an orientation to conflict (Aristotle, 2011, 1226a; Kock, 2009).

This does, however, not imply that ad hominem attacks, name-calling, ridicule, and so forth, are seen as legitimate rhetorical strategies in political debate. By contrast, such practices are seen as signs of “bad” debate, as they contribute to a dislocation of the public’s attention to the participants’ personal traits (Jørgensen, 2000; Kock, 2011b), and may be used by actors to dominate the opponent (Ås, 2001, 2004).

This debate form, in which personal attacks flourish, while often being associated with social media, is, however, not unequalled. For instance, the political debates of the 1820s and -30s in Norway, have been described as “far more brutal than they are today” (Johansen, 2017, 143, my translation). They were “characterised by directly ill-natured personal attacks, intentionally insulting rude remarks, rumours, gossip and slander” (Bastiansen & Dahl, 2003, 142, my translation). The prevalence of personal attacks in this historical period’s rhetorical culture should, according to Johansen (2017, 143-144), be seen as a consequence of the current deliberative ideal.

Political issues were to be discussed by individuals who were economically and politically independent, as well as cultured (Habermas, 2002). Through rational deliberation, where the most reasonable argument gained the adherence of the others, they should come to an agreement about the common good. When the debates did not result in consensus, but rather an irreconcilable disagreement, it necessarily followed that some of the debaters were corrupted and immoral. When the political actors were debating by virtue of their competency and moral character, rather than representing a group or a party, the political issues became inextricably linked to the persons, and criticism of the politics necessarily had to become an attack on the person (Johansen, 2017, 143-144).

The correlation between an unclear distinction between the person and the issue, and a political debate characterised by personal attacks, also manifests itself in American politics. In the U.S., presidential candidates, first and foremost, represent themselves



and campaign on their personal qualities as a national leader. As a consequence, political campaigns and debates gain a character of personal feuds, where opponents attack each other's personal qualities through negative campaigning (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1997; Hall Jamieson, 1992).

In participatory media, public debate is carried out by "average" citizens who do not represent a party or a group, but themselves. They participate in these debates, not by virtue of their competency or morale, but by virtue of their individually held and authentic opinions. They approach the political issues through their personal experiences, emotions and opinions. Necessarily, criticism of their comments, quickly become attacks of them as persons. In other words, the blurring of the lines between the personal and the political in these debates may contribute to making political disagreements develop as personal feuds. As I will argue in chapter 8, the aggressive argument culture may, thus, be a consequence of a principle of expression, where individuals are oriented to expressing their authentic self. If criticism and opposition is an obstruction of the individual's ability to express his or her true self, then one way to safeguard one's expression is to secure the final word for oneself. Thus, to attempt to silence others through attacks, ridicule or threats may be seen as a means for self-fulfilment.

### **Epidictic rhetoric and moral positioning**

Thus far, I have defined political rhetoric as rhetoric about future choices of action. While being about political issues, the majority of utterances in the news-generated social media debates lack an orientation to the outcomes of future action. Surely, such utterances are also present, but the many of utterances are emotional expressions and moral evaluations of the self and others (see chapter 7). Thus, the rhetorical practices in these debates perform functions usually associated with *epideictic* rhetoric: they display, praise and blame.

In classical rhetorical theory, epideictic rhetoric was a distinct genre, separated from deliberative rhetoric. The epideictic genre was more or less synonym to ceremonial speeches that primarily performed functions of display of the rhetor's skills and virtues, and entertainment for the audience. For this reason, it has often been seen as of lesser

importance to a well-functioning public sphere than deliberative and forensic rhetoric, which are clearly “concerned with the civic requirements of establishing and upholding the laws” (Hauser, 1999a, 9). Epideictic speeches have been described in terms of “demonstrative, showy ostentatious, declamatory [...] composed for ‘show’ or ‘exhibition’ [to] display the orator’s powers, and to amuse an audience” (Cope, 1867, 121). Consequently, the genre has traditionally not been given as much attention as the other speech genres.

In recent times, however, this has changed. It has been argued that not only is epideictic rhetoric an inherent part of all political debate but also that it is necessary to include a notion of the epideictic if we are to understand the scope and functions of political rhetoric in participatory media (Vatnøy, 2017). Modern theories of epideictic rhetoric treat it less as a genre and extend its limits beyond the confines of oral speech. Rather than a genre to which particular speeches belong, it is now commonly viewed as a function or persuasive mode that can be identified both in particular texts that we might not regard as primarily epideictic (Sheard, 1996, 774), and in more wide-ranging discursive practices, such as the discourses of education, criticism, or scientific discourse (Sullivan, 1991, 1993; Sullivan, 1994). Less attention is given to the epideictic’s ceremonial functions and aesthetic qualities, and more attention is given to its performative and societal functions. It is emphasised how epideictic rhetoric can function to educate a community’s members and reinforce the community’s collective values. It does so by defining issues, and through the display of things, events or people that represent the values the speaker aims to promote (Condit, 1985; Hauser, 1999a; Sheard, 1996). Thus, epideictic rhetoric is understood as preparation for deliberation and political action (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971), as well as a way to “perform” community (Beale, 1978).

A particularly influential account is Michelle Celeste Condit’s review of the modern principles of epideictic rhetoric. Condit (1985) does not regard what she terms the *display/entertainment*-function of epideictic as mere entertainment that should not be taken seriously. Rather, Condit argues, it provides leaders – and potential leaders – with the opportunity to prove their capacities, and the audience the chance to judge “the eloquence – the broad human capacities – of a would-be leader” (Condit, 1985, 291).

Moreover, the speakers' display of eloquence and the entertainment of the audience is only one of three functional pairs served by epideictic. It also serves the functional pairs *definition/understanding* and *shaping/sharing of the community* (Condit, 1985, 288).

The first of these two pairs refers to epideictic rhetoric's power to define the situation to an audience who, especially in confusing or troubling times, actively seek an explanation of the social world (Condit, 1985, 288). By explaining the troubling issues to the audience in terms of their fundamental values and beliefs, the speaker provides his or her audience with a sense of comfort, and at the same time gains the power to define the issue and the situation, which may later serve argumentative purposes.

The functional pair of shaping and sharing of community refers to how the speaker can shape a sense of community through invoking the community's historical symbols, myths and values and strengthen the adherence to shared values (Condit, 1985, 289). This functional pair is particularly crucial for understanding the political role of epideictic rhetoric. Despite not being oriented towards the outcomes of political issues, epideictic rhetoric can nevertheless influence deliberation and have consequences for political choice. It can function as preparation for action, as it consolidates the values on which all political debate about future action must rest (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, 50)

Describing the characteristics of political debates in social media, Vatnøy (2017) has suggested an expansion of the concept of political rhetoric also to include "processes of collectivisation", i.e. processes of formation and re-formation of collective identities through epideictic rhetoric. These processes include the display and maintenance of identities, values, norms and group relations. Through these processes, opinions, beliefs and values that can be actualised in deliberative and electoral processes, are formed. The processes of collectivisation, then, describes the "formation and re-formation of collective identities as the foundation for the political community" (Vatnøy 2017, 71). Epideictic is, in this sense, viewed as an inherent part of all political debate, as well as a predominant form of rhetoric in debates in social network sites.

In the analysis presented in chapter 7, I will discuss how the verbal displays of community's values through praise and condemnation, often gain a character of moral

positioning by which participants demonstrate their stance in the issue. This points to how acts of epideictic rhetoric may function, not only to shape a community and consolidate the values upon which future political action must necessarily rest, but also to perform moral positions, sustain polarisation and forestall argumentation about future action.

The promotion of certain values, stories and heritage over others, necessarily also contributes to exclusion. Amongst those who live within the spatial boundaries of the community, there will never be complete unity about what values should be promoted and how these should be applied. Consequently, “definitions of community are often advanced by contrast with ‘others’ outside of the community” (Condit, 1985, 289). Thus, while epideictic speeches can function to unite national communities or sub-groups within the national community, they do so by excluding others. The unifying force lies precisely in the reassurance that “we” are not “them”. The speeches held on 17<sup>th</sup> of May, the national day of Norway, constitute a national community by praising what is “typically Norwegian”, by contrast to the “others” – for example, the Swedes and the Danes. The speeches held on May 1<sup>st</sup>, the international workers day, function to unite the labour movement through displays and praise of solidarity, but necessarily also excludes conservatives from this community of workers.

Epideictic rhetoric, then, can function to shape the community, strengthen the adherence to its values, as well as to divide and exclude. In its extreme consequences, for instance, in the immigration debate, it can come to “represent exactly the kind of nationalistic propaganda that theories of deliberative democracy set out to eliminate” (Vatnøy, 2015, 10). As such, epideictic rhetoric can contribute to increase and sustain group polarisation in society. Various scholars have identified a number of characteristics of polarising rhetoric, many of which corresponding well to the “praise” and “blame” commonly associated with the epideictic. King and Anderson (1971) argued that polarising rhetoric encompasses two principal strategies, namely, strategies of affirmation and strategies of subversion. In other words, polarisation requires both the creation of strong identification with an in-group and the creation of a perceived common enemy.

Affirmation is invoked through appeals to shared values, references and experiences that promote a strong sense of group identity (Cheney, 1983). Subversion, on the other hand, is invoked through the undermining of competing group's ethos, for example through attacks on the enemy's moral character or by appealing to stereotypes and prejudices. The enemy is vividly depicted as a threat, and as something distinctly different from the in-group (Davis, 1969; King & Anderson, 1971; Raum & Measell, 1974).

The rhetorical practices associated with epideictic rhetoric, namely the display and celebration of community's values through praise of persons and actions that embody them, and condemnation of an "other", may thus also function to polarise. However, whereas the epideictic is commonly understood in terms of an orientation to shaping and sharing community, polarising rhetoric, is associated with purposes of creating and amplifying social division (Jasinski, 2001b). While the substantive and stylistic features of epideictic and polarising rhetoric may often overlap, their main functions are defined differently. Moreover, whereas the epideictic rhetoric may often involve an implicit "other" against which the "us" is defined, the confrontation with the "other" is actively sought out in the polarising rhetoric.

In chapter 7, I will argue that the verbal displays of community's values performed through praise of persons and actions that embody these, as well as condemnations of an "other", in the news-generated social media debates, primarily gain a function of moral positioning, by which the participants perform their stances on the issue and assert a position of moral superiority. This function of epideictic can often be observed in questions that concern the identity of the national community. For instance, the immigration debate has been described in terms of a "moral championship" (Brox, 1991; Brox, Skirbekk, & Lindbekk, 2003), about "who are moral insiders and outsiders within the national community" (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017, 260-263, see also chapter 4).

An example that demonstrates the rhetorical practice of moral positioning particularly well is the, at the time, dean of the Church, Niels Hertzberg's "berserker-speech" in the Norwegian parliament's union negotiations in 1814. Anders Johansen (2019, 156-157) describes how Hertzberg spoke heartfelt and with big and poetic words against a union with Sweden. Apparently, he recommended total war against the

Swedes, if it was impossible to broker a deal that secured Norway's freedom and independence. If this was to happen, all Norwegians should preferably take up arms, and the ones who refused to do so should be hanged. While it was not unthinkable that Norway would lose the war and that Norwegians, the dean included, would die in the battle, it was better to die fighting for the fatherland, than to submit to the Swedes: It was "better to die with honour than to live with shame"<sup>10</sup>. The following day, Hertzberg voted in favour of the union with Sweden. Johansen calls this speech a "patriotic theatre": Rather than being an advice on future political action, it was a rhetorical *performance*, by which Hertzberg demonstrated his rhetorical skills and his moral stance (Johansen, 2019, 157). The stance did, however, not come with real implications for future political action.

The utterances in the news-generated social media debates are certainly not equal to the Hertzberg's speech: They are performed in an entirely different situation, with fundamentally different situational demands. Moreover, their formal qualities are far from eloquent: These utterances are not great rhetorical performances by which the speakers demonstrate their rhetorical and literary skills. In the setting of news-generated social media debates, the epideictic rhetoric thus lose its function of demonstration of eloquence, with which it has traditionally been associated. The epideictic rhetoric in these debates, however, function as moral stance taking, and also, I will argue, prevents the development of argumentation about future choice of action by developing into epideictic struggles.

The "berserker-speech" must be understood against the backdrop of the particular historical context's political culture. The political culture was greatly influenced by other genres, in which the dominant rhetorical forms were of an epideictic, rather than a deliberative character (Johansen, 2019, 187ff). Hertzberg himself was a dean of the Church. As such, his experience with public speaking came from the sermon, a clearly epideictic genre. The encouragements and promises to sacrifice everything for the Fatherland should, thus, be seen as a consequence of the genre conventions of the

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<sup>10</sup> Hertzberg, Niels. (1814). Til Vaaben! In: *Virksomme ord*. The full speech is available (in Norwegian) here: <http://www.virksommeord.no/tale/22/>.

demonstrative speech, by which the speaker is to display his eloquence and moral position, rather than as an advice for political action (Johansen, 2019, 202).

Moreover, the political culture was influenced by the sociable forms of interaction in the Gentlemen's clubs, the literary and music societies, as well as the patriotic residents' associations. In these sociable settings, it was the epideictic and sociable forms of rhetoric that prevailed: the elevated, poetic celebration of the community's values through toasts and songs, on the one hand, and pleasant conversation, oriented to sociability, rather than conflict and controversy, on the other (Johansen, 2017, 159-163; 2019, 187ff).

These semi-private arenas are described in Habermas' historical account of the development and decay of the public sphere in Western Europe, namely in terms of a cultural public sphere (Habermas, 2002[1962]). Habermas describes the cultural public sphere as a seed to the political public sphere, as these social spaces functioned as arenas for discussion and development of organisational practices and discussion norms. However, as argued by Johansen (2017, 162-163), the sociable character of these arenas also constrained them as spaces for critical discussion and opinion formation. Because what was most important in these arenas was to secure a social atmosphere, discussions could not be allowed to tip over into unpleasant conflicts. As discussed earlier, this is also Schudson's (1997) objection to the view of the sociable conversation as democratically important. In essence, an orientation to mutual respect and a social tone, implies that disagreements cannot be pursued and explored, as the conversation may then become unpleasant and exclusionary.

The blurring of boundaries between the private and public spheres of communication, shaped by social network site's organisation both around personal profiles and networks, and public commenting features (boyd, 2007, 2), contributes to a similar ambiguity around the conventions that govern the public debates in these environments. As previously argued, social media are, by many, viewed as arenas for sociable conversation. However, they are also understood as arenas for political debate. In chapter 9, I argue that this discrepancy manifests itself in an ambiguous set of genre conventions, where norms associated both with political rhetoric and personal communication are operative.

In the following, and final part of this chapter, I discuss how genre conventions are shaped and influenced by individual actors' knowledge of and expectations to previous genres, and how material structures, in this case, the affordances of the medium, interplay dynamically with individual actors' practices in establishing, upholding, challenging, and creating new conventions for rhetorical practice.

### **Negotiations of the genre**

The fact that utterances in the news-generated social media debates perform functions associated both with political debate, epideictic rhetoric, as well as personal communication, necessarily implies that rhetoric is not "just words", it is action (Kjeldsen, 2014). The words (or other symbols) have an aim and a function. This is, however, not to say that the utterance always does what it was intended to do. Still, when the utterance does something else, it still *does* something.

As suggested in the introduction, intentions and function manifest themselves in rhetorical strategies, i.e. the interplay of form and substance in an utterance, and the utterances' interplay with the context. A rhetorical strategy, as argued, entails a combination of the utterances' content and style, the rhetor's stance on the issue, and the utterance's performative functions (Wheatley & Vatnøy, 2019, 13). To see utterances as rhetorical strategies, thus, implies an understanding of the communication as both intentional and effective. An individual's intentions become a strategy through constellations of content and style, and gain an effect by virtue of the situational demands.

That the communication is intentional does, however, not mean that rhetorical messages must be crafted with a clear aim of what the utterance is to do. Rather, utterances may be expressed due to a felt need to express a reaction – for example to an aggressive comment posted earlier in the thread – or to create identification between the speaker and (some) members of the audience. That rhetorical moves are not necessarily intentional, in the sense that they are aimed at persuasion, is captured in Kenneth Burke's (1951, 203) emphasis in identification, rather than persuasion, as well as his definition of rhetoric as symbolic action. Rhetoric is, according to Burke, "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols"



(Burke, 1969, 43). It allows humans to construct social reality and to function within it, by establishing identification and inducing cooperation. Rhetoric is, however, also contingent and dynamic, as actors continuously vie for and negotiate how they identify themselves and others against how they are identified, establish and change affiliations. That the communication in the news-generated social media debates is intentional, then, should here be understood as that the actors act on a perceived need, whether this need is to attempt to persuade an opponent or a third-party, to ventilate, or to express one's authentic self.

In acting upon a perceived need, the participants in the news-generated social media debates do something that creates an effect. That the utterance has a function or effect is, however, not to say that it is *effective*, i.e. that it succeeds in doing what it aims to do. An utterance has an effect when it does something to the audience, but this "something" is rarely – if ever – the same to all audiences. Utterances will always carry different meanings for different audiences and have different effects on different audiences (Stromer-Galley & Schiappa, 2018). How audiences interpret and respond to rhetoric, is dependent upon a variety of factors that reside not only within, but also outside of the text, such as the situation in which they encounter the utterance, their preconception, cultural background, personal values and attitude towards the issue and the speaker. That the communication has an effect, should here be understood as that it *does* something – it is not "just words" – but the function must neither be the same as intended by the rhetor, nor must it be the same for all in the audience. Moreover, as suggested by the introduction of the "principle of expression," it does not necessarily imply that the utterances have real, in-life consequences, i.e. that they function to produce change in the offline world. A logic of expression implies that utterances are merely expressions, without an orientation to producing action. Nevertheless, as rhetorical moves in the debates, I argue, even such expressions gain an effect, i.e. they influence how the debate develops.

To examine intention and effect empirically cannot easily be done. Even in reception studies, we are rarely able to fully access the complex relations between intention, utterance and effect. However, although we can never know for sure what an actor's true intentions are or what an utterance actually does to an audience, it is possible

to approach both rhetors and audiences' expectations to the communication by examining how conventions are negotiated. In the news-generated social media debates, a large amount of the utterances are pre-occupied with meta-debate. This debate about the debate concerns conventions and expectations of what public debate is, what constitutes general conversation norms, as well as appropriate stylistic expressions. Put differently, they concern what the genre is.

As I will discuss in chapter 9, these negotiations revolve around issues such as whether claims must be justified, whether it is acceptable to criticise others, as well as what is of relevance to the topic discussed. The conventions and expectations that manifest themselves both in the rhetorical strategies applied by the actors and in their sanctions of others' rhetorical strategies, show that different actors have different expectations to the communication. Moreover, it suggests that these expectations are informed by experiences and assumptions of what is "fitting" in other genres, more precisely in political debates and in private conversations.

A rhetorical culture, understood as the configuration of a typical rhetorical situation, a specific world view, as well as a particular rhetorical style, is, as argued, constituted by speakers and audiences, cultural and technological constraints, as well as a set of prevailing norms and conventions. All rhetorical cultures and genres come with a set of conventions and expectations of what makes a "good" argument, as well as appropriate content and stylistic level. As these are the result of individual actors' interpretation and practice, these norms and ideals are, however, not stable (Miller, 1984, 163). Through rhetorical practice, actors continually re-establish, maintain and transgress genre conventions. In doing so, actors may be met with ridicule and criticism, but their practices may also, through uptake by other actors, contribute to changing existing genres, or to produce new genres.

Here, I view the news-generated social media debate as a genre. I argue that it is feasible to do so, given that most people would recognise it when they see it, have an opinion on what are appropriate substantial and formal elements in it, as well as expectations to what functions can be performed through it. This is, however, not to say that all people agree on the genre's conventions. Rather, the conventions are continuously negotiated and re-established through the many individual actors'

practices. Indeed, it could be argued that disagreements about the genre's conventions visible in these debates preclude the possibility of viewing them as a genre. According to Lomborg, a genre is only constituted "insofar as the communicative practices, conventions and expectations linked to the genre are socially shared and recognised among a group of users and recurrently expressed in text" (Lomborg, 2011, 61; see also Miller, 1984; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992).

However, as genres are the result of actors' interpretation and use, they necessarily "change, evolve and decay" (Miller, 1984, 163). The observation that "genres come from somewhere and are transforming into something else" (Schryer, 1993, 208) is, in this respect, useful, as it points to how genre conventions develop from individuals' earlier experiences with the genre, as well as with other genres, and can be transformed through practice.

Conventions and expectations to a particular genre build on "typifications", i.e. peoples' "stock of knowledge", derived from situations that they perceive to be similar to the situation they are now in. Typifications should be seen as part of our habitual knowledge: they are standardised, socially available classifications of strategies for recognising and acting in familiar situations (Schütz & Luckmann, 1974, 108). They are not static, but rather subject to modification, as they are brought into contact with the individual's unique experiences and "biographical articulations" (Schütz & Luckmann, 1974, 78). Moreover, typifications are inextricably linked to situations and are based on the experience that what has previously been a "fitting" response in a particular type of situation, is likely to be a fitting response also when this type of situation recurs (Schütz & Luckmann, 1974, 99). One's perception of situations, thus, emerges from the interplay of the individual's concrete experiences, individually formed inclinations and dispositions, as well as the "socially derived, intersubjective typifications available to us for acting in recognizable situations" (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993, 481).

Carolyn Miller incorporates the notion of "typification" into her definition of genre: Genres are "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (Miller, 1984, 159). In doing so, she views genres as socially determined, intersubjective means for recognising and acting within recurring situations. The existence of conventions and

expectations, thus, depends on interpretations of situations – interpretations that are done on the basis of preceding situations.

That a situation “recurs” should, however, not be understood as an objectivist or materialist claim. Objective situations are necessarily unique and cannot recur. Rather, recurring situations should be understood as recurring intersubjective *interpretations* of situations. Rhetorical situations should, according to Miller<sup>11</sup>, neither be seen as existing prior to human action – as suggested by Bitzer (1968), nor created by individual agency alone, as suggested by Vatz (1973). Instead, recurring rhetorical situations are produced by human’s interaction with the situation; they are “social constructs that are the result, not of “perception”, but of “definition” (Miller, 1984, 156). Intersubjective definition of situations is possible, because:

our stock of knowledge [...] can be brought to bear upon new experience: the new is made familiar through the recognition of relevant similarities; those similarities become constituted as a type. A new type is formed from typifications already on hand when they are not adequate to determine a new situation. If a new typification proves continually useful for mastering states of affairs, it enters the stock of knowledge and its application becomes routine. Although types evolve in this way, most of our stock knowledge is quite stable, [as they reside in discourse] (Miller, 1984, 156-157).

Consequently, genres are culturally dependent; they are products of a shared interpretation of the situation and of what are “fitting” ways to respond to the situation. Thus, genres are “rule governed” (Miller, 1984, 161). “Rule governed” does, however, not connote formal rules, but that the rhetorical action gains meaning as it is “interpretable by means of conventions” (Miller, 1984, 161). Constitutive “rules” inform the rhetor in how to fuse form and substance to produce a meaningful text, and offer a fitting response to the situation. Moreover, they instruct the audience in how the particular fusion is to be interpreted within its context (Miller, 1984, 161). These conventions are found in the rhetorical situation itself, in former texts in the genre, as well as in larger contexts, such as culture and religion.

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<sup>11</sup> Miller arrives at this by connecting the notion of “typification” to Kenneth Burke’s concept of “motives”, understood as “shorthand terms for situations” (Burke, 1984, 29). Our motives are, according to Burke, “distinctly linguistic products” and products of our socialisation, as “[w]e discern situational patterns by means of the particular vocabulary of the cultural group into which we are born” (Burke 1984, 35). Thus, interpretations, and consequently also situations, are social products – they are the results of socialisation.

In the news-generated social media debates, negotiations of genre conventions suggest that actors interpret the situation differently. Some participants seem to perceive the communication situation to be a political debate, indicated by how they express expectations to argumentation, correct and unbiased information, as well as that one should stick to the subject. Other participants seem to base their expectations on conventions derived from the personal, sociable conversation, indicated by how they express expectations to being able to express their opinions without having to justify them and respond to criticism and counter-arguments, as well as an expressed wish to be “nice” to each other.

These contradictory expectations make visible the genre’s instability. It demonstrates how the genre is subject to continuous negotiation and is the result of individual actors’ choices. The force of the individual actor’s choices in the making and re-making of the genre can be understood against Miller’s (1994) re-articulation of the concept of genre, where she argues that classifications of action should be based in Giddens’ (1984) concept of *reproduction*, rather than *recurrence*.

By reproduction, Giddens refers to how “the conduct of individual actors reproduces the structural properties of larger collectives” (Giddens, 1984, 24). Whereas the notion of “recurrence” described genres as products of intersubjective perception (Miller 1984), the notion of “reproduction” incorporates the action of the participants as vital to understanding how social structures are reproduced. A genre’s stability relies both on the structural aspects of the situation, for instance of the medium, and on individual actors’ willingness and ability to reproduce the actions afforded by these structures. As argued by Miller: “Social actors *create* recurrence in their action by reproducing the structural aspects of institutions, by using available structures as the medium of their action and thereby producing those structures again as virtual outcomes, available for further memory, interpretation, and use” (Miller, 1994, 60, it. in original). This leads Miller to re-define genre as:

that aspect of situated communication that is *capable of reproduction*, that can be manifested in more than one situation, more than one concrete space-time. The rules and resources of a genre provide reproducible speaker and addressee roles, social typifications of recurrent social needs or exigences, topical structures (or ‘moves’ and ‘steps’), and ways of indexing an event to material conditions, turning them into

constraints or resources. In its representation of and intervention in space-time, genre becomes a determinant of rhetorical *kairos* - a means by which we define a situation in space-time and understand the opportunities it holds (Miller, 1994, 71, it. in original).

With this definition, Miller foregrounds the relational aspect of rhetorical action; that is, how rhetorical actions are dependent on others to be realised. This way, the structures and norms that hold genres together as social systems are maintained or changed through rhetorical action. As argued by Miller:

[...] this addressivity, or relational quality, provides a specific mechanism by which individual communicative action and social system structure each other and interact with each other. The individual must produce patterned notions of others, institutional or social others, and the institution or society or culture must provide structures by which individuals can do this (Miller, 1994, 72).

This implies that the conventions that guide and govern rhetorical action are shaped by the actions of individual actors' interaction with other individual's actions, as well as institutional structures. The social structures affords certain actions, however, the realisation of conventions relies on the actors' choice to utilise these action-possibilities in particular ways. Thus, genre conventions are made subject to change when individual actors chose to transgress institutionalised conventions.

This interplay of social structures with the actions of individuals is evident in how institutionalised genres change over time. For instance, an opinion piece is not the same today as it was 50 years ago. Whereas the genre "opinion piece" is institutionalised through conventions that are incorporated into official documents such as the news' organisations' "ethical codes of practice", as well as non-official norms upheld through each news paper's editorial offices, these conventions with regards to both substance and form has changed. Increasingly, the "ordinary" person's experiences and emotions, as well as the highly subjective, confessional and intimate mode of address have come to be characteristic substantive and formal elements of the opinion piece – as well as of the journalistic genre altogether (Hirdman et al., 2005; Holmedal, 2018; Hornmoen, 2015; Natvik, 2015; Røysted, 2019). This shift has happened due to individual actors' (journalists and editors) choices to transgress the established conventions and expectations to what an opinion piece is. Other individuals have then started to reproduce these actions, and thus over time, changed the social structures of the news.

The individual's actions have, however, not been performed in isolation. Rather, the opinion pieces are written, edited and published within institutional and technological structures that have transformed. Two obvious developments that have played into this are the shift away from the party press system to a commercial media system and the advent of online media. Both of these developments have contributed to increased competition for the readers' attention, which has created new conditions for what is "newsworthy" – or perhaps "click-worthy" is a more adequate term – contents and styles. These transformations can also be viewed as a consequence of more wide-ranging changes in the post-modern society, to an increased personalisation and intimisation of the public sphere (Bennett, 2012; Sennett, 1977), as well as personal lifestyle values as the mechanism for organising civic life (Giddens, 1991).

Whereas these societal structures afford and guide individual's actions, it is, nevertheless, individuals' choices to utilise the action-possibilities inherent in these structures, that respectively uphold and reproduce, or evolve and change, conventions and expectations to a genre.

### **Algorithmic and individual agency**

In the news-generated social media debates, discursive practices are shaped and influenced both the technological structure – the software and algorithms – of the social network site, and the users' expectations to, and use of, the genre. The technological structure of the social network site affords certain rhetorical practices while obstructing others. The users perform and reward certain rhetorical practices while abstaining from and sanctioning others. The interplay of the medium's technological affordances and the users' knowledge of and expectations to the genre, shapes users' perception of the situation and the "fitting" rhetorical response.

The rhetorical practices that constitute the genre *news-generated social media debate* should, thus, be viewed as influenced by both algorithmic and individual agency. Rhetorical agency should here be understood as something that rests not solely with the individual actor, but rather emerges from the interplay of actors engaging in a process of social engagement (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, 962), as well as the interplay of actors and the context of action (Gunn & Cloud, 2010; Miller, 2007). It connotes the individual

rhetors' *possibilities* to act by connecting intention to strategy and, in doing so, influence their surroundings, combined with their *ability* to do so by the virtue or despite of the structures they are embedded in (Hoff-Clausen, Isager, & Villadsen, 2005, 57; Rønlev, 2014, 47), for example, the affordances of the medium.

The concept of “affordances” was initially developed by the psychologist James Gibson to describe how animals interact with their natural environment. In the book, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, he defined affordance as what the environment offers the individual: “The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill” (Gibson, 1979, 127, it. in original). The concept describes the properties of an object or environment that facilitate specific actions for a particular user (Gaver, 1991; McGrenere & Ho, 2000). The affordances of an environment, however, should not be understood as material properties or ecological niches, rather the concept of affordances describe the *potential uses* the environment offers to the observer (Markus & Silver, 2008). The potential for use resides in the user’s perception of the affordance; “from the mental interpretation of things, based on our past knowledge and experience applied to our perception of the things about us” (Norman, 1988, 219). Thus, affordances are the combination of the actual and perceived properties of an environment or object (Norman, 1988; Norman, 2002).

The same aspect of an environment may, thus, provide different affordances to different individuals, and even to the very same individual at different times, as learning to perceive an affordance happens through socialisation. As such, affordances do not determine, but shape “the possibility of agentic action in relation to an object” (Hutchby, 2001, 444). Affordances, then, should be understood as potentials for interaction between actors and technologies, but not the interaction itself. The interaction requires agency, i.e. the will or ability to (inter)act.

The concept of affordances has been widely applied in studies of communication media (e.g. Hjarvard, 2008; Hutchby, 2001), and recently also in studies of rhetorical practice in digital environments (e.g. Miller & Sheperd, 2009; Vatnøy, 2017). Applied to these contexts, the affordances are, in contrast to in Gibson’s original conception, not a naturally occurring phenomenon, but rather designed by the media’s creators in order



to direct the users to use the technology in a particular way (Davisson and Leone 2018, 87). Facebook's affordances are the results of the company's commercial interests, i.e. they are designed to make people act in ways that benefit the company. Facebook can, however, not operate solely out of self-interest but has to adhere to international, as well as national laws and regulations concerning privacy protection, illegal utterances, targeted marketing and editorial responsibility. As a consequence, the political struggles over what Facebook is allowed to do also affect the users' action-possibilities. One concrete way in which this manifests itself is how the presence of surveillance and monitoring – which can be performed both by big, global companies and nation-states, as well as by the users' friends, acquaintances, employees, and so forth – may function as a constraint on people's practices. It may do so, if people restrain their activities, due to fear of the information they share to be misused commercially or having negative consequences on one's employment or social relationships (Staples, 2014; Trottier, 2016).

Negotiations of genre conventions, then, happen both at the micro-level (in the debates between the actors who use the genre) and at the macro-level (between nation-states and Facebook). While the affordances function to direct and determine the user's practices, the actual use, however, also depends on the users' ability and willingness to utilise them (Davisson and Leone 2018, 88, 92). Commonly, unintended uses of the technology emerge due to users' knowledge of, and engagement with, it (Norman, 1988). Attending to both the affordances designed to direct users to specific uses, and users' perception of and actual use of these it is, thus, possible to gain an understanding for how the rhetorical culture of social media develop through “the needs, values, and interests of people” (Castells, Cardoso, & Nitze, 2006, 28).

Combined, the concepts of genre conventions and affordances, provide a theoretical framework that can guide the examination of how users' rhetorical expressions are shaped and influenced both by experience and assumptions to what a “fitting” contribution to the news-generated social media debates is, and of the technological constraints and possibilities afforded by the environment.

## **Chapter conclusion: New practices - new perspectives**

As established in this chapter, social network sites afford self-display and -disclosure, everyday, interpersonal communication, as well as public debate. In the news-generated social media debates, conventions and expectations from different communicative settings are mixed, in a particular blend of personal expressions, argumentation, epideictic rhetoric, as well as hostile attacks.

By drawing parallels between the characteristic features of the rhetoric in the news-generated social media debates and those of rhetorical cultures in other historical contexts, as I have done throughout this chapter, I have suggested that rather than representing a radical change of the public sphere and the rhetoric embedded in it, these new media are influenced by expectations and knowledge about previous genres found in other parts of the public sphere. However, the particular ways in which these characteristic practices are fused in the news-generated social media debates, I argue, namely the fusion of personal, hostile and epideictic forms of rhetoric, should be viewed as the development of a new rhetorical culture, which still is subject to constant negotiation.

In the chapter, I have introduced a variety of theoretical perspectives that may help us understand the nature of public debates in social media. I have discussed how these debates are taking place in an arena that, while being public, is also closely related to the private sphere. I have discussed the features commonly associated with these public debates, namely the personal engagement and expression, the aggressive argument culture, the prevalence of epideictic rhetoric, as well as how genre conventions and norms of the debate are established, maintained and challenged through practice. By introducing a variety of theoretical perspectives, it is, then, possible to gain a better understanding of the functions and scope of participation in these social media debates.

In doing so, I follow a long line of scholars who have sought to expand the theoretical framework for understanding social media's role in our society and culture. More attention has been given to how social media can facilitate new forms of social engagement and collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013; Fladmoe et al., 2016), and play an important role in social and political movements (Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman, & Etling, 2015; Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013), as well

as in election campaigns (Persily, 2017; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013). Increasingly, scholars have paid attention to the role played by emotions, affects and passions (Papacharissi, 2015), the blurred boundaries between the personal and political (Bennett, 2012), as well as to the inclusion of politics into the structures of everyday life (Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2016; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015). Moreover, scholars have examined how digital environments shape and influence communicative practice (Bendor et al., 2012; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013), and how conversations in these environments differ from face-to-face conversations (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Carpini, 2012; Davis, 2005; Wojcieszak, Baek, & Carpini, 2009).

New perspectives, such as *digital rhetoric* (Eyman, 2015; Hess & Davisson, 2017; Lanham, 1992; Zappen, 2005), *online rhetoric* (Warnick & Heineman, 2012), *new media rhetoric* (Brooke, 2009) and *screen rhetoric* (Welch, 1999), have been introduced to apply or adjust rhetorical theory to the new digital reality, or to introduce and develop a new rhetorical theory in order to account for online environments. In particular, these new perspectives have been concerned with how digital technology affords and constrains rhetorical practice (Brooke, 2009; Gurak, 2001; Gurak & Antonijevic, 2009; Warnick & Heineman, 2012). These efforts to adjust rhetorical theory to the new media reality are not entirely novel to digital rhetoric, rather they follow earlier efforts to account for how contemporary media society and the rise of new technology, such as the television and the radio, has implications for rhetorical practice, and consequently also theory (Brummett, 2015; Johansen, 2002; Kjeldsen, 2008; Kjeldsen, 2017).

Rhetorical theory has always been concerned with rhetorical practice's relation to its situational conditions, and can, thus, offer perspectives on the new forms of communication afforded by changing societal and technological circumstances. For this reason, the rhetorical perspective has shown an ability to deal with fragmented and complex situations, and adjust to changing societal and technological circumstances, and with them, rhetorical practices.

In the chapter that follows, I account for the how the rhetorical perspective is applied in the study of the news-generated social media debates and discuss the benefits, as well as challenges, of studying these debates through a rhetorical lens. The chapter

outlines the material studied in the dissertation, accounts for the process of data collection and analysis, as well as the ethical considerations that have guided the study.

### Chapter 3: Methodology and data

The dissertation examines what types of rhetorical expressions and forms of interaction are made possible and prevail under the circumstances created by social media. To do so, the study performs a large-scale qualitative close-reading of news-generated debates on Facebook about an issue recognised as particularly “social media-friendly” (Vatnøy, 2017), namely the immigration issue. The study is limited to one particular issue in the immigration debate: the Syrian refugee crisis, representing a “peak moment” when the immigration issue dominated the public agenda in the three Scandinavian nation-states (Ihlebak & Endresen, 2017). The three nations studied are relatively homogenous polities, with overlapping histories, similar political systems, media institutions, culture, language, and ethnic and religious make-up (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2010; Gripsrud, 2019; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hovden et al., 2018, 330; Pettersen & Østby, 2013). The three nations are, however, also three different nations, as demonstrated by the national variations in the political handling and public debate about the immigration issue, as well as the refugee crisis (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2010; Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Hovden et al., 2018). The main aim of the study is, however, not to look for differences in how the issue was debated on social media in the three nations but rather to identify rhetorical practices that recur across three similar, yet different, cultural contexts.

In order to do so, the study examines two key events in the debate about the refugee crisis in the Scandinavian nations: the influx in refugees coming to the nations in August and September 2015, and the retrenchments in the nation’s asylum policies in the period between November 2015 and January 2016. These two events are here viewed as key events in the debate about the refugee crisis as they presented the issue in different ways, thus offering differing perspectives and different situational demands for the actors in the debates. The selection of these two events, as well as the analysis itself, applies an action-oriented perspective on discourse, i.e. it assumes that discourse does not merely *mean* something; it *does* something.

The study is, however, not based on the assumption that these comment section debates have a high impact on political processes or public opinion formation in the immigration issue. Instead, the interest in the comment section debates on social media

comes from the observation that social media have become an integrated part of people's experiences of communication and that this has created new rhetorical forms and ideals in the public sphere (Hess 2018, 7).

The shift from analogue to digital communication technology has made its mark on both media outlets, social arenas and forms of expression, and consequently also on democracy – both as a form of government and as a social system (Gripsrud, 2009, 6). Social network sites increasingly influence social, cultural and work practices, in particular how information is discovered, consumed and shared (O'Riordan, Feller, & Nagle, 2012). Moreover, while most citizens do not participate in public debates on Facebook regularly (see e.g. Moe et al., 2019), those who do, view it as at one of the most important and influential spheres of argumentation in society (Vatnøy, 2017, 214). Furthermore, the concerns raised about these environments' impact on the public debate and democracy – in academic literature and in the public debate alike – suggest that these arenas are believed to have some impact, not necessarily on political processes, but on citizens' ability to stay informed and participate in the public sphere.

The overall aim of the study is to identify the characteristic features of, and conditions for, public debate about controversial political issues in one, relatively new, debate arena in the public sphere. This is examined through a large-scale close textual analysis (in total 2728 comments to 32 newspaper posts), that studies the comments as *rhetorical moves* in the debates. This implies that single utterances are not studied in isolation, but rather seen as interacting with and structured by other utterances in the debates, as well as the broader communicative context. As such, utterances, interactions, as well as the contextual frames of the debates, are studied. The benefit from such an approach is the flexibility, which allows the analysis of the concrete texts to be informed by the particular context that, in online environments, is fluid and changing.

The study also produces insights about how the immigration issue is talked about and experienced in one arena of the public sphere. By studying comment section debates in which people respond to and discuss news articles about the immigration issue, the analysis produces insights into how people, i.e. those participating in these discussions, *actually* talk about these issues. Studying these arenas can thus be seen as an inroad to study ordinary citizens' rhetorical practices, which is a notoriously tricky thing to do in

offline settings. Interpretative close-readings of the text produced by the citizens' themselves, may give us valuable insights into how audiences reacted and responded to an issue in the actual situation, and how this, in turn, was expressed.

The comments written as responses to a news article are, however, also mediated forms of audience participation. What is uttered here is, like in every form of conversation taking place in a social context, regulated by expectations of what can and cannot be uttered, and how it can and cannot be uttered, as well as by technological structures that afford some actions while preventing others. Not expecting to be the object of study, these may nevertheless provide accurate insights into how some audiences interpreted, reacted to, and engaged with the issue at hand in the actual situation.

The main aim of the dissertation is, however, not to provide new insights into the immigration issue. Rather, it is to provide a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) both of the contextual frames and actual texts in public debates on Facebook. In doing so, the study produces insights into how these, relatively new, arenas for public debate facilitate certain rhetorical practices in the public sphere. The aim is not to produce insights that can be generalised across platforms, national or historical contexts or issues. Instead, it is to produce in-depth knowledge about the rhetorical practices and the contextual frames of one particular debate – in two stages and three nations – namely the news-generated Facebook debate about the Syrian refugee crisis in the Scandinavian nations.

Whereas there exists a vast number of studies of online comment sections, various discussion forums, as well as particular social network sites – most prominently Twitter – as arenas for public debate, comparably few have studied public debates on Facebook. When studied, this social network site has commonly been approached as a medium for self-display and relationship management. As many newspapers have, in recent years, moved their public commenting features to Facebook, the site is, however, increasingly also becoming an arena for public debate.

By studying how Facebook facilitates and is utilised for public debate, then, the dissertation contributes to a large, and still growing, body of research that examines the conditions for public rhetoric in digital environments. In this chapter, I account for the data collection process, the material, the analytical steps taken and the practical, as well

as ethical challenges of researching digital platforms. In the chapter conclusion, I outline my contribution to the study of social network sites as arenas for public debate.

### **Data selection and collection**

The dissertation examines material from comment section debates on newspapers' Facebook pages in three national contexts: Norway, Sweden and Denmark. From each national context, similar "events" are included in the material. Thus, a total of six events are included. These events are treated as embodiments of two stages of the same debate. The newspaper articles debated in the first stage ("the reception"), presented the refugee crisis as a crisis for the *refugees* and emphasised the humanitarian response to the situation. The responsibility to act was placed mainly on the individual, who was praised for – and encouraged to – do something to help. The articles debated in the second stage ("the retrenchments"), presented the refugee crisis as a crisis for the *receiving countries* and emphasised the political solution to the situation. The responsibility to act was placed on political actors, who frequently appeared in the newspaper articles, and conflicts and controversy surrounding the decisions were brought to attention.

Facebook-posts from national news providers in each country are included in the material. Five posts from different newspapers, as well as the public service broadcaster's online news page, covering the events in each country, were selected. The most important news providers from each country are included in the material, and both quality, tabloid and public service news providers, as well as newspapers with different scores on the "brand trust"-index were included in the material (see Table 1).



**Table 1:** Overview of the newspapers included in the material.<sup>12</sup>

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Brand trust (1-10)<sup>13</sup></b>	<b>Weekly use online (%)</b>	<b>“Likes” Facebook</b>	<b>Subscribers Facebook<sup>14</sup></b>
VG	Tabloid	6.23	56	524,402	512,196
Dagbladet	Tabloid	6.15	34	403,714	400,771
Aftenposten	Quality	7.02	28	407,153	387,668
NRK Nyheter	Public service	7.42	31	402,237	401,450
Aftonbladet	Tabloid	4.89	46	430,930	421,314
Expressen	Tabloid	4.99	32	488,967	463,379
Dagens Nyheter	Quality	6.28	18	200,260	200,037
SVT Nyheter	Public service	6.68	15	179,537	181,348
Ekstra Bladet	Tabloid	4.6	27	347,368	331,815
Berlingske	Tabloid	7.03	13	272,119	265,689
Politiken	Quality	6.99	16	278,996	267,125
DR Nyheder	Public service	7.48	37	388,651	383,920

The newspapers selected from Norway are the two tabloids, *VG* and *Dagbladet*, the quality newspaper, *Aftenposten*, as well as the public broadcaster, *NRK*. The three newspapers are the largest in terms of weekly readership – online as well as offline. *NRK News* is the most-watched public broadcaster. However, the commercial broadcaster *TV2 News online* has more weekly readers on their online page. Nevertheless, I choose to include *NRK* in my material, as they are considered to be less tabloid and more important as a news provider than its commercial competitor. This indicated by its top ranking on the “brand trust score”, where *TV2*, in comparison, ranks in fifth place. In Norway, 51 per cent get their news from social media, in which the news providers selected have substantial numbers of followers (Moe & Sakariassen, 2018).

The newspapers included in the Swedish material are the two tabloids *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*, the quality newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, as well as the public broadcaster

<sup>12</sup> The numbers for Brand trust and Weekly use online are collected from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2018, 74-75; 92-93; 104-105). The numbers for Facebook-“likes” and -subscribers are collected from Facebook, December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019. The Norwegian newspapers’ appear first in white marking; the Swedish follow in a light grey marking before the Danish newspapers appear lastly in darker grey markings.

<sup>13</sup> The numbers include all those who have heard of the brand. The numbers are, generally, somewhat higher when only users of the brand are included.

<sup>14</sup> Both “likes” and subscribers are included; both options will give the user the newspaper’s posts in their feed. It is possible to both “like” and to subscribe, only “like”, or only subscribe. Therefore, the two categories are not merged in the overview.

*SVT News*. The three newspapers are the most read newspapers online and are only surpassed by the free daily newspaper, *Metro*, offline. *SVT* is the most used news source offline but is online surpassed by the commercial broadcaster, *TV4*, as well as the online site of their own radio channel, *Sr.se*. *SVT* ranks second on trust, again surpassed by their own radio channel, *SR News*. 53 per cent get their news from social media in Sweden (Westlund, 2018), and all the selected news providers have substantial followers on these sites.

The newspapers included in the Danish material, are the two tabloids *Berlingske* and *Ekstra Bladet*, the left-leaning quality newspaper, *Politiken*, as well as the public broadcaster, *DR*. The three newspapers selected have the highest numbers of weekly readers online. Offline, they are all surpassed by the free daily newspaper, *Metroxpres*. *DR News* is the most read online news provider, and also ranks first on weekly offline use. 46 per cent of Danes get their news from social media, where all these news providers have substantial followers (Schröder & Ørsten, 2018).

The data collection was primarily conducted manually through searches. Initially, I used the *Netvizz*-application for Facebook (Rieder, 2013; Rieder, Abdulla, Poell, Woltering, & Zack, 2015), which allowed me to gather data about what posts had been posted to the selected newspaper's Facebook-pages in a given period, including the comments to these posts. However, in the middle of the data collection process of this study, Facebook dramatically restricted access to its pages' API, as I will discuss more at length under the section "Practical and ethical challenges".

As it is the APIs that allow researchers to retrieve large-scale data from Facebook, this change made software dedicated to academic research on Facebook, such as *Netvizz*, unable to collect data systematically. To solve this, I had to collect the data manually from the news providers' public Facebook-pages and anonymise the participants manually. Initially, as long as the *Netvizz*-app worked, I gathered data from the period between August 1<sup>st</sup> 2015 and February 1<sup>st</sup> 2016, as this was the period when the refugee crisis dominated the public agenda in the three countries. The app does not allow you to search for particular content but provides a list of all the posts in a given period. Thus, I went through the dataset manually to look for posts related to the refugee crisis. For many of the articles, it was obvious from the title that it was about the refugee crisis, but

for many, it was also necessary to use the link provided in the collected files to access the article, as they had no or an unclear title. Furthermore, the material that was collected through the app turned out to be incomplete. Manual searches on Facebook revealed that articles, as well as comments to these articles, were missing from the dataset.

To get a more complete overview of the articles posted about the refugee crisis in this period, I, therefore, conducted additional searches using Facebook's search function. Here it is possible to type a search word, chose the page you wish to conduct your search on, and the period. I conducted searches on the selected news pages using the Norwegian, Swedish and Danish's language words for "refugee", "asylum", as well as "immigrant/immigration".<sup>15</sup> In this data collection, I did not seek quantitative representativeness, but rather variation and semantic richness in the material, allowing for in-depth descriptions of the material (Gentikow, 2005). Thus, the manual searches and the data collected through *Netvizz*, provided me with a, not complete, but sufficient overview of what the news about the refugee crisis posted to social media was about in this period.

From the two periods, I have included "key texts", i.e. texts that are "provocative and worthwhile" for the purpose of the research (Hoff-Clausen, 2008, 21; Nothstine, Blair, & Copeland, 1994, 7). The selection of newspaper texts and associated comment sections was guided by the overview collected through the manual and automated searches, and by previous research on the Syrian refugee crisis in the Scandinavian nations. Hovden et al. (2018), found that in September, the humanitarian frame dominated the press coverage, whereas the focus shifted to national security in November. Kjeldsen and Andersen (2018), found that the photos of Alan Kurdi, which were published at the beginning of September, intervened in public discourse. The photos were viewed as a "wake up call" and brought about an almost unanimous call for humanitarian action. In this period, citizen initiative groups such as *Refugees Welcome* and *Venligboerne* were constituted and got much media attention (Eimhjellen, 2016;

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<sup>15</sup> I used the following search words: flyktning\* (NO), flykting\* (SE), flygtning\* (DE), as well as asylum, asyl\*. Furthermore, I searched for the words for immigration and immigrants: innvandring\* and innvandrere\* (NO), invandring\* and invandrere\* (SE), as well as indvandringer\*, indvandrere\* and udlændinge\* (DE).

Fladmoe et al., 2016). Furthermore, national authorities in all three nations – particularly in Sweden –initially took a strong humanitarian position, but changed to a more restrictive tone during the fall when several measures to cope with the influx were implemented (Hagelund, n.d.; Hernes, 2018).

The articles included in the material are texts that exhibit the characteristic features of the reporting of the selected events: The articles from the first period are characterised by pathos-based argumentation and a strong emphasis on the humanitarian response to the situation, as well as the individual’s responsibility to act; the texts from the second period are characterised by a more nuanced reporting and an emphasis on the political decisions, actors and conflicts.

### **Material**

The three events that constitute the first stage of the debate are related to the arrival of refugees into the nation, namely:

*Norway:* Hotel owner, Petter Stordalen, assisted the government by offering temporary housing of asylum seekers in one of his hotels.

*Sweden:* Three campaigns from national newspapers in Sweden, aimed at inspiring citizens to help the refugees.

*Denmark:* “Welcome-ads” made by citizens in response to ads made by the Minister of Immigration and Integration, Inger Støjberg, to warn refugees from coming to Denmark.

The three events were all characterised by the vast posting of articles on the respective countries’ news outlets’ Facebook-pages. New manual searches on Facebook were conducted, applying search words related to each of these three events. Five posts from each country are included in the material, except for Sweden, where seven articles were included to make up for the relatively low number of comments some of the articles had. These posts were selected after reading through all the posts found through manual searches. The decision to include these seven posts was guided by a wish to include

posts from the different news providers accounted for earlier, as well as a strategic consideration of what was most interesting. Thus, the selection of data required interpretation, as well as evaluation.

To be included in the material, the events had to serve as the main theme of the article. Furthermore, the articles had to emphasise the humanitarian perspective of the situation and address this as a question of private initiative. The posts chosen represent the general tendency in the coverage of these three events. They all concerned the arrival of refugees to the nation – with a particular focus on what the nation’s reception of refugees said about who “we” are. They presented the question of how to deal with the arrival of refugees as a question of the community’s morality, as well as individual responsibility, and addressed their audiences as a homogeneous group with a common wish to help the refugees. All of the discussions took place within the two months when the arrival of refugees increased dramatically in all three countries (August and September), and where the refugee issue dominated the national, as well as international media.

First, an initial reading of all the comments was conducted, which revealed that similar arguments, perspectives and positions were repeated and rearticulated throughout the entire exchange. To allow for a close reading of the material, a sample of the 100 first comments to each article was included in the material.<sup>16</sup> As more data did not reveal new insights to inform the theoretical aim of the study, the sample allows for comparison as well as for theoretical discussion, commonly referred to as theoretical saturation (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017).

Some posts had less than 100 comments – particularly in the Swedish material. To weigh up for this imbalance, more posts were included from Sweden (see also Appendix B, for additional information about the selected posts).

Material and number of comments included in the material:

*Norwegian comment sections:*

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<sup>16</sup> The same applies to the study of the second stage of the debate, elaborated on below.

*VG*, Sep. 8 2015: “Stordalen about hotel help for the refugees: - Not possible to profit from this”. 100 comments.

*NRK*, Sep. 8 2015: “Stordalen wants to house 5000 refugees». 100 comments.

*Aftenposten*, Sep. 5 2015: “UDI rents hotel rooms from Stordalen. Price: 650 per night”. 100 comments.

*Aftenposten*, Sep. 6a 2015: “Stordalen praised by humanitarian organisations, but is criticised in social media”. 100 comments.

*Aftenposten* Sep. 6b 2015: “Had to get diapers for the asylum children in a hurry”. 100 comments.

*Swedish comment sections:*

*Aftonbladet*, Sep. 3a 2015: “Here is how you can send money to help the refugees – like Vi hjälper [We are helping] for more initiatives”. 90 comments.

*Aftonbladet*, Sep. 3b 2015: “Vi hjälper – here is how you can contribute in the catastrophe”. 51 comments.

*Dagens Nyheter*, Sep. 6a 2015: “#jagdelar [Ishare]”. 95 comments.

*Dagens Nyheter*, Sep. 6b 2015: “Kerstin Ekman: There exists a gold reserve of humanity in Sweden”. 26 comments.

*Dagens Nyheter*, Sep. 6c 2015: “This is #jagdelar”. 19 comments.

*Dagens Nyheter*, Sep. 6d 2015: “#jagdelar [Ishare] the faith in humanity and human compassion”. 17 comments.

*Expressen*, Sep. 5 2015: “Swedes show their support for the Red Cross and Expressen’s effort”. 81 comments.

*Danish comment sections:*

*Berlingske*, Aug. 5 2015: “Welcome ad addressed at refugees to be printed in big British newspaper”. 94 comments.

*Berlingske*, Sep. 29 2015: “Here is the counter-move to Støjberg’s ad”. 64 comments.

*Ekstra Bladet*, Aug. 4 2015: “Swindled Støjberg. Advertise for Denmark as amazing asylum country”. 86 comments.

*Politiken*, Sep. 9 2015: “New ad in Libanon. Danes apologise for Støjberg’s campaign”. 100 comments.

*Politiken*, Aug. 3 2015: “Danish chairwoman to refugees in a British newspaper: Please come to Denmark”. 98 comments.

The articles that constitute the second stage of the debate are concerned with the political decisions to make retrenchments in the nation’s asylum policies. This happened in the period between November 2015 and January 2016 in the three countries. This period was marked by more negative press coverage of the refugee crisis, with an increased emphasis on the negative consequences for the nations’ security and economy (Hovden et al., 2018), as well as political measures to stop the influx of refugees (Hagelund, n.d.; Hernes, 2018). In this period, all three countries debated, and ultimately decided, to

implement stricter asylum policies to cope with the influx of refugees and asylum seekers. Among the retrenchments were the implementations of temporary border controls, temporary residence permits for refugees, medical age determination tests of under-aged asylum seekers, and limiting the right to family reunification. In the Danish context, also controversial legislation was passed, known as “smykkebogen [the jewellery law]”.

The initial data collection looked for all the material posted to the Facebook sites of the dominant news outlets in Norway, Sweden and Denmark about the retrenchments in asylum policies between November 2015 and January 2016. The events chosen were the prominent policies and the presentation of these by the politicians. The three events chosen for this period are:

*Norway:* The asylum conciliation [asylforliket], in which all but two parties in parliament agreed on a list of retrenchments in the asylum policies, and the debates leading up to it and following it.

*Sweden:* The government’s decision to implement stricter asylum policies and their presentation of these at a press conference, and the debates preceding these discussions.

*Denmark:* The government’s decision to implement stricter asylum policies, among them the so-called “jewellery law”, and the debate leading up to it.

As from the first period, five posts from each country were included in the material. Here the Swedish posts had more comments than in the first case; thus, no additional posts were included in the material. The selection of the five posts was conducted after reading through all articles and interpreting and evaluating their importance and perspective. The selection of articles to which the comments were written, presented the retrenchments made, and often explained and evaluated them. In the articles, both the politicians initiating the retrenchments and their critics were quoted. In contrast to the articles selected in from the first period, the articles from the second period more clearly presented the issue as a political issue, as well as a controversial issue in which there

were conflicting views (see also Appendix B, for additional information about the selected posts).

Material and number of comments included in the material:

*Norwegian comment sections:*

*VG*, Nov. 11 2015: “Here is how Labour Party-Jonas will stricthen the asylum policy”. 100 comments.

*Dagbladet*, Nov. 19 2015: “These are the asylum agreement’s 29 points”. 100 comments.

*Dagbladet*, Nov. 9 2015: “- One cannot just come here and have welfare benefits that Norwegian taxpayers have built.” 100 comments.

*NRK*, Dec. 29 2015: “We will have an asylum policy among the strictest in Europe” 100 comments.

*Aftenposten*, Dec. 29 2015: “Here are Sylvi Listhaug’s (Progress Party) demands to immigrants”. 100 comments.

*Swedish comment sections:*

*Aftonbladet*, Nov. 26 2015: “The government has decided to implement medical age determination tests of alone-coming children”. 54 comments.

*Aftonbladet*, Nov. 24 2015: “Romson in tears when the government implements temporary residencies”. 100 comments.

*Dagens Nyheter*, Nov 24 2015: “Sweden adapts the migration policy to EU’s lowest level”. 100 comments.

*Expressen*, Nov. 11 2015: “THE MESSAGE: The government implements border controls” 100 comments.

*SVT Nyheter*, Nov. 26 2015, “The voters’ verdict on the new hard refugee policy: - Necessary, but way too late”. 68 comments.

*Danish comment sections:*

*Ekstra-Bladet*, Jan. 26 2016: “Controversial asylum retrenchments passed”. 99 comments.

*Politiken*, Jan. 26 2016: “Today the Parliament votes on the controversial immigrant law no. 87”. 86 comments.

*Berlingske*, Jan. 26 2016: “Asylum retrenchments are now passed”. 100 comments.

*Berlingske*, Jan. 6 2016: “Støjberg wants to make it more difficult for unwanted immigrants”. 100 comments.

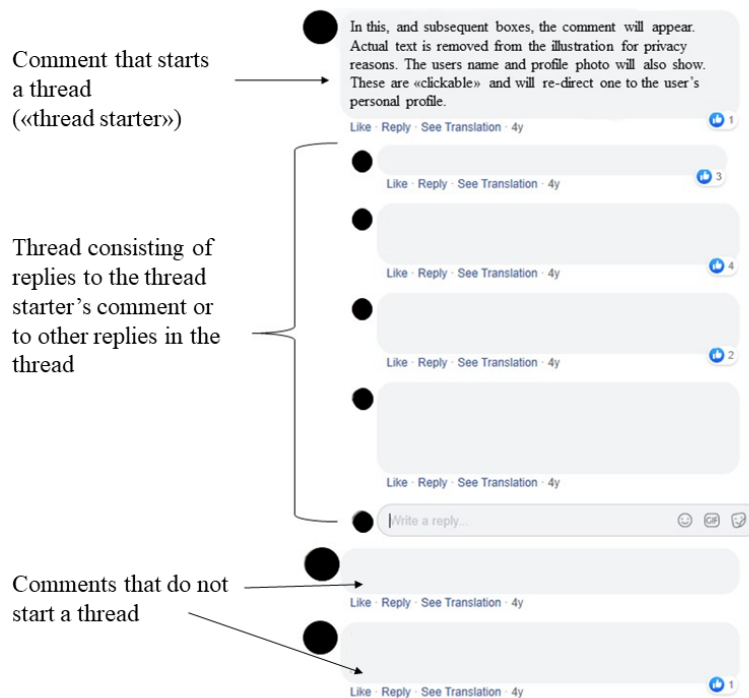
*DR Nyheder* Jan. 20 2016: “Denmark asked to explain jewellery law in the EU”. 100 comments.



## Data processing

In the analysis, the comment sections are examined as entire texts, consisting of many different debate genres and topics. A description of the news article, to which the comments are written as replies to, is also included in the analysis, in order to gain a better understanding of the contextual frames of the debates.

The newspaper's post consists of a pitch, a photo, an embedded link to the article, the heading of the news article, comments, as well as replies to these comments (see Figure 1). When a comment is replied to by others, we have a thread. The comment that starts the thread is in the following referred to as the "thread starter".

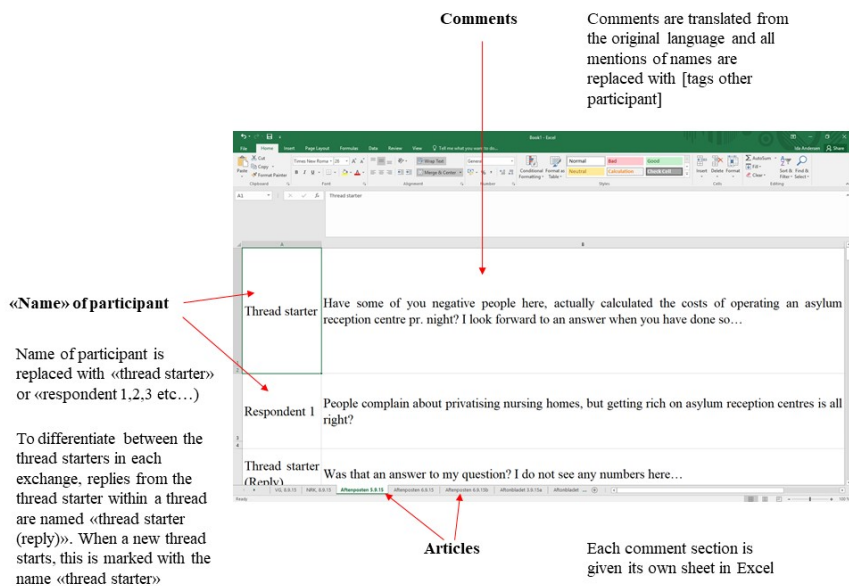


**Figure 1:** Illustration of a comment section. The debates will take place either in the general comment section or in sub-"threads" within the overall comment section, as illustrated by the figure.

In the analysis, I use the terms "thread", "reply", "comment", "thread-starter", "respondent 1, 2, 3 etc", as well as "pitch". A *thread* refers to a sequence of the comment

sections consisting of one initial comment written by what I refer to as a *thread starter*, as well as the *replies* to this comment. Not all comments in one thread are replies to the initial comment, but rather enter into the conversation started by this initial comment. *Respondent 1, 2, 3 etc.* refers to the speakers who are engaged in this thread, together with the *thread starter*. A *comment* refers to all types of comments, irrespective of whether they started a thread, were not responded to by anyone or were written as a reply to previous comments. Finally, *pitch* refers to the additional text provided by the newspaper when posting the article to their Facebook page. This should not be confused with the *heading* of the article, which also appears in the Facebook post, as well as in the news article (see also Figure 4 in chapter 5).

As mentioned, the API-lockdown required that the material was collected manually. To ensure that the dataset was manageable and that comments were anonymised properly, I copied comment by comment into an excel-document, as shown in the figure below.



**Figure 2:** Illustration of the dataset entered into excel, with added explanations. All personal and sensitive information is removed from all of the comments.

As the figure shows, all names were replaced (including mentions of other commentator's names inside a comment) with codes indicating whether the commentator was the thread-starter or a commentator replying to a comment (respondent 1, 2, 3 ...). When the thread-starter also engaged in the replies to his or her comment (in the thread), this was marked as "thread starter (reply)".

### **Two-step analysis of the texts**

The analysis of the texts was conducted in two steps, and a hermeneutic movement between these steps. The first step of the analysis is a categorisation of all the texts, in which 2728 comments were broken into different thematic, formal and functional categories. The second step of the analysis performed a close textual analysis of the comments within each category, as well as the interactions brought about by various types of comments. This step also included an analysis of the contextual frames of the debate. This was done by examining the newspaper articles these were written to, identifying dominant ways in which the immigration issue has been discussed in the Scandinavian public spheres, both historically and in relation to the refugee crisis, as well as the technological structure of Facebook. The analysis thus is conducted in a hermeneutic movement between single texts, interactions, and the context, as well as in a dialectical movement between categorisation, close reading and conceptual reflection. In the following, I account for these three stages of the analysis.

#### **Step 1: Categorisation of the texts**

To get an overview of the large material, I found it useful to begin by categorising the utterances after their various themes and functions. The excel worksheets (see figure 2) were imported to *Nvivo*, where each of the 2728 comments was broken into different thematic, formal and functional categories. The categorisation of the comments should here be viewed as the first step of the analysis, which later informed the close textual analysis of the comments. The categorisation was of a qualitative, iterative nature. While inspired by pre-existing categories derived from theory and previous research on the issue, the categories ultimately emerged from recurring practices and themes in the

material itself. Thus, categorisation of the texts was in itself an interpretive and evaluative process (Altheide, 1987).

“Codes” are here understood as “[t]ags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, 56). By this, I refer to how the “codes” are primarily a tool allowing the researcher to categorise a large material. The codes are developed to capture and name something salient, typical or prominent in the texts. Each comment was coded by the level of meaning in the overall comment. However, the codes developed are not mutually exclusive. It was necessary to allow for an utterance to be coded into more than one category, as many of them contained more than one meaning and carried more than one function.

The coding-processes was conducted in three steps, where new meanings and interpretations arose throughout the process.

Initially, I assumed a data-driven inductive method, where a large number of codes were developed uncritically in an attempt to identify both the substantive, formal and functional features of each comment. Each utterance was given a code that was descriptive of the actual content in it. For example, a code was: “We should not receive more refugees!”, and another: “We should not receive more refugees, because we cannot afford it.” This left me with a large set of descriptive codes, which I then used as a starting point to identify recurrent substantive features, formal elements and functions, that allowed me to merge many of the codes in a second stage of the coding.

To identify recurring substantive features, I merged many of the codes into categories of substantive and formal topoi, as well as loci communes (Kjeldsen, 2017, 151). In other words, the utterances were categorised after the particular perspective applied on the issue (e.g. economy or morale), the internal structure of the argument (e.g. analogies and contrasts), as well as “common sense” beliefs, standard formulations, expressions and sayings (Andersen, 2012, 160), for example, the commonplace expression “*not genuine refugees*” or “*help in the nearby areas*”. Together, these three different types of topoi offer a way to examine the different forms of arguments, formulations and viewpoints that are recurrent within a genre and an issue. Thereby, this

three-part categorisation of topoi, produced insights into the cognitive and cultural structures available, both in the immigration issue, as well as in the comment sections.

The initial data-driven categorisation of the utterances made it evident that the dominant formal elements of the utterances, were traits of vernacular, personal (Campbell, 1973, 1998, 1999)<sup>17</sup>, as well as provocative style (Lund, 2012, 2017). Consequently, the second round of categorisation merged utterances into categories of personal (e.g. personal anecdote) and provocative style (e.g. ridicule) when such formal features were observable.

Moreover, the initial categories were recoded into categories of relevant functions, i.e. as attacks, defences and acclaims (Benoit, 2001; Benoit & Harthcock, 1999).

Again, this categorisation, while providing me with a more systemised impression of the material, resulted in many codes (107), and a high degree of cross-coding. I, then, in the third round of coding, went back to the full material, where it was possible to see each utterance in relation to the context in which it appeared. This required examining both the newspaper article and its presentation on Facebook (“pitch), to which the comment was posted, as well as the interaction of which it was a part. When examined as part of an interaction, many of the utterances gained new functions and meaning, than when examined in isolation. An example is the following interaction:

Has the Swedish government suddenly become racist!!!

*Reply: Ok, so in your opinion, all should be allowed into Sweden? IS and many others? Can they stay at your place then?*

I thought you would understand that I was being ironic. The Swedish government calls the Sweden Democrats racists, and I wrote ironically that they are also racist for implementing border controls (c. Expressen 11.11.15).

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<sup>17</sup> Campbell describes these formal elements, i.e. elements such as self-disclosure, direct addresses, pathos-appeals and affective charged words, anecdotal evidence based on personal experience, assuming a persona as an average individual, as elements of a *feminine* style. Here, I view them as elements of a vernacular, personal style (see e.g. Howard, 2010; Svennevig, 2001, 246-259, see also Chapter 6).

The first comment in this exchange was originally coded as “Attack: Politicians, parties, policies (direction)”, and “Attack: Racism (topos)”. We see from the reply that this is also how the utterance is interpreted by another participant. The response to this interpretation of the utterance, however, makes it clear that the utterance was “ironic”. As such, a movement between the particular utterances and the context made new interpretations and new patterns visible.

The third stage of the coding, then, was conducted in a hermeneutical movement between the patterns already identified through the two first stages of the coding, every single utterance in the existing categories, as well as the context of each utterance. Based on the impression formed of the material and the research question guiding the study, a decision was made to categorise the utterances after the overall performative function they had in the interaction of which they were part of (Table 2, see also Appendix A, for explanations and examples of each category).

I still allowed for an utterance to be coded in more than one category but reduced the number of codes substantially. This resulted in seven main categories: 1) *Advice for/against future action*, 2) *Personal action frames*, 3), *Subjective evaluations*, 4) *Acclaims*, 5) *Evaluative definitions*, 6) *Attacks*, and 7) *Sanctions*. Some of these main categories were further divided into sub-categories. Three additional categories (8-10) were added to capture the comments that did not contain anything but “external content”, i.e. comments that did not contain any self-produced text. One category (11) captured the utterances that, even after the reading of the texts in context, were impossible to interpret. Finally, two categories (12-13) account for whether the utterance is written as the first comment in a thread, and thus is interacting with the newspaper article (thread starter) or is a response to other comments in the comment sections (replies).

**Table 2:** Categories and sub-categories from third, and final, stage of coding (n=2728).

	<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
<b>1</b>	Advice for/against future action	322
<b>1.1</b>	<i>Collective responsibility</i>	103
<b>1.2</b>	<i>Make demands</i>	29
<b>1.3</b>	<i>Nearby areas</i>	12
<b>1.4</b>	<i>Other countries</i>	10
<b>1.5</b>	<i>Weak groups at home</i>	133
<b>1.6</b>	<i>Economy</i>	35
<b>2</b>	Personal action frames	63
<b>3</b>	Subjective evaluations	849
<b>3.1</b>	<i>Assuming the role of an “average” citizen</i>	275
<b>3.2</b>	<i>Personal evaluation/truth</i>	478
<b>3.3</b>	<i>Personal anecdote</i>	96
<b>4</b>	Acclaims	647
<b>4.1</b>	<i>Persons or actions that contribute</i>	107
<b>4.2</b>	<i>Participant in the comment sections</i>	122
<b>4.3</b>	<i>Political actors</i>	418
<b>5</b>	Evaluative definition	321
<b>5.1</b>	<i>Definitions of the immigrants</i>	236
<b>5.2</b>	<i>Definitions of the nation’s economy</i>	85
<b>6</b>	Attacks	1412
<b>6.1</b>	<i>Morale/intention</i>	607
<b>6.2</b>	<i>Claims/arguments</i>	271
<b>6.3</b>	<i>Generic</i>	116
<b>6.4</b>	<i>Attack on political actors</i>	418
<b>7</b>	Sanctions	777
<b>7.1</b>	<i>Misunderstanding</i>	63
<b>7.2</b>	<i>Irrelevant contribution</i>	327
<b>7.3</b>	<i>Personal attack</i>	111
<b>7.4</b>	<i>Style</i>	66
<b>7.5</b>	<i>Generalisation</i>	54
<b>7.6</b>	<i>Incorrect information</i>	33
<b>7.7</b>	<i>Source criticism</i>	123
<b>8</b>	No self-produced text: Only hyperlink	16
<b>9</b>	No self-produced text: Only emoticons	9
<b>10</b>	No self-produced text: Only tag	3
<b>11</b>	Content incomprehensible	54
<b>12</b>	<i>Sequence: 1<sup>st</sup> comment in thread</i>	939
<b>13</b>	<i>Sequence: Reply to another comment</i>	1789

In Appendix A, I offer explanations and examples for each code. Here I will provide a brief explanation of some of the codes. As the table shows, some of the main categories (1-7) were divided into subcategories.

The sub-categories to category 1 are topoi and commonplace expressions found in *advice for/against future action*. The utterances in these categories function as arguments, here understood as consisting of both a claim and a justification of that claim (e.g. “We should make demands on the immigrants, because....”). Indeed, there are more recurring topoi and commonplace expressions in the material than the six sub-codes signify. However, these perform other functions than advocating for or against future action. An example is the commonplace expression “goodness poser”, which is an attack on an opponent’s morale/intention and, thus, coded in category 6.1.

The sub-categories to category 3 account for the formal elements of subjective evaluations. Category 3.1. *Assuming the role of an “average” citizen* involves utterances in which this role of the speaker is emphasised, as in comments such as “As a pensioner with low income...”. Category 3.2 *Personal evaluation/truth* involves comments that present highly personal “truths” about reality, as well as personal evaluations of this, such as “I, for my part, believe...”. Category 3.3. *Personal anecdote* involves utterances in which personal experiences function either as reasons in arguments or self-disclosure. When these personal anecdotes function as reasons in arguments, they often do so through the topos “Weak groups at home”, as such some of the utterances in this sub-category are also coded in the sub-category 1.5.

The sub-categories to category 4, shows the target of the acclaim.

The sub-categories to category 5 show what is defined. As we see, it is primarily the immigrants who are defined (5.1). In this category, we find utterances from the commonplace expression “not genuine refugees” and “people in need”, as well as the topoi “culture” and “security”. The nation’s economic situation is also defined (5.2), primarily from an economic topos, and the commonplace expressions “we are a rich nation” and “we are a small nation”. Whereas these could be seen as advice for future action, i.e. as enthymemic arguments where the proposal is left out in the actual utterance, I have chosen to keep this as a distinct category. I did so, as what characterises the utterances in this category is that they do not explicitly contain advice for or against



future action, albeit this will often follow from the definition of the situation. A few utterances from this category are, nevertheless, also coded in categories 1.1 and 1.6, as they also advocate for or against future action.

The sub-categories to category 6 show what is attacked and who. 6.1 *Morale/intention* contains both attacks on other participants in the debates, and on other persons, e.g. a celebrity who appears in the media with an appeal to help the refugees. In both cases, the attack targets an other's *person*. By contrast, attacks on claims/arguments (6.2) are attacks on other participants' utterances. These are attacks on the *content* of other participant's utterances, in contrast to the utterances in category 7) *Sanctions*, which are attacks or criticism of other participant's debate practices and behaviours, i.e. the ways in which the utterance is performed. Sub-category 6.3 contains personal attacks that are generic, i.e. they attack a person but not anything in particular about that person. Instead, the attack is generic, i.e. it could be used to attack anyone with whom one disagrees. An example would be: "You idiot!". Sub-category 6.4 contains attacks on political actors, i.e. both personal attacks on particular politicians and attacks on the party.

Sub-categories 7.1-7.7 account for what about an utterance is sanctioned.

All comments are coded into one of the two categories 12-13, and these categories are mutually exclusive. This is done only to get an overview of the degree of interaction in the debates. The categories 8-11 are also mutually exclusive, as they require that the comment consists *only* of a hyperlink, without any additional text (8), *only* emoticons (9), or *only* tags (10), or that the comment is impossible to comprehend altogether (11).

The remaining categories are not mutually exclusive, as an utterance may perform more than one function at once. For example, an utterance may both acclaim a person or action and attack another. An example from the material is the comment: "Great and necessary initiative, not all Danes are like Støjberg and the Danish People's Party."

Important to note is that this categorisation is general and does not fully account for how the interaction in the material unfolds. This is a challenge to all attempts to categorise complex and often ambiguous texts that gain their meaning and function in

interaction with others. For this reason, the categorisation of the utterances serves only to guide the close textual analysis of the utterances, which is done by going back to the material in which all comments appear together with the other comments in the comment sections, and where it is possible to see them in relation to the interaction of which they are part.

The actual textual analysis contains two parts: The context and the texts. That is, the analysis examines not only the utterances but also the contextual frames of them. In the following, I account for this analytical process.

### **Step 2: Close textual and intertextual analysis of the texts**

The analysis is a rhetorical criticism based on a close reading of texts and the intertextual reactions they produce. Rhetorical criticism should be understood as an umbrella-term for analysis, interpretation and evaluation of rhetorical utterances (Villadsen, 2009). Broadly defined, it describes the hermeneutic, critical close-reading of rhetorical discourse (Ceccarelli, 2001, 6-9; Rønlev, 2018).

The aim of rhetorical criticism is to account for how utterances function in a given situation, and how the utterances respond to the situation in which they occur. It examines “the purpose of a text from evidence the text itself provides” (Black, 1965, 16). It is a qualitative research method, “designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artefacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (Foss, 2009, 6). Rhetorical criticism is commonly described as more of an art than a method, as it relies heavily on the critic’s subjective interpretations as well at the text at hand (Kuypers, 2009, 14). This is evident how the critic is described as “the sole instrument of observation” (Black, 1965, xi), and interpretation is seen as the central feature of rhetorical criticism (Leff, 1980; Villadsen, 2014).

Interpretation should here be understood as “the overall account of the text’s meaning and mode of operation” (Villadsen, 2014, 42, my translation). Based on an understanding of the text as the key to its interpretation, Leff (1980) formulated the concept of rhetorical *close textual analysis*. This is an interpretative practice aimed at developing a “theory” about what a given text *does*, based on a close reading of it, and a hermeneutic movement between the text(s), its context(s), the critic’s prior

understanding, as well as relevant theoretical concepts. It is a hermeneutic process that “meditates between the experience of the critic and the forms of experience expressed in the text” (Leff, 1980, 345). The critic reads back and forth between the text and the rhetorical concepts that guide the analysis.

Moreover, it involves a hermeneutic process between text and context. As utterances appear in different situations, in which they perform different functions, the critic approaches the text, not through a pre-defined set of steps, but rather in a way that takes into consideration the distinctive character of the text. Based on close readings of the text, the critic makes arguments about what it does (Leff, 1980; Villadsen, 2014, 52). The critic attends to “the interplay of ideas, images, and arguments as they unfold within the spatial and temporal economy of the text” (Browne, 2009, 63). This requires examining the form and content of the text, and the interplay between these, while asking what the context of the text is, what the text is intended to do, what it does, and how it potentially functions on an audience.

Consequently, the close textual analysis is not paired with a particular theoretical perspective. The choice of theory and analytical concepts depends on what is examined (the research question), what the analysis reveals (the material), and what theories and concepts are most relevant for answering the research question and describe the material (research tools). As a consequence, close textual reading, as a method, cannot be described in detail, but instead rests on the critic’s presumptions and impressions of the texts’ unique context, substance and form (Leff, 1980, 345; Villadsen, 2014, 42).

In the analysis of the news-generated social media debates, which are not coherent texts written by a single author, but rather consisting of a variety of different utterances, carrying different functions, it is, as I have argued, necessary to mobilise a variety of theoretical perspectives and to evaluate every single utterance after what the particular utterance does, evaluate it in relation to other utterances in the material, and to try to identify both recurrent patterns and divergence.

In the analysis of the comment sections, my interpretation of the intentions and functions of the texts is also supported by the reactions they bring about. Inspired by the close textual-intertextual analysis (Ceccarelli, 2001, 6), the analysis makes use of the audiences’ written reactions to validate and nuance my own interpretation of the

rhetorical practice and its functions. A textual-intertextual analysis is a method for rhetorical criticism, where the critic performs close textual analysis of both the primary text s/he examines and secondary texts (e.g. reviews, articles, letters) responding to the primary text. Based on the close reading of the secondary texts, the critic can then modify, alter or strengthen his or her hypothesis about the primary text's rhetorical effects (Ceccarelli, 2001).

In this study, this means that utterances are analysed both based on the utterance's form, content and function, as well as the reactions it brings about. This can be done, as these reactions are readily available in the comment sections in the form of replies. Moreover, when met with a particular reaction, speakers will often follow up with another comment, explaining the intent of her or his comment. Thereby, it is possible to interpret the rhetoric in a particular comment in relation both to the speaker's intention, as expressed by him- or herself, and the effects it has on the audience, as expressed through reactions. By moving between a close-reading of one particular comment and the secondary texts it brings about, I can, thus, develop and sharpen my own interpretation of the text (Harris, 2003, 249; Rønlev, 2018).

The benefits from such an approach are the flexibility and ability to adapt to different contexts in order to provide "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of rhetorical communication's fluid and always-changing contexts, particularly pertinent online.

In this study, this means that the analysis is divided into two parts: 1) the contextual frames, and 2) the utterances and interactions. The first part of the analysis is presented in chapters 4 and 5, where the most important contextual frames for the interaction are accounted for, namely the issue and the medium. The two chapters review previous studies of immigration discourse, primarily in the Scandinavian context, and affordances of social media in order to describe features of the issue and the medium that may have influence what is expressed, how, as well as how the interaction develops. Additionally, a description of distinctive features of the articles that are debated is provided in chapter 4, in order to gain an understanding of what types of utterances these invited. Moreover, chapter 5 examines the particular affordances that are in force in the news-generated Facebook debates and demonstrates these with examples from the material.

The second part of the analysis examines the utterances and interactions in the material. The analysis studies the utterances both as isolated rhetorical utterances, and as rhetorical moves in the debate.

To examine what characterises the interaction in the debates, a version of stasis theory, as it has been adjusted to practical argumentation (Jørgensen & Onsberg, 2008), and rhetorical criticism (Just & Gabrielsen, 2008), constitutes the backbone of the analysis. The benefits of such an approach are that stasis theory allows us to establish what the contentious issue in a debate is, and at what level the debate takes place, i.e. whether the disagreement concerns the facts in the issue (what has happened), definitions of what has happened (how should we understand it), evaluations of what has happened (is it good or bad), or what should be done with what has happened (future action).

As such, the four stases: the *conjectural*, *definitional*, *qualitative*, and *advocative* (Jørgensen & Onsberg, 2008), or *transcendental* (Just & Gabrielsen, 2008), are at once resources for understanding and categorising a disagreement, tools for invention (practical argumentation), as well as identifying rhetorical strategies, and the expressions of these, in a given dispute (Just & Gabrielsen, 2008, 26-27).

One single utterance may reside within more than one stasis at once, but generally, utterances in the conjectural and definitional stasis will usually be assertive and referential speech acts, i.e. utterances that perform claims about and representations of reality. However, definitions may also contain evaluations and thus be evaluative, or “persuasive”, definitions that define the value of the conditions defined (Jørgensen & Onsberg, 2008, 44; Just & Gabrielsen, 2008, 28). Utterances in the qualitative stasis contain evaluations and will thus often be expressive: They express the speaker’s subjective evaluations (Jørgensen & Onsberg, 2008, 44-45). Understood as the level of advocating, utterances in the fourth stasis will usually be advice for or against future action (Jørgensen & Onsberg, 2008, 45). Understood as the transcendental level, by contrast, utterances in the fourth stasis will attempt to change the understanding of the issue, and thus the starting point of the debate, through re-framing (Just & Gabrielsen, 2008, 22-23). The stases can, thus, be categorised in the following way:

	<b>Conjectural</b>	<b>Definitional</b>	<b>Qualitative</b>	<b>Advocative</b>	<b>Transcendental</b>
<b>Dispute</b>	The facts/realities in the issue: What is true and false?	Definitions of the facts/realities: How is this to be defined?	Evaluations of the facts: Is it good or bad?	Advice for/against future action: What should we do about it?	Change of perspective: What is this actually about?
<b>Types of utterances</b>	Assertive Referential	Definition Evaluative definition	Expressive Acclaim Attacks	Directives Arguments	Topical/thematic leaps
<b>Example from the material</b>	I have donated.	They are asylum seekers, not refugees.	Great to see that people are contributing!	We should close our borders	What this is really about, is...

**Figure 3:** The four stases explained with examples from the material. The categorisation is informed by Jørgensen & Onsberg (2008), and Just & Gabrielsen (2008). While Jørgensen and Onsberg treat the advocative stasis as the fourth stasis, Just and Gabrielsen treats the transcendental stasis as the fourth stasis.

Stasis theory, which is concerned with the stages of *argumentation*, can arguably be applied also to texts that do not contain arguments (Jørgensen & Onsberg, 2008, 47). For the analysis of the news-generated social media debates, I find it useful as a starting point to identify the source of disagreement in the debates, i.e. to understand what the discussion is about. However, I argue, this approach alone does not always offer much to the analysis. As I will show, some of the discussions seem not to involve disagreement at all, but rather the discursive struggle is over the possibilities to perform one's "authentic" expression and defeat the adversary verbally. Combined with other theoretical and analytical concepts, however, I argue that this approach to the texts makes it possible to produce new insights into the characteristic features of these debates.

As established earlier in this section, the close textual analysis, is a hermeneutic and interpretative process. As such, the choice of theory and analytical concepts depends both on what is examined, what the analysis reveals, and what research tools are most relevant. The analysis in this dissertation examines several different characteristic features of the debates, as discussed in chapter 2: the personalised expression and expressions of an authenticity ideal (chapter 6); struggles over evaluations and

definitions through epideictic rhetoric (chapter 7); the aggressive argument culture (chapter 8); as well as norms and genre conventions that manifest themselves through sanctions (chapter 9). As a consequence, the analysis mobilises various theoretical and analytical concepts from various theoretical traditions. For this reason, a brief presentation of the dominant categories examined and the analytical approach is included in each of the analysis chapters in part III (chapters 6-9).

### **Practical and ethical challenges**

There is little doubt that digital technology has changed the conditions for human communication and interaction. It has also changed how human communication can be studied. For researchers, social media has produced both challenges and possibilities. On the one hand, it is now, to a much larger extent, possible to study people's everyday rhetoric practices and experiences as expressed, for example, on personal blogs and in comment sections online. Comment sections to news articles or a politician's Facebook-post can give the researcher access to the readers' reactions to the rhetorical utterances, as well as to how people speak about these issues. On the other hand, it poses several ethical and practical challenges.

The rich masses of readily available texts, produced by ordinary citizens, has created new possibilities to access and analyse vernacular discourse. However, "capitalizing on that tantalizing potential is far from straightforward, as the seemingly infinite archive of online texts, is among other things, dauntingly massive and modally complex" (Gibbons & Seitz, 2018, 170). Scholars have argued that the digital era's "archival abundance" has created a "methodological moment" that substantially changes rhetoric's field of practice (Enoch & Gold, 2013, 106). The challenges posed to rhetorical studies in the digital era are not novel. Instead, they are challenges to the study of rhetoric in the modern media society more generally, characterised by fragmentation, changeability and complexity (Kjeldsen, 2008). These challenges are, however, especially pertinent online, as social network sites are by nature interactive, intertextual and transitory.

Both *texts* and *situations* are complex, changing and incalculable (Kjeldsen, 2008; Hess, 2018). Communication online is characterised by intertextuality,

inconsistency, immediacy, pace and fragmentation (Kjeldsen, 2008; Warnick, 1998, 2007). Contexts are countless and indefinite online, and the lines between different contexts, for instance between a private and a public context, are not clear-cut. Texts and discourses are fragmented and circulated – often far removed from their original context and speaker. Fragments from rhetorical utterances are shared and re-contextualised, commonly in multimodal utterances, such as “memes” or “mash-ups”. Thereby, texts gain new meaning, and in many cases, audiences only encounter the re-contextualised version of a text.

Consequently, the interpreter must not only interpret the rhetorical utterance, which is the object of study but also find a way to decide what constitutes a text and a context in a meaningful way. Whereas rhetoricians have always selected “key” texts to study, the abundance of texts in digital environments, in contrast to analogue archives, “has no natural boundaries and is more fragmentary, anarchic, and ephemeral” (Gibbons & Seitz, 2018). Necessarily, the critic’s task of “inventing a text suitable for criticism” (McGee, 1990), increases, and the selection of a material to study an increasingly important part of the rhetorical criticism. As described above, this study attempts to solve this by examining utterances both as isolated rhetorical utterances and as rhetorical moves in an interaction, as well as interacting with and structured by two contextual frames, namely the issue and the medium.

Not only selecting but also collecting data is challenging, for both practical and ethical reasons. Although there exist tools to collect data, frequent software updates and changes in the sites’ privacy policies, make these unreliable. As mentioned earlier, at the beginning of 2018, Facebook dramatically restricted the access to its pages’ Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), allegedly as a response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal.<sup>18</sup> As it is the API that allows researchers to retrieve large-scale data from Facebook, this change made software dedicated to academic research on Facebook, such as netvizz, NodeXL, SocialMediaLab, fb\_scrape\_public and Rfacebook, useless. Consequently, one has to collect the data manually from public pages on Facebook and anonymise the participations manually. Not only does this make retrieving large data-

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<sup>18</sup> Schroepfer, M. (2018). An Update on Our Plans to Restrict Data Access on Facebook. *Facebook*, April 4, <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/04/restricting-data-access/>



set incredibly time-consuming, often impossible, it also poses substantial ethical challenges for the researcher, who is now unable to receive the data fully anonymised from the start.

Given the size of Facebook's userbase, with more than two billion users and 140 million businesses, as well as widespread activity, with more than 100 billion messages shared every day<sup>19</sup>, it is crucial that researchers have access to examine how the social network site facilitates human communication, experience and interaction. If we are to gain insights into how new media and new technology change the general conditions for public communication, and in doing so, be better equipped to create conditions that allow all citizens to take part in the public debate, we need to be able to collect data from one of the most important arenas for human communication today. Moreover, Facebook's power as a company with seventy offices around the globe and 43 030 full-time employees (per Sept. 30, 2019<sup>20</sup>), it is crucial to be able to examine its activities critically.

The collection and analysis of content from these sites are, furthermore, complicated by another form of lack of transparency. In the comment sections, comments are often removed from the thread. They can be removed from the thread either by the one who wrote the comment (either by deleting it or by deleting one's profile altogether), by the newspaper's moderators, or by Facebook after other participants have reported it. This is, however, not marked in any way. The only way to discover this is from the remaining comments in the thread. Sometimes, participants address commentators that are nowhere to be seen in the thread through tags, and sometimes indirectly by referring directly to the content of their comment. Finally, a challenge that is not particular to Facebook, but all digital environments, is the instability of hyperlinks. Often, hyperlinks posted in the comment sections lead to sites that no longer exist, either due to updates in the hyperlink, or removal of the site altogether. In sum, this makes it difficult to gain an overview of the relationship between texts and contexts and to interpret many of the texts in the comment sections.

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<sup>19</sup> Facebook (2019). Company info. Sept. 30, <https://about.fb.com/company-info/>.

<sup>20</sup> (Ibid.)

In addition to the fragmentation of texts characteristic of communication in social network sites, audiences are also fragmented both in a spatial and temporal sense. As messages are shared and stored, audiences can encounter these both in different “places” of the internet (Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, the online newspaper, and so forth), and in different places around the globe. Some may encounter these messages at immediately as they are posted, whereas others may first encounter those years later due to a search or because the content is replicated and shared. Thus, utterances online are seen by an “invisible” audience (boyd, 2008). Also the speaker may be invisible to the audience, as the one who shares an utterance is not necessarily the one who originally produced it. Additionally, many of the texts that circulate online are anonymously or “autobotically” produced (Gibbons & Seitz, 2018, 170). The lines between rhetor and audience are, furthermore, often unclear and unstable, as the communication is produced collectively and characterised by interactivity. Another key challenge for rhetorical studies online is, thus, how to conceptualise audiences and rhetors in a situation in which “[e]veryone is a rhetor, and everyone an audience” (Warnick, 1998, 77).

This points to that it is complicated to isolate contexts that reasonably can be described as rhetorical situations when the communication happens online. In digital environments, speakers often find themselves in multiple different rhetorical situations at the same time, acting on multiple exigencies, addressing multiple audiences, and necessarily their communication is dependent on multiple, often conflicting sets of constraints. These circumstances are challenging to navigate for the users of social media, and they are challenging to study for the researcher. Rhetorical utterances are often not clearly delimited, intentional and expedient. Rather they are mosaic, characterised by bricolage, flow, change, immediacy and pace (Kjeldsen, 2008; see also Kjeldsen, 2017, 57-58). All of these issues have implications for how we can understand the context of the utterances: How can we isolate contexts that can reasonably be described as rhetorical situations, with an exigence, and audience and certain action-possibilities and constraints?

The field of rhetoric is still in the process of developing methodological approaches to communication in digital environments and, as argued by Gibbons and Seitz:

it is still not entirely clear what rhetoricians can – let alone should – do to navigate and make meaning of this vast, unstructured, “impossibly fragmented” [...], frequently caustic and irrational, often anonymously or autobotically authored, textual “stuff” (Gibbons & Seitz, 2018, 170).

This study should be seen as an effort to overcome these challenges and explore possibilities for studying rhetorical practice in online environments. The analytical framework incorporates both the contextual and textual level of the utterances studied, and in doing so, I argue, can help clarify the complex relationship between texts, contexts, producers and audiences in online environments. Nevertheless, as discussed in this chapter, the methodological procedures pursued in the study also have clear limitations. Rhetoricians, then, need to continue to explore different possibilities and develop new approaches, which better allows us to study online rhetorical practice in the future.

Research on social network sites also raises several ethical challenges. In particular, researching people’s utterances and activities on social media is complicated by the unclear boundaries between what is public and what is private. The Norwegian National Research Ethics’ (NESH)<sup>21</sup>, *Guidelines for internet research*, maintain that research can be conducted without the informants’ consent on online pages that are public and do not contain sensitive information. There are, however, many grey zones, which requires a careful assessment of the researcher. The guide to internet research says:

It is crucial here to distinguish between accessibility in the public sphere and the sensitivity of the information. The statement might have been made in public or in private, and the content can be of a personal or general nature. There is thus a continuum that ranges from particularly sensitive information revealed in closed online forums to general information published in a public arena targeting a broad audience. In terms of research ethics, the grey zone often involves sensitive information and statements published in open Internet forums where it may be less obvious whether this is a public arena or not (NESH, 2019, 9-10).

As drawing a line between what is private and what is public is often tricky in digital environments, this requires the researcher’s careful assessment of the “reasonable expectation of publicity” (NESH, 2019, 10). This refers to the informant’s

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<sup>21</sup> Few other countries have developed their own ethical guidelines for research on digital environments (Ess, 2015), and I, therefore, look to NESH for guidelines.

understanding and expectations to their actions and utterances as public or private, and whether this information may be used for research purposes. Moreover, NESH emphasises the context of communication as crucial in distinguishing between what is public and private (NESH, 2019, 10). In particular, this applies to social network sites where the conditions for communication are not always clear or known to everyone involved, and where understandings and expectations of publicity and privacy settings may vary between users (Elgesem, 2015, 15-16). While media researchers often tend to regard open pages on Facebook, such as the newspapers' pages, as public, we cannot assume that all participants on these sites share this understanding.

In social media, much of people's postings are seen by what danah boyd calls an "invisible audience" (boyd, 2008, 26ff). In many situations, it can be unclear both who a post's audience actually is, and also whom the post is intended for. Thus, it becomes particularly challenging to assess whether the use of utterances posted in social media in research, conflicts with the intentions and expectations the person who posted it had for his or her post. However, obtaining consent from all participants in a comment section, which may involve hundreds of people, will usually be practically impossible. Obtaining consent can also have a negative impact on the object of study itself. Knowing that they are being observed, the participants may change their practices to suit the researcher's interest, or it can make them avoid participation altogether.

In the ethical guidelines, the task of deciding what is public and private, sensitive and not sensitive, is given mainly to the researcher: "Researchers must actively balance these different concerns, and take a personal responsibility for assessing the appropriate criteria for reasonable expectations of publicity" (NESH, 2019, 10). I argue that the comment sections related to the newspapers' Facebook-pages can reasonably be seen as public and that research, thus, can be conducted without consent from the participants.<sup>22</sup> This is supported by the fact that the activity is taking place on the newspaper's public page and commentators are interacting with a broad array of others who are mainly strangers to each other.

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<sup>22</sup> It was also submitted a notification form to the Data Protection Official for Research, Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and the project was allowed to conduct the study.

Moreover, most Facebook users have made use of the privacy settings available, and adjusted who can view, comment or share content posted on their profile page. This indicates that they do not view their Facebook-activity as public in every sense of the word, but distinguishes between the content they regard as public and content they regard as private – either entirely private or accessible only to friends. Thus, I argue, researching open Facebook pages, like those of the newspapers’, does not require consent from the participants. I argue that it is reasonable to expect that participants in a comment section on a newspaper’s open Facebook page regard their activity as public.

Nevertheless, the use of quotations in an analysis of these threads *can* be problematic. Although the comments did not contain sensitive information in their original situation, identification of the same utterances in a published study can make the participants vulnerable. Many of the posts written in the comment sections were political, and they are written to a controversial issue. Exposing ordinary citizens’ political opinions can potentially entail a risk of discomfort, or even danger for the exposed. As a general rule, then, the participants should not be identified more than necessary. In this study, all the participants are anonymised immediately. They are not identified by name, gender, age or location. Moreover, the utterances are translated from Norwegian, Swedish and Danish into English to make them unsearchable. They are, however, translated as accurately as possible, in order to allow for an analysis that is as accurate as possible.

### **Chapter conclusion: What kind of knowledge is produced?**

Digital technology has become an integrated part of people’s use and experience of communication and has changed the conditions for human communication and interaction. The main aim of rhetorical studies is to produce knowledge about the conditions for human communication. In doing so, we are better equipped to create the conditions that give all citizens the possibility to participate in the public sphere (Kjeldsen, 2008, 42). Here, I have proposed a qualitative approach to the texts found in news-generated social media debates. The benefits of a qualitative approach to texts in digital environments is the ability to provide “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973), and in-depth understandings of the often ambiguous and complex nature of each

contribution. Arguing in favour of a qualitative approach to discursive practices in social network sites, more precisely Twitter, Marwick (2014), acknowledges that large-scale analysis aimed at identifying patterns are useful, but emphasises how such studies can also “overlook *how* people do things with Twitter, *why* they do them, and how they *understand* them” (Marwick, 2014, 119, it. in original). A qualitative approach, Marwick argues, can produce such insights by placing technology “into specific social contexts, places, and times” (Marwick, 2014, 119). Similarly, Murthy (2017) argues in favour of inductive methods for the study of Twitter, as this allows researchers in-depth analysis of digital environments, characterised by “messy” contexts, that require approaches beyond deductive reasoning (Murthy, 2017, 560).

With the qualitative close reading of a large number of comments and the entire debate course in which these appear, this dissertation’s empirical contribution is the detailed description of both the contextual frames of and actual texts in public debates on Facebook.

In doing so, the dissertation produces knowledge about the conditions for public debate in a relatively understudied digital arena. Albeit Facebook holds a unique position of all the social network sites in many nations, among them in the three Scandinavian countries, both in terms of extensiveness, use and relevance in people’s lives (Moe et al., 2019, 73; Werliin & Kokholm, 2016), a limited amount of studies have dealt with this particular social network site (as suggested by e.g. Karlsson et al., 2015; Larsson, 2018). Given Facebook’s popularity and widespread use, I argue that it is important to examine how it is used for and how it facilitates public debate.

In what follows, I begin by examining the contextual frames of the debates: the immigration issue (chapter 4), and the affordances of the social network site (chapter 5), before I proceed to examine the characteristic features of the debates in chapters 6-9.

**PART II:**  
**The contextual frames of the debates**

## **Chapter 4: The immigration issue and the Syrian refugee crisis**

The social media debates I examine here are about the immigration issue, more precisely the Syrian refugee crisis. As such, the immigration issue in general, and the refugee crisis in particular, provides a central contextual frame for the debates studied in this dissertation. In this chapter, I discuss what conditions the issue creates for public debate. I suggest that the issue influences how the debate develops in three ways, i.e. by actualising questions that facilitate 1) expression of personal identities and emotions, 2) arousal of strong emotions and controversy, and 3) a fusion of deliberative and epideictic rhetoric. What follows is an inquiry into both the immigration issue in general and the refugee crisis – and the presentation of it in the news articles that generated the debates examined – in particular.

### **The Syrian refugee crisis in the Scandinavian context**

During 2015, the number of refugees crossing into Europe increased dramatically. Although being geographically, culturally, and climatically more distant from the Middle East than the rest of Europe, the Scandinavian nation-states were affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. However, the crisis affected the three nation-states differently. Between the three nations, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, there were prominent differences in both arrival numbers, how the crisis was handled politically, as well as how it was discussed in the public debate.

While immigration, and issues related to immigration, receive vast attention in the Scandinavian media on a regular basis, the refugee crisis created a situation in which the immigration issue dominated the public agenda. As the term “the refugee crisis” suggests, it was comprehended as a crisis – both for the refugees and for Europe. The Scandinavian nations – Sweden in particular – experienced a rapid increase in arrivals of asylum seekers, and the authorities – particularly, the Swedish – struggled to deal with the situation. The situation was experienced as an “immigration shock” that pressured the governments to make dramatic retrenchments in the asylum policies (Hagelund, n.d.). During 2015, all three nation states moved in a more restrictive direction, both with regards to regulatory policies and with regards to the refugees’



access to social rights (Hernes, 2018). Again, the shift away from a humanitarian to more restrictive policies was most noticeable in Sweden, where the retrenchments were characterised as a “U-turn” in the field of immigration politics.

At the same time, the situation was perceived to be a humanitarian crisis. The gravity of the situation characterised the public debate about it, and feelings of urgency, chaos and despair were easily aroused. Heart-breaking images of suffering and dead refugees, most prominently the Alan Kurdi-photos, depicting a dead toddler washed ashore on a Turkish beach, were widely circulated in the mass media, as well as in social media. Many engaged personally in the issue, evident in the massive volunteer engagement to help the refugees, much of it mobilised through social media (Eimhjellen, 2016; Fladmoe et al., 2016; SOU, 2017:12, 31).

Prior to the crisis, the Scandinavian countries – particularly Sweden – had some of the most liberal refugee and asylum policies in Europe. During 2015 more than 160.000 asylum applications were lodged in Sweden (Migrationsverket, 2016). Already in the years preceding the dramatic increase, the war in Syria had been noticeable in the nation, which had experienced a steep increase in the number of asylum applications, from close to 30.000 in 2011 (Migrationsverket, 2012) to over 80.000 in 2014 (Migrationsverket, 2015). When the numbers continued to increase in 2015, the Swedish authorities struggled to cope with the influx of refugees and asylum seekers to the nation state. Particularly pressing were challenges of registration and processing of asylum applications, as well as housing the newly arrived (SOU, 2017:12, 28-29).

From initially saying that it was out of the question to close the borders for refugees and that there was no upper limit to how many refugees Sweden could take, the tone changed. In November 2015, the government decided to implement restrictions. Among these were the implementation of temporary residence permits for refugees, medical age determination tests of allegedly underaged asylum seekers, limiting the right to family reunification, as well as the reintroduction of border controls on the border to Denmark (SOU, 2017:12, 29).

The Syrian refugee crisis was also noticeable in Norway and Denmark, where the numbers of asylum applications also increased rapidly – although the numbers were

considerably lower than in Sweden. During 2015, Norway received 30.470, and Denmark 20.825 applications (Eurostat, 2016).

In Norway, the numbers of received asylum applications were relatively low until they rose noticeably by the end of the summer. The refugee crisis became a hot topic on the public agenda in April 2015, when the media reported on mass drownings in the Mediterranean, and The Labour Party's party conference discussed whether Norway should take in 8000 or 10 000 quota refugees. In June, there was a broad political consensus on the decision to take in 8000 quota refugees. All parties in parliament, except for The Socialist Left Party, The Christian Democrats (wanting to receive higher numbers), and The Progress Party (wanting to receive lower numbers), supported the legislation.

Despite having been a topic on the public agenda since April, it was first by the end of August and early September, that the refugee situation came to dominate it. In this period, the increase in arrivals, particularly to Oslo, as well as northern parts of Norway through Russia, created long waiting lines for registration. The unbearable situation for the waiting asylum seekers received vast attention in the media, resulting in massive mobilisation of volunteer efforts (Eimhjellen, 2016).

More restrictive policies were implemented during the fall of 2015. In November, the parties in parliament begun debating and negotiating retrenchments. On November 13<sup>th</sup>, a proposition with measures to reduce the influx of asylum seekers without a right to protection was presented in parliament. On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, eight out of the six parties in the Norwegian parliament – all but The Socialist Left Party and The Green Party – agreed on several measures to cope with the influx of asylum seekers, what was called “the asylum compromise [asylforliket]”. The measures were aimed at reducing the number of asylum seekers arriving in Norway, as well as improving the integration of those who were given residence permits. Among the measures were quicker returns of asylum seekers without a right to protection, reductions in the social benefits for asylum seekers, stricter rules for family reunification, as well as implementation of medical age determination tests.

Following the broad compromise, the government presented an audit document with proposals for further restriction, which was criticised by the other parties – also by

those who had supported the asylum compromise. Despite supporting the asylum agreement, The Progress Party continued speaking in favour of more restrictive policies, thus demonstrating its immigration critical position (Pedersen, 2016).

The Danish immigration policies were already strict prior to the refugee crisis, and they increasingly became so throughout 2015 and 2016. A conservative-liberal coalition, supported by the immigration critical The Danish People's Party, replaced the social democratic government in June 2015. The asylum policies were already strict when the new government introduced a number of retrenchments, both in the regulation of arrivals and in the refugees' social rights. In the fall of 2015, the government launched a controversial campaign advising potential seekers not to come to Denmark, and in the beginning of 2016, controversial legislation, known as "the jewellery law [smykkeloven]" was passed, allowing authorities to confiscate migrant's valuables exceeding €1340, without sentimental value, to offset their accommodation costs (Kvist, 2016).

### **Political and epideictic rhetoric in the immigration issue**

The Syrian refugee crisis represents a "peak moment" when immigration dominated the public agenda. Furthermore, it brought to the fore the contradictions inherent in the immigration issue as a political field: an issue both about idealism and about "realpolitik". On the one hand, the immigration issue is about the nation-state's adherence to the universal values of human rights. On the other hand, it is about the nation state's regulation of access, rights and duties based on national membership (Brochmann & Kjeldstadli, 2008, 16; Thorbjørnsrud, 2017, 263). This materialises in how the nations', to various degrees, have pursued immigration politics that are "strict, but fair"<sup>23</sup> (Gripsrud, 2018; Hagelund, 2003).

As such, the immigration issue actualises both questions of practical political solutions and identity, morale and group-relations. How many immigrants shall we accept into the nation? How is this to be financed? What shall our integration policies look like? These are examples of questions that often form the basis for deliberative

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<sup>23</sup> In Norway, in particular, where this is a commonplace expression particularly associated with The Labour Party's immigration policies.

rhetoric, i.e. argumentation about future action. The immigration issue also actualises questions that are largely handled through epideictic and constitutive rhetoric, i.e. rhetoric that displays and celebrates the community's shared values, and constitutes a (national) "we". Who are we – and whom shall we be? What does it mean to be "good"? What are decent attitudes in society – and what are not?

The immigration issue, then, facilitates both political rhetoric and epideictic, as well as constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987). This is evident in how the immigration issue is, and has historically been, debated both in terms of practical political solutions, concerned with the maintenance of the welfare state, and in terms of the community's decency and values. For instance, analyses of Norwegian political TV-debates, parliamentary debates and white papers from the 1970s until 2002, show how immigration policy often has been "construed as a matter of values and of what kind of society "we" want", and spoken about as "something that should reflect certain aspects of the nation state, its ideals and traditions" (Hagelund, 2003, 253).

The rhetorical constitutions of the three national communities performed in public addresses, while bringing to fore certain similarities, also suggest national variations of how the nation and nationhood are understood and upheld. Through references to the national community's heritage, values and traditions, Denmark has been constituted as a "rooted nation", and a "small nation" (Kjeldsen, 2019). Sweden, by contrast, has been constituted as an "immigrant nation", made up by immigrants (Kjeldsen, 2019), as well as a "decent people" and a "humanitarian nation" (Kjeldsen & Andersen, n.d.). Also the Norwegian people have been constituted as a "humanitarian nation" (Bjøntegård, 2017; Demiri & Fangen, 2019), and a "decent people" (Hagelund, 2003), as well as a "multicultural nation", where Norwegian traditions and heritage lives side by side with the country's "new compatriots" (Kjeldsen, 2019).

These often small, but noticeable differences in how public figures have spoken about the national community in issues concerned with immigration, can also be observed in the three nations' practical politics in the immigration field. Although the countries have often looked to each other, and to some degree adopted each other's policies and approaches in the issue, both the policies and the public discourse have developed differently in the three neighbouring countries (Brochmann & Hagelund,

2010, 352). Sweden and Denmark have been the furthest apart, whereas Norway has occupied a middle-position, historically leaning more to the Swedish approach in the beginning, but recently more often looking to Denmark.

According to Brochmann and Hagelund (2010, 353), the most significant difference between Sweden and Denmark is their ideological approach to the immigration issue. Sweden has applied a *demos*-approach, in which society's constitutive values are not viewed as "Swedish" but rather "democratic", and immigrants have primarily been met with rights, rather than demands. Out of the Scandinavian countries, Sweden has had the most liberal *immigration*-policies, giving the most newcomers residence, as well as the most liberal *integration*-policies, in which minorities' rights to maintain their own identity and culture have been more emphasised than their obligation to adjust to their new community. Denmark, by contrast, has applied an *ethnos*-approach, in which immigrants are expected to obtain an understanding of fundamental "Danish" values and norms. Denmark has had the strictest regulations both of immigration and integration, with requirements of language skills, skills in Danish social studies and history, as well as long residence time to obtain status as a Danish citizen (Midtbøen, 2015a).

There have also been noticeable differences in the public debate about the issue in the three countries. The tone in the Danish debate has been harsher and has increasingly become so in recent years. A higher presence of immigration critical voices, including a strong immigration critical party, have been present in the public debate and had influence over immigration politics since the beginning of the 2000s. In Sweden, the debate has, up until recently<sup>24</sup>, been more cautious, and there has been an aversion to talking about problems related to the multicultural society. Often those who have raised concerns about Swedish immigration and integration politics have been met with moral condemnations (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2010, 361).

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<sup>24</sup> Up until 2010, when the Sweden Democrats gained seats in the parliament, the debate has been characterised by an absence of immigration critical voices, but this has changed in recent years. As of 2020, the Sweden Democrats have been the biggest party in several opinion polls and have gained a prominent position in the public debate.

Consequently, there has been created an image of Sweden as “kind” and tolerant, and Denmark as “mean” and less tolerant for other cultures, with Norway in a more unclear middle-position – both in terms of actual policies and public discourse (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2010, 353). The image of Sweden as liberal, Denmark as strict and Norway somewhere in-between is also reflected in the MIPEX-index, which measures the nation’s policies’ inclusiveness towards immigrants: Sweden ranks first, Denmark at number 13, and Norway at number 4 (Huddleston, Bilgili, Joki, & Vankova, 2015). Actual population figures and arrival numbers give us the same picture: 22 per cent of the Swedish population are immigrants or have an immigrant background, 13 per cent of the Danish population are immigrants or have an immigrant background, for Norway, the numbers are 17 per cent (Nordic Statistics database, 2020).

The differences between the three nation states’ handling of the immigration issue are, thus, evident *both* with regards to practical political differences and differences in how the nations have been constituted in public discourse. Yet, compared to other European nations’, the three nations are, and have historically been, more similar than different (Gripsrud, 2019), also reflected in the media coverage about the Syrian refugee crisis (Hovden et al., 2018). Moreover, in all three Scandinavian nations, the political debates about the issue have historically been, and still are, characterised by a fusion of deliberative argumentation and acts of epideictic constitutions, and often contain many – often contradictory – constitutions of the national community (Bjøntegård, 2017; Kjeldsen & Andersen, n.d.).

The immigration issue is, furthermore, what we may call a controversial issue, and in the Scandinavian public spheres, it has increasingly become so (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). It is identified as an issue that “touches a sensitive nerve in public debate”, and that makes many abstain from engaging in public debate in fear of social exclusion (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017, 258). Controversial issues are described as issues that are considered important by many people and that involve value judgements (Wellington, 1986). They are complex issues that actualise competing values and interest, and that can easily arouse strong emotions (Berg, Graeffe, & Holden, 2003). They are found to invite moral positioning, flaming and pathos-based argumentation (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Wales, Cotterill, & Smith, 2010), and to be less likely to enhance

deliberation and more prone to create polarisation (Bächtiger, 2011; Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010; Steiner, Bächtiger, Spürndli, & Steenbergen, 2004).

The controversial nature of the immigration issue manifests itself in descriptions of the Scandinavian immigration debates as a “moral championship” (Brox, 1991; Brox et al., 2003), that plays out in “a climate where contenders on both sides depict each other as threats to the very existence of civil society as they know it” (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017, 263). The controversy often comes down to, not practical political problems, but to moral values and symbolic boundaries, through which people and practices are separated into groups of “who are moral insiders and outsiders within the national community” (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017, 260, 263).

That the issue actualises questions of morale, identity and values contributes to making positions in it closely related to people’s personal experiences and emotions. This also makes the immigration issue an easily personalised issue, in which one is not required to hold detailed knowledge to form an opinion.

### **Topoi and commonplace expressions in the immigration debate**

In the news-generated social media debates, many topoi, arguments and commonplace expressions from other parts of the public sphere, re-appear. With the concept of “topoi”, I here denote the “mental” places from where content and arguments can be found, and by “commonplace expressions”, I refer to the standard formulations, expressions and sayings that are shared by the members of a community. With these definitions of topoi and commonplaces, I describe two different levels and kinds of topoi, treated within different traditions of rhetorical theory: With *topoi*, I denote what has been termed “structural” or “specific” topoi, and with *commonplace expressions*, I denote what has been called “loci communes”. I choose to do so, solely for the sake of conceptual clarity, something that the treatment of the concept of topos (plural: topoi) throughout the rhetorical tradition, has not been (Gabielsen, 2014, 142).

In classical theory, the concept of topos referred to the commonplaces of expressions and arguments that every rhetor could draw upon (Billig, 1988; Crowley & Hawhee, 1999). The concept was, however, ambiguous already in classical theory, where its meaning ranged “from recurrent themes appearing in a certain kind of

discourse to abstract patterns of inference” (Leff, 1983a, 220). Moreover, in Latin rhetoric, the commonplaces (*loci communes*) were, according to Leff “finished products that integrate logical argument, emotional appeal, and style into a single structure” (Leff, 1996, 448). Still, in general terms, the classical concepts of *topoi* and commonplaces should be understood as inventional tools used for the discovery of arguments and to bring an audience to a place of shared understanding of a situation (Aristotle, 2007, 45, 1358a; Leff, 1996; Ross, 2013, 91).

In modern rhetorical theory, these commonplaces are viewed both as part of argumentation theory and as rhetorical forms of ideology (Billig, 1991; Crowley & Hawhee, 1999; Ross, 2013, 2017; Wodak, 2001). Broadly defined, *topoi* are viewed as recurrent elements of rhetorical practice (Hahn & Gustainis, 1987; Ivie, 1980; Nothstine, 1988; Ross, 2013). These elements hold both “content, arguments, and cognitive patterns” (Gabrielsen, 2009, 11, my translation).

My definition of “*topoi*” denotes what is commonly called “structural *topoi*” (Kjeldsen, 2017), i.e. the mental categories the rhetor can apply when producing arguments. This includes a set of general perspectives that, in principle, can be applied to all issues. Aristotle called these *specific topoi*, relating certain sets of *topoi* to subjects belonging to the three speech genres (deliberative, forensic, and epideictic). For example, specific *topoi* for the political speech were economy, war and peace, defence, export and import, and legislation (Aristotle, 2007, 53, 1359b). According to Leff, this category of *topoi* should be viewed as propositions that draw upon a community’s stock of cultural knowledge or express beliefs and values that are generally accepted in society (Leff, 1983b, 25-26).

In the immigration debate, for instance, two recurring *topoi* are *economy* (manifested in arguments such as “we must restrict the immigration, because we cannot afford it”), and *morale* (manifested in arguments such as “we must take in refugees, because we have a responsibility to help people in need”). In this sense, a structural *topos* is not only a tool for invention made use of by the rhetor, but also a discursive element that activates a certain system of associations. Thus, *topoi* can also shape the audience’s perceptions of the issue and influence how opponents can act.



My definition of commonplace expressions refers to what has often been called “*loci communes*”, i.e. the “common sense” views and beliefs, standard formulations, expressions and sayings shared by the members of a community (Andersen, 2012, 160). It describes the recurring content in rhetorical utterances within a community. We find these views and beliefs in recurring formulations, sayings, and historical and cultural references. Such sayings may be general and applied in many different issues, such as the saying “It is typically Norwegian to be good” [“Det er typisk norsk å være god”]. They may also be issue-specific, such as the phrases “convenience refugees” or “We are a small nation”, which are commonplace expression often found in the immigration debate (Bjøntegård, 2017; Hagelund, 2003). These commonplace expressions are more specific to the situation than the structural topoi, as they resonate with an audience at a particular place and time; they are culturally and historically dependent (Killingsworth, 2005).

Central topoi in the Scandinavian political debates about immigration, that also manifest themselves in the social media debates, include *morale*, *responsibility*, *deservingness*, *decency*, *goodness* and *racism*<sup>25</sup>. This set of topoi relate to the immigration issue as an issue of “idealism”. Another set of central topoi relate to the immigration issue as an issue of “realpolitik”, namely *economy* and *the welfare state*<sup>26</sup>. A third set of topoi, relating to the immigration issue as an issue of realpolitik, as well as an issue of national culture and identity, are the topoi *culture*, “*equality*”, *religion* and *terrorism*<sup>27</sup>. Incorporating both fields of the immigration issue as a political issue, i.e. as “realpolitik” and “idealism”, the topos *the (moral) elite vs. average citizens*, has also been central in the Scandinavian debates about the immigration issue.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> These topoi are identified through a literature review of Bjøntegård (2017); Brox (1991); Brox et al. (2003); Gripsrud (2018); Gullestad (2002); Hagelund (2003); Kjeldsen (2020), as well as Kjeldsen and my own (unpublished) work on “Topoi, arguments and identity in public debates on immigration” in the Scandinavian election debates from the 80s to today (Kjeldsen & Andersen, n.d.).

<sup>26</sup> These topoi are identified through a literature review of Bjøntegård (2017); Hagelund (2003, n.d.), as well as the study of the Scandinavian election debates (Kjeldsen & Andersen, n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> These topoi are identified through a literature review of Eide (2018); Hagelund (2002); Salte (2018), as well as the study of the Scandinavian election debates (Kjeldsen & Andersen, n.d.).

<sup>28</sup> This topos is identified through a literature review of (Brox, 1991; Gripsrud, 2018; Hagelund, 2004); Kjeldsen (2020).

These topoi manifest themselves in commonplace expressions also found in other areas of the public sphere. Some examples are: “Shame on you” (Kjeldsen, 2020), “I’m not racist” (Brox, 1991; Hagelund, 2004), and “fleeing from war and oppression” (Bjøntegård, 2017; Hagelund, 2003), as well as various formulations of the commonplace expressions “not genuine refugees” and “weak groups at home” (Hagelund, 2003).

That several topoi and commonplace expressions can be identified across discursive arenas and particular debates suggests that some cognitive “places” – arguments, formulations and perspectives are readily available in the issue. People draw on these perspectives when they interpret and communicate the world around them. In chapter 6-9, I offer a lengthier discussion of some of these topoi and commonplaces, as well as the functions these gain as rhetorical moves in the news-generated social media debates.

Now, I turn to the newspaper articles and account for how their presentation of the Syrian refugee crisis in two periods reflects tendencies in the public debate about the immigration issue in general, and create certain conditions for the news-generated social media debates.

### **Presentation of the issue in the newspaper articles**

The press coverage of the refugee crisis was characterised both by national variations and a change over time (Hovden et al., 2018). The Swedish press, in general, appeared to be more positive towards the refugees, commonly foregrounding the humanitarian perspective. The Danish press appeared more negative and more often emphasised the negative economic consequences of the refugees’ arrival and focused on measures to protect the nation’s security. The Norwegian press occupied a middle ground, leaning more towards Sweden than Denmark. The humanitarian perspective was, in all three nations, more prevalent in September, after the death of Alan Kurdi, whereas the focus shifted to protective measures during the fall.

Although the media coverage varied both between countries and over time, a large part of the news articles about the refugee crisis, particularly in the beginning of the fall of 2015, discussed measures to help the refugees, often by offering asylum or in

the form of citizen initiatives, providing food, clothes or shelter for the refugees (Hovden et al., 2018). Later the same fall and following winter, the news coverage increasingly became focused on measures to protect Europe and on political solutions to deal with the situation (Hovden et al., 2018).

The articles to which the comments examined are posted, fall into these two periods where the issue was approached differently in the media. The articles in the first period concerned the arrival of refugees and the nation's proper response to this (August-September). In the second period, the articles were concerned with the political decisions to make retrenchments in the nations' asylum policies (November-January). These two periods represent ruptures in the discourse on the refugee crisis. The first did so by a strong emphasis on the urgency of the situation and the humanitarian reaction to it. The latter, by emphasising the need to restrict immigration through political means.

The newspaper articles are the direct occasions of the comments, as it is something in these articles that creates a need for the individual to respond rhetorically. Thus, the articles, more precisely the posting of the articles to Facebook, are the immediate exigencies that bring about the rhetoric in the comment sections on Facebook. The articles both bring about rhetoric and offer particular possibilities and constraints to act rhetorically. The theme of the article, as well as the perspective from which it is approached, encourage certain types of responses and forms of engagement.

The newspaper articles, I argue, influence how the debates develop in three ways: 1) through an emphasis on "good" actors and deeds, as well as on "who 'we' are", they facilitate a debate characterised by *epideictic rhetoric*, 2) by presenting the issue in terms of private engagement ("What can *I* do?"), they facilitate the expression of *personal evaluations and emotions*, and 3) through an orientation to political actors and political conflicts, they facilitate a *conflict-oriented and controversial* debate, involving many personal attacks both on participants in the debates, as well as politicians that are mentioned in the articles' titles and Facebook-pitches.

## Inciting personal engagement and emotions

Many of the articles in the first period, in particular the ones by the two Swedish newspapers *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*, invited an emotional response to the refugee crisis and explicitly called on their readers to engage personally in the issue. The political dimensions of the situation were, sometimes explicitly, downplayed in the articles, and the emphasis was on how the readers of these articles should “feel”, and what they could do to contribute. The articles strongly emphasised the refugee crisis as a “human catastrophe”. The audience was addressed primarily as private individuals and was encouraged to act to help the refugees. They were not mainly asked to mobilise as a community; rather they were asked to act alone by donating money, clothes, shoes, and so forth (Aftonbladet Sep. 3 2015a). Moreover, the articles addressed an audience that shared the understanding of the situation as a human catastrophe, and who wanted to help. In both the Facebook-pitches and in the articles, the question of how to help, was presented as the question everyone was asking themselves: “We wish to inspire to find answers to the question we are all asking ourselves: What can *I* do?” (Aftonbladet Sep. 3 2015b).

Two quotes are telling for the general attitude promoted in these articles. The first quote is from the Swedish Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, in the campaign Jagvillhjälpa by *Expressen*. It appears on the campaign-website, together with similar quotes from Swedish athletes, celebrities, business leaders and journalists.

As the prime minister, I will continue working to make sure the reception of refugees to Sweden works as it should. The municipalities need support, and all municipalities have to receive refugees. I work to make all countries in the EU take their share of the responsibility. It is wonderful to see how people in Sweden and around in Europe have displayed human compassion and a huge will to help. People have to decide for themselves how they wish to help. It can be everything from donating money to an aid organisation, to help refugee children doing their homework. (Stefan Löfven, *Expressen*, webpage<sup>29</sup>)

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<sup>29</sup> Expressen. (2015). #Jagvillhjälpa. Campaign web-page, n.d.,

<https://www.expressen.se/jagvillhjälpa/>.

All of the following quotes in the chapter are translated from the original language to English.

In the statement, the prime minister draws attention to the political work he is doing to solve the situation. On the one hand, it is argued that political action is called for. On the other, it is argued that individuals should also contribute through humanitarian action, and those who have already done so are praised.

The political dimension of the situation was also addressed in the Vihjälper-campaign launched by *Aftonbladet*. In an article, the situation is said to have occurred because of political leaders “incapability to deal with the situation”. The political dimension of the situation is, however, downplayed in favour of the private humanitarian side. In a video featured in one of the news articles, the newspaper’s publisher, Jan Helin, explains the media’s responsibility not only to describe the situation through neutral reports, but also provide their audiences with some sense of comfort:

We have had a public debate about the refugee crisis, in which an image of hopelessness has been summoned. Political forces are trying to promote an end of the world-image. In this situation, I think that journalism has to ask itself: Why are *we* here? What can *we* do? Surely, we can describe this; surely, the debate has to continue, but right now, I think that we should show this: What does this catastrophe look like? We are calling it a catastrophe, and that is correct, it is a refugee catastrophe, but it is important to remember that it is a human catastrophe. It is crucial to describe this through journalism, but not only describe this, but also show that there are actually things that you can do (Jan Helin, *Aftonbladet*<sup>30</sup>).

The statement demonstrates how the campaign treated political discussions about how to solve the crisis as important but inefficient. It is argued that what is important is that people are inspired to contribute. Furthermore, it explicitly proposed that the task of journalists is both to describe the situation, and to mobilise people into action.

Moreover, the newspapers, to a large extent, presented engagement in the issue through “personal action frames” (cf. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, see also Chapter 6). Overall, there was a strong emphasis on the individuals’ choice to decide how to help, and the campaigns, thus, encouraged people to make the issue “their own”. An example

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<sup>30</sup> Helin, J. (2015). Nya katastrofbilder – så kan DU hjälpa. *Aftonbladet*, Sep. 3, [https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/7lxQ84/nya-katastrofbilder--sa-kan-du-hjalpa?fbclid=IwAR0uV\\_ABsrerF1bbNB4kMTiIND64D4E3-8iqS5p1P3hDUIA8deJrMRY7QR0](https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/7lxQ84/nya-katastrofbilder--sa-kan-du-hjalpa?fbclid=IwAR0uV_ABsrerF1bbNB4kMTiIND64D4E3-8iqS5p1P3hDUIA8deJrMRY7QR0)

is a statement by the journalist, author and TV hostess, Alexandra Pascalidou found on the webpage of the Jagvillhjalpa-campaign, together with similar statements:

There exists a wide variety of ways of helping people. I think one can help the way oneself wishes. Whether some want to give away a fifty-kronor bill or if someone sees it as a long-term engagement in these issues. I just hope this does not become like a spark that goes out. I hope we all realise that we are partly responsible for what happens. All my life I have tried to render visible tried to humanise these people. I have made radio shows, TV shows, written books and articles. I also work through a lot of organisations (Alexandra Pascalidou, Jagvillhjalpa-webpage<sup>31</sup>).

In this statement, humanitarian action is presented as a lifestyle choice, by which everybody should find “their way” to help. A small sum of money donated with a few keystrokes is put on an equal footing as long-term engagement. Thereby, the appeal gives priority to the individual’s desires over what is the most efficient way to help. Pascalidou also says: “I hope we all realise that we are partly responsible for what happens”. Thus, not only the individual choice but also *responsibility*, is addressed.

Several of the celebrity statements in the campaign promoted similar ideas, as they commonly spoke of helping the refugees as “our duty”. Thus, on the one hand, the celebrity statements emphasised the individuals’ freedom in choosing which humanitarian action s/he desired to perform. On the other hand, the act of helping was not presented as a choice, but rather a responsibility.

Moreover, pathos-based argumentation dominated. Images of suffering refugees are embedded in many of the (Swedish) articles that call for a particular emotional response. The audiences are, moreover, introduced to the private emotions of the celebrities promoting the Jagvillhjalpa-campaign. In many of the statements, they drew attention to their own reaction to the refugee crisis, in particular, the visual representation of it disseminated in the media. It was described it as “terrible”, “tragic”, and “painful to see”, “incomprehensible”, and “paralysing”. Referring to the images of Alan Kurdi, one of the statements said: “It hurts one’s heart when one sees small children dying, trying to flee into the ocean when one sees drowned children – it is terrible”. While they drew attention to their personal reaction to the situation, the emotions they feel are promoted as the way everyone *should* feel:

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<sup>31</sup> Expressen (2015). #Jagvillhjalpa. Campaign web-page, n.d., <https://www.expressen.se/jagvillhjalpa/>.

The humanitarian catastrophe we see is something that I believe touches us all. I believe I share a vast feeling of frustration and insufficiency with most people in this country.

The images we now see leaves no one untouched.

Whereas the news-articles made explicit calls on the audience to act, for example by donating money to the Red Cross, the emotions expressed were more of a private character, than of a deliberative, i.e. the emotions were not directed towards a specific action that could change the situation (Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2018, 323). Instead, what was expressed was feelings of “paralysis” and “insufficiency”, as well as a feeling of being “touched” by the catastrophe.

As I will discuss in chapter 6, the debates sparked by these articles, contain many statements in which engagement in the issue is promoted through “personal action frames” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Participants, moreover, use their emotions and personal experiences as sources for argumentation and promote their highly personal evaluations of the issue. While one could have imagined that the newspaper articles, with their direct calls upon action, could cause the genre of the news-generated social media debates to mutate into an arena for mobilisation, there is little evidence of this happening. This does, however, not imply that the comment sections only serve as arenas for debate. Instead, many of the utterances function as self-presentation, by which speakers draw attention to their own identity and present themselves in a favourable light. Rather than creating a debate between opposing views, such utterances primarily bring about celebration or condemnation of the speaker.

The prevalence of personal contents and styles in the news-generated social media debates should also be seen in relation to the affordances of the social network site, which is structured around personal profiles and pre-existing networks, and is mainly used for personal purposes (see Chapter 5). Moreover, as I will discuss in chapter 9, the personal orientation manifests itself also in negotiations of the genre, where two conflicting expectations become visible: Whereas some of the participants promote obligations to argumentation and counter-argumentation as genre conventions, others

renounce these obligations, and instead express anticipations of being allowed to express themselves without giving arguments and be met with criticism.

### **Orientation to controversy and political conflict**

The articles in the second period (Nov 2015-Jan 2016) were concerned with political decisions to make retrenchments in the nation's asylum policies. This period was marked by more negative press coverage of the refugee crisis, with increased emphasis on the negative consequences for the nations' security and economy, as well as an increased focus on political measures to stop the influx of refugees (Hovden et al., 2018)<sup>32</sup>.

In this period, all three countries debated, and ultimately decided, to implement stricter asylum policies to cope with the influx of refugees and asylum seekers. Among the retrenchments were the implementations of temporary border controls, temporary residence permits for refugees, medical age determination tests of underaged asylum seekers, and limiting the right to family reunification. Many of these retrenchments were viewed as controversial, in particular legislation passed in Denmark, known as "the jewellery law [smykkeloven]", which allowed the authorities to confiscate the asylum seekers valuable to finance their stay.

In the newspaper articles, both the politicians initiating the retrenchments and their critics were quoted, and the articles focused on the policies and political actors, commonly with an emphasis on these policies' controversial nature.

In Norway, the newspapers reported on the so-called "asylum compromise [asylforliket]", the process leading up to it, as well as The Progress Party's additional proposals to the agreement one month after the agreement was made. The articles are primarily concerned with The Labour Party and The Progress Party. The titles of the articles suggest an orientation to individual political actors, and commonly present the party politics as the politics of these individuals. For instance, one title says: "Here is how Labour Party-Jonas will retrench the asylum policy" (VG Nov. 11, 2015). Another

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<sup>32</sup> Hovden et al. 2018 only examines November (in addition to April and September).



one says: “Here are Sylvi Listhaug’s (Progress Party) demands to immigrants” (Aftenposten Dec. 29, 2015).

Many of the titles and Facebook-pitches also contain controversial utterances from representatives from The Progress Party, such as “- One cannot just come here and have welfare benefits that Norwegian taxpayers have built.” (Dagbladet Nov. 9, 2015), as well as “We will have an asylum policy among the strictest in Europe” (NRK Dec. 29, 2015). Moreover, the political parties’ policies are presented through a “game metaphor”, indicating that politics is a cynical game in which the aim is to get the most votes. For instance, a Facebook-pitch says: “The parties are now competing in making the asylum policies stricter” (VG Nov. 11, 2015). It is emphasised that The Labour Party has made a turn away from a less strict policy proposed earlier the year, and the competition is presented mainly as “won” by The Progress Party, evident in the pitch: “The Progress Party is really pleased with the asylum compromise” (Dagbladet Nov. 19, 2015).

In some of the articles, also representatives from the other parties appear as sources. Primarily, they function as opponents to and critics of the new, stricter policies. Thus, the issue is framed as an issue of conflict and controversy. For example, a representative from The Socialist Left Party is quoted referring to the proposed retrenchments as “a shame, and a shame that also The Labour Party, The Liberals and The Christian Democrats will have to carry if they do not stop this, and do not stop Listhaug from throwing about Norwegian values” (Aftenposten Dec. 29, 2015).

The articles from the second period in the Swedish material, reported on the government’s so-called “U-turn” in the asylum policies. The restrictions implemented were perceived to be drastic, as the government had initially emphasised that Sweden had to be an open and humane nation, setting no upper limit to how many refugees could come. When authorities and municipalities struggled to cope with the influx of asylum seekers, the government found it necessary to implement temporary border controls, as well as temporary residence permits for refugees, medical age determination tests of allegedly underaged asylum seekers, limiting the right to family reunification, and the reintroduction of border controls on the border to Denmark. The retrenchments were

presented as necessary means to get some “breathing space [andrum]”, and to put more pressure on other European countries to take their share of the responsibility.

In the articles, the retrenchments were largely presented as radical, as evident in the titles: “Sweden adapts the migration policy to EU’s lowest level” (Dagens Nyheter, Nov. 24, 2015) and “THE MESSAGE: The government implements border controls” (Expressen Nov. 11, 2015). Moreover, it is emphasised how the leader of one of the government parties, Åsa Romson from The Green Party, broke out in tears while presenting the new policies at a press conference. “Romson in tears when the government implements temporary residency”, the title of an article in *Aftonbladet* (Nov. 24, 2015), says. The article is posted to Facebook with the pitch: “The vice prime minister was visibly affected when she had to answer questions about how her own party would receive the tougher law practice.” In the same article, Romson is quoted saying: “This is not decisions that we wish to make, it is decisions that we have to make”. In the article, she is moreover said to have described the situation as “very difficult both for the country and for her own party”. She described the retrenchments as “dramatic”, and as something that will “send waves of shock” – both in Sweden and in Europe. In the article, also the prime minister, Stefan Löfven is quoted, saying “it hurts me to say that Sweden is unable to receive in the same tempo as we are today”. Both Löfven and Åsa Romson are said to have described the decision as “hard and painful, but necessary”. Romson is quoted saying: “It is a terrible decision that the government now feels obliged to make. It is terrible, first and foremost, for all refugees who put all their hope in Sweden as a safe place to build a future” (Dagens Nyheter Nov. 24, 2015).

As the Norwegian articles from this period, also the Swedish articles focused on individual political actors. However, while the Norwegian articles presented parties’ politics as individual actor’s politics, the Swedish articles were to a large extent oriented towards the political actor’s personal emotions, in particular Åsa Romson’s sadness.

Moreover, as in the Norwegian news articles, the retrenchments are presented as controversial: It is emphasised how “the message became world news in international media”, and the decisions are, by the media, called “surprising” (Expressen Nov. 11, 2015). However, also political actors are interviewed in the articles, the majority of them expressing support for the decisions – a support that is seemingly also found in the

population. An article from *SVT Nyheter* (Nov. 26, 2015) is titled: “The voters’ verdict on the new hard refugee policy: - Necessary, but way too late”.

The Danish articles in the second period were concerned with asylum retrenchments that were passed in the Danish parliament in January 2016. Among them was the so-called “Jewellery Law [smykkeloven]”, allowing the authorities to confiscate asylum seekers’ valuables to pay for their stay. The retrenchments, in particular, the “Jewellery Law” (law no. 87) are presented as controversial by the newspapers, evident in titles such as “Controversial asylum retrenchments passed”, posted on Facebook with the additional text: “The authorities can, as of now, confiscate the refugees’ valuables”, as well as a photo of the Minister of Integration and Immigration, Inger Støjberg (*Ekstra Bladet* Jan. 26, 2016), and “Today the Parliament votes on the controversial immigration law no. 87” (*Politiken* Jan. 26, 2016). The latter of these articles was posted on Facebook together with a clearly evaluative and emotional “pitch”:

Everyone can imagine it: A miserable refugee family reaches, after weeks of exhausting travels up through Europe, finally the promised land, Denmark. And what happens? Uniformed officers grab their hands and twist the wedding rings of their fingers. Empathy their pockets and wallet. Questions them inquisitorial whether they have now displayed all that they own? Were it a movie, it would certainly be in black/white. (*Politiken* Jan. 26, 2016).

As the Norwegian and Swedish articles, an orientation to individual actors is evident. All articles, except for one, appear on Facebook together with an image of the minister of Integration and Immigration, Inger Støjberg. Moreover, the articles all report on the retrenchments as highly controversial. Whereas some of the articles, as the aforementioned article by *Politiken*, are clearly evaluative, others make visible the controversy by reporting that Støjberg (and the government) were required to explain the retrenchments to the EU’s civil rights committee (*Ekstra Bladet* Jan. 26, 2016; *Berlingske* Jan. 26, 2016a; *DR Nyheder* Jan. 20, 2016). One of the articles is titled “Støjberg wants to make it more difficult for unwanted immigrants”, and is posted to Facebook with the pitch: “Now it is not possible to make it more difficult” (*Berlingske*, Jan. 6, 2016b).

It is also reported that the proposed law is heavily criticised, both in Denmark and internationally. It is told about “massive international press coverage of the Danish

plans to confiscate refugees' valuables, such as jewellery, to pay for their stay in Denmark" (DR Nyheder Jan. 20, 2016). It is presented as a law that, "according to critics, will get Denmark sentenced for breaking human rights" (Politiken Jan. 26, 2016). Moreover, it is reported that the issue created a "several hour-long debate among the parties", suggesting that the retrenchments were controversial and contentious, also in Denmark (Berlingske Jan. 26, 2016a).

It was, however, not only in the second period where articles were presented as, or perceived as, controversial. Also in the reporting of the Danish "welcome ads", an emphasis on conflict prevailed. These articles mainly framed the events as a *contest* between the Minister of Immigration and Integration, Inger Støjberg, and the ad-makers, who are commonly allowed to speak "on behalf of the Danes". This contest is won by the ad-makers, as indicated by the strong emphasis on the popularity of the welcome ads, as well as by the strong presence of the ad-makers in the articles. Moreover, the ads are said to "pre-empt" and "forestall" Støjberg's ads, and the ad-makers to have "swindled" Støjberg and "beaten her to it" (Politiken Aug. 3, 2015; Politiken Sep. 9, 2015; Ekstra Bladet Aug. 4, 2015).

Both the ads and the initiators are quoted in all of the articles, while representatives from the government are largely absent. Moreover, the government's advertisements to warn asylum seekers against coming to Denmark are referred to as "Inger Støjberg's ads", and criticism of these ads is quoted and reported on in the articles. While not explicitly taking sides, the framing of the events in the newspapers is predominantly positive towards the welcome-ads, while being more negative towards the government's ads.

In the articles, the popularity of the welcome-ad is emphasised, and the titles and the Facebook-pitches claim that these ads have forestalled the ads made by the government, for instance, a pitch says: "A Danish initiative pre-empts Inger Støjberg with a welcome-ad addressed at refugees in The Guardian" (Berlingske, Aug. 5, 2015). The articles also account for the government's ad, and in particular, for the criticism it has received for being "a scare-campaign, making not only the average Dane look bad, but also hurting Denmark's international reputation" (Berlingske Sep. 29, 2015). The articles in *Politiken* presents the government's advertisements as problematic by

conveying the national and international criticism these ads have received. The articles also present the “ad-war” as a political controversy, by interviewing representatives from parties on both sides of the immigration issue.

The article in *Ekstra Bladet* distinguishes itself from the other articles, in that the welcome ads are framed predominantly in a negative way, and the criticism of the government’s ads is not included. The title of the article says: “Swindled Støjberg. Advertise for Denmark as amazing asylum country”, and the Facebook-pitch says: “A Danish woman invites, in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, refugees to Denmark, where one gets free education and fast family reunification” (*Ekstra Bladet* Aug. 4, 2015). The title and the Facebook-pitch here suggest a more negative framing of the welcome ads than in the other of the newspapers. The article confirms this, as it mentions “the chaos in the French city Calais, where refugees use all means to cross the border into England”. In the article, it is also said that “the refugee debate is very emotional, which can often result in transgressive comments to be uttered in the debate”, but informs that the ad-maker has received “no threats”, suggesting that the ad-makers’ actions are something that is likely to bring about threats.

In the Facebook-debates sparked by these articles, many of the utterances perform condemnation or praise of the political actors, as well as the ad-makers. Personal attacks prevail over debate about political solutions. As I will discuss in chapters 7 and 8, the news-generated social media debates are characterised both an aggressive argument culture, in which conflicting political convictions are treated, not primarily as political disagreements but rather as an issue of moral positions. This, I argue, should be understood as a consequence both of the orientation towards individual political actors in the newspapers’ coverage of the political proposals and decision, and as a consequence of the controversies inherent in the issue. Moreover, it must be understood against the backdrop of the conditions for debate created by the affordances of the social network site, which I account for in the subsequent chapter. Before I do so, I turn to the final characteristic trait of the newspaper articles, namely the use of epideictic rhetoric.

## **Display and celebration of the community's values**

The articles in the first stage of the debate (Aug-Sept. 2015), were all concerned with the arrival of refugees to the nation – with a particular focus on what the nation's reception of refugees said about who “we” are. They presented the question of how to deal with the arrival of refugees as a question of the community's morale, and addressed their audiences as a homogeneous group with a common wish to help the refugees. The articles concerned three different national “events” in which humanitarian responses were reported on: The hotel mogul, Petter Stordalen, who assisted the government by offering temporary housing of asylum seekers in one of his hotels (Norway), celebrities and average citizens' initiatives to help refugees by donating money, clothes, toys, food, their time, and so forth (Sweden), as well as an initiative to make ads to welcome refugees into the nation, made as a response to the government's ads telling the refugees to stay away (Denmark).

Whereas the first two “events” (Norway and Sweden), were reported on in a largely non-political and non-controversial way, the Danish welcome-ads emphasised the political controversy inherent in the issue, by continuously referring to these ads as “counter-moves” to Inger Støjberg's measures to counteract the influx of asylum seekers to Denmark. In contrast to the articles that were published later in the fall and winter, political actors were close to absent in the Norwegian and Swedish articles from this period, and the question of how to deal with the crisis politically was not treated. Rather, benefactors, i.e. national celebrities and private initiatives who wished to help the refugees were presented as “heroes” who performed acts of goodness. The emphasis in these articles was on the goodness demonstrated by individuals, and on how citizens could contribute.

The Norwegian articles from the first period told about the hotel mogul, Petter Stordalen, who offered to house refugees in one of his hotels. The articles emphasised the generous offer made by the hotel mogul, as well as the urgency of the situation. Stordalen was presented as a representative of the Norwegian mentality, in which doing voluntary work together (“dugnad”), is commonly viewed as a defining feature of “Norwegianness”. The articles generally functioned as display and praise of the good

deed. Stordalen served as the primary source in the articles, in some articles as the only source (VG Sep. 8, 2015), and his understanding of the issue was made salient. The hotel mogul himself was, to a large extent, allowed to define both his actions and the situation. He did so by constituting the Norwegian people as a people partaking in a “national dugnad” – a dugnad that he also joined – and the situation in terms of humanitarian crisis and national chaos. An illustrative example is found in the article from *VG* (Sep. 8, 2015), in which Stordalen is quoted saying:

The world is facing what may be one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes since the Second World War. It is impossible not to be affected by it. In Nordic Choice, we have a culture for contributing, both locally and internally, but this also applies when a crisis emerges outside of the hotel doors. When we see what happens in the Mediterranean, it is natural for us to contribute. A national voluntary effort [dugnad] takes place and, of course, we have to join it [...] Helping people is vital in Nordic Choice’s values and culture.

Praise is conveyed through the newspapers’ interviews, among them a representative from the UDI, who expresses “gratitude” over the offer made by Stordalen (NRK Sep. 8, 2015). Representatives from the humanitarian organisations Amnesty International Norway and Flyktninghjelpen are quoted describing Stordalen’s actions as “great”, “exemplary”, as well as a “contribution to the national ‘dugnad’ to help the refugees who are coming to Norway” (Aftenposten Sep. 6, 2015a). In one article, a researcher at the Department of Innovation and Economic Administration is quoted saying: “He is not like other millionaires. Therefore, I am so naïve that I think he actually means it. Surely, it will have a positive effect on his reputation, but I nevertheless believe that this is something he cares about. What he does is very generous”.

The articles in the Swedish material promoted or reported on three campaigns aimed at encouraging Swedes to help the refugees, and display tolerance and human compassion. The campaigns’ propositions were articulated in different ways, by different actors. Whereas the campaigns Jagvillhjälpa (*Expressen*) and Vi hjälper (*Aftonbladet*) primarily addressed their audiences as individuals by promoting emotional reactions and individual humanitarian action as the proper responses to the situation, the Jagdelar-campaign (*Dagens Nyheter*) primarily addressed their audiences

as a public, with a call for a defence of Swedish values from xenophobic and racist attitudes in society.

In all three campaigns, a variety of speakers conveyed the message, although some speakers were more prominent than others. Whereas the Jagvillhjälpa-campaign relied heavily on celebrities as spokespersons, celebrity voices were utterly absent in *Vi hjälper*, which primarily conveyed their message through journalists. Jagdelar relied on the support of 100 celebrities, but only three of them appeared as speakers. By contrast, all 118 celebrities supporting Jagvillhjälpa were given a voice. Another difference is found in the foci of the campaigns. Whereas Jagvillhjälpa and *Vihjälper* primarily address the need for humanitarian action to help the refugees, Jagdelar primarily focused on the need to improve the public debate.

The three Swedish campaigns were exceptional in their normative point of departure and their use of the epideictic rhetoric of praise and blame. Their second persona (Black, 1970), was someone who shared the value “human compassion” and saw it as a duty to help the refugees. The concept *second persona* describes how the speaker constructs an audience through the values s/he promotes, the arguments used, and the speaker’s tone and choice of words. It does not refer to the actual audience, but the speaker’s implied audience. Nevertheless, the second persona guides the audiences’ interpretations of the world, as “actual auditors look to the discourse they are attending for cues that tell them how they are to view the world, even beyond the expressed concerns, the overt propositional sense, of the discourse” (Black, 1970, 334).

None of the campaigns addressed potential counter-arguments as legitimate. Thus, they primarily addressed a second persona already in agreement. Generally, the campaigns promoted their propositions as “self-evident”, and shared by all. In the Jagvillhjälpa-campaign, 70 of the 118 celebrity statements explicitly treated the question of helping the refugees as “self-evident”. They did so, by speaking of humanitarian action as a “duty”, and through phrasings including the word “of course”. Some examples of this are the following quotes from Swedish celebrities, found on the campaign website:



Of course we are going to help, it is a privilege to have the ability to do so, and we are going to do all we can.

Sweden is, of course, going to continue being a country that takes its responsibility.

Of course we are going to help as much as we can, there is no alternative.

The Vi hjälper-campaign suggested that the only suitable reaction to the refugee crisis, is asking the question “What can *I* do?”<sup>33</sup>. It did so, through presenting this question as the “question everybody is asking themselves”. Thus, the campaigns’ second persona is an audience asking this question. By telling the stories about praiseworthy citizen initiatives, “deserving attention”, the campaign also demonstrates what it means to be a good citizen. Furthermore, the campaigns commonly argued that the alternative to humanitarian action is immoral and illegitimate. For instance, some of the celebrity statements in the Jagvillhjälpa-campaign say:

It would have been inhumane to say no to helping people in need.

We have to help people fleeing for their lives. Anything else would have been inhumane.

It is absolutely evident that one has to help the refugees ... only a heartless person can oppose helping.

One is going to help refugees if one does not wish to be a little turd.

In these statements, the alternative to helping the refugees is presented as illegitimate: It is “inhumane” and “heartless”, and the one who does not help the refugees is “a little turd”.

The Jagdelar-campaign (Dagens Nyheter, 2015<sup>34</sup>) most explicitly addressed the question of legitimate and illegitimate attitudes in society. In the texts, the Swedish society was described in a certain way that functioned to prescribe the proper response to the situation. The campaign’s proposition was, like in the other two campaigns,

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<sup>33</sup> Helin, J. (2015). Nya katastrofbilder – så kan DU hjälpa. *Aftonbladet*, Sep. 3, [https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/7lxQ84/nya-katastrofbilder--sa-kan-du-hjalpa?fbclid=IwAR0uV\\_ABsrerF1bbNB4kMTiIND64D4E3-8iqS5p1P3hDUIA8deJrMRY7QR0](https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/7lxQ84/nya-katastrofbilder--sa-kan-du-hjalpa?fbclid=IwAR0uV_ABsrerF1bbNB4kMTiIND64D4E3-8iqS5p1P3hDUIA8deJrMRY7QR0)

<sup>34</sup> Dagens Nyheter (2015). #jagdelar. Campaign-webpage, n.d., <https://jagdelar.dn.se/>

treated as “self-evident”. In an op-ed piece written by the paper’s head of culture, Björn Wiman, the campaign is described as a: “reminder of the broad consensus in the Swedish society about the most defining idea from the Enlightenment, the one about all humans’ equal worth. It might seem self-evident, but bad times force us to actualise it every once in a while.”<sup>35</sup>.

Throughout the campaign, Swedish society and its values were defined, primarily by reference to a set of commonly shared values with broad support, namely tolerance and humanity. These values are contrasted with the attitudes that are said to threaten them: xenophobia, egoism, and racism. Such attitudes are called “fusty and ill-founded”, as well as “stupid” (Ekman, article and webpage<sup>36</sup>), and “dangerous” (Gardell, jagdelar-webpage). The condemnation of an “other”, is particularly evident in the author Kerstin Ekman’s article (Dagens Nyheter, 6.9.15b):

Those who say that Muslims are taking over Sweden are as unyielding as only stupidity can be. They say that the refugees should be helped where they are and not be let in by us. [... Rather] we should fear for what is ours, for our tax money and our culture.

Furthermore, Ekman’s text serves as an example of how the second persona is attempted “constituted” by establishing the audience as a transhistorical subject that, due to its heritage and history, can only respond in the way proposed by the speaker. Ekman argues:

During the past centuries, we have gradually developed a humanism in our country. Sometimes it is hidden, sometimes deeply buried. Nevertheless, it lies there as a gold reserve. It has been dug up during times when many minds have been infected with unpleasant and dangerous ideologies. During WW2 families took in Jewish refugees. Children who were forced to leave their parents during the Finnish Winter War were allowed to come here. Survivors from the concentration camps came to us in the Red Cross’ white busses. German ‘ruin children’ got to live and go to school here after the war ended. Even undernourished children from the isolated West-Berlin were during the Cold War let in here by us.

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<sup>35</sup> Wiman, B. (2015), #jagdelar i dag upplysningens kärnvärderingar. *Dagens Nyheter*, [Campaign web-page, and online edition of the newspaper], Sep. 6, <https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/bjorn-wiman-jagdelar-i-dag-upplysningens-karnvarderingar/>

<sup>36</sup> Ekman, K. (2015). Det finns en guldreserv av humanism i Sverige. *Dagens Nyheter*, [Campaign webpage, and online edition of the newspaper], Sep. 6, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/kerstin-ekman-det-finns-en-guldreserv-av-humanism-i-sverige/>

With the concept of *constitutive rhetoric*, Charland (1987) further developed Black's (1970) concept of the second persona, by describing what happens when the audience accepts and identifies with the second persona's position. Constitutive rhetoric establishes communities by presupposing their existence, i.e. through *interpellation* (cf. Althusser, 1999) – and by creating a connection between the community, an established past and an imagined future through shared *topoi* and values (Charland, 1987).

What the text by Kerstin Ekman does, is that it promotes a particular understanding of the Swedish national community. It does so, both by promoting certain values and through telling a narrative of Sweden as a nation in which these values have developed and gained widespread support. This happens through references to a transhistorical subject, i.e. through the telling of the Swedes' history with refugees. The text thereby offers a range of examples of Swedish humanity, all of them about times when refugees have been welcomed into the country. Thereby, the text connects the past and the present, and presents the present as an extension of the past. If successful, i.e. if the audiences accept the collective identity they are interpellated into, the audiences are motivated towards particular future acts that are in line with the narrative (Charland, 1987, 141-143). If they are to act accordingly to their role in the narrative, the Swedish people, then, has to show solidarity for the refugees.

Whereas much of the existing literature on the mass media and the immigration examines the portrayal of immigrants, who are often found to be presented as an “other” (see e.g. Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, & Nicholson, 2013; Boomgaarden & Vliegthart, 2009; Lahav, 2013; Schemer, 2012), these articles – and the responses to them in the comments, show how media texts can also contribute to an “othering” of some positions within society. By constituting an audience into social subjects, through the promotion of narratives, symbols and collective values, the articles not only define who the audiences *are* but also who they *should be*. As argued by Charland (1987, 141-143) constitutive rhetoric, then, is potentially powerful, as such constitutions – if successful – motivate audiences towards particular future acts and thus structure public motives. This shows how speakers, through epideictic and constitutive rhetoric, can attempt to constitute an audience in a way that makes certain actions and attitudes possible, and others not.

Relying primarily on epideictic and constitutive rhetoric, the Swedish campaigns in particular, but also to some extent the Norwegian and Danish reporting in the first period, attempted to strengthen the adherence to certain values and to strengthen the disposition to certain actions. To some degree, it seems as they succeeded in the epideictic constitution, indicated by the prevalence of the utterances that display community's values through praise and condemnation of persons, attitudes and actions, as I will discuss in chapter 7.

That the values displayed in the newspaper-articles are widely shared and recognised is indicated by the widespread praise of the celebrities appearing in the newspaper articles, as embodiments of the community's values. However, while many of the utterances express acceptance of the newspapers' constitution and partake in praise of persons and actions promoted as representatives of community's values by the newspapers, many of the utterances also oppose this. Thus, the debates develop as epideictic struggles over moral positions. Here, the Facebook-debates are not fundamentally different from other public debates about the immigration issue, in which conflicting perceptions of nationhood, values and morale manifest themselves through conflicting constitutions of the national community, what the situation represents, and disagreements over who and what is "good" are – and have historically been – an inherent part of the immigration debate.

### **Chapter conclusion: The social media-friendly issue**

In this chapter, I have argued that the immigration issue produces certain conditions that influence how the debates in the news-generated social media debates develop. First, the immigration issue actualises both issues of practical politics and of community, morale and values. As such, it will necessarily be approached both through deliberative argumentation and epideictic rhetoric. Moreover, I have argued, the issue is an easily personalised issue, in which many will have a strong personal and emotional engagement. Consequently, it is an issue that everyone can easily form an opinion in, and that will often arouse strong emotions. In particular, the refugee crisis, where heartbreaking images of suffering refugee children circulated in the media, and where feelings of uncertainty and chaos were conveyed through the description of it as a

“crisis” and “catastrophe”, made personal emotions and engagement easily attended to. Finally, the immigration issue is a controversial issue, where opposing political views often become questions of who are moral in- and outsiders and develop into competitions over who is morally superior.

These characteristic traits of the immigration issue manifested themselves in the newspaper articles about the refugee crisis that generated the social media debates examined in this dissertation. Combined, the particular articles, and the issue more generally, contributed to facilitating a particular type of debate characterised by expressions of personal identity, emotions and engagement, intense emotions, as well as epideictic struggles.

The controversial and moral nature of the immigration issue can perhaps also explain its ability to create user engagement in social network sites. These features of the immigration debates are said to make the issue a particularly “social media-friendly issue” (Vatnøy, 2017), and in the newspapers’ comment sections on Facebook, the immigration issue tends to bring about much user-engagement (Larsson, 2018).

The logics of social media are commonly said to favour issues that are emotive, moral and controversial (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Eberholst & Hartley, 2014; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015). Choosing what content to publish in their social media channels, media organisations prioritise content and styles that are apt to arouse reactions and emotions, because this is what creates user-engagement and, thereby, generates clicks (Hågvar, 2019, 4).

As argued by Vatnøy (2017, 258), the types of issues that spark debate in social network sites are typical “easily personalized political issues” that involve personal identity, morals and values, such as the immigration issue, as well as issues about gender roles, religion and sexuality. What the social media-friendly issues have in common, is that they are all emotive, display moral and ethical dilemmas, and require little subject-specific knowledge for people to form an opinion.

What is it, then, with the logics of social media that favours such issues? In the chapter that follows, I discuss how the technological structure and affordances of Facebook constitute another important contextual frame that influences how debates on this platform develop.

## **Chapter 5: The technological structure and affordances of Facebook**

In the previous chapter, I argued that the immigration issue facilitates a particular type of debate, characterised by a fusion of deliberative argumentation and epideictic constitutions, personal engagement and emotions, as well as controversy and strong emotions. Moreover, I proposed that the issue, for these reasons, is particularly apt to create engagement in public social media debates. This claim finds support in the fact that the immigration issue is found to create much user activity on social media (Larsson, 2018), and is highlighted as a particularly “social media-friendly”-issue by active debaters (Vatnøy, 2017). In this chapter, I draw attention to the affordances of social network sites, the affordances of Facebook in particular. I discuss how these affordances make certain discursive practices possible and create certain conditions that influence how the debates develop. I argue that the medium influences the debates in three ways, namely, by 1) making the personal engagement and expression easily attended to, 2) encouraging and rewarding emotive and controversial content, and 3) facilitating a variety of different practices, thus contributing to unclear and ambiguous genre conventions.

### **Affordances of social network sites**

The concept of affordances should, as discussed in chapter 2, be understood as the properties of the environment that facilitate certain actions. The affordances are not the same as an environment’s actual material properties, but describes a combination of the actual and the *perceived* properties of an environment (Norman, 1988; Norman, 2002). As such, affordances do not determine practice but serve as possibilities and constraints for agentic action (Hutchby, 2001, 444).

Applied to the context of social media, affordances are, in contrast to James’ Gibson’s (1979) original concept not naturally occurring phenomena in a given environment. Instead they are designed by the social network site’s creators in order to direct its users to use these sites in a particular way (Davisson and Leone 2018, 87). While the affordances function to direct the user’s practices, the actual use, however, depends on the users’ ability and willingness to utilise them (Davisson and Leone 2018,

88, 92). In the news-generated social media debates, rhetorical practice is shaped and influenced by the technological structure – the software and algorithms – designed by the site’s creators. The site’s affordances make some practices possible and easily attended to while obstructing others. As such, the affordances of the site can be seen as a set of possibilities and constraints in the rhetorical situation that encourage users to “engage in or to attempt certain kinds of rhetorical actions rather than others” (Miller & Sheperd, 2009, 281). By drawing attention to the affordances of Facebook, I thus, attend to “material structures impact rhetorical agency and recurring practice” (Vatnøy, 2017, 101).

Generally, social network sites hold two categories of affordances: “social affordances” and “content affordances”. The first category describes the features that afford social connection and interaction, as well as the (re)presentation of an online self: the affordances of “social connectivity”, “social interaction”, and “profile management” (O’Riordan et al., 2012). The latter describes the features that afford the actors’ to encounter and disseminate content in social network sites (O’Riordan et al., 2012), i.e. through hyperlinks, tags, search results and recommendations, the latter two often based on algorithmic agency, i.e. the algorithms’ suggestions of content that the individual user is likely to be interested in based on her or his past activities (Cha, Mislove, & Gummadi, 2009).

In what follows, I first provide a brief explanation of the affordances that make themselves relevant in the news-generated social media debate, before I discuss how these constitute a contextual frame of the news-generated social media debates and how this is likely to shape and influence the practices in them. For this purpose, I also include a discussion of the particular affordances that are in force in the news-generated Facebook-debates.

### **Affordances of Facebook**

Since Facebook was launched in 2004 with restricted access for students at Harvard College and re-launched with public access in 2006, it has undergone several significant changes at the software level. Frequent adjustments of the interface design, expansions of the core set of communicative features (e.g. direct messages, groups, additions to the

“like”-button”), and integration with several external applications, for instance, Instagram and Games (Brügger, 2013), may contribute to making users insecure about the what are appropriate uses and to blur the boundaries between Facebook and the surrounding web (Lomborg, 2014, 145; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011, 300).

According to Lomborg (2014, 144-145), Facebook represents a “mixed genre”, as the social network site facilitates a broad range of communicative settings and purposes, with different genre conventions. Various stand-alone genres, with different purposes, audiences and conventions, such as the news-generated public debate, the semi-public discussion groups, and the personal chat, are integrated and interwoven on the site. Moreover, various types of communication are afforded, such as comments, “likes”, status updates, photo-sharing, video-uploads, recommendations and games.

The social network site is organised around individuals’ personal profiles and networks (Lomborg, 2014, 145; O’Riordan et al., 2012), and enables the individual to broadcast content both to the entire network (McLaughlin & Vitak), and to one or a few persons directly (Rainie & Wellman; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). Primarily, user’s networks are made up by their large and diverse pre-existing relationships – relationships that normally would be established and maintained independently of one another in separate contexts (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012a; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). The integration of many, typically separated, networks have often been described in terms of “collapsed contexts” (boyd, 2002, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Three types of affordances support the management of an online persona and the establishment and management of social relations: the affordances of *profile management*, the affordances of *social connectivity*, and the affordances of *social interactivity* (O’Riordan et al., 2011).

The affordances of *profile management* allow users of social network sites to manage their profile page, which represents their public identity (Acquisti & Gross, 2006). Profile pages will usually contain personal information such as name, age, gender, location, interests and a list of friends (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). On Facebook, users can also manage their profile by uploading profile photos, pictures, add a “bio”, check into places, “like”



pages, and post content to their profile page. This allows users to display not only basic personal information but also their cultural taste, interests, as well as political leanings (Lomborg, 2014, 184). As such, profile management affords users to present themselves to others and create an online “persona” (O’Riordan et al., 2012).

Participating in news-generated debates on Facebook, users are required to participate under their full name, which is visible to others together with a thumbnail of their profile photo. “Clicking” on a participant’s name or photo will redirect one to his or her personal profile. Thus, the profile pages afford participants in the public social media debates to access personal information about each other, and based on this, form an impression of other participant’s character, knowledge-level and political beliefs (Vatnøy, 2017, 236-238). Users can, however, also manage who may access the personal information they disclose on their profile-page by adjusting their privacy settings. Depending on the individual users’ privacy settings, users may be able to access others’ profiles fully or only partly.

The affordances of *social connectivity* (friends/followers, “like pages”, groups and friend-lists), enable users to establish and maintain relationships. Primarily, these affordances promote the establishment of existing reciprocal relationship, as actors must accept each other as “friends” to connect, which usually signifies an already established relationship. However, one-way connections are also afforded through the ability to follow media sites, groups and people that are not part of the actors’ existing network (O’Riordan et al., 2012). For example, the participants in the newspapers’ comment sections may have connected with the newspaper by following the page, thus receiving its posts in their newsfeed. Most participants in the debates will, however, not be connected to *each other* as friends or followers, but instead appear as strangers who encounter one another in a public space.

Affordances of *social interactivity* describe the potential for users to interact with others through comments, posts, direct messages and “likes”. Social network sites facilitate social interaction with a variety of different purposes, such as everyday conversation, complaints, recommendations, expression of opinions, expression of a reaction through a comment or emoticon, information and content sharing, self-

promotion and maintenance of pre-existing relationships (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007; Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010).

Many have identified the latter, i.e. maintaining pre-existing relationships, as the primary communicative function of Facebook (Ellison et al., 2007; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012a; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). However, this maintenance does not, according to Lomborg (2014, 155), evolve around deep, personal communication, but instead serves purposes of entertainment, time-passing and the quick, superficial “catching up” or “checking in”. The principal means for social interaction is afforded through “status updates”, comments and “likes” (O’Riordan et al., 2012). Moreover, Facebook affords both synchronous and asynchronous communication and both public, semi-public, as well as private forms of communication (O’Riordan et al., 2012).

The affordances of social interactivity, together with various content affordances (emoticons, tags, hyperlinks), promote interaction settings that resemble informal face-to-face conversations. The technology affords conversations characterised by immediacy, direct addresses and an informal and personal tone. Nevertheless, these conversations are distinct from face-to-face interactions. Written communication, which is the mode in the news-generated debates, does not afford body language and tonality of voice. The lack of modes of voice and body language is, however, replaced with emoticons and “likes”, which affords new ways to express emotions and reactions (Vatnøy, 2017, 234-236). Additionally, one can use hyperlinks to direct other users to content that exists outside of the immediate communicative setting, and thereby share information, as well as substantiate claims.

These affordances structure the general uses of Facebook, and influence also the particular use of this site for public debate. In order to fully grasp the structure of the news-generated social media debates, it is, however, also necessary to draw attention to some technological features that make themselves particularly relevant in this regard, namely how users encounter and access these debates, as well as what types of interaction are afforded in them.

## Affordances of the news-generated Facebook debates

Whereas the comment sections found on the newspaper's own web-page (i.e. outside of social media) requires users to seek out the article actively, and scroll to the bottom of the text, the comment sections on newspaper's Facebook-pages requires little effort from the users. Commenting can be done quickly, without reading the article, and without viewing previous comments to it. Contrary to the newspaper's webpage, where commentators actively have to choose the article and seek out the comment sections, Facebook-users can be introduced to an article in several ways: The article may appear in the user's feed when 1) s/he "follows" the newspaper on Facebook; 2) when a "friend" has liked, shared or commented on the article; 3) the post is shared in a group the user is part of; 4) when the newspaper has paid Facebook to boost the post; 5) when algorithms decide that the user is in the targeted group; or 6) the user has actively visited the newspaper's public Facebook page.

Independent of how the user accesses the post, it will contain the newspaper's name and logo, the main photo used in the newspaper article, the title of the article, as well as an additional introduction – a "pitch", as described in the figure below.



**Figure 4:** Facebook post as it appears for the users The post is from Berlingske (Jan. 6, 2016). Clicking on the photo or title of the article will re-redirect the user to the article on the newspaper's own web-page.

The “pitch” allows the newspapers to add an additional introduction to the article when they post it to Facebook. As they are dependent on likes, shares and comments to make their articles visible in the abundance of posts on Facebook, they might choose an introduction that arouses interest and reaction, and thus incite comments, shares and “likes”. News providers commonly make use of emotive and controversial “pitches” when posting their news article to social media. These pitches often contain emoticons, questions and evaluations that are inviting the audience to react to the article (Hågvar, 2019).

The actual debates present themselves in the shape of a comment section with three possibilities for social interaction. One can choose to “like” the post, “comment” on the post or “share” the post. Commenting can be done either directly to the newspaper’s post, or to a comment already written by someone else through the “reply”-function. Doing the latter, one participates in a “thread”, i.e. a sub-conversation within the comment sections (see Figure 1 in chapter 3).

These threads will appear chronologically, with all comments shown, but the entire comment section will appear differently to users depending on their preference settings (see Figure 5). The standard setting that will apply unless users actively choose otherwise is based on the algorithms’ calculation of what will be “most relevant” to the individual user. This implies that comments from their “friends”, as well as comments that are “popular”, i.e. have many “likes” or “replies” will appear first. Moreover, comments that are regarded to be “spam” by Facebook’s algorithms will be filtered out. Users can change these settings by choosing either “newest”, which will show all the comments in reverse chronology, or “all comments”, which will show all comments, also those recognised as “spam” in the same order as the “most relevant”-setting.

✓ **Most Relevant**

Show friends' comments and the most engaging comments first.

**Newest**

Show all comments, with the newest comments first.

**All Comments**

Show all comments, including potential spam. The most relevant comments will appear first.

**Figure 5:** Preference settings in the newspapers' comment sections on Facebook. The standard setting is "most relevant", but users can actively change this to "newest" or "all comments".

There is no upper limit to how many may engage in a "thread", and these will often develop as "multilog", i.e. as conversations between many participants speaking at once, some talking past one another, others engaging in dialogue with one another.

To ease the communication, users can "tag" (shown in excerpts as [tags participant X]) others in their comment, which will give the "tagged" person a notification that s/he is mentioned in another comment. The tag-function is, according to O'Riordan et al. (2012), an affordance of content aggregation, as it enables users to aggregate relational data, by tagging people in photos, posts, places, and so forth. In the comment sections debates, however, the tag-function primarily serves two functions: 1) to invite an already established contact into the conversation, and 2) to address another participant already involved in the debate. The first of these functions describe how actors can connect with their already established group of friends while debating with strangers. They can, in other words, bring elements of their personal life into the public debate. The latter function allows users to address others in the debates directly and enables them to understand and be notified when others are addressing them.

Other affordances that users may utilise in their communication in the news-generated Facebook debates include the "like"-button, which makes expressing support for a post or a comment easy, and will also give the "liked" content more visibility, as well as the "emoticon", which allows users to express an emotion or direct others' interpretation of one's comment. For instance, one can use emoticons such as "Heart",

“Crying Face”, “Angry Face” or “Vomiting Face”, to convey a feeling, or add a “Winking Face” or to indicate that one is joking. This way, the affordances of Facebook offer actors ways to convey moods and assess others reactions to their comments.

Finally, the users can include hyperlinks, i.e. “clickable” references to additional data hosted on other sites, for example, newspaper articles, Youtube-videos and statistics. This can be utilised by the actors as a way to substantiate their claims by directing others to additional evidence.

In the following, I account for how these affordances influence how the debate develops, i.e. how it constitutes the contextual framework of the debates and shapes how one can express oneself, promote, as well as counter, claims and arguments. I will demonstrate this through examples from the material.

### **The titles and “pitches”**

As established above, users are not required to read the article before commenting on it. The analysis of the comments suggests that not all actors *have* read the article, but instead react and respond to the post as it appears on Facebook (see Figure 4). This is suggested by how many comments convey criticism and claims that would be self-contradictory if one had read the article. The title of the article, the image and the additional “pitch”, will thus have the potential to influence how the debate develops.

The articles that create the most user engagement in the material are characterised by controversial and conflict-oriented titles and “pitches” (for an overview of all articles’ number of comments, see Appendix B). In particular, articles with a misleading, emotive or controversial pitch, bring about many comments and often heated debate, in which strong feelings are expressed. The article with the most comments is an article from *Expressen*, titled “THE MESSAGE: The government implements border controls”, which received more than 1200 comments. Whereas the implementation of border controls in itself may appear as controversial, this is sensationalised by the newspaper’s use of capital letters to emphasise “the message” as astounding.

The other articles that spur much user activity (ranging from 433-523), include titles and pitches such as:

Swindled Støjberg. Advertise for Denmark as amazing asylum country (title). A Danish woman invites, in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, refugees to Denmark, where one gets free education and fast family reunification (pitch). (*Ekstra Bladet*, Aug. 4, 2015)

- One cannot just come here and have welfare benefits that Norwegian taxpayers have built (title). (*Dagbladet* Nov. 9, 2015).

Controversial asylum retrenchments passed (title). The government can, as of now confiscate, the refugees' belongings (pitch). (*Ekstra Bladet*, Jan. 26, 2016).

Romson in tears when the government implements temporary residency (title). The vice prime minister was visibly affected when answering how the restrictions would be received by her party (pitch) (*Expressen*, Nov. 24, 2015).

The popularity of such articles supports previous claims made about how social media logics favour content that is emotive and controversial (Barberá et al., 2015; Eberholst & Hartley, 2014; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015). The prevalence of such titles and Facebook-“pitches” in the material, in particular in the articles from the second period, in which political decisions are reported on, also suggests that the media organisations prioritise content that can arouse emotions and be perceived as controversial in order to create user engagement and generate clicks (Hågvar, 2019, 4). This is also supported by utterances by the media professionals themselves. For instance, a media industry CEO, interviewed by Braun and Gillespie (2011, 395) said:

Low-quality comments on Facebook are very valuable because all you care about is the person's friends reading it and clicking on the link. Low-quality comments [on a traditional news site] are terrible – poison.

This points to how media professionals, while commonly found to regard the comment sections hosted on the newspaper's web-page as problematic, due to the abusive nature of much of the content in them (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015), view the same comment sections as valuable as long as they are on Facebook. On Facebook, abusive comments can make posts go viral and generate traffic to the newspapers' web-page. While the newspapers are responsible for the content in their Facebook comment sections, the negative feelings people could get from reading abusive comments are believed not to affect their impression of the newspaper but instead of the platform. This suggests that the newspapers are prone to give prevalence to contents and ways of presenting this that

may stir up strong emotions and “low-quality” comments, because this gives the content visibility, and the newspaper “clicks”.

This claim can also be substantiated through two articles, both from *Aftenposten*, and both about the hotel mogul, Petter Stordalen’s, offer to house refugees in one of his hotels. These articles follow a social media logic, attempting to arouse strong emotions through controversy. While all of the articles about the hotel mogul’s offer received many comments (between 221-471), these two were the most commented. One of the articles is titled “UDI rents hotel rooms from Stordalen. Price: 650,- per night”, and is posted on Facebook together with the pitch: “Tonight the first asylum seekers move into one of Stordalen’s hotels. Price: 650,- per night.” (Aftenposten Sep. 5, 2015).

The news article reports that 50 refugees will arrive tonight to one of Petter Stordalen’s hotels and will stay in rooms rented by The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration [UDI]. Both the title of the article and the pitch on Facebook, emphasise the expenses of their stay. Later in the article, however, it is mentioned that it is not at all sure that Stordalen will charge the authorities for the asylum-seekers’ stay. Petter Stordalen is interviewed, and he underscores that the bill is not yet sent, and it is not sure that it ever will be. Moreover, it is explained that the 650 Norwegian kroner per night is the cost price of a room at the hotel, i.e. what it costs the hotel to have a guest staying in the room, not what they will charge for the stay.

The comments to this article, however, indicate that not all have read the full article, but are reacting to the title and the “pitch”. Stordalen is here subjected to criticism and suspicion, evident in comments such as:

**Examples 1-4:**

For 650,- a night I would also rent out my guest bedroom for some weeks.

Is it human compassion to profit from other people’s tragedies?

Stordalen profits from this. It is entirely reprehensible. Just as reprehensible as those who transport people for money.

Not bad, only 20 000,- per month, is it us, the taxpayers, who get the bill?



The other article that followed a social media logic aimed at arousing strong emotions, and with a focus on conflict was the article published by *Aftenposten* the day after the article mentioning the price tag (*Aftenposten* Sep. 6, 2015a). The article was titled: “Stordalen praised by humanitarian organisations, but criticised in social media”. The article was posted to Facebook together with the pitch: “It almost boiled over in the comment sections here on Facebook when we posted the issue about the refugees who moved into Stordalen-hotel last night”. The news article is, in other words, an article about how the previous article the newspaper posted to social media created much user engagement, suggesting that these are important considerations in the media organisation’s social media strategies.

Misleading, clearly emotive or controversial titles and Facebook-pitches generally cause greater participation in the comment sections. In contrast, largely non-controversial articles, such as the several of the articles about the Swedish help-campaigns, which were often without titles and pitches, as well as articles with matter-of-factly titles such as “These are the asylum agreement’s 29 points” (*Dagbladet* Nov. 19, 2015), bring about comparatively little engagement in the comment sections (see Appendix B).

### **“Tagging”**

The news-generated social media debates are closely intertwined with the overall Facebook-environment. Here, users are surrounded by friends and acquaintances, and at the same time as one participates in a public debate, one may, for instance, also be chatting with a personal friend through Facebook’s function called “Direct Message”.

Commenting on a newspapers’ post on Facebook will often make both the post and the comment appear in one’s friends’ newsfeed. Thus, the activity of commenting on an article or discussing something with strangers on an open page on Facebook may also be a way to communicate about yourself to the people you know. This function of the comments might be important to understand the many acclaims written to the articles in the first period (see chapter 7), in which there was a strong emphasis on helping the refugees. By writing comments such as “Go Stordalen, go! (c. *Aftenposten* 6.9.15a)<sup>37</sup>,

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<sup>37</sup> The reference here denotes that the utterance is a comment (“c.”), as well as to which of the newspaper articles in the material it is written to.

“So greeeeeat 🖤” (c. Berlingske 5.8.15), and “I share the faith in humanity and human compassion” (c. Dagens Nyheter 6.9.15d), users can display their reactions and positions in the issue, not only to the strangers in the comment sections but also to their Facebook-friends.

In the material, there are also several instances of users’ friends being “tagged”, and thereby made aware of the debate and invited to participate. Some examples are:

#### **EXAMPLES 5-7:**

[Tagging friend]<sup>38</sup> It reminds a little of what you wrote 😊

*Reply: Yes, it is good to see 😊* (c. Politiken 9.9.15)

But for fuck’s sake [tagging friend], what is happening... (c. Aftonbladet 26.11.15)

Wow [tagging friend], this seems to be a topic that engages people! (c. Dagens Nyheter 24.11.15)

This way, the affordances of social connectivity contributes to blurring the lines between the public debate and personal uses of Facebook, i.e. for maintenance of personal relationships. “Tagging” also serves another function, namely as a way for the participants already *in* the debate to address each other, as I attend to in the following discussion of how the interaction is structured in the news-generated social media debates.

#### **Affordances that structure interaction in the debates**

The news-generated debates on Facebook are characterised primarily by public, asynchronous communication. There are no formal rules for turn-taking and for who may join an on-going exchange. Instead, multilogs are allowed, and commonly the interaction between two interlocutors is interrupted by many other participants, creating a cacophony of voices rather than dialogue.

The table below (Table 3) shows the proportions of comments that are part of an interaction between more than two actors (multilogs), two actors who read and respond

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<sup>38</sup> That participants are tagging a friend is suggested by the tagged person’s absence from the comment sections before the tag.

to each other’s comments (dialogues), and alone-standing comments, i.e. comments that are not replied to in the comment sections (monologues).

**Table 3:** Modes of interaction in the material. Number of comments that appear alone (monologue), are involved in an interaction between two participants (dialogue), or in an interaction with more than two participants involved (multilog).

	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Threads</b>	<b>Comments pr. interaction (average)</b>
Multilogs	1771	167	10.6
Dialogues	289	118	2.5
Monologues	668	668	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>2728</b>	<b>953</b>	<b>2.9</b>

As the table shows, the multilog is the dominant type of social interaction found in the news-generated Facebook-debates. In contrast, the dialogue, i.e. the interaction between two actors who read and respond to each other’s contributions, is the least prominent form of interaction in the debates. The majority of the comments are part of interactions with many participants involved, and these interactions are often lengthy, with an average of 10.6 comments per thread. The longest thread in the material holds 59 comments and involves 26 different actors (c. Aftenposten 29.12.15).

Moreover, a dialogue should here not necessarily be understood as *dialogic*. Instead it often takes the shape of display of a subjective evaluation and celebration or condemnation of this. The following “dialogue” may serve as an example of how these typically unfold:

**EXAMPLE 8:**

Sweden’s hypocrisy is striking. One side displays human compassion and solidarity, the other provides a sanctuary for those who actually created the influx of refugees.

*Reply:* Fuck how right you are! (c. Dagens Nyheter 6.9.15a)

Many comments are, moreover, not replied to at all (monologues), suggesting that the comment sections are both an arena for debate with many participants and arenas for expressing an opinion or reaction without being part of a debate. As I will discuss in chapter 6, many comments do not invite debate, but instead precludes interaction by emphasising that it is “just my opinion”. Furthermore, as I will discuss in chapter 9,

attempts at debate through promoting criticism and counter-arguments, are often sanctioned as interventions in the individual's possibilities to express him- or herself.

Here, I turn to the type of social interaction characteristic of the multilog. To demonstrate how the multilog typically unfolds, I include a lengthy excerpt from the material. The example gives an impression of how the interaction is structured, as well as how participants may utilise content affordances, such as "tags", hyperlinks, and emoticons in the debates. The excerpt is from the comment sections of *Aftenposten* (5.9.15) to an article about the hotel mogul, Petter Stordalen's offer to house refugees in his hotels.

#### **EXAMPLE 9:**

Thread starter: Have some of you negative people here, actually calculated the costs of operating an asylum reception centre pr. night? I look forward to an answer when you have done so...

Respondent 1: People complain about privatising nursing homes, but getting rich on asylum reception centres is all right?

Thread starter: Was that an answer to my question? I do not see any numbers here...

Thread starter: Stordalen is not getting any richer from this. Costs of capital and operating expenses are running regardless of who sleeps in the room.

Respondent 2: The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration has revealed that it costs 100.000 per person per year in a reception centre. That is only for housing, and then all other expenses are added to it.

Respondent 3: Well, he did not offer an asylum reception centre, and the one who says no to 650 000 kr a night does not deserve to run anything.

Thread starter: OK. 275 per night is just housing expenses. And then we have to look at where the reception centres are located. And where are the hotels located? The market (that many of the negative people here love so much) will naturally make hotels more expensive than a barn in the village. And then there are administration costs and maintenance costs etc etc. 650 is probably a zero-budget.

Respondent 4: How did you get in here, [Tags participant whose comments have been removed from the comment section]<sup>39</sup>?

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<sup>39</sup> The comment section debates on the newspaper's Facebook-pages are moderated by the newspapers themselves, who have an editorial responsibility to remove hate speech and threats. Comments can, however, also be removed by the participant him- or herself, as Facebook allows one to delete one's

- Thread starter: [Tags participant whose comments have been removed from the comment section]: Go to bed! Way under the covers and stay there!!!
- Respondent 5: Of course, Stordalen profits from this. The hotels are not paid in full, of course, he does not offer the best. But, hello, the reactions to this are to the way in which Stordalen has presented this. As a charitable Samaritan. Just send them, and I will house them. Just remember that you have to pay.
- Thread starter: [Tags respondent 5]: what does a refugee in real need look like, then? Apparently, you know...
- Respondent 5: Well, looks do not matter. A refugee in need has fled a country at war, and his or her life is at risk. When masses are coming from Turkey and other countries with fake passports, we are idiots not to question this. The more who manage to get in on false grounds, the less are helped. And honestly, it is a good point that those who come have passed 10-15 peaceful countries. This may make one wonder whether it is the good welfare benefits that are tempting. That masses of men are violent, aggressive and refuse to be in a camp even for a short period also makes one wonder. If one is persecuted and has gotten into safety, one should maybe not start making demands.
- Respondent 6: Stordalen emphasises in the article that no bill has been sent yet. It might be wise to wait until Tuesday to state something too firm about how much he eventually profits from it?
- Thread starter: [Tags respondent 5] Are they coming from Turkey? I did not know that there was war in Turkey? When did it start? Why is this not in the news? I thought those who are coming are from Syria. I must have been completely wrong then...
- Respondent 7: They are travelling from Turkey after having gotten there, but it almost seems as if there is war in Turkey as all want to flee from there. And all are definitely not from Syria.
- Respondent 8: No, they are not all from Syria, that's for sure because if one looks at the ones who have been in the media, one sees that they have both nice shoes, clothes and cell phones of the newest kind. The refugees from Syria do not.
- Respondent 5: [Tags thread starter], if you are not aware that many are coming from Turkey, among them the little three-year-old on the photos that have been widely circulated the past couple of days, then actually you should begin to read the news. There have also been reports about organised groups of immigrants who are being sent up in Europe with fake Syrian passports.

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own comments. A third way the comment may be removed is that the commentator is no longer on Facebook.

- Thread starter: Ehhh, then watch the news... Turkey cannot take them all alone. And that they look western these refugees... yeah, well, Syria was not a poor third world country before the war. So they are a bit similar to you and me, yes... But nevertheless – they are fleeing from war. Similar to what it would be like if Russia attacked us.... Then we would have taken our iPhones and gone to Sweden, Denmark, England or where we would like to flee. Syrians who flee are, on average, equally educated and smart as you and me.... Stop messing around!
- Thread starter: [Tags respondent 5] stop messing around. I refuse to believe that you have so little knowledge. What I wrote was irony.
- Respondent 9: Cheaper to just close the borders.
- Respondent 5: Idiot! [“Gjøk” which means both “idiot” and “cuckoo”]
- Respondent 7: That all are coming from Syria is bullshit... Surely there are many fortune hunters... The problem is that no one is asking how to stop this.
- Thread starter: Cuckoo? Owl!!! That struck home, I suppose! Such high level...
- Respondent 9: [Tags thread starter], does [tags respondent 5] have little knowledge? “Aylan grew up in Turkey” [hyperlink to an article in *Aftenposten* with the same title]. “-Syrian passports can be bought in Turkey” [hyperlink to an article on the financial news website *Hegnar.no* with the same title]. I think you have to obtain some knowledge and not just be controlled by the emotions aroused in you by front pages.
- Respondent 10: Wow!! Aylan grew up in Turkey! ☺☺ Oh my God, then everything falls apart ☺
- Respondent 11: Cheap to close our long border to Sweden and Finland? Because border control guards and customs officers are not to be paid?
- Respondent 12: [Tags thread starter], so 650\*30 is a cheap monthly rent?
- Respondent 12: [Tags respondent 5], ouch, have you experienced a mean foreign boyfriend, perhaps? All I can say is, when you have made your bed, you have to lie in it.
- Respondent 13: I wonder when we are going to have to start to read about such things: [broken hyperlink to the Danish local newspaper *Hoersholm lokalavisen*]
- Respondent 14: Easy to be generous when one profits from it.....
- Respondent 15: If we follow your logic, [Tags respondent 5] then it will be cheaper to house our elderly in Grand Hotel in Oslo in single rooms than to let them stay in double rooms or in the bathroom of an old people’s home.

- Respondent 16: A single mom with two children is placed in a camping site in a cabin without a mains connection for water in a difficult life situation. I feel that this is going a bit through the roof. It is no wonder that average people get pissed when they see the treatment given to the refugees. This may create racist attitudes, and we do not want that.
- Respondent 17: Apparently, there is a difference between a king and a cat... But for comparison, the hotel housed so-called Syria refugees... Mainly young men in their prime. At least according to the published images. And the people in Finnmark during the Second World War. There lived close to 60 people in the entrance of the mine in Kirkenes during the entire course of the war. While the war was going on right outside. Kirkenes is one of the places that was bombed the most during the Second World War. Both children, youth and elderly lived there, and they made it. Even with the housing conditions. Even after the Nazis burned down all of Finnmark. Even then, the people in Finnmark managed with what they had. Because this was the only choice they had. But the Syrian refugees are housed in Choice hotels at the cost of 650 kr per person. Expenses that we are forced to help pay for. During the Second World War the people from Finnmark were close to left to themselves against the Nazis' ravage. The help they got came first when the Russians came over Storskog in Sør-Varanger municipality. (c. Aftenposten 5.9.15)

The example illustrates well the social interaction in many of the exchanges in the material. What characterises the social interaction, is that many participants are discussing many different issues at the same time (in this example: 18 participants). Not all contributions are clearly addressed to others in the exchange, and not all are responded to (e.g. respondent 16 and 17). Some of the utterances, by contrast, are replies to others' utterances (e.g. the thread starter and respondent 5), and several exchanges are taking place over one another. Moreover, as there are no formal rules for turn-taking and for who may join the exchange, new participants continuously enter into the thread, some of them responding to earlier comments, others introducing new perspectives and topics. Some of the actors contribute only with one comment, whereas others post several comments.

If this was a debate taking place face-to-face, there would be no way for the actors to hear and respond to each other's contributions, or even get an overview of the debate. Surely it cannot be easy in an online setting either. This is indicated by how the use of irony causes misunderstandings. The thread starter ironically writes "Are they coming from Turkey? I did not know there was war in Turkey? When did it start? Why is this

not in the news? I thought those who are coming are from Syria. I must have been completely wrong then”. This leads respondent 5 to write “if you are not aware that many are coming from Turkey... then actually you should begin to read the news”, upon which the thread starter attacks his or her opponent for not understanding the irony.

Furthermore, whereas the threads<sup>40</sup> in the material appear the way I present them (chronologically), the entire comment section will usually be organised after popularity and relevance (see Figure 5), implying that comments written by friends, as well as the comments that receive the most “likes” and responses, will appear on top. In contrast, the least “liked” and responded to comments will appear at the bottom of the comment sections.

In the example above (example 9), we also see how some of the participants make use of affordances that are unique to online interactions, namely “tags”, hyperlinks and emoticons. In one utterance (respondent 9), hyperlinks to two articles from two different news sites are included. Primarily, these hyperlinks function as parts of an attack on an opponent (thread starter). The attack consists of a rejection of the opponent’s wisdom by contrasting reason to emotions and claiming that the opponent is controlled by the latter (“you have to obtain some knowledge and not just be controlled by the emotions aroused in you”). In this context, the content the hyperlinks direct one to, serve as evidence of the “truth” – a truth the opponent allegedly is incapable of seeing, because the emotions have replaced reason. The hyperlinks, thus, function as a way to “win” the debate.

The other utterance in which a hyperlink is used, also re-directs one to a newspaper article from a local newspaper (respondent 13). At the time when the analysis was conducted, the hyperlink was, however, no longer functioning and, thus, it is no way of knowing what the content of the article was. The additional information the utterance contains indicates that the article reports on either a negative event or an unacceptable situation (“I wonder when we are going to have to start to read about such things”). Given the issue discussed (the housing of refugees in a Norwegian hotel), this

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<sup>40</sup> A thread is here understood the interaction spurred by one comment, as the multilog in example 9. The comment that starts the thread is referred to as the *thread starter* (see Figure 1 in Chapter 4).



is likely to have something with the reception of refugees to do. Independent of the content of the article, the hyperlink primarily serves as part of a statement by which the speaker expresses a concern. None of the two hyperlinks contributes much to the debate – the first of the two utterances is ridiculed (“Wow!! Aylan grew up in Turkey 😊😊 Oh my God, then everything falls apart 😊”), the latter does not bring about any responses.

Based on the textual study performed in this dissertation, there is no way of knowing whether other actors click on the hyperlinks and read the content, but there are indications of both options in the material. Many of the hyperlinks in the material do not bring about responses from others. Many of these hyperlinks are also posted without additional claims or information about what the content of the hyperlink is aimed to do; rather, the comment only contains a hyperlink. As I will discuss more at length in chapter 9, where I look at the sanctions in the material, the typical response to hyperlinks, i.e. when responded to at all, is that they are sanctioned for directing others to content that is false or unreliable. An example is the following comment:

**EXAMPLE 10:**

Please read this before you link to frieord.no. If you still choose to post articles from the site, it is your choice, but at least now you know the site’s background [hyperlink to an article about alternative immigration critical sites by “Researchkollektivet”] (c. Berlingske 5.8.15).

The utterance in which the hyperlink is ridiculed from the example above (example 9), illustrates yet another use of the technology’s affordances, namely the use of emoticons. In the debates, emoticons function both as a way to express feelings and, as in this example, as a way to indicate that one’s comment is sarcastic. Thus, the emoticons offer participants ways to convey modes and to guide others’ interpretation of one’s utterances. In face-to-face interactions, these functions would mainly be performed through body language and voice, i.e. through eye-contact, gestures, tonality, and so forth.

Moreover, the “tag” is utilised. In contrast to the examples cited earlier (examples 5-7), in which the tag functioned to involve users’ personal contacts into the debate, the tag here functions as a way to address other participants already participating in the

debate, thereby, enabling their interlocutor to understand that the comment is addressed to them and that a response is expected.

Finally, the affordance that allows users to “like” comments, while not explicitly studied here, function as a way to easily express support for a comment, without having to participate in the debate by writing one’s own comment. A “like” also gives the comment more visibility in the comment sections. There are some instances of such “likes” actively being used in the participant’s ethos-formation and in their assessment of others’ popularity. Three comments can serve as examples:

### **EXAMPLES 11-13:**

[...] Now I have 70 “likes” on my comment. How many do you have on your response?  
(c. Aftenposten 29.12.15)

[Tags another participant] And just now reader number 110 clicked “like” on my comment. How many have liked your comments? (c. Aftenposten 29.12.15)

I do not know what is most depressing. That [tags another participant] probably believes his own “facts”, or that a bunch of people gives the fabrications “likes”. I get sad. (c. Aftenposten 6.9.15b).

The three examples demonstrate how “likes” are viewed as a sign of widespread support and popularity. In the first two utterances, these “likes” are used to claim superiority over an opponent – to proclaim oneself as the winner of the debate. In the last of the three examples, the “likes” given to an opponent are evaluated negatively (“I get sad”). Still, these likes are viewed as a sign that the opponent has widespread support – that his or her views are popular – and this is what upsets the speaker.

In sum, the affordances that structure the interactions in the news-generated Facebook debates offer the actors ways to express emotions, support, to share, and substantiate their own opinions, as well as challenge others’ claims, through emoticons, hyperlinks, “likes”, shares, and so forth. These affordances are substantially different from affordances in everyday face-to-face interactions, although they mimic some of the functions available by body language and voice. Moreover, the “tag”-function affords actors to address other participants directly and makes sure that the addressed actor will be made aware of the comment through a notification. This might ease the interaction, which is otherwise characterised by lack of overview and coherence. Often,

many participants are involved, many issues are debated, and topical and thematic leaps are frequently made, all obstructing the flow and coherence of the interaction.

### **Personal profiles**

Facebook is structured around the users' personal profiles. When participating in news-generated debates on Facebook, users display their full name and a thumbnail of the profile photo to the other participants. Actors may also choose to click on other participants' names and thereby access their personal profile. Actors can manage who can access the personal information they disclose on their profile-page and, depending on the individual users' privacy settings, actors may be able to access others' profiles fully or only partly.

In the material, there is evidence that participants make use of the possibility to visit others' profiles and, based on this, construct or confirm their construction of interlocutors' ethos. Two comments can serve as examples:

#### **EXAMPLES 14-15:**

You reveal yourself – hahah no profile photo, covering with lies about not voting for the Progress Party, how stupid are you. You do not realise that it is true. I have looked at your profile, and it corresponds very well with my image of you. Thus, I am right, and you can swear as much as you want. With burqa-jokes on your wall, you reveal yourself. Thus, xenophobia and less empathetic abilities. Have a look at your own profile, and you might understand what I mean – or perhaps you will do as Peter the disciple and deny. Or as other Progress Party-voters, just criticise and find errors in others. Who performed the most significant terror attack after the Second World War??? If you do not know, it was one from your political position, you fucking nationalist bitch. When will you wake from your sleep? (c. Dagbladet 9.11.15)

I blocked him. Dialogue is impossible. Though it surprises me that “guys” like him usually are depicted with a beer in their hand. I think he needs help, but I do not understand why refugees should have to suffer from it. (c. Politiken 26.1.16)

The two examples point to an use of the affordances of personal profiles also identified in other studies of social media as arenas for public debate, namely to “check out” interlocutors that one does not know beforehand in order to be able to create an impression of them as persons (Vatnøy, 2017, 237). The three examples above, however, also suggest that this impression is already created and that the information accessed

through the interlocutor's profile primarily serves as a way to confirm this impression and to provide a personal attack with substance.

This should be seen in relation to what has been termed "solipsistic introjection" (Suler, 2004), namely how people, when communicating textually in online settings construct, not only an online identity but also construct an image of others based on what they write and how they write it. Whereas the psychoanalytical concept of introjection refers to the process in which an individual replicates behaviours or attributes of other subjects in his or her surrounding, the term solipsistic introjection, describes a process that happens when people communicate textually online. Reading messages written by others, humans commonly perceive these texts as a voice in their head. If a person with whom we are communicating is unknown to us, we choose or invent a voice that fits the content and style of the message. In doing so, we also construct an image of the person conveying the message (Suler, 2005, 186). Consequently, if the only information available to us is what a person says in the comment section, the character we create of that person may be based on typical characteristics, our stereotypes or prejudices, as well as whether or not we agree with the content of the person's comment.

The affordances of profile management, however, allows users to access additional information about others that can play into and, as the examples above suggests, *confirm* the construction of other participants in the news-generated social media debates. For instance, the first of the comments say "I have looked at your profile, and it corresponds very well with my image of you". Similarly, the latter comment promotes a stereotype based on both the impression left by the opponent's comments and his profile page ("guys" like him"). While not explicitly stated that being "depicted with a beer in their hand" is something negative, the utterance indicates that this is something wrong, by relating it to a group of people to which the opponent arguably belongs, and by attacking the opponent as a representative of this group.

Also in the first of the two utterances, the opponent is categorised into a group, i.e. as a supporter of the Norwegian Progress Party. Although the utterance suggests that the opponent does not admit to voting for the Progress Party ("lies about not voting for the Progress Party"), the profile allegedly "reveals" the opponent's true self: S/he is

“xenophobic”, lacks “emphatic abilities” and is a “nationalist bitch”. How the opponent is said to reveal his or her true self, is through inappropriate jokes (“burqa-jokes”) posted on the profile page. Moreover, the absence of a profile photo is evaluated negatively and ridiculed (“hahah no profile photo”), as well as taken to signify that the opponent is trying to hide something about who s/he is.

The affordances of profile management, then, allows users of social network sites to create an online “persona” and display their identity to others. More important in this context, however, is that it allows participants in the debates to assess others’ ethos (Vatnøy, 2017, 236). In the news-generated debate, such assessments play into an impression already constructed of the other, and as suggested by the examples, primarily serves as a way to confirm and strengthen participants’ negative evaluations of others. This gives content to attacks, which become not only about what others write but attacks on who they are.

### **Chapter conclusion: The technology’s influence on the potentials for debate**

In this chapter, I have argued that the technological structure of Facebook in general, as well as the particular affordances in force in the news-generated debates, provide participants’ with a set of possibilities and constraints that influence how the debates unfold. As such, the technological structure is an essential contextual frame of the news-generated social media debates, together with the immigration issue. In this concluding section, I will draw attention to some ways, in which the software can be said to influence the debates.

First, the debates take place in an environment that is structured around personal profiles and pre-existing relationships, and that is, first and foremost, used for self-presentation and maintenance of personal relationships. This, I argue, contributes to a personalisation of the public debate. This manifests itself, for instance, in how affordances such as the “tag” can be used to communicate about the debates to personal contacts and invite these into the exchange. Another way in which the public debate becomes personalised is through the affordances of profile management, which allows participants to make assessments of other debaters based, not only on what they write but also on who they are – or at least how they present themselves on their personal

profiles. This provides users with the ability to find content for personal attacks, i.e. to attack persons for who they are, rather than for their contributions in the debates.

This also points to another way in which the technological structure of the news-generated social media debates influences the rhetorical practices in them, namely how it facilitates for provocation. It does so, I argue, through a logic which favours – and perhaps necessitates – content that is controversial and astonishing. Facebook’s way of organising content after the popularity principle (i.e. what is most liked and commented on becomes most visible), together with the abundance of content and utterances, as in the multilog, encourages hard-hitting, controversial and sensational content. The provocative style can, thus, be an effective way to gain the attention of others.

This manifests itself in how “likes” are interpreted as popularity and used by participants to dethrone opponents and proclaim themselves as “winners” of the debate. Moreover, it is evident that misleading, clearly emotive and controversial titles and “pitches” in the newspaper’s postings of articles to Facebook create greater engagement in their comment sections, and facilitate heated debates oriented towards conflict. Thus also the newspapers’ active choice to promote specific contents and styles invites a conflict-oriented debate, in which strong emotions can easily be aroused.

Finally, the technological environment creates a communicative setting in which ambiguous and often contradictory conventions and expectations are at play. Facebook facilitates for several different practices and purposes – spanning from the everyday conversation with close friends and persona management, to public debate with strangers. Also within the context of the public news-generated debates, several different practices are afforded, among them to express a reaction or an emotion to the newspaper article, express support or disagreement, express something about one’s own identity, engage in dialogue with others, as well as to debate. For instance, the hyperlink provides users with a way to strengthen their arguments by including warrants. Sometimes this affordance is used this way, it is, however, also used to dethrone others – to prove that they are wrong – and to claim a superior position for oneself. Emoticons can be used to express an emotional engagement in the issue, as well as to ridicule one’s opponent through sarcasm and irony. It can also be used as a way to anchor one’s utterance, thus guiding the interpretation of it, in a similar manner as one is afforded to do through body

language.

In this, and the previous chapter, I have suggested that the contextual framework of the debates, constituted by the issue discussed and the technological structure of the debate arena, contributes to shaping a debate characterised by personal, emotive and epideictic rhetorical expressions, as well as by ambiguous genre conventions. In the four subsequent chapters, I examine how these features of the news-generated social media debates unfold and make possible or hinders the potential of these arenas to be used for public debate and deliberation.

**PART III:**  
**The characteristic features of the debates**



## **Chapter 6: Personalisation and the ideal of authenticity**

While being structured around personal profiles and pre-existing relationships, Facebook also facilitates public debate through commenting features on public pages, for instance, on the newspapers' Facebook-pages. As established in the two previous chapters, both the issue and the medium contribute to an orientation to personal identities, values and engagement. Social media facilitates self-presentation and the construction of an online persona through affordances of personal profiles. The medium, moreover, contributes to a blurring of the lines between the public and private spheres of communication through porous boundaries between different genres facilitated. The immigration issue actualises, not only questions of practical political solutions but also of who we are and whom we want to be. As such, the issue is easily personalised, i.e. it is an issue in which everyone can form their own, personal opinion and become personally engaged.

This chapter studies how an orientation to the personal materialises in the news-generated social media debates about the refugee crisis. It examines what functions personal contents and styles serve in this context, and what kind of debate it creates. The personal manifests itself in self-disclosing utterances, direct addresses, expressions of private emotions, anecdotal evidence, based in personal experience, and in how the actors' primarily assume personas as average individuals (e.g. "pensioners") when debating. Moreover, it manifests itself in how evaluations of the political issue are oriented to who the political actors are as persons.

I argue that an orientation both to the participant's personality and subjective evaluations, as well as an orientation towards others' personal qualities, prevents debate from occurring, and mainly invites celebration and condemnation of persons. Moreover, when expressions of subjective experiences, feelings and evaluations function not only as expressions of the self, but as claims about reality, they invite a form of debate in which the disagreement plays out either as a disagreement about the factual realities, the definitions or evaluations of the issue, attitudes or persons.

The prevalence of personal expressions not oriented to debate, I argue, can be seen as violations of a principle of deliberation, according to which interlocutors relate to

one another through argumentation. Moreover, I propose, it can be viewed as an expression of another communicative ideal, namely the principle of expression, entailing that every individual should be allowed to express him- or herself authentically. In what follows, I locate this ideal within a more general structural transformation of political participation, namely a process of political individualisation and personalisation of politics that pre-dates the emergence of social media but can be said to have gained increased currency with the development of social network sites.

### The analysis

The analysis of the news-generated social media debates presented in this chapter draws primarily on the following categories identified in the material:

**Table 4:** Selection of the most central codes referenced in chapter 6 (n=2728).

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Personal action frames	63
Subjective evaluations	849
<b>Total:</b>	<b>912</b>

The largest of the two categories (subjective evaluations), contains the following sub-categories:

**Table 5:** Sub-categories of the category “subjective evaluations” (n=849).

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Assuming the role of an “average” citizen	275
Personal evaluation/truth	478
Personal anecdote	96
<b>Total:</b>	<b>849</b>

As established in Chapter 3, the analysis considers not only each utterance in isolation but how utterances interact with and structure each other in the exchanges. Consequently, the analysis is conducted in a hermeneutic movement between the utterances in these categories and the responses they bring about in the debates. Necessarily, also comments from other categories, such as acclaims and attacks on other commentators (categories 4 and 6 in Table 2), which are common responses to the

expression of personal opinions, emotions and tales of personal life and experience, are included in the analysis in this chapter.

In addition to identifying the source of disagreement in the debate, the analysis mobilises the concept of personal style, i.e. it examines formal elements that signify a personal tone in the debates, namely self-disclosure, anecdotal evidence based on personal experience, pathos-appeals and affectively charged words, as well as assuming a persona as an average individual (e.g. “as a pensioner”). These stylistic elements have previously been associated with a *feminine* style (Campbell, 1973, 1998, 1999), as well as a vernacular mode and informal style (Howard, 2010; Svennevig, 2001, 246-259). Here, I view them as expressions of a personal and individualised engagement in the issue.

In the chapter, I discuss four ways in which an orientation to personal engagement and experiences manifests itself in the news-generated social media debates and examine what type of interaction these utterances facilitate: 1) personal action frames, 2) personal anecdotes, 3) subjective evaluations and “truths”, as well as, 4) an orientation to political actor’s appearance and emotions. All four features point in the direction of a personal and individualised debate, in which the issue is mainly approached through subjective experiences and individually held opinions, and where an ideal of authenticity prevails. I discuss these features in light of theories of personalisation and individualisation of political communication (Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), as well as the emergence of authenticity, both as a moral ideal (Taylor, 1991, 2007), and a modern ethos-ideal (Hall Jamieson, 1988; Johansen, 1999, 2002; Kjeldsen & Johansen, 2012).

### **Individualisation and personalisation of politics**

The emergence and popularity of social media at once reflect and drives processes of an “expansion of individualism and an increase in self-consciousness”, characteristic of the post-modern era (Webster, 2001, 4). The medium is, in this sense, both determining social practice, and a symptom of an already existing cultural pattern.

Postmodern societies are characterised by an increased concern with the individual self-expression, lifestyle and quality of life, as well as a general decline in

hierarchical institutions and rigid social norms (Inglehart, 1997). This has provided people with possibilities to shape an empowered self and develop individual identities away from traditional group identities (Giddens, 1991). It has, however, also created a need for constant self-presentation and affirmation, as the individual is facing constant ambivalence and uncertainty (Bauman, 2000, 2005).

Moreover, issues that previously were embedded in the intimate realm of life, such as sexual orientation, gender roles, parenting, food and health, “body politics”, and so forth, have become politicised. Consequently, the lines between what is public and what is private have been blurred, and the public sphere expanded into parts of life previously exempt to controversies about power (Keane, 1991). In this context, it is argued, citizens become less attracted to traditional ideology and more interested in “identity politics”, leading to personalisation and individualisation of politics (Dahlgren, 2013; McAllister, 2005; Melucci, 1996).

Many have explained the rise and popularity of participatory media, with reference to these features of postmodernity, emphasising how digital technologies both shape and create new forms of citizenship, and are shaped by already existing cultural patterns (Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, 2013; Dahlgren, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012b; Wellman et al., 2003).

An orientation to personal and individualised forms of political engagement and public expression is undoubtedly observable in digital environments, this is, however, neither a feature distinctly of, nor novel to, the social media era. Instead, the personalisation and individualisation of politics have been viewed as an overarching shift in the contemporary public sphere that precedes the emergence of social media. As discussed in chapter 2, the mass media are found to increasingly devote space to individuals’ personal, often private, stories and emotions (Hirdman et al., 2005; Hornmoen, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, 2007). Personal experiences, identities and lifestyles occupy much of the public debate, and rational arguments in political debates are, arguably, surpassed by evaluations of the actor’s intentions and personality (Goodnight, 1982; Habermas, 2002; Hall Jamieson, 1988; Sennett, 1977). The advent of electronic mass media is found to have contributed to an “intimisation” (Sennett, 1977), and “ethos-orientation” (Kjeldsen, 2017) in the public sphere. As a consequence,

political actors are encouraged to appear as “authentic” persons, and audiences accustomed to seeing them as “persons”, rather than “politicians” (Hall Jamieson, 1988; Johansen, 1999, 2002; Kjeldsen & Johansen, 2012).

Such observations describe how not only the personal experience and emotion has gained an increasingly important role in the political debate and the public sphere, but also point to how the expression of one’s true, authentic self has become a political and, as such, also communicative ideal. In what follows, I examine how these features of the political debate materialise in the news-generated social media debates, which are *public*, and yet, closely intertwined with other personal genres on the social network site.

### **Individualised and personal engagement in the issue**

Participatory media are said to drive processes of political individualisation and personalisation of the political in four interrelated ways: These media facilitate the creation of social connections outside of existing communities and allow for engagement in multiple and differentiated issue networks (Calenda & Meijer, 2011; Castells, 2001, 2010; Wellman et al., 2003). They channel participation and engagement across large and diverse networks and allow for this participation and engagement to be personalised (Bennett, 2012).

The individualisation of politics should here be understood as “the process of developing political identities away from traditional structures – primary or secondary – to the individual and his or her self-selected context” (Calenda & Meijer, 2011, 611). It refers to a style of political communication and participation characterised by personal expressions, and dynamic connections to issue networks. Furthermore, it involves processes of social individualisation, referring to how people become less strongly connected to traditional communities, such as the family, the church, the party, and so forth. Moreover, it involves processes of political networking, referring to a decline in engagement in these stable communities, and increasing engagement in multiple and differentiated issue networks. This process is viewed as a structural feature of contemporary differentiated societies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), often linked to

processes of fragmentation of the public sphere, and the weakening of traditional ties and hierarchal structures in postmodernity (Calenda & Meijer, 2011).

The decline in hierarchical institutions and social norms has, on the one hand, been described as contributing to shaping an empowered “self” characterised by “reflexivity” and willingness to change and adapt to the continuously changing late modern society (Giddens, 1991). On the other hand, it has created a “self” which is continually facing ambivalence and uncertainty, and consequently also a need for constant self-presentation and to seek the affirmation of others (Bauman, 2000, 2005).

As such, sharing, liking and commenting on contents in social media can be a way for the individual to express and seek confirmation of one’s identity. In the material, this orientation manifests itself in several expressive statements, in which the speaker’s thoughts and feelings are expressed. Two utterances may serve as examples:

**EXAMPLES 16-17:**

I would like to help at least one child to come to Sweden and live with my family ♡. (c. Aftonbladet, 3.9.15b)

I have signed up to be a monthly giver at the Red Cross. (c. Aftonbladet, 3.9.15b)

Statements such as these perform expressive functions, i.e. they express the speaker’s attitudes, thoughts or emotions. Although the second of the two utterances also performs representative functions, i.e. it represents a condition in the world (the speaker has signed up as a giver at the Red Cross), both utterances mainly function as expressions of the speakers’ attitudes and experiences. As such, the utterances also implicitly entail evaluations of these attitudes. By this, I mean that the speakers would, in all likelihood, not express their engagement in the issue publicly, if they did not view this as a praiseworthy personal trait. Such utterances, then, may function as a form of self-presentation by which participants can express their personal engagement, and thus highlight some aspects of their identity and seek others’ recognition.

These utterances can be seen as examples of a personalised form of political communication, applying what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have termed “personal action frames”. Personalised political communication describes a form of political participation characterised by “an ethos of diversity and inclusiveness”, as well as the

rise of inclusive “personal action frames” that lower the barriers to identification (Bennett 2012, 22).

Personal action frames describe how political participation is framed through easily personal ideas that are inclusive of a variety of different ways of identifying with a cause, i.e. through the sharing of one’s own experiences, hopes and grievances. Consequently, political engagement does not require the rhetorical construction of a united “we”, but rather develops from the “self-motivated (though not necessarily self-centred) sharing of already internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources with networks of others” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 753). Thus, personal action frames allow individuals to make the cause their personal cause. By contrast, collective action frames encourage people to join the *cause*, i.e. through a political party, a movement or a union, where the identification lies with the issue, rather than the person’s experiences and priorities.

In contrast to collective action frames, personal action frames are “inclusive of different personal reasons for contesting a situation that needs to be changed” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 744). As such, although the two concepts “personalised politics” and “political individualisation” should be understood differently, they imply one another: In a society in which political participation is individualised, political participation is communicated through personalised and inclusive frames of action.

The refugee crisis, I argue, is an example of an issue that facilitated personal action frames. The immigration issue is a highly controversial issue, which tends to play out as a “moral championship”, between two clearly defined sides, and the midfield is largely uninhabitable (Brox, 1991, 2009; see also Gripsrud, 2018). Precisely for this reason, the immigration issue facilitates individualised and personal engagement. On the one hand, because the issue actualises questions of morale, identity and values, positions in the issue are closely interrelated with personal identities and values. On the other hand, the issue can gather large and diverse groups that, in other issues would be divided, into two positions; for or against immigration.

An issue such as the refugee crisis was able to mobilise such large and diverse groups to engage in a joint effort to help the refugees. Various political party independent groups mobilised large and diverse citizen groups, mainly through social

media (Eimhjellen, 2016; Fladmoe et al., 2016). As discussed in chapter 4, the Swedish newspaper articles in the period between August and September, to which many of these utterances, including the two utterances cited above, were posted, also encouraged this form of individualised political engagement, where large and diverse groups can gather in their engagement in this particular issue. The campaigns gathered hundreds of Swedish “celebrities”, spanning from politicians from all different parties except for the right-wing immigration critical party, the Sweden Democrats, to business leaders, journalists, athletes, bloggers, and so forth. Moreover, the campaigns emphasised the individualised engagement in the issue, while downplaying the political implications of the situation. In some of the articles, it was explicitly argued that private engagement was more precarious at the time than the political solutions to the situation. The audiences were encouraged to ask themselves “What can *I* do?”, and were offered a variety of possible answers to the question, emphasising how each and every one should find a way to contribute that best suited him or her personally. As such, each individual was afforded to choose to engage in this particular issue, and to do so in an individualised way, i.e. without identifying with a grand narrative about the group’s identity.

Surely, not all accepted the encouragement to engage in the issue, apparent in statements such as:

**EXAMPLES 18-19:**

Sounds good. However, I will keep my money to myself. (c. Aftonbladet 3.9.15b).

I have not helped anybody ☺ (c. Expressen 5.9.15)

Although the position expressed differs from the statements that expressed a wish to help the refugees (examples 16 and 17), the two statements above, nevertheless, perform the same function, namely to display the participant’s position in the issue and a (lack of) engagement for the refugees. By sharing their reactions and positions in the issue, participants can thereby show others what is important them, and seek others’ recognition of this. This can, in other words, be seen as a way to signal to others who one is and what one cares about. Thus, sharing and commenting on news in social



networks can be viewed as “symbolic declarations of the self” (Hermida, 2014, 38), or in other words: *performances*.

The concept of performance emphasises that identities and social roles are social and rhetorical constructions that are performed through social interaction (Butler, 1990). As argued by Goffman (1956b), social interactions are performances in which we present ourselves to others according to how we wish to be seen, as well as to the social situation we are in. We present ourselves to others in ways that correspond with our goals and desires, as well as with the social roles into which we are socialised.

In the news-generated social media debates, expressions of individualised engagement in the issue may function as a performance of one’s identity and as a way to seek the recognition of others. Rather than facilitating debate between opposing ideas and views, these types of utterances primarily encourage audiences to applaud or condemn the person. As such, the interaction stays at the qualitative stage of the debate, i.e. in which the quality of an attitude or action is evaluated. Consequently, many of the utterances in the debates are not contributions to a debate about future action, but rather evaluations, in particular of, the persons who speak. In the material, many comments are simply acclaims of other commentators. Some examples of how these acclaims are articulated are:

**EXAMPLES 20-22:**

10/10, [tags other participant] 👍 (c. Aftenposten 29.12.15)

I totally agree [tags another participant] 👍 👍 You go girl 👍 👍👍👍👍👍 (c. Aftenposten 6.9.15b)

Thank you 🙏 (c. Aftonbladet 3.9.15b)

Actors who disagree, on the other hand, are found to respond with ridicule of and attacks on the person, rather than the utterance, as in the following examples:

**EXAMPLES 23-25:**

LOL (c. Berlingske 6.1.16)

You are, obviously, completely lost. (c. Berlingske 29.9.15)

No one cares about what you think. (c. Aftonbladet 24.11.15)

While the direction of the reactions to the expressions of personal engagement in the issue, differs (i.e. either positive or negative), the reaction is essentially the same: The responses either display agreement or disagreement through respectively celebration or condemnation. Rather than facilitating debate between opposing views, the individualised political expression, then, primarily encourages celebration or condemnation of the person. As a consequence, evaluations in these debates are based on the audience's impression of the speaker's character and competency, rather than in the arguments in the issue.

As discussed in chapter 2, the orientation to personalities and personal lifestyles in the public debate is often seen as a threat to a well-functioning public sphere, precisely for this reason. Private concerns and personal stories are found to prevail over issues about the common good and political action, and arguments in public debate are increasingly justified in the interests of the individual, rather than in the interests of a common "we" (Jerslev, 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). Rational argumentation and critical reflection are replaced by an orientation to persons' psychological motives, and consequently, citizens become passive individuals who celebrate the personalities and lifestyles of public figures, rather than critically assessing arguments in matters of public concern (Goodnight, 1982; Habermas, 2002, 148; Sennett, 1977).

On that note, it seems appropriate also to remind that the debates studied here, are only a small part of the public sphere. The participants in these debates partake by being themselves and promote their individually held opinions and personal engagement. In other words, the functionality of the public sphere does not stand and fall on these vernacular debates. As discussed in chapter 2, however, the tendencies that manifest themselves in these debates, are also observable as more widespread cultural patterns.

### **Anecdotal evidence and self-disclosure**

In the material, personal action frames appear, not only in statements through which the cause is personalised, but also serves as anecdotal evidence in argumentation. In this

context, I argue, the sharing of personal experiences, serves not primarily to *display* an attitude, and thereby aspects of one's identity, but rather to justify an attitude. As such, the sharing of personal experiences also entails an evaluation of attitudes. In particular, this rhetorical strategy is utilised by actors arguing in favour of restrictions in the immigration policies by applying various formulations of the commonplace expression *weak groups at home* (category 1.5, Table 2).

In the utterances in this category, an immigration critical position is promoted through invoking claims that the refugees receive special treatment, whereas "our own" are ignored. The utterances rely on the premise that the nation's citizens are the rightful receivers of the welfare benefits. As such, the utterances commonly articulate a contrast between immigrants and weak groups in society and present the question of whom to help as an either-or question. Two examples are: "I'd rather care about the children in our own country first" (c. Aftonbladet, 3.9.15b), and "I have no income, and if I had I would have helped the local homeless" (c. Aftonbladet, 3.9.15b).

Moreover, as suggested by the latter of these two examples, personal experiences with the hardships of life (illness, homelessness, poverty, etc.), are commonly shared. In this context, I argue, such personal experiences primarily function as a justification of the speaker's attitude. An example of this is the following utterance:

**EXAMPLE 26:**

I myself am ill, and I do not receive much in social security benefits. I have a chronic disease. And no, I am not going to donate money to them. Most of the money I receive, I spend on my medicines and they are not fucking cheap, living off 1000 kr monthly is not fun. (c. Aftonbladet 3.9.15).

This is a referential utterance, in the sense that it represents a condition in the world (the speaker suffering from a chronic disease). However, the utterance mainly expresses the speaker's subjective experience of this condition, which is evaluated negatively ("not fun"). This subjective experience, in turn, functions as a justification of the speaker's evaluation of the issue in question (donating money to the refugees). As such, the utterance functions as an argument, however, not an argument that advises or advises against a particular future action – it is not advocating – rather the personal experience function as an argument for why the speaker should be allowed to hold the attitude that

s/he does. Thereby, the utterance is a qualification of an attitude, rather than an argument about future action.

As argued in chapter 2, vernacular rhetoric springs out from “average” citizens’ personal experiences and emotions. The self-disclosive, anecdotal and emotive forms of expressions, are, as such, characteristic features of the vernacular, informal style (Howard, 2010; Svennevig, 2001, 246-259). Moreover, tales of personal experiences are considered to be effective pathos-appeals, as it makes the abstract argument concrete, immediate and possible to identify with. Thus, it is also seen as an inherent part of all political communication. By dramatising concrete experiences, it is possible to invoke identification and sympathy, and narratives are therefore viewed as resources for the community. As argued by Glasser, personal stories based on everyday experiences can:

[...] enable us to think creatively and imaginatively about our experiences and the experiences of others; they empower us to interpret and thereby comprehend the endless details of life. [...] Stories have a] basic role in transforming individual and essentially private experience into a shared and therefore public reality (Glasser, 1991, 235-236).

Through personal anecdotes, for example about suffering and injustice, as many of the participants in the news-generated social media debates share, it is possible to evoke others’ emotions and empathy, and thereby create identification and mutual understanding. Thus, stories about self-experienced events and realities may function to forge bonds of solidarity among a community’s members (Ettema & Glasser, 1994, 5), and in doing so, create adherence to bits of advice for or against a particular political action. Consequently, public display of individuals’ experiences can shape the community and prepare the grounds for political action. As argued by Wahl-Jorgensen:

Though the embarrassing, the painful, the wonderful, and the beautiful textures of our lives may be grounded in experiences of a deeply personal nature, perhaps they are also the only experiences we can truly share with others, and speaking about them the only way to link us together in an empathic pursuit of the elusive common interest (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, 317).

While tales of personal experiences generally have the ability, not only to serve as evidence to support the claim but to create identification and understanding, the majority of these utterances, the above-cited example (26) included, instead bring about personal attacks. They do so, I argue, because they do not serve primarily as stories that invite

others to identify with the speaker's situation, but rather as justifications of the speaker's attitude and his or her right to hold this attitude.

This function, i.e. how personal experiences function as (positive) evaluations of the speakers' attitudes, becomes evident in the following example:

**EXAMPLE 27:**

Thread starter: Yes, great idea to give to some who are only interested in taking. HOORAY, I wonder how far away we are from society collapsing. He could have given shelter to 50 homeless Norwegians instead. I myself lived a few years on the street and will never obtain a healthy blood circulation in my fingers again after frost injuries.

Respondent 1: We do not matter that much, you know. Only those who flee can have it all and even more. Were it not for my parents, I would have ended up on the street after a break-up and would probably still have lived there.

[1 comment removed from the excerpt]:

Respondent 3: You must be very traumatised by the war you 'experienced' too! Or the family members that were killed right in front of you. Poor people!!!!!!

Thread starter: We lost all of our family members, I held my dead father's hand when I was six years old. It is hard to live that way. A fucking socialist theocratic corrupt power game is glorified and create idealised images of what we see here. Norway is probably the best place in the world, as long as you are not Norwegian. I fucking lived in an asylum centre even though I am 100 per cent ethnic Norwegian. This is sad. It is what it looks like right before society collapses. The middle classes disappear and then it is on.

Respondent 4: [Tags thread starter] My God, really? So in your opinion, they should just scoot off for "home" so that they can be killed? Really? They are people too!

Respondent 5: And still, you are unable to sympathise for those who are in a similar situation to that you apparently were in?

Thread starter: No, immigrants have stabbed me on three different occasions. I was in a coma the last time when 8 of them wanted my wallet. I got to keep my wallet, but the stab wound in my back was 4 cm away from the spine. Of those who come here, few have good intentions; thus, it is suicide to try to

integrate them. We can help 10.000 of those who really suffer instead by sending the help there, but no, the socialists do not care for that, it is more important to import voters. (c. Aftenposten, 6.9.15b)

What we see in this exchange, is that one participant (the thread starter) performs an utterance that function as a (negative) evaluation of the hotel mogul, Petter Stordalen's, offer to shelter the refugees. Also the refugees are evaluated negatively ("only interested in taking"), and the utterance advocates future action, namely that Stordalen should "give shelter to 50 homeless Norwegians instead". This advice for future action, however, should probably be read mainly as an expression of the negative evaluation of Stordalen's offer to house the refugees, rather than as an actual solution to the problem of homelessness. Moreover, the utterance contains a personal anecdote ("I myself lived a few years on the street and will never obtain a normal blood circulation in my fingers again after frost injuries"). Like in the previous example (26), the sharing of an unfavourable personal experience functions as an argument, not for the proposed future action, but the legitimacy of the speaker's attitude.

This becomes more apparent as the exchange develops, and the speaker is met with criticism and attacks. To respond to criticism and attacks, new negative personal experiences – one worse than the other – are shared. The sum of these personal experiences is a story that lacks both coherence and credibility. In order to believe the story, we are required to believe that all of the following has happened to the speaker: 1) lived on the streets for a few years, and as a result, suffered from frost injuries; 2) lost all of his or her family members; 3) lived in an asylum centre, albeit being Norwegian; and 4) been stabbed by immigrants on three different occasions, one of them involving eight offenders and knife wounds so deep that the speaker fell into a coma.

Unless the speaker has been incredibly unlucky – and at the same time incredibly lucky for surviving all these events – the personal experiences through which this story is developed must be understood as a strategies for defending his or her attitude against criticism. It could, of course, also be an instance of human trolling, i.e. online behaviour aimed at provoking others and starting quarrels, through a person's deliberative posting of random, unsolicited or provocative comments.

Not knowing the intentions of the speaker, we are required to look to the interpretation of the utterances as it is offered by the participants who respond to them. These responses suggest that the utterances are interpreted as genuine attempts to justify an attitude. This is indicated by how the responses do not challenge or criticise the personal story for its inconsistency or lack of credibility. One of the responses (respondent 1), expresses acceptance of the attitude (“We do not matter that much, you know”). Moreover, the immigration critical attitude is justified by another personal anecdote, this time, experienced by respondent 1 (“Were it not for my parents, I would have ended up on the street after a break-up and would probably still have lived there”).

The personal experiences are, however, not accepted by all as a justification of an immigration critical attitude. Instead, three of the responses (respondents 3,4 and 5) challenge the speaker’s evaluation of his or her attitude towards immigrants, that is: the attitude the speaker promotes is evaluated as “bad”. It represents a lack of sympathy for others (“And still you are unable to sympathise for those who are in a similar situation to that you apparently were in?”), as well as a lack of human compassion (“My God, really? So in your opinion they should just scoot off for “home” so that they can be killed? Really? They are people too!”).

Moreover, the speaker is attacked for comparing his or her own situation to that of the refugees (“You must be very traumatised by the war you ‘experienced’ too! Or the family members that were killed right in front of you. Poor people!!!!!!”). These attacks on the speaker, thus, function to disclaim the personal experiences as legitimate grounds for holding negative attitudes to immigrants, which I argue, is the primary function served by the personal anecdotes in this example.

The example, then, demonstrates the how personal stories generally function as rhetorical moves in the news-generated social media debates, namely as a pretext for the expression of the speaker’s attitude to immigration and immigrants, as well as to the newspapers’ emphasis on the need to help the refugees. Rather than being able to invoke the sympathy of others and forge bonds of solidarity, the personal stories serve as personal displays, as well as justifications for one’s attitudes.

This can be substantiated by the fact that many of the speakers who make use of personal anecdotes express an unwillingness to listen and respond to criticism, as well

as to substantiate their premises and claims. An example of this is found in the following thread, to a newspaper article in which citizens are encouraged to help the refugees:

**EXAMPLE 28:**

Thread starter: Terrific! We all – both rich and poor - have to help with the resources we have! Humanity! I myself knit sweaters, gloves and socks, winter is coming up. Will send it to the refugees.

Respondent 1: I am homeless, will I get a sweater too? I know of Swedes who are homeless, are they forgotten? Hello, wake up, no one is helping the Swedes.

Respondent 2: This endless “what about me?” Swedish jealousy. Many organisations help homeless today, maybe not all are helped, but they know where to turn. The refugees need all the help they can get, they do not know where to turn to, they are so many that the government and organisations do not have enough capacity, so all resources are needed. Excellent, [tags thread starter], we contribute with what we can.

Respondent 1: No, they are not worse off than homeless children and not worse off than me. I slept in a tent in minus degrees as a teenager. They are better off than alcoholics and many Swedes. Numbskulls, my God, stupid Swedes who are feeding their neighbours’ children and telling their own that they are better off.

Respondent 3: [tags respondent 1], no one is feeling sorry for you. I would rather welcome a refugee who fled from war and hunger into my home than you! Because the way you reason, is the way only a racist reasons! Usch!

Respondent 1: The one who yells racist is the racist one. You can swap places with me, [tags respondent 3]. ... I have a handicap and receive no support, never have, not even in school (c. Expressen 5.9.15).

Here, I wish to draw attention to the utterances of respondent 1, and to how this participant responds to criticism, counter-argumentation and attacks through disclosing more and more personal information. As rhetorical moves in the debate, this, I argue, functions as anecdotal evidence for a claim about the situation, justification of the speaker’s attitude, as well as victim positioning.



Before doing so, it is necessary to look at how the exchange begins, namely with the thread starter's utterance. This utterance is both evaluative, definitional and advocative: It expresses the speaker's subjective attitude towards helping the refugees ("Terrific!"), and in doing so performs a positive evaluation of this attitude. A definition of the action in terms of shared values (humanism), supports the positive evaluation. Moreover, the speaker applies a personal action frame to make the cause her or his own, i.e. the utterance also shows what the speaker is doing to support the cause ("I myself knit sweaters..."), and advocates for future action ("We all ... have to help"). The advice for future action is, however, not specified more than as an encouragement to do *something*. As such, it encourages an individualised engagement in the issue, characterised by the inclusivity of a variety of personal expressions for engagement. Moreover, the engagement displayed by the speaker can be also seen as a typical expression for personalised engagement in the issue, carried out through a personal action frame. As argued, this form of political engagement allows the individual to combine his or her desires and interests (e.g. knitting), with being politically engaged.

The attitude expressed is opposed in respondent 1's utterance, in which the attitude is evaluated negatively through an expression of the speaker's subjective experience of the situation. The action of helping refugees is, in this utterance, defined as the opposite of humanism: It is to neglect weak groups in society. The personal information disclosed in the utterance ("I am homeless"), here serves as a way for the speaker to assume a victim position, as well as a position of an "average" citizen, who through his or her personal experiences, possesses knowledge about this particular situation.

As in the previous example (27), the utterance is met with counter-arguments (respondent 2). The counter-argument opposes the definition of the action of helping refugees as an action of neglecting weak groups at home. Moreover, the utterance performs a negative evaluation of the attitude expressed by respondent 1 ("this endless "what about me?" Swedish jealousy"), as well as celebration of the thread starter's attitudes and actions ("Excellent...").

Responding to the counter-arguments, i.e. that homeless people can get help, whereas the refugees need help, respondent 1 directly opposes the claim that refugees

are in more grave need of help than homeless people by promoting this as an inference about reality (“No they are not worse off than homeless children and not worse off than me”). This claim about reality is substantiated through a personal anecdote (“I slept in a tent in minus degrees as a teenager”). Furthermore, the utterance negatively evaluates the attitude expressed by the other two participants, as well as promoted by the newspaper article, by attacking a group of people who hold this attitude for being ignorant towards their “own” (“Numbskulls, my God, stupid Swedes who are feeding their neighbours’ children and telling their own that they are better off”).

Thus far, the disagreement in the interaction is over how to *define* the situation (for weak groups in society) and over how to *evaluate* actions and attitudes towards helping refugees. In the response that follows (respondent 3), we see how these personal anecdotes are, furthermore, interpreted as victim positioning and a request for sympathy – a request that is dismissed (“no one is feeling sorry for you”). Moreover, the participant’s reaction to the utterances suggests that they are interpreted as positioning in the issue, as respondent 1 is ascribed with racist attitudes (“the way you reason, is the way only a racist reasons!”). The utterance, thus, is primarily an expression of the speaker’s subjective evaluation of the “other” that functions as a negative evaluation of the opponent’s morale, which is at once disgusting (“Usch!”) and “racist”. In chapter 7, I look more closely into the function of the expressions of emotions such as disgust and shame, as well as the construction of enemy images through accusations of racism. I will argue that these condemnations are part of epideictic struggles, by which participants place themselves and others into moral categories, as we also see in the example discussed here.

Here, however, I concentrate on how this negative evaluation of the other’s attitudes is responded to through the disclosure of more personal information, and what functions are served by this rhetorical move in the interaction. Respondent 1’s response to being attacked and ascribed with disgusting and racist attitudes, is to perform a negative evaluation of the opponent, by which the opponent is re-constituted as racist (“the one who yells racist is the one who is racist”). Moreover, another personal experience is shared (“I have a handicap and receive no support, never have, not even in school”). Whereas the previous personal anecdote served to support a claim about

reality, this one functions to justify the speaker's attitudes and (attempt) to strengthen the speaker's victim position.

The disagreement in this discussion is, thus, about how to define and evaluate the issue, as well as over how to evaluate attitudes. Responding to counter-arguments, the speaker makes use of more personal experiences, and in doing so, attempts to justify her or his attitudes, support the claims s/he makes about the situation, and assume a victim position. Like the utterances in example 27, the personal information that is disclosed concerns the difficulties the speaker has experienced in his or her life and becomes more detailed and more grave as the interaction continues. Thus, the disclosure of personal information is also a way for the speaker to disclaim his or her obligations to respond to criticism and counter-arguments.

Although many of the utterances in which speakers share personal details from their own lives – primarily of illness and poverty – are promoted as concrete examples that illustrate a more general point (e.g. tales of self-experienced homelessness to illustrate that there are people who fall outside of the welfare state's safety net), they do not function as argumentation about future action, but rather as arguments about how to define and evaluate the issue, as well as justifications of the speaker's attitude. When met with criticism, attacks, and counter-arguments, speakers often disclose more, and more grave, personal information, in an attempt to prove that they are right – and right to say so. Consequently, the personal stories should primarily be seen as rhetorical strategies to “win” the debate.

While normative theories emphasise that arguments in the political debate should be anchored in shared experience and values (see e.g. Habermas, 1990; Habermas, 2004; Jørgensen, 2011; Kock, 2011a), this does not imply that personal stories have no place in the political debate. To make use of personal stories does not imply that one is incapable of considering a common interest, rather issues of private, individual welfare cannot easily be separated from those relevant to the common good (Benhabib, 1992; Wahl-Jørgensen, 2001, 317).

As discussed in chapter 2, the use of personal stories may, however, also function to undermine the public sphere and political debate. Rather than facilitating debate between opposing ideas and views, the exposure of the individual's personal

experiences and emotions, arguably, turns audiences into passive consumers of exciting personal stories and encourages them to applaud or condemn the person, rather than the arguments in the issue (Habermas, 2002; Hornmoen, 2015; Sennett, 1977; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001). Consequently, issues are not debated and evaluated based on the force of the argument, but on the audiences' impression of the speaker and her or his intentions, morale and values, as well as the emotions s/he manages to arouse (Lavik, Moe, & Gripsrud, 2017). This leads to a dislocation of the public's interest, away from the consequences of political decisions, to the intentions of the speaker. Consequently, citizens become incapable of making political decisions unless they can relate to the views and arguments on a personal level and do not care about persons, institutions or events unless we can see them as persons with a personality that we can identify with (Sennett, 1977).

Moreover, because "you can't argue" with the personal experience (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, 317), the possibilities for debate between opposing ideas and views can be undermined when public forums become places "for plaintive individuals to expose their side of the story" (Eliasoph, 1998, 6). In the news-generated debates, people *do* argue with the personal experience. However, they often do so by attacking the person who promoted them. This is not surprising, given that the person, in many instances, *is* the argument. Necessarily, criticism of the utterance involves a criticism of the person. Similarly, agreement with views promoted becomes praise of the person. Consequently, as a rhetorical move in the news-generated social media debates, the personal experience primarily encourages celebration or condemnation of the person.

### **Authenticity as a communicative ideal**

With the increased possibilities for developing an individual identity, away from traditional group identities in postmodernity (Giddens, 1991), also the moral ideal of being "true to oneself" has gained new content, namely as an ideal of "authenticity" (Taylor, 1991, 15). Both the processes of political individualisation and the development of authenticity as a moral ideal pre-dates the emergence of social media. Being structured around personal profiles and facilitating the sharing of personal thoughts,

feelings and experiences, social network sites, however, provide public arenas for expressions of one's authentic self and can, thus, be seen to drive the expansion of this ideal – also into genres, in which other communicative ideals have previously prevailed.

As suggested in chapter 2, the moral ideal of authenticity implies a “moral relativism” (Bloom, 1988) founded on an individualism principle that encourages people to be true to themselves and to seek self-fulfilment. Each person should act in accordance with his or her highly personal desires, ideals, beliefs and motives, and these are not only personal but also expressions of the person's “true” self. Because morality is relative to each individual, no one can dictate how the individual seeks to fulfil his or her potential. As such, authenticity as a moral ideal requires that human beings are to strive to be true to who they are, even when this collides with certain social norms (Trilling, 1972). Rather than “surrendering to conformity”, the “purpose of life is to find one's deepest self and then express that to the world, forging that identity in ways that counter whatever family, friends, political affiliations, previous generations, or religious authorities might say” (Taylor, 2007, 475).

As a consequence, moral positions cannot be “grounded in reason or the nature of things but are ultimately just adopted by each of us because we find ourselves drawn to them” (Taylor, 1991, 18). This, then, implies that all individuals should be allowed to express their true self, rather than be required to ground their claims, definitions and evaluations in reason, reality or in shared moral principles. As a *communicative ideal*, it also implies, as I will return to in chapter 9, that the authentic expression cannot be criticised and argued against, both because there exist no standards after which it can be criticised, and because this violates the individual's abilities to be his or her *true* self. Thus, as a communicative ideal, this principle of expression stands in direct opposition to the principle of deliberation, according to which one is required to give arguments for one's claims and to listen and respond to counter-arguments.

The affordances of Facebook encourage, not only the exposure of what was previously confined to the private sphere but also the authentic expression of this content. In the status update-field, it says “What are you thinking about?”, encouraging users to share their inner thoughts with their entire network. Emoticons afford users to display their emotions. In status updates, as well as in albums, one can share photos and

videos from one's everyday life, and more importantly, one can choose which facets of one's life to be publicly visible, and thus carefully construct an "authentic self", according to how one wishes to be seen.

Facebook shares this with other social media, which have been described "as vehicles for a more public experience of intimacy, enacted and negotiated with an increasing number of networked connections, beyond the domestic sphere and the special bond between close friends or significant actors" (Lomborg, 2014, 187). Scholars identify self-exposure and voyeurism as the primary functions served by social media for its users (Miller & Sheperd, 2004), and view social media as part of a development in contemporary media society towards intimisation and emotionalisation of public spaces where the personal "backstage" is expected to be displayed publicly (Christensen & Jerslev, 2009, 22-27).

Moreover, social media does not only facilitate self-expression, but also the truly authentic expression of the self. In fact, authenticity is identified as a communicative ideal, also in public debates on these arenas. In a study of so-called "expert citizens", who actively use social media as an arena for political debate, an expectation to the authentic expression of political opinions was identified (Vatnøy, 2017). These debaters both wished to and expected from others to "convey an image of themselves as independent political beings", and discuss political issues "on the basis of their own personal opinions" (Vatnøy, 2017, 237). Such "individually held opinions and personalised expressions" were considered more authentic, and thus more valuable, than expressions of collectively held opinions.

This authenticity ideal manifests itself also in the utterances in the news-generated social media debates, i.e. as a principle of expression. In chapter 9, I examine more closely how this ideal contradicts the principle of deliberation, by entailing that counter-argumentation is uncalled for, and how both principles are present as communicative ideals in the debates. Here, I look more closely at how this principle of expression manifests itself in expressions of subjective evaluations and highly personal "truths" about reality, and examine what functions such expressions gain as rhetorical moves in the debates.

## Personal “truths” and evaluations

In contrast to speech advice and ethical considerations about the rhetor’s requirement to give arguments that are universally warranted, based in shared experiences and a common values (Kock, 2013; Jørgensen, 2011), the news-generated social media debates are characterised by the promotion of highly personal truths. The speakers’ share their personal opinions, held and promoted by virtue of being an “average” person. This manifests itself in how speakers promote their claims by assuming a persona as a “pensioner”, “mother”, the “average Dane/Norwegian/Swede”, or as someone who is “ill”, “poor” or “homeless”. Whereas the speakers craft all of the utterances in these vernacular debates by virtue of being individual political beings (by contrast to for example that of a representative for a party), this speaker-role is often also explicitly emphasised in the utterances. As such, many of the rhetorical expressions in these debates are characterised by the speaker assuming a persona as an “ordinary” individual, a trait associated with the personal (and feminine), as well as vernacular style (Campbell, 1973, 1998, 1999; Howard, 2010; Svennevig, 2001, 246-259)

Participants commonly highlight that what is uttered is their own, personal “truth” and, as such, signify that their utterances are personal expressions, rather than contributions in the debate. Such comments are characterised by the use of personal pronouns (*I, me, mine, my*), and phrasings such as “I’m certain”, “I feel”, “I believe”, “I fear”, “I doubt”, and so forth. An example is the following utterance:

### EXAMPLE 29:

“Much filth here... I, for my part, am most concerned with the refugees being taken care of!” (c. *Aftenposten* 5.9.15)

The utterance expresses a subjective evaluation of what is important in the issue, as well as a negative evaluation of other utterances in the debates (“much filth”). That this is a subjective evaluation is highlighted by a specification of this being the speaker’s personal opinion (“I, for my part”). This signals to others that the speaker is not interested in debating the issue, s/he is not claiming anything about the issue, but is merely expressing her or his own, personal opinion in the issue.

In another example, a subjective evaluation of whether Petter Stordalen's offer to help the refugees is good or bad is offered, much in a similar way as the latter example:

**EXAMPLE 30:**

I do not know if I should believe what Stordalen says, I believe that he profits from everything and everyone (c. VG 8.9.15)

Like the previous example (29), this utterance too, expresses a subjective evaluation, albeit not of what is essential in the issue, but of whether an action should be interpreted as good or bad, as well as true or false. This is, however, the speaker's subjective evaluation, it is not an argument for the legitimacy of this evaluation, nor is it inference about reality. This is evident in how the speaker does not assert his or her observations as truths, but instead as what s/he personally "believes" to be true. Thus, the utterance does, as the previous example, not invite debate, as one cannot, at least according to an ideal of authenticity, argue against personally held beliefs.

Whereas the two utterances cited above do not *invite* debate, other utterances explicitly dismiss obligations to give arguments for one's views, as the following example:

**EXAMPLE 31:**

I do not have to give arguments or account for why I hold the opinion that I do, and especially not to you. (c. Berlingske 26.1.16a)

As I will discuss more at length in chapter 9, such utterances directly oppose the communicative ideal traditionally associated with public debate, namely that one is to give arguments for one's views. By contrast, utterances like this promote authenticity as a communicative ideal, i.e. they defend the individual's right to express his or her personal evaluations and truths, without being met with criticism or expected to give arguments. In utterances in which this ideal is promoted, counter-arguments and critique are, moreover, experienced as an offence, as it violates the individual's possibility to express him or her-self in a true, authentic way. This will become apparent in chapter 9, where I demonstrate how legitimate criticism is often experienced as personal attacks.



Here, I will offer an example of how the obligations to respond to counter-arguments is, albeit not explicitly rejected as an attack, attempted dodged through frequent topical and thematic leaps:

**EXAMPLE 32:**

Thread starter Yes, of course, migrants and refugees shall be better off than Danish social benefits receivers. We shall kiss the earth they walk on, although they commit: gang criminality, rapes and terror. And although many of them come out of pure and simple convenience.

[Seven comments (five different actors) removed from the excerpt]

Thread starter There is a difference between being a Danish citizen and applying for social benefits and coming as a parasite from Arab countries and Northern Africa. Do you believe that the Danish state's funds are bottomless and that we can just hand it out to all the world? We ourselves have citizens who suffer.

[Twelve comments (six different actors) removed from the excerpt]

Respondent 9 If you have not noticed, let me expand your understanding. Before the numbers of refugees rose to the levels they are at today, we, unfortunately, had the same cuts in the public sector. From cuts in the unemployment benefits to cuts in the education sector. That the public sector and the «worker» is let down is, unfortunately, not a new phenomenon. Not only in Denmark but unfortunately in the entire world. Rather than «lashing out» on refugees, perhaps you should question whether tax reliefs, increased salaries for politicians, cuts in car taxes etc. are the best choices in times of crisis. The costs for one asylum seeker per year is right below 200.000 kr [hyperlink to an article in Information titled: «Expenses per asylum seeker drops significantly] – which I do not suggest are pocket money but compared to the 6,2 billions that «disappeared» out of Denmark when the tax authorities overslept or the money that was sent to tax paradises after DONG was sold, 200.000 kr is not that much money.

[1 comment removed from excerpt]

Thread starter [Tags respondent 9], but that has nothing to do with: Gang criminality, sexual assaults and terrorism... We have an elder boom that is a burden, but refugees/migrants still cost many billions.

Thread starter Foreigners perform around half of the rapes in Denmark. That should be food for thought.

Respondent 9 Unfortunately, criminality is not a new phenomenon (neither among immigrants, second-generation immigrants or ethnic Danes), and I condemn all forms of criminality regardless of ethnicity. The Danish

Correctional Service's yearly statistics for 2014 show that out of 13.000 new imprisonments, «only» 3000 of them were immigrants, second-generation immigrants or without Danish ties, while the rest were ethnic Danes [hyperlink to Danish Correctional Service's yearly statistics]. The share of ethnic criminals follow a clear tendency – ethnic criminality (from non-Western backgrounds) is a direct consequence of social instability and social undernourishment, and follows precisely the tendency one would anticipate compared to other people/religion/countries.

Thread starter I repeat: Around half of the rapes.

[1 comment removed from excerpt]

Respondent 9 “Foreigners perform around half of the rapes in Denmark” - some random guy on the internet. If you show me facts from an independent and unbiased source, I will delete all my comments from the thread and admit I was wrong. Come on, man.. Your background is within natural sciences.. You should know that no assertions have worth without facts.

Thread starter [broken hyperlink to an article on Berlingske]

[1 comment (thread-stater addressed to another participant) removed from excerpt]

Thread starter Do you also want the percentage of terror attacks that are performed by Muslims?

Respondent 9 Unbiased  
Not having or showing an unfair tendency to believe that some people, ideas, etc., are better than others: not biased  
-Berlingske  
-Unbiased source  
Choose one of them.  
[broken hyperlink to a gif]. I acknowledge that the number of rapes is too high compared to the number of immigrants in the country. This is, unfortunately, a problem, but (again, again) it is part of a tendency for areas with low social stability.

Thread starter Do you also acknowledge that most terrorism is Islamic? ☺

Respondent 9 The percentage of terrorism is unfortunately not so straight forward, as there are different definitions of terrorism. For example was 9/11 (understandably) defined as terrorism, while arson attacks and vandalism on asylum centres are not defined as terrorism.

Thread starter Oh, and I just thought there was hope for you. (c. Politiken 26.1.16)

In contrast to the previous examples (29-31), the expressions of personal truths, are in this example, not promoted as being the speaker's subjective opinions, but are instead

given form of referential utterances, i.e. as representations of reality. The claims are not expressed as the speaker's personal experiences of the truth, rather s/he writes "they commit", "many of them come out of pure and sheer convenience", as well as "do you also acknowledge?", thus promoting these as facts in the issue. As such, the speaker's utterances do, by contrast to the latter two examples, invite debate, however, not primarily about what future action to take, but rather about the facts in the issue. Consequently, the disagreement in this exchange is also located at the conjectural stage of argumentation. Moreover, many of the utterances are located at what Just and Gabrielsen (2008, 22-23) term the "transcendental stage" of the debate, i.e. they perform topical and thematic leaps and, thereby, attempts to re-frame discussion and, thereby, change what is the contentious issue in the debate.

The disagreement is handled differently by the two interlocutors: One of the participants (respondent 9) responds to the claims of the other by giving counter-arguments, whereas the other performs topical leaps, i.e. s/he changes the topic to respond to counter-arguments and criticism.

Topical leaps are characteristic for multi-party conversations in offline environments (Linell & Korolija, 1997, 198), and are also common in the multilogs of the news-generated social media debate. By shifting the perspective in a conversation, such topical leaps may serve to maintain the interest of the conversation partners and ensure the conversation's progress (Allen & Guy, 1974, 225). In the social media debates, topical leaps gain another function, namely as an avoidance strategy, which allows participants to talk past one another, thus enabling them to express their personal truth, without giving arguments for this.

The claims and counter-arguments in the exchange can be summarised the following way:

<b>Thread-starter's claims:</b>	<b>Respondent 9's responses:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The influx of refugees causes cuts in Danish social security benefits</li> <li>- The refugees are unworthy of our support (“We shall kiss the earth they walk on, although they commit: gang criminality, rapes and terror”)</li> <li>- The refugees do not need our support (“many of them come out of pure and simple convenience”)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- These cuts came before the influx of refugees</li> <li>- The government's tax policies together with a general economic crisis have caused this (“perhaps you should question whether tax reliefs, increased salaries for politicians, cuts in car taxes etc. are the best choices in times of crisis”)</li> <li>- Asylum seekers cost the state less than the money that disappears into tax paradises</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Immigrants threaten our security (“Gang criminality, sexual assaults and terrorism”)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most immigrants are not criminal (“The Danish Correctional Service's yearly statistics for 2014 show that out of 13.000 new imprisonments, “only” 3000 of them were immigrants, second-generation immigrants or without Danish ties”)</li> <li>- Ethnic criminality is a direct consequence of social instability</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Immigrants threaten our security (“Foreigners perform around half the rapes in Denmark”)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I do not see a credible source for this number (“If you show me facts from an independent and unbiased source...”)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Muslims are cultural threats (“most terrorism is Islamic”)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This is a problem of definition (“arson attacks and vandalism on asylum centres are not defined as terrorism”)</li> </ul>

**Figure 6:** Overview of claims and counter-arguments in example 32.

As we see, one of the participants introduces new perspectives and claims, rather than responding to the criticism promoted by the other. These new claims are promoted in a way that suggests that the opponent's responses are not relevant answers (“but that has nothing to do with...”), and that s/he is failing to answer to the points raised by the thread-starter (“I repeat”).

Despite one of the participant's efforts to hold the other responsible for his or her claims, the interaction is, nevertheless characterised by that the two interlocutors talk past one another. Thus, while one of the participants engaged in this exchange (respondent 9), actually listens to what the other says, and responds to his or her claims, the other (thread starter), continually expresses his or her “personal opinions”, makes non-contingent assertions of the truth, and make use of topical leaps to be able to

maintain his or her position and personal view on the issue. Moreover, the counter-arguments are dismissed as illegitimate – both through assertions of this having “nothing to do with” the issue discussed, and through indications of the opponent’s efforts to debate being a violation of the genre conventions (“Oh, and I just thought there was hope for you”).

Expressions of subjective evaluations and personal truths counteract, not only the norms of giving universally warranted arguments in public debate, but such utterances also go against the very principle of deliberation, namely that one is to relate to the opponent through argumentation. Such utterances, I argue, could be viewed as expressions of an ideal of authenticity, in which the individual is expected to express him- or her-self in an authentic way. Generally, such utterances do not invite debate – some even explicitly decline attempts to debate. When not explicitly expressed as one’s personal opinion, but rather as truths about reality, however, a debate is encouraged albeit not about choices for future action. Instead, the debate plays out in the conjectural stage of argumentation, i.e. the arguments are about what is a true and fair representation of reality.

The authenticity ideal, thereby, forestalls debate and deliberation, understood as interactions where participants relate to one another through argumentation. It also does so, also in another way, namely when it is invoked through evaluations of political actors’ character and performance, which I will now turn to.

### **The inauthentic politician**

In the debates, the ideal of authenticity, as well as a more general personalisation of the political issues, manifests itself, not only in how the participants promote their own, personal opinions and use personal experiences as anecdotal evidence but also in the orientation towards the political actors as persons. This feature of the debates is particularly evident in several utterances in which Åsa Romson from the Swedish Green Party is attacked. These attacks are brought about by her appearance at a press conference where she and the prime minister, Stefan Löfven, presented the retrenchments in the asylum policies. At this press conference, Romson was clearly moved, with tears in her eyes, and emphasised that “These are not decisions that we

wish to make, they are decisions that we have to make”. Moreover, she described the situation as “very difficult” – both for the nation and for her party, and the retrenchments as “dramatic”, as well as something that will send “waves of shock” through both Sweden and Europe (*Aftonbladet*, Nov. 24, 2015).

In the comment sections to this article, Romson is attacked for being a “cry-baby”, a “hypocrite”, an “idiot” and a “witch”, and her tears are called “fake”, as well as “embarrassing”. Two utterances may serve as examples of the attacks targeting Romson:

**Examples 33-34:**

Romson is a power-crazed fake person, and if one does not realise that, one should not be allowed to vote, as one is too naïve and thus damaging to the nation.

Nobody bought Romson’s fake tears, I hope? The witch is standing there and forcing herself to cry a little to win the Green voters’ sympathies.

The attacks on Åsa Romson are not concerned with the policies presented at the press conference. Nor are they concerned with what Romson said about these policies. Instead, they are concerned with whether she actually *meant* what she said – and actually *felt* the feelings expressed through her body language. Thus, these utterances perform (predominantly negative) evaluations of her person. She is accused of being inauthentic (“fake person”), whose emotional reaction is a stage display (“fake tears”, “forcing herself to cry”), to win votes (“to win the Green voters’ sympathies”). She cries, not because she is sad, but as a strategy to gain power (she is “power-crazed”).

The orientation to the politician’s personal feelings and motives should be understood against the backdrop of earlier accounts of how the advent of electronic mass media has replaced earlier understandings of eloquence in political communication with notions of intimacy and authenticity (Hall Jamieson, 1988; Johansen, 1999, 2002; Kjeldsen & Johansen, 2012). Today, Kjeldsen and Johansen (2012) argue, politicians, have to - “as genuinely, naturally and spontaneously as possible – give the impression that they are truly “themselves”” (Kjeldsen & Johansen, 2012, 171). Increasingly, the political issues are becoming inseparable from the political actors’ as private individuals: We interpret their stances on and arguments about political issues as signs

of who they are, what they are feeling and look for what their underlying personal motives are (Kjeldsen & Johansen, 2012, 176).

This changed role of the politician – from previously being a public figure to currently being a “true and authentic individual” – is understood as a consequence of the mass media, in particular the television, where we see our politicians all the time, at close range, and in informal settings and situations. As a consequence, we feel that we know them as *persons*, not as politicians (Johansen, 2002; Kjeldsen & Johansen, 2012; Meyrowitz, 2006). Consequently, audiences have been cultivated to expect that politicians appear as genuine human beings, disclose facets of their personal life, and intimately address the audience, rather than to give rational and evidence-based arguments for their views (Hall Jamieson, 1988). The development is increasingly fuelled by social media, in which politicians invite us into their “private sphere”, that is, a highly mediated form of the private sphere. They display themselves as “ordinary” citizens, doing “ordinary things”, such as eating a pizza and watching a movie or hiking in the mountains<sup>41</sup> (Esperås, 2013).

In doing so, they show us who they are as *persons*, and this contributes to blurring the lines between their political views and actions, and who they are as persons. As a consequence, ideological positions and practical political solutions, become increasingly intertwined with the politicians’ personal character. When Åsa Romson is attacked for crying, she is attacked for performing a role, rather than actually “being herself” – she is not authentic; instead, she is acting strategically to gain power.

In the news-generated social media debates, utterances that express evaluations of political actor’s authenticity, thus, contribute to framing political issues in a personal way. However, whereas many of the previous examples discussed in this chapter do so by changing the perspective from the issue to the speaker’s person, these rhetorical expressions do so by changing the perspective from the political issue to the political actor who represents the issue. Nevertheless, the ideal of authenticity is visible in both

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<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, The Progress Party’s leader, Siv Jensen’s, Facebook-post about homemade pizza and movie tips, discussed by Magnus Hoem Iversen (2017) in “Fredagskos”, *Vox Publica*, May 24<sup>th</sup>: <https://voxpública.no/2017/05/fredagskos/>, as well as The Labour Party’s leader, Jonas Gahr Støre’s, Facebook-post about a mountain-hike, discussed by Magnus Hoem Iversen (2016) in “Politikeren i naturen”, *Vox Publica*, August 31<sup>st</sup>: <https://voxpública.no/2016/08/politikeren-i-naturen/>.

types of utterances: In the first type the ideal of authenticity is performed through the participants' utterances; in the latter, the ideal is invoked through attacks on another for violating it.

### **Chapter conclusion: Personal engagement and authentic expressions**

In this chapter, I have discussed the prevalence of personal engagement and self-expression in the news-generated social media debates about the Syrian refugee crisis. I have argued that personal and individualised forms of political engagement are facilitated by the issue, which was largely conveyed in the mass media as a question of “how *I* can help”, as well as the medium, which is structured around personal profiles and relationships and encourages the users' to display their identity. The analysis identified an orientation to the participant's personal identity, opinions and feelings, manifested in subjective evaluations, personal action frames, tales of personal experiences, as well as an emphasis on the speaker's role as that of an “average” person.

The orientation to persons and personalities, I argued, creates a type of interaction characterised by celebration and condemnation, rather than debates between opposing views. Moreover, I argued, such expressions make visible a political and communicative ideal, which stands in direct opposition to the deliberative ideal usually associated with public debate, namely the principle of expression. In contrast to a principle of deliberation, according to which participants are to meet through argumentation, the principle of expression, as I will discuss more at length in chapter 9, suggests that argumentation is illegitimate. Instead, the individual's authentic expression, which cannot be criticised or opposed, is promoted as valuable. The observation of this principle emerged from the examination of utterances that promoted subjective evaluations and highly personal “truths” and prevented criticism and counter-argumentation through an emphasis on one's opinion as an individually held belief or evaluation, as well as explicitly rejected obligations to give arguments. Moreover, this principle, which is founded on an ideal of authenticity, manifested itself in an orientation to political actors' authentic appearance, suggesting that the political issues are interpreted as tightly intertwined with the political actors as *persons*.



As suggested, the orientation to persons and personalities, as well as the individualised forms of engagement expressed in the debate, do not function primarily as contributions in a public debate, but rather as personal expressions. Commonly, these expressions fail to bring about a debate between opposing views. Instead, they facilitate the celebration and condemnation of persons. This suggests, then, that the public debates on social media are not only characterised by personal engagement and expression, but also by *epideictic rhetoric*, as well as a particularly aggressive argument culture, examined in the two subsequent chapters.

## **Chapter 7: Epideictic struggles and moral positioning**

In the previous chapter, I discussed how many of the utterances in the debates are not oriented towards interaction and do not invite debate, but rather function as expressions of the individual's authentic self. In this chapter, I examine a particular form of interaction characteristic of the news-generated social media debates, namely the epideictic struggle.

In contrast to deliberative rhetoric, epideictic rhetoric is not characterised by argumentation about future action. Instead, epideictic rhetoric is associated with functions of maintaining community and strengthening the adherence to shared values. This is done through the display of values, by defining issues in terms of community's values, praising actions and actors who embody them and condemning actions and actors who violate them. Epideictic rhetoric can, thus, be seen as pre-deliberative: It consolidates the values upon which all political debate about future action must rest (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, 50), and established who "we" are, and what the issue is about. As such, epideictic rhetoric precedes argumentation about future action (Vatnøy, 2015, 2017).

Within the debates studied here, a movement from definitions and evaluations of persons, actions and events to argumentation about future action seldom takes place. Instead, these rhetorical practices bring about acclaims, condemnations, as well as re-definitions and re-evaluations. The source of the disagreement is, essentially, deciding who and what is good and bad – and this produces epideictic struggles over moral positions. The moral positions, I argue, are grounded in evaluative definitions of a third component exterior to, but nevertheless vital for them to exist, namely the immigrants, who are either "victims" or "threats".

The concept of "epideictic struggles", then, describes a verbal struggle over evaluative definitions and evaluations of one's own, as well as others' moral character. As suggested in chapter 1, the concept has similarities to Brox' (1991) concept of "expression competition", which I will use in a somewhat different way in the discussion of the aggressive argument culture in chapter 8. Brox' concept of "expression competition", described a discourse in which participants compete in having the

strongest expression of shared values and their moral qualities, and the interaction between participants lead to an acceleration of the intensity of both parties’ expressions (Brox, 1991, 33, 53-54; 2009). By contrast, the “epideictic struggle” is characterised by its lack of progress. Rather than increasing the strength of each other’s expressions, the participants’ utterances are characterised by re-definition and re-evaluation. As a consequence, the discourse becomes deadlocked in disagreements over definitions and evaluations, without the intensity of the expressions necessarily increasing. By calling this an “epideictic struggle”, I, moreover, draw attention to how this definitional and evaluative conflict is expressed rhetorically, namely through verbal displays of who “we” are.

### The analysis

The analysis in this chapter examines disagreements over definitions and evaluations. Primarily utterances from the following categories in the material are examined:

**Table 6:** Selection of the most central codes referenced in chapter 7 (n=2728).

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Acclaims	647
Evaluative definition	321
Attacks: <i>Morale/intention</i>	607
<b>Total:</b>	<b>1575</b>

As in the previous chapters, I use these categories as a starting point for examining not only the utterances in these categories but also the interaction they produce and are produced by. As such, I examine both the functions performed by the utterance alone and how it functions in the interaction, i.e. what it is a response to and what type of interaction it creates.

The disagreements examined in this chapter are located at the definitional and qualitative stage of the debate, and are primarily disagreements over moral evaluations, carried out through praise and condemnation. As discussed in chapter 2, these are rhetorical practices often associated with epideictic rhetoric. For this reason, I incorporate concepts from earlier theoretical and empirical accounts of epideictic

rhetoric that allows me to describe the potential functions of these utterances and interactions. Epideictic rhetoric should be understood as rhetoric that functions to display the speaker's eloquence and human capacities, define the situation in terms of community's values and beliefs, and thus guide the audience's interpretation and understanding of it, as well as to shape and strengthening a sense of community (Condit, 1985). The rhetorical strategies through which the speaker achieves this are verbal display and praise of people, actions and events that represent the values the speaker seeks to promote, condemnation of people, actions and events that violate these, as well as by defining the situation in terms of shared values and beliefs.

In the debates studied here, evaluative, or "persuasive" definitions (Jørgensen & Onsberg, 2008, 44; Just & Gabrielsen, 2008, 28), serve as implicit or explicit premises in moral evaluations of persons and actions. The evaluations rely on different definitions of a group exterior, but nevertheless indispensable, to the moral positions negotiated, namely the immigrants. They are defined in terms of being either "victims" or "threats". In the chapter, I, therefore, begin with inquiring into them.

Furthermore, the chapter goes on to explore several different rhetorical strategies, all, I argue, decisive to understand what characterises the epideictic struggle. Following the evaluative definitions, the analysis examines how persons, attitudes and actions are evaluated either positively or negatively through a rhetoric of "praise" and "blame". In particular, the analysis attends to two expressions of moral condemnations that are prominent in the material, namely accusations of persons who want to help refugees for being moralists and goodness posers, as well as condemnations of the immigration critics through application of shame and disgust. These rhetorical strategies should be seen as rhetorical moves in the epideictic struggle, which is fought through re-definitions of "goodness", as well as re-positioning and re-appropriation of words such as morality and humanism. Thus, I argue, epideictic struggles lack progress, they do not develop neither in the direction of a solution of the moral conflict, nor towards an intensification of it.

Following this, I look into two possible ways in which the conflict over moral positions may become intensified, namely by the evoking of enemy images through allegations of nation treason and racism. Despite bearing witness of an acceleration of

the conflict, as well as the expressions in it, I maintain that these utterances do not create a “schismogenetic conflict” (Bateson, 1935, 1958) – at least not within the social media debates. Whereas these rhetorical strategies are strong expressions of a moral position, they have few implications for how the interaction develops.

The different parts of the analysis, then, form the basis for the following argument: The news-generated social media debates about the immigration issue largely plays out as epideictic struggles over moral positions. What characterises the epideictic struggle is that it begins from evaluative definitions, whereby a group is portrayed either as a victim of a threat. On the basis of these definitions – which can be either explicitly or implicitly expressed in the debate – two moral positions are formed: the “good” and the “evil”. Through a rhetoric of praise and condemnation, participants in the debate position themselves and others into either one of these two moral categories. Rather than progressing, the dispute over the moral positions treads water, as participants continuously position and re-position themselves and others.

### **Evaluative definitions enabling moral categories**

Epideictic rhetoric’s ability to define and create a shared understanding of the situation entails that the speaker gains definitional power that may later serve argumentative purposes. In particular, in troubling or confusing times, which the refugee crisis surely was, definitions of the situation in terms of key values and beliefs may serve important functions – both for the speaker and for the audience. The speaker gets to guide the audience’s interpretation of the situation, and the audience is offered comfort and understanding (Condit, 1985, 288). This can shape and reinforce a sense of community, as well as prepare the grounds for political action and argumentation. For instance, when the nation’s leader speaks to the nation in times of a national crisis, such as in the aftermath of a terrorist attack or a natural catastrophe, persuasive definitions of the situation may shape the collective’s dispositions and scope of action, and thus come to influence both political action and future deliberation (Vatnøy, 2015).

In contrast to coherent speeches given by one rhetorically privileged person, such as a national leader, to a well-defined audience, such as the national community, the utterances in the news-generated social media debates are participating in multilog.

These multilogues are, as discussed in chapter 5, characterised by the involvement of multiple speakers, who speak at the same time and often past each other. The audience is invisible, large and diverse, and members of the audiences may also be speakers in the communicative setting. Moreover, these speakers, i.e. the “average” persons, lack the type of definitional power that a national leader has, and the speakers – and audiences – will often have contradictory interpretations of the situation, community, and the community’s shared values. Consequently, the speaker’s utterances are not only incapable of, but also most likely not aimed at, shaping the community and help the nation interpret, understand and overcome a grave situation – although the refugee crisis was also understood as precisely a crisis.

In what follows, I discuss two conflicting definitions of the situation offered in the debates studied, namely a situation in which people in need are seeking refuge, or as a situation in which those who are coming are not “genuine” refugees, but rather “convenience refugees”. These definitions are, I argue, *evaluative definitions*, i.e. they define not only a person, situation or action, but also its value (Just & Gabrielsen, 2008, 28). In the material, the evaluative definitions primarily concern how to define – and evaluate – the people who are coming to the nation to seek for asylum. Additionally, as shown in the table below, the material holds some definitions of the nation’s economic situation that I will comment upon towards the end of this discussion.

**Table 7:** Sub-categories of the category “evaluative definitions” (n=321).

<b>Evaluative definitions</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Definitions of the immigrants	236
Definitions of the nation’s economy	85
<b>Total:</b>	<b>321</b>

The utterances that perform evaluative definitions of the immigrants fall into two main categories: The immigrants are defined either as “genuine refugees” or “convenience refugees”. In the immigration debate, both definitions have historically been present – the first has commonly been applied to argue from an immigration positive position, the latter from an immigration negative position (Hagelund, 2003).

In the first of these two definitions, the people who are now coming to the Scandinavian nation-states to seek asylum are described as “genuine” refugees who are in true need of help. They are commonly described in terms of despair and suffering. They are fleeing from oppression, hunger, discrimination, war and death. The sacrifices they have made in order to come to safety are often emphasised: They have “left everything behind” (c. VG 8.9.15), and they “risk their lives” on the “dangerous journey” (c. Ekstra Bladet 26.1.16).

In the other definition, the same group of immigrants are described as “welfare migrants”, “convenience refugees” and “fortune hunters”. They are depicted as persons who are not truly in need of help; on the contrary; they are coming to Scandinavian countries in order to benefit from these nations’ generous welfare schemes. Commonly, they are described in terms of “young and strong men” (c. NRK 29.12.15), who are “tricksters on asylum shopping” (c. Ekstra Bladet 26.1.16). Moreover, it is often argued that the immigrants who have the means to travel all the way to the Scandinavian nations obstruct the “genuine” refugees in the refugee camps from receiving the help they need.

The two definitions of the situation, thus, also involve evaluations – both of the situation and the immigrants. An example of how these two conflicting evaluative definitions are confronted in the debates is found in the following exchange:

**EXAMPLE 35:**

Put yourselves in these refugees’ shoes. Desperate human beings who flee from war etc. If my toddler and I were fleeing, I would be grateful if anyone had done this for us.

*Reply:* Well, I see now that they refuse to stay in other countries. They are refusing to move and scream that they are not going there and there but that they are going to Norway, Germany etc. Funny that they know where they are going. They say it themselves: They are only going to countries with good welfare benefits. Speaks for itself. (c. Aftenposten, 5.9.15)

The first utterance in the exchange defines this as a situation, where people in need are “desperate” to find safety. What follows from this is that “we”, who are privileged enough to be able to offer them our help, should try to understand what they are going through (“put yourselves in these refugees’ shoes”), and offer our support. The latter is

not explicitly stated, but nevertheless indicated, as it is claimed that the refugees, most likely will show us their gratitude if we offer to help them, as the speaker would have done (“I would be grateful”). As such, the ways in which the situation is defined provides guidelines for how the discussion can continue: when discussing this, we have to approach it from the perspective of the asylum seekers; as well as for how we can act in the future: we have to do our best to offer our help to those who are less fortunate than us.

The definition, and thus the guidelines for how the issue can be discussed, is, however, not accepted by the interlocutor. In contrast to the first utterance, the response defines this as a situation where people are seeking a better life for themselves, and evaluates this in a negative way. This is done by depicting the immigrants as stubborn and goal-oriented – they “know where they are going” (to nations with generous welfare schemes), and they “refuse” and “scream”, when offered to stay in countries that they did not plan for. Although it is not explicitly stated, what follows from this, is that “we” are not to feel obliged to offer our help or empathy, but should instead protect our welfare schemes from those who are trying to benefit from them.

As such, the disagreement is not only over how to define the situation but also over how the situation is to be evaluated. Necessarily, this has implications for what future action is desirable. Descriptions of refugees and asylum seekers as “welfare migrants” or “fortune hunters”, function to prepare the ground for arguments of restrictive asylum policies, where the issue is not approached from the asylum seekers’ perspective, but rather from “our” perspective. However, as the example shows, the arguments themselves are seldom performed, and because there is disagreement over the definitions and evaluations, the debate stays put in the definitional and evaluative stasis, rather than constituting the grounds for argumentation about future action.

Moreover, evaluative definitions of the nation state’s ability to receive refugees are a source of disagreement that follows the same poles of opposition as the conflicting definitions of the immigrants. As the competing definitions of the immigrants, these definitions become struggles over definitions, rather than providing the basis for argumentation. The following exchange may serve as an example:



### EXAMPLE 36:

Thread starter: Speak of speaking with two tongues, Støre has finally realised that it was not thoroughly thought through to invite the rest of the world to Norway, we are, in fact, a small nation.

Respondent 1: We are relatively rich and have relatively much room, and once upon a time, a wish to help people in need.

Respondent 2: Much room?

Respondent 1: Relatively much room, I said.

Respondent 3: But these fortune hunters do not want to live anywhere – I am sure you have not missed that????????

Respondent 4: Norway is only mountains and plains. Norway rich? Lower GDP than California... (c. Dagbladet, 9.11.15)

The exchange contains conflicting definitions on two levels: definitions of the nation's ability to receive refugees, and who the immigrants are. The nation is, on the one hand, defined in terms of being "a small nation" that has neither the economy ("lower GDP than California"), nor enough room to receive refugees ("only mountains and plains"). On the other hand, the nation is defined in terms of being a "relatively rich" and large country. Moreover, the immigrants are defined, on the one hand, as "people in need", and on the other hand, as difficult "fortune hunters", who will not settle for anything ("do not want to live anywhere").

The utterances in the exchange also contains evaluations of policies – and as such, also implicitly advises against a particular future action ("invite the rest of the world to Norway") – the immigrants ("demanding" or "in need"), the national community's ability to receive refugees, as well as community's values. An evaluation of the community's values is performed in the second utterance in the exchange, which can be seen an example of constitutive rhetoric, i.e. rhetoric that "interpellates" (cf. Althusser, 1999) subjects in a certain way in order to constitute a common "we", and connects this collective to an established past and imagined future (Charland, 1987). Constitutive rhetoric is closely connected to the functional pair "shaping/sharing community" of epideictic rhetoric (Condit, 1985), as the community is constituted through the community's shared values, heritage and identity. The utterance in question both defines

the nation's ability to receive refugees and the people who are coming as asylum seekers. Moreover, a "we" is established through the utterance's connection between a shared past ("once upon a time a wish to help people in need") and today's realities ("We are relatively rich..."). While it is not explicitly argued that the nation *should* help people in need in the future, it follows from the claims that we are a) able to help, and b) a nation with traditions of helping. In order to act in accordance with the narrative created of a community with traditions of helping, the right choice of is to help the refugees who are in need of help now.

This narrative is, however, opposed through conflicting definitions of the refugees ("fortune hunters"), and the nation's wealth and room. The different definitions are not merely definitions, but also contain and make possible opposite evaluations of what is good and bad. They do so, as these definitions contain definitions of the immigrants, on the one hand, as victims, and on the other, as threats. These two competing definitions of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers have been identified in numerous studies of how the immigration issue is framed in the mass media (see e.g. Benson, 2013; Bleiker et al., 2013; Cisneros, 2008; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017), also in the Scandinavian mass media (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Hovden et al., 2018).

These two contradictory definitions, I argue, render possible disagreement over evaluations of who and what is "good" and "evil", i.e. they enable the formation of moral categories. When the immigrants are defined in terms of victims, the one who displays a wish to help them is either a compassioner across from a sufferer, or a helper across from a needer. Thus, s/he is "good". By contrast, the one who does not display a wish to help is either an ignorant across from the sufferer or a neglecter across from the needer. Thus, s/he is "evil". If the immigrant, by contrast, is defined in terms of a threat, the moral positions change. The one who displays a wish to help becomes a neglecter across from the nation state's citizens and an accomplice of the threat. The one who displays an immigration critical attitude, by contrast, becomes a supporter of the nation's own citizens – and of the nation altogether. As such, the evaluative definitions of the immigrants play important roles in evaluations of who and what is "good" and "evil", and form the basis of the enemy images invoked through accusations of "nation treason" and "racism", which I examine later in this chapter.

## Praise and condemnation

Positive evaluations of persons and actions are often performed through acclaims. Many of these appear in the debates about the persons who were featured in the newspapers for helping the refugees in the period between August and September (see also chapter 4). Acclaims are, as shown in the table below, also performed to express positive evaluations of politicians – both of politicians who promote liberal immigration policies and who advocate and carry out the retrenchments told about in the newspaper articles in the period between November and January. Acclaims are also directed at other participants in the debates, and as discussed in chapter 6, function as celebrations of other’s utterances.

**Table 8:** Sub-categories of the category “acclaims” (n=647).

Acclaims	Frequency
Persons or actions that contribute	107
Participant in the comment sections	122
Political actors	418
<b>Total:</b>	<b>647</b>

Some examples of acclaims, in which the actions aimed at helping the refugees – and the persons who perform them – are praised, are:

### EXAMPLES 37-44:

“Go Stordalen!” (c. Aftenposten 6.9.15a)

“This inspires respect of Stordalen” (c. Aftenposten 5.9.15)

“Super! What a man! 🙌” (c. NRK 8.9.15)

“All honour to Stordalen” (c. NRK, 8.9.15)

“Such a wonderful man with his heart in the right place” (c. NRK, 8.9.15)

“So niuuuuuuuuuuice 🙌” (c. Berlingske, 5.9.15)

“Proud of you who wish to apologise. You are amazing. Respect” (c. Politiken, 9.9.15)

“Great! 🙌” (c. Dagens Nyheter, 6.9.15b)

As indicated by these examples, the majority of the acclaims share a set of formal and substantive qualities. They are relatively short, contain praise of a person or a group of persons, commonly expressed through evaluative words with a positive direction, such as “great” and “nice”, as well as words that suggests that the speaker pays homage and

tribute to the object of praise (“respect” and “honour”). A majority of the utterances are articulated as exclamations (“!”). Many of them also contain emoticons that express approval and positive feelings towards the object of praise, such as “thumbs up”- and the “heart”-emoticons. Despite their briefness, I suggest that these acclaims can be viewed as praise of persons and actions as *embodiments of community’s values*, and as the speaker’s way of taking a moral stance in the issue. When these persons and actions are celebrated, they are so, because they embody who “we” are. At the same time, the speaker signals something about his or her stance towards these persons and actions, i.e. s/he expresses identification with them.

The epideictic function of the acclaims, i.e. displaying community’s values through praise, becomes more evident if we look at some other utterances in the material, where the actions are explicitly defined in terms of values such as “solidarity” and “humanity”, for instance, the two utterances:

**EXAMPLES 45-46:**

Such a beautiful way to express solidarity 🍀 (c. Dagens Nyheter, 6.9.15b)

This is what makes us human! 🍀 (c. Dagens Nyheter, 6.9.15d)

In these, as well as the previous acclaims, persons and groups are praised for their efforts to help the refugees. Necessarily, then, the acclaims require an understanding of the immigrants as people in need. Although it is not explicitly expressed, this, I argue follows from the expressions of praise. It does so, as it would be impossible to praise these persons for helping someone who is seen as a threat, as will become apparent also in the discussion of accusations of “goodness posing”, “moralism” and “treason” carried out later in this chapter.

As discussed in chapter 2, the promotion of values, through praise of certain actors, while having the ability to strengthen the adherence to these values, and thereby to establish and strengthen a sense of community, may also function to exclude and divide. Amongst those who live within the spatial boundaries of the community, there will never be complete unity about what values should be promoted and how these

should be applied. Thus, “definitions of community are often advanced by contrast with ‘others’ outside of the community” (Condit, 1985, 289).

While epideictic speeches can function to unite communities or sub-groups within the national community, they do so by excluding others. Performances of identity happen through constructions of difference. To say who “we” are is also to say who “we” are not. Moreover, an explicitly defined “other” is also a way to construct and perform who “we” are. An “other” is, in fact, required in the construction of an “us”, as we are only able to realise who we are, by contrasting us to others that are not like us (Blumenberg, 1987, 457). As such, to define ourselves in terms of who we are not, and to reassure ourselves that “we” are not “them” has a unifying force (Kraft & Brummett, 2009). As argued by Smith-Rosenberg (1992, 846), “[i]nternally fragmented subjectivities assume a coherence [...] by being juxtaposed to multiple others – especially negative (feared or hated) others”. The naming of an “other”, can thus serve vital functions in the construction and maintenance of a community and is, therefore, seen as an important vehicle of epideictic (Condit, 1985), as well as constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987).

Many of the utterances in the news-generated social media debates are structured around contrasts to an “other”, as well as a constellation of both praise and blame: They combine the acclaim of actors and actions who welcome and help the refugees, with criticism and condemnation of those who do not:

#### **EXAMPLES 47-49:**

Great and necessary initiative, not all Danes are like Støjberg and the Danish People’s Party. (c. Berlingske, 29.9.15)

Thank you, wonderful response to Støjberg’s misanthropic attitude. Well done, I straighten my back a bit again. (c. Politiken, 3.8.15)

Great! Just sad that it is needed, that it was always needed and that it will always be needed (c. Dagens Nyheter, 6.9.15a)

While these utterances do not contain much information about why helping refugees is praiseworthy, they do define this in terms of necessity and goodness (“great”, “necessary” “wonderful”, “needed”). Being against helping the refugees, on the other

hand, is presented as critique worthy through evaluative words with a negative direction, such as “sad” and “unfortunately”, as well as descriptions of the opposition’s attitude as “misanthropic”, “alienating”, “stupid”, “hateful” and “critical”.

Thus, these utterances function as praise by contrasting the actions of persons, to an “other”. This “other” is either a pronounced outsider of the community (e.g. the politician Inger Støjberg and the political party The Danish People’s Party) or a general attitude in society that render necessary a campaign that “stands up for human compassion and tolerance” and “renounces hatred, threats and racism”, that is: the campaign that the latter of the three comments is praising. Evaluations of what and who is good and evil, then, are performed both through praise and condemnation. A “good/evil”-dichotomy is established, and persons are placed into one of these two moral categories. Thus, also an “us/them”-dichotomy is established, in which a “we” is constructed through a contrast to an “other”.

As such, the utterances observed in these news-generated social media debates, share similarities with how the immigration debate has previously been described, namely as a “moral championship” (Brox, 1991; Brox et al., 2003), where the source of disagreement has not primarily been over practical political solutions, but rather over moral positions and boundaries (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017). As discussed, Brox describes the immigration debate as a contest, in which participants compete in having the strongest expression of their moral qualities – both with others in their in-group and with the opposing side. This way, Brox argues (1991, 2009), the immigration debate takes the shape of a “schismogenetic conflict” (Bateson, 1935, 1958), where the expressions are continuously intensified. As a consequence, the poles of opposition are driven further and further apart, and it becomes impossible to steer a middle course in the debate.

By approaching the struggles over moral positions, that characterise also the news-generated social media debates about the immigration issue, as epideictic struggles, I offer a way to understand how these positions are expressed and how the interactions develop. As suggested at the beginning of the chapter, these epideictic struggles do not, in contrast to the moral championships described by Brox, develop as schismogenetic conflicts, characterised by a continued acceleration of the expressions’

intensity. Instead, the expressions stay put at the same level of intensity, as well as the same level of disagreement, as the participants promote contradictory definitions and evaluations. An example of how this unfolds is found in the following exchange about the Danish “welcome-ads” (see chapter 4 for a discussion of these ads):

**EXAMPLE 50:**

Thread starter: Really great to advertise in Politiken and The Guardian. It probably gives the humazists a really good feeling inside. However, it is unlikely that many refugees will come across these two media and have a chance to see the ads. But again, the humazists get to feel good about themselves, and that seems to be what counts! What is even better, is that one has disclaimed that the ads will be printed in media that actually are distributed in the areas, which, again, confirms that this is about showing that one is good, without actually having to be so.

Respondent 1: [Tags thread starter] – You might be right. Perhaps the ad is not seen by the refugees that it is trying to help. But I think that you have completely missed the point of the ad. The people who you so mockingly call humanists – and thank you for the compliment, by the way – wish revolt against you xenophobic, self-righteous “Danes”, who sit around your tiled table, drink coffee and eat lemon cake, and think that if we only close our borders and scare the strangers away, everything will be fine. The ad is sending a signal to the international community, that a coarse immigration policy is carried out with the weakest mandate possible, and that we are many Danes who do not support the government’s policies.

Respondent 2: What are you – antihumanist? Do you know what humanist means?

Respondent 3: I feel good inside because I, as a supporter of the ads and a humanist (uuuuuh, did I just say “humanist”?) contributes to showing that a large part of Denmark wants a Denmark that is different from what The Danish People’s Party, The Liberals, etc. attempts to create (c. Politiken 3.8.15).

The first utterance in this exchange performs a negative evaluation of the ad-makers by accusing them of “humazism”. Their actions are defined as instances of goodness posing (“showing that one is good”), as well as self-fulfilment (“to feel good about themselves”), rather than examples of genuine goodness. As such, the speaker condemns the ad-makers in particular, and all “humanists” in general. S/he ascribes a negative

evaluation to the word “humanist” and evaluates the humanists’ person and actions negatively. The utterance thus contains a good/evil-dichotomy, although only the “evil” is explicitly named. However, by naming an “other”, the utterance also implicitly constructs an “us”, that is: “we” who are not like “them”.<sup>42</sup>

In response to this utterance, the ad-makers’ actions are re-defined and re-evaluated in terms of goodness (“revolt against xenophobic, self-righteous “Danes” and “sends a signal [...] that we are many Danes who do not support the government’s policies”). Moreover, the pejorative “humanist” (i.e. “humazist”) is reclaimed and given the reverse value, i.e. it is reclaimed as good. The participants in the debate, thus, perform linguistic reappropriations (cf. Brontsema, 2004; Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom, & Bodenhausen, 2003) of the word “humanist”, which they, in turn, use in self-praise (“thank you for the compliment” and “I, as [...] a humanist”). Thus, these participants position themselves, together with the ad-makers, in the “good” category in the dichotomy.

Moreover, they position an “other” in the “evil” category, namely the immigration critic (“xenophobic, self-righteous [...] who] think that if we only close our borders and scare the strangers away everything will be fine”, “the government”, “antihumanist”, “The Danish People’s Party and The Liberals”). Two of the participants (respondent 1 and respondent 2) address the opponent directly and also position him or her in this category (“you xenophobic...”, “what are you – antihumanist?”). The utterances, then, praise the persons and actions that are condemned in the first utterance. The persons and actions are praised as embodiments of the community’s values, and the “others” are condemned for violating these. This is evident in how these positions are performed through invoking the question of who “we” are, and contrasting this to its opposite (“contributes to showing that a large part of Denmark wants a Denmark that is different from what the Danish People’s Party, the Liberals, etc. attempts to create”).

This exchange, then, demonstrates a disagreement over evaluations that also contains conflicting definitions over persons and actions. The disagreement is over who “we” are and should be, as well as what is “good” and “evil”, and materialise in an

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<sup>42</sup> I discuss this particular utterance more at length on pages 217-218, where I discuss “moralism” and “goodness posing” as moral condemnations.



epideictic rhetoric of praise and condemnation. It does, however, not create a space for argumentation about future action. Instead, it stays a question of evaluations. Nor does it develop as a schismogenetic conflict, i.e. a conflict where the intensity of the expression accelerates and thereby drive the poles of opposition further apart (Bateson, 1935, 1958). Rather, the exchange has little progress both towards a solution of the conflict and towards amplification of it.

In what follows, I will look more closely at how evaluations are performed through moral condemnations, more precisely through attacks on others’ moral character and intentions, and examine how these function as rhetorical moves in the debates.

### **Moral condemnations and positioning**

The attacks on others’ moral character or intentions divide along a primary pole of opposition, namely between immigration negative and immigration positive attitudes. Broken down on sub-categories (Table 9), we see that the attacks on persons who display immigration positive attitudes are performed through accusations of “moralism”, “goodness posing” and “nation treason”. Attacks on persons who display immigration negative attitudes, on the other hand, are performed through a language of “shame and disgust”<sup>43</sup>, as well as accusations of “racism”.

**Table 9:** Sub-categories of the category “attacks: moral character/intention” (n=607).

<b>Codes in the material</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Moralism	139
Goodness poser	139
Nation traitor	52
Racism	72
Shame and disgust	205
<b>Total:</b>	<b>607</b>

The condemnations of other persons’ moral qualities are, thus, performed through value-laden words, namely “moralism”, “posing”, “shame”, and “disgust”. Whereas the first

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<sup>43</sup> In the debates studied here, these emotions primarily serve as condemnations of immigration critical attitudes. However, there are also a few examples of shame being inflicted on persons who display immigration positive attitudes.

two words, which are used to condemn expressions of immigration positive attitudes, are words that contain evaluative descriptions of persons and actions, the latter two, primarily used to condemn expressions of immigration negative attitudes, are expressions of emotions that contain negative evaluations. Moreover, I argue, these attacks may also function as domination techniques (Ås, 1979; 2004, see also chapter 8), by which the speaker asserts a position as morally superior. Finally, they function as displays of the community's values. As shown in Table 9, some of the condemnations also invoke enemy images, namely "nation traitors" and "racists".

The source of disagreement that manifests itself through these attacks is conflicting evaluations of values and norms. As such, the disagreement takes place on the qualitative stage of debate. Here, utterances are prone to be expressive, i.e. they express the speaker's feelings but, as we will see, these predominantly negative feelings are directed towards another. Value-laden words are characteristic of such disagreements over evaluations and, as it is the speaker's subjective feelings and evaluations that are expressed, arguments in the qualitative stasis tend to lack argumentation (Jørgensen & Onsberg, 2008, 44-45).

These moral condemnations, which also often contains assertions of one's morality, can best be understood as moral positioning, through which participants define and evaluate persons and actions through the dichotomy "good/evil". As will become apparent, the source of disagreement in these interactions is over who positions what category of the dichotomy, i.e. who and what is "good" and "evil". Moreover, the positions are often invoked by a third component outside of the dichotomy itself, namely a victim or a threat (or both), that the "good" either helps or defeats, and the "evil" either neglects or is an accomplice of.

In the following, I first examine how accusations of "goodness posing" and "moralism" function as attacks on an opponent, as domination techniques, as well as performances of individual and collective identities through constitutions of an "other" (Blumenberg, 1987, 457; Smith-Rosenberg, 1992, 846). The "other" is closely related to the "enemy" (Jasinski, 2001a, 412), which in these debates manifest in the invoking of two enemy images, namely "nation traitors" and "racists". Following the discussion of

the moral condemnation of an “other”, I therefore turn to how the same disagreement and poles of opposition are expressed through constructing the “other” as an “enemy”.

### **Accusations of “moralism” and “goodness posing”**

“Moralism” and “goodness poser” are both value-laden words that are used, not to describe reality, but to evaluate it. Both words entail negative evaluations of a person or a group. In contrast to “morale”, “moralism” is in vernacular language, not something we associate with positive feelings, but rather with the negative experience of being told how to behave by someone who claims to be us superior. “Goodness poser” is a word that has developed as a commonplace expression in the immigration debate, used to negatively evaluate persons who allegedly are “posing” as good, rather than *being* good.

In the Scandinavian immigration debate, such accusations have primarily been used by immigration critics to attack a “moral elite” who claims to have ownership over goodness (Hagelund, 2004). This is also how they are used in the debates studied here, namely as attacks on persons and groups who promote immigration positive attitudes or perform actions to help the refugees. As such, these accusations function, not only as attacks on opponents but also as evaluations of what “morality” and “goodness” is.

As personal attacks, accusations of goodness posing and moralism are directed, primarily, at public persons, appearing in the news stories about welcoming and helping the refugees. Both Petter Stordalen, who housed refugees in one of his hotels, the celebrities figuring as supporters of the Swedish help-campaigns, and the Danish ad-makers, who welcomed refugees into the nation, are targets of attacks. Also participants in the debates are accused, however, the public persons are the primary targets of these attacks.

The attacks concern 1) whether the person is genuinely “good” (intention), 2) the person’s sense of reality (wisdom), as well as, 3) the person’s moral character. First, the attacks dismiss the person’s “goodness” by attacking his or her motives. Accusations of “goodness posing”, in particular, attack the person who displays a wish to help refugees for not acting out of goodness, but ascribes him or her with motives of wishing to be *seen* as good. Moreover, this attack on the person’s intentions often involves an evaluative definition of his or her actions, in which these are defined in terms of “misuse

other people's money" (c. Berlingske 5.8.15), "less foreign aid to genuine refugees" (c. SVT 26.11.15), and "demanding that others pay" (c. Expressen 5.9.15). An example is the comment:

**EXAMPLE 51:**

Every single one of the so-called "celebrities" (and all other "ordinary" people) who pose in the media about the refugee flood in Europe in order to score extra points, should be asked whether they will welcome a refugee family into their own home for an indefinite time, pay for their food, health care and education. If they do that, it is good. If not, they are demanding that OTHERS pay so that they can stand there in the media with a halo of self-righteousness and think they have helped. (c. Expressen, 5.9.15)

The utterance expresses a subjective evaluation of the "others," i.e. the ones "who pose in the media about the refugee flood in Europe". As suggested by the word "pose", those who display their wish to help refugees publicly are seen as false. To express a wish to help is defined in terms of "scoring extra points", rather than contributing ("think they have helped"). This is evaluated negatively: It is an expression of "self-righteousness" and is, moreover, to place a burden on others ("demand that OTHERS pay"). As such, the utterance both defines the actions of others in terms of their intentions and evaluates them in terms of good or bad.

Utterances like this should be seen as personal attacks that undermine the opponent's intentions and moral character by presenting his or her actions as expressions of underlying personal interests and feelings. The goodness posers are eager to be *seen* as good, consequently their actions and positions are nothing but efforts to "score points". In this sense, the accusation is used to undermine the status of the opponent's actions and stance in the issue.

It is also an attack on the person's sense of reality and rationality: S/he is depicted as someone who has not thought his or her actions through, or who is too naïve to understand that what s/he is doing is the opposite of helping, as suggested by the phrase "think they have helped". Commonly, attacks on "goodness posers" and "moralists" also involve such attacks. They are "naïve" and "misguided good" (c. Berlingske 5.8.15), "naïve dreamers" (c. Aftenposten 5.9.15), as well as "blinkered" (c. Aftonbladet 26.11.15). Moreover, their "idealistic" attitudes and "so-called human compassion" are called out as "not feasible" (c. Aftenposten 29.12.15).

Finally, and primarily, the accusation attacks the person's moral character. The "moralist" is accused of being "intolerant towards certain political ideas" (c. Dagens Nyheter 6.9.15), described in terms of the "latte-segment's"<sup>44</sup> know-all attitude and hatred/condescension towards others who do not agree" (c. Politiken 3.8.15). As such, these accusations often activate the question of goodness through a relationship of privileges-deficiencies, where a "moral elite" is constituted as a privileged group that oppresses and mocks the average person.

Moreover, utterances in these categories, while expressing a critique of moralism and self-righteousness, are themselves characterised by a self-righteous and moralistic tone. The speakers assume a position of moral superiority above those whom they attack for being moralistic and self-righteous. An example can be found in the first utterance (thread starter) cited in example 50 (see page 211), where "humazists" are condemned morally. As we remember, the utterance performs a negative evaluation of persons with an immigration positive attitude. They are accused both of being moralists and as posing as good, and are constituted as "others" to the community: They are accused of being "self-righteous" and self-satisfied (they "pat each other on the back"). Their actions are destructive – both for the nation and for the refugees. As such, the utterance also defines their actions through persuasive definitions, in which the value of the actions is defined (Just & Gabrielsen, 2008, 28). The speaker's negative feelings towards the other is expressed through value-laden words such as "self-righteous", "dismantle" and "kill", as well as the "humazists", a re-articulation of the word "humanists" that invokes a negative attitude towards humanists and humanism, which is here likened to Nazism.

The utterance, thus, accuses the opponents of claiming a moral high ground and suggests that they are not thinking straight due to the satisfactory feeling they have from thinking that they are morally good ("high on goodness"). By describing the "other" with such terms, the speaker presumes the moral claim that goodness requires good intentions and cannot be done in order to "feel good". In doing so, the speaker also – paradoxically – asserts his or her moral superiority over those who believe they are morally superior: S/he is genuinely good, because s/he wants to help the "genuine refugees" and "society's weakest", while not assuming a self-righteous and self-

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<sup>44</sup> The "latte-segment" is usually used to describe the urban elites (that drink caffè latte).

satisfactory attitude. This is a paradox, as the speaker does precisely what s/he attacks the “other” for doing: S/he assumes moral superiority by mocking others.

The fact that utterances that condemn a moralistic attitude in others are also written from a position of moral superiority, is particularly evident in the utterances in the category *moralism* that attack the “the people of the goodness industry” (c. Berlingske 6.1.16), for claiming a “monopoly on goodness”, as seen in the following example:

**EXAMPLE 52:**

Perhaps North-Korea suits you better? I pity you who think you have a monopoly on goodness. Less foreign aid to genuine refugees in the war’s nearby areas and more to some few that come here, how is that goodness? (c. SVT 26.11.15)

This accusation is performed in a condescending tone, with a sarcastic remark (“Perhaps North-Korea suits you better?”). The utterance is performed from a superior position, one that allows the speaker to “pity” the opponent. It performs a negative evaluation – it is insinuated that s/he is undemocratic, the actions of the other are defined in terms of being harmful to the “genuine” refugees. As such, the opponent’s goodness is dismissed (“how is that goodness”) and the opponent is mocked for being moralistic (“think you have a monopoly on goodness”). In doing so, the utterance also invokes explicit moral claims, by which the speaker asserts moral superiority.

While criticising others for being self-righteous and moralistic, the utterances in which others are accused of “goodness posing” and “moralism” are, as such, participating in the very activity that they are criticising in others. The criticism of another’s moral character entails a claim to the moral high-ground, evident in how speakers emphasise that they “think differently than the media and stuffed politicians” (c. Expressen 11.11.15), and are “realists” (c. Aftenposten 29.12.15), who understand that one needs to keep one’s head cool to be able to find realistic solutions to the situation.

In the debates, accusations of “goodness posing” and “moralism”, then, function as evaluations of what are good persons and actions, and as expressions of the speaker’s attitude towards people who publicly display immigration positive attitudes. As such,

they function as positioning in the immigration issue. Moreover, these evaluations are also concerned with the community's values – and who represents these. This is evident from how a relationship of privileges-deficiencies is activated through images of a moral elite who mocks the “average” person and asserts ownership of the concept of goodness. Rather than developing into an argumentative stage of the debate, where one argues for and against a solution, such utterances tend to bring about more evaluative utterances, where one “side” of the issue celebrates, and the other condemns. In other words: as rhetorical moves in the debate, they primarily facilitate praise and blame. In what follows, I turn to these instances of condemnations of other participants in the debates performed through expressions of shame and disgust. I do so, as this demonstrates how the debates develop as evaluative – or epideictic – struggles over who and what is good and evil.

### **Rhetorical expressions of shame and disgust**

Shame and disgust are both so-called “negative” emotions, associated with the transgression of values and norms (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000; Tangney, Mashek, & Stuewig, 2005). This understanding of these particular emotions implies an understanding of emotions, in general, as judgements. They are so, because what brings about emotional responses is our evaluations of actions, events and persons, and these evaluations are anchored in our understanding of what is right and wrong (Nussbaum, 2004). As rhetorical moves in public debates, expressions of shame and disgust do not concern whether or not individuals actually *feel* ashamed or disgusted but rather functions as a display and negotiation of social norms through correction of others' behaviour (Kjeldsen, 2020). Thus, this also establishes obligations with political implications: It establishes norms for what the community should think and feel and, when accepted, an obligation to act to change what is disgraceful (Kjeldsen, 2020, 121).

Expressions of shame and disgust, then, can be seen as functions of epideictic rhetoric: They display the community's values – and seek community's recognition of these – by condemning violations of these. Yet, the expression of shame and disgust is also a performance of the speaker's subjective evaluation and negative emotion towards

an object. Thus, it may also function to dominate the target of the emotions, and produce resistance and anger.<sup>45</sup>

In immigration discourse, expressions of shame and disgust have served as moral condemnations of persons and actions that represent both immigration positive and negative attitudes (Every, 2013; Kjeldsen, 2020; Pantti, 2016; Villadsen, 2019). In the debates studied here, these emotions primarily serve as condemnations of immigration critical attitudes; however, there are also a few instances of shame imposed on persons who display immigration positive attitudes. As the accusations of “goodness posing” and “moralism”, also attacks on a “disgraceful” or “disgusting” other involves the assertion of moral superiority. More clearly than attacks on “goodness posing” and “moralism”, many of these attacks also display the community’s values explicitly and contrast them to the attitudes of the “other”.

While shame and disgust are two distinct feelings for the individual, the expression of both of these two emotions function as a moral condemnation of persons and actions. In the debates studied, the two emotions often appear together, as in the following example: “I get nauseous from reading what people manage to spout out of themselves, you should be ashamed.” (c. Aftenposten, 9.5.15). Moreover, the emotional expressions have two directions: they express the speaker’s own emotions (“I am disgusted”) or the emotions that the target such feel (“Shame on you”). The function is nevertheless the same: It functions as a condemnation of the “other”, and as a way for the speaker to position him- or herself across from the object of the emotion, the community and the issue. This is evident in utterances in which these two directions are combined, for instance: “I am embarrassed to live in the same country as [tags another participant]. Shame on you!” (c. Aftenposten, 5.9.15).

While these expressions could also be seen as encouragements to the target of the emotions to act to change to the better, it is more likely to evoke feelings of anger, indignation and contempt, than to cause the addressee to feel ashamed or disgusted (by him- or herself) and to change. This is so, both because the expression of the emotion

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<sup>45</sup> In the Norwegian social psychologist Berit Ås’ work on “master suppression techniques” (also called “domination techniques”), applied by men to dominate women at the workplace, the imposition of guilt and shame was identified as one of the, initially, five, and later, seven, domination techniques (Ås, 1979; 2004, see also chapter 8).



happens through a personal attack by which the person's character is evaluated negatively, and because "to be ashamed requires that one share the values one is accused of being disgraceful for having violated" (Kjeldsen, 2020, 118). Real shame can thus only be felt by those who view themselves as associated with the group who issues the shame - and who shares the group's values, norms and practices. As a consequence, expressions of shame and disgust, rather than encouraging others to change, primarily function as moral evaluations and naming of an "other". This is performed through epideictic rhetoric of blame, and it functions both to condemn an "other" and to display and seek the community's recognition of social norms and shared values (Kjeldsen, 2020, 120). Moreover, it is a way for the speaker to display personal values and to seek recognition for his or her personal character, as well as to seek community with those who share these values.

The expression of these feelings are commonly rhetorical moves responding to accusations of "goodness posing" and "moralism", as the two utterances below are examples of:

**EXAMPLES 53-54:**

It is frightening, I think, that people are sceptical and critical when someone out of care and goodness wants to help someone else. I admire you, Petter Stordalen, for your good heart and care for those in need... I am ashamed of people who are so petty. You go, Petter. All honour to you (c. VG 8.9.15).

I think some of you should shut your mouths now. There has been so much regurgitation directed at Stordalen. Is it envy or inferiority complexes that surface? I am ashamed by people's pettiness. (c. NRK, 8.9.15).

The two utterances both express the speaker's feeling of being ashamed ("I am ashamed"). The reason for the feeling is, however, not the speaker's actions or attitudes, but others' "pettiness". Thus, while the utterances are expressions of the speakers' emotion, the emotions expressed are not their own, but rather emotions that should be felt by others. As such, the two utterances express the speakers' negative evaluation of others, more precisely of those who attack Petter Stordalen for being a "goodness poser". The opponents' attitudes are, moreover, evaluated negatively through words such as "frightening", "regurgitation" and "envy", as well as contrasted with the positive words "good heart", "goodness" and "honour". The utterances, thus, display community

through praise of Petter Stordalen as an embodiment of the community's values. His critics are, by contrast, condemned and excluded from this community. As such, the two evaluations participate in a struggle over what and who is good, and the speakers assume a position of moral superiority over the targets of their emotions through ridicule and personal attacks: The "others" are "petty" and suffer from "envy or inferiority complexes".

The expression of shame and disgust may thus function both alienating and constitutive. It gains this double function because expressions of shame and disgust not only names something that already exists. It also constitutes the object it names as something disgusting or disgraceful through the reiteration of already established social conventions (Ahmed, 2014, 93). It is because a person has violated social norms s/he is asked to be ashamed. This is central to how emotions function as *judgements*: They are "not only about the 'impressions' left by others, but ... involve investments in social norms" (Ahmed, 2014, 196). Constituting someone as disgusting or disgraceful does, however, not only constitute the target of the emotion, it also constitutes the speaker as something away from and superior to the disgraceful (Kjeldsen, 2020). As such, expressions of shame and disgust are also rhetorical means to assert oneself and try to dominate the "other" (Ås, 1979, 2004; Kjeldsen, 2020, 117, 122). This function of the expression of shame is evident in utterances such as:

**EXAMPLE 55:**

Sad attitude! What do you yourself contribute with to Sweden? I am proud to be Swedish and to have Swedish values that are not at all in line with what you are writing. You should be ashamed, grown-up man??!!! (C. Expressen 5.9.15)

In the utterance, a contrast between pride and shame positions the speaker in relation to the addressee, and positions the speaker, as well as the addressee, in relation to the national community. The speaker expresses a feeling of being "proud" to be part of the community by adhering to the community's values. By contrast, the target of the expression of shame violates the communal values by writing what s/he does ("not at all in line with what you are writing"). Consequently, the addressee should be ashamed for violating the community's social norms and is placed outside of the community. By positioning her- or himself inside, and the opponent outside, of the community, the

speaker also claims a position as morally superior to the opponent. Thus, the utterance functions not only to constitute the speaker and the opponent and the community. It also functions as a way to dominate and alienate the opponent, as well as to seek community with those who share the moral condemnation.

Thereby, the rhetorical act of inflicting disgust or shame upon others publicly, not only constitutes the speaker and the object of emotion, it also constitutes a community of those who are bound together by the moral condemnation performed. By constituting certain persons as something “other” and “odd” to the community, participants are displaying who “we” are by contrasting “us” to “them” (Blumenberg, 1987, 457; Smith-Rosenberg, 1992, 846). Thus, while the emotional expression may function to alienate some, it may also function to seek an emotional recognition of community’s shared norms and values – and to seek community with others who share these norms and values. An example of this, is the following utterance:

**EXAMPLE 56:**

Funny in a way, but sad with these unintelligent, almost univocal comments that we should be ashamed of (Ekstra Bladet, 4.8.15)

This utterance appears as a response to a previous comment in which the Danish “welcome ads” (see chapter 4) are praised and called “good humour”. In the utterance, the speaker expresses agreement with the views of the previous speaker (“funny in a way”) and seeks community with him or her, as indicated by the use of the personal pronoun “we”. While signifying identification with the previous speaker, the author of this comment also constitutes the group of people who criticise the ad-makers as disgraceful – as “something *we* should be ashamed of”. Thus, the speaker expresses shame on behalf of a collective and encourages others in the community to do the same. In doing so, s/he seeks community’s recognition of the social norms that are violated and asserts the community’s – in which s/he is included – moral superiority over the group of people who act disgracefully.

As rhetorical moves in the debates, the expressions of shame and disgust are, as argued often a way to respond to accusations of goodness posing and moralism. Moreover, as the accusations they are refuting and criticising, these expressions do not

invite debate between opposing views. Rather, these utterances mainly function to dominate an opponent, to assert oneself, and to seek recognition from the in-group. In the following, I take a closer look at how such expressions function as rhetorical moves in the debates.

### **Epidictic struggles as stable conflicts**

Neither expressions of shame and disgust, nor accusations of moralism and goodness posing function as advice for future action, but rather as evaluations. The disagreement displayed through such utterances is, as I have argued, essentially over what and who is “good” – and what and who is “evil”. In the news-generated social media debates, this disagreement takes place and stays at the qualitative stage of the debate, where one evaluation is responded to with another. Accusations of goodness posing and moralism are responded to with expressions of shame and disgust – and vice versa. Participants on both sides of the disagreement re-define actions and re-constitute objects to express their evaluation of what is good and bad, as we saw in example 50 (page 211), where the pejorative “humanist (humazist)” was re-appropriated and used to alter the “good/evil”-dichotomy.

Similarly, expressions of shame and disgust are evaluations that bring about more evaluations, either as expressions of recognition of the evaluation or as opposition through accusations of moralism or name-calling. By fighting back, the “shamed” can form a new identity, namely as the “oppressed” (Every 2013, 682). This, Kjeldsen (2020) explains, happens, because the act of inflicting shame (and, I will add, disgust) upon others is an act of condemnation from a position of perceived moral superiority. Rather than moving the opponents to change their behaviour, the rhetorical act of inflicting shame, then, is likely to increase their resistance and weaken their empathy towards the speaker and the speaker’s group. An example of this is the following exchange:

#### **EXAMPLE 57:**

Thread starter:     Yes I am ashamed to be Norwegian when I read many of the comments here.

- Respondent 1: I totally agree!!!!!!
- Respondent 2: [Tags thread starter] You naïve idiot.
- Thread starter: Let me add: Incivility is also a hallmark.
- Respondent 3: Just because we do not share your view?
- Respondent 4: Clearly, it is not going to be easy to be good in this country.
- Respondent 5: It is easy to be good in this country, and there are many who are good. One does not have to be evil if one is in doubt. Look at the reception centres today and tell me what you see.
- Respondent 4: It was meant as a response to the criticism of Stordalen. I totally agree that there are many good people in the nation.
- Respondent 6: I agree, envy is widespread in Norway
- Respondent 7: That is how most people get when they have a lot of everything, they get jealous. (c. NRK 8.9.15)

The exchange's first utterance expresses a feeling of shame on behalf of the national community ("I am ashamed to be Norwegian") for the many offensive comments Norwegians have produced in the news-generated social media debates. As the remaining comments in the thread shows, the expression of shame functions in two ways: a) to shape a community among those who share the social norms that are violated – and agree that they are violated – and, b) to alienate and induce resistance in those who are targeted. That the utterance function to shape a community, is evident in the acclaims that recognise the social norms that have been violated and repeats the moral condemnation, either by acclaiming the thread starter and expressing agreement ("I totally agree!!!!!!"), or by recognising that norms have been violated and repeating the condemnation ("Clearly, it is not going to be easy to be good in this country", "envy is widespread in Norway", "they get jealous").

Across from the group who is accused of having violated the community's social norms, however, the rhetorical strategy is not effective, i.e. they do not accept the accusation and seek to improve. Rather, they attack the speaker who expresses shame through name-calling ("You naïve idiot") and dismiss her or his position of moral superiority ("Just because we do not share your view?"), suggesting that the shamer is

the one who is morally corrupt as s/he seeks to silence the opponents through a rhetoric of “othering” (cf. Jasinski, 2001a). As such, accusations of moralism can be seen as rhetorical moves that function both to oppose accusations of disgraceful behaviour through a reconstitution of the self as the oppressed, and a re-constitution of the accuser as the oppressor (Kjeldsen, 2020, 128), and to perform a moral condemnation and assert superiority over an “other”.

Thereby, neither accusations of moralism or goodness posing, nor expressions of shame and disgust, function as deliberative rhetoric, but rather as epideictic and, partly forensic, rhetoric. These utterances perform evaluations, and they do so through moral condemnation. Because there exists disagreement about the evaluations, the interaction cannot move into advocative stage of the debate, where arguments about future action can be performed. Rather, the disagreements develop as struggles over the concept of “goodness”, as well as who is entitled to this position.

The conflict does, however, not accelerate and amplify the social divisions. Instead, the expressions gain a character of repetition, where different participants make use of similar condemnations, such as “envy” and “jealous”, rather than attempting to exceed each other in strength. Thus, the epideictic struggle develops neither in the direction of argumentation about future action nor in the direction of a “schismogenetic” conflict (Bateson, 1935, 1958; Brox, 1991, 2009). As such, the epideictic struggles can be seen as stable conflicts, i.e. conflicts that neither increase or reduce the distance between the opponents – at least not as expressed through the texts.

Sometimes, however, an intensification of the conflict is visible, namely when the “other” becomes the “enemy”. As we have seen, the disagreement is commonly carried out through devaluations of others and assertions of the self through categorisations in “good/evil”, as well as “us/them”-dichotomies. Thus, the epideictic struggle also entails features commonly associated with polarising rhetoric, namely affirmation and subversion (King & Anderson, 1971). It creates and celebrates an “us” by attacking a “them”. These features of the moral evaluations in the debates clearly manifest themselves in the invoking of enemy images through accusations of “racism”, on the one hand, and of “nation traitors”, on the other. The construction of such enemy images could be seen as an acceleration of the conflict, in which the “other” becomes

the “enemy”. This acceleration does, however, not take place *within* the news-generated social media debates, as I will show, but within the broader communicative context.

### **Enemy images: traitors and racists**

In the debates, two different enemy images prevail: the immigration friendly “nation-traitor”, who destroys the nation through filling it with immigrants, and the “racist”. The two different enemy images follow the poles of opposition identified above. However, while the opponent in the examples above is constituted as an “other” to the community through attacks on his or her moral character, s/he is here constituted as an “enemy” of the community. Whereas accusations of goodness posing and moralism entail negative evaluations of the “other”, who is constituted as a sort of enemy to the community, some utterances also directly invoke enemy images by attacking others for being “nation traitors [landsforrædere]”, who are performing actions that are “harmful to the country” [landsskadelig virksomhed]. Similarly, although expressions of shame and disgust are powerful moral condemnations, accusations of racism entail exclusion from the sphere of legitimacy, as being racist means that one holds attitudes at odds with, not only with what is perceived of as legitimate attitudes in society but that, when expressed publicly, are also at odds with national law and international conventions.

As already established, epideictic rhetoric may function both to unite and divide, as a community is shaped and celebrated through the exclusion of an “other”. Necessarily, epideictic rhetoric can also be polarising. As discussed in chapter 2, polarising rhetoric is built around two principal strategies, namely affirmation strategies and subversion strategies (King & Anderson, 1971). It is thus characterised by the expression of an “us/them” dichotomy. As in epideictic rhetoric, identification with and adherence to a community is invoked through appeals to shared values, references and experiences that promote a strong sense of group identity (Cheney, 1983). Subversion, on the other hand, is invoked through the undermining of competing group’s character, for example through attacks on the enemy’s morale, appeals to stereotypes and prejudices, as well as depicting the enemy as a threat to the in-group. In contrast to epideictic rhetoric, however, polarising rhetoric is often described in terms of seeking out confrontation with the enemy, in order to amplify social divisions (Jasinski, 2001b).

By contrast, epideictic rhetoric is commonly described – and studied – through instances where a rhetor speaks to his “own”, and the exclusion of an “other” is a result of the celebration of one’s own, rather than the very aim of the discourse.

In the debates, accusations of “nation treason” are primarily performed in the Danish debates about the “welcome ads”, and are targeting the makers of these ads. Two examples may serve as examples of these accusations:

#### **EXAMPLES 58-59:**

When Denmark was destroyed from within by the nation traitor’s sabotage. Let us just open the borders, liberalise our weapon legislation and throw the welfare state in the rubbish bin. This way, the goodhearted bran women [klidkvinder] of the goodness industry would not have time for this type of sabotage as they would have real work to do. (c. Politiken, 3.8.15)

A Danish woman of the worst kind, she should be punished with many years in a labour camp, the Danish prisons are too good to store fools of her calibre. (c. Ekstra Bladet, 4.8.15)

The accusations of nation treason essentially perform the same functions as accusations of goodness posing and moralism. They perform evaluative definitions of the acts of welcoming and helping refugees, in this case in terms of “sabotage” (example 58), as well as “treason against the West, humanity and Denmark” (c. Politiken, 9.9.15). They evaluate the persons performing these actions negatively, by calling them damaging and dangerous, as well as ignorant and moralistic (e.g. “goodhearted bran women”, “goodness industry”), as well as “know-all and devoted self” (c. Politiken, 3.8.15). The accusation performed through the commonplace expression “nation traitor” is, however, more severe: Those who are attacked, are not only attacked for mocking the average citizens through their self-righteous moralism, they are accused of treason, as well as destroying the national community (“destroyed from within by the nation traitor’s sabotage”).

Consequently, the opponent is depicted as an enemy of the nation state, evident in how many of the utterances in which this accusation is performed call for “punishment”: They enemy should be “punished with many years in labour camp”, and excluded from the nation state. For instance, one writes: “send her out” (c. Ekstra Bladet, 4.8.15), and another: “remove her from our poor country” (c. Ekstra Bladet 4.8.15).



As such, the utterances from the commonplace “nation traitor” invoke subversion, characteristic of polarising rhetoric (Davis, 1969; King & Anderson, 1971; Raum & Measell, 1974). An enemy image is invoked through attacks on this enemy’s moral character and through appealing to stereotypes and prejudices (e.g. “goodhearted bran women”, “know-all and devoted self”). Moreover, the enemy is here vividly depicted as a threat to the in-group – in this case, the national community, which s/he betrays. This is evident in how discouraging images of the situation the nation is in are invoked: The nation is “poor” and people from the outside are “pouring in”, causing the community of Danes to dissolve: “soon it will not be Danish anymore” (c. Ekstra Bladet 4.8.15). As these utterances suggest, the constitution of the nation traitor as a threat relies on a definition of the immigrants as threats to the nation state. In many of the utterances that accuse people who display immigration friendly attitudes of nation treason, this definition is expressed explicitly, however, not in all. This definition of the immigrant is, nevertheless, always present – implicitly or explicitly – in the accusations of nation treason, as the one threat (the traitor) implies the other (the immigrant).

In many of the utterances, the destruction of the nation is claimed to be the very intention of the “nation traitors”. The act of welcoming refugees into the nation is not an act of humanity and solidarity, it is an intentional act to destroy the community from within it. These acts are, moreover, depicted as part of a larger conspiracy to ruin the nation state:

#### **EXAMPLES 60-61:**

Yes, it is not easy to get the better of the Marxists. They did not get their international revolution, so now mass import of foreigners is their best weapon against the despised nation-states. We have to bear with these morons, they do not know better. But at the same time, we do wisely in preparing for a civil war or two. (c. Berlingske, 5.8.15)

Those who desire political chaos have gotten wind in their sails. They finally found an issue by which they can stir up the mood in the entire country. In my opinion, only one word covers their efforts – antidemocracy. These anti-democratic people are about to succeed at what the far right, the far left and various fanatical religions have failed at doing. How can people, who claim that they love this country, be excused when they make undermining propaganda that obstruct the present democratically chosen government? They CANNOT, and they do not even dare to come forward with their names, but instead call themselves a “Danish group”. Unfortunately, we have seen numerous examples of what people are able to do in order to belong to a group. Stop and think again, before you destroy the country you say you love. (c. Politiken, 9.9.15)

In the first of the two examples above (60), the ad-makers' are called "Marxists", and the act of welcoming refugees into the nation is called a strategic war act against "the despised nation states". Immigrants – more precisely "mass import of foreigners" – are described as a "weapon" used to destroy the nation states. The war-metaphor is, it seems, not only a metaphor, as the speaker also suggests the Danish people start "preparing for a civil war or two". In the second utterance (61), the ad-makers are called "anti-democratic people" whose goal is to destroy democracy and "the country[they] say [they] love". They are likened to anti-democratic, terrorist, groups on the far-right, far-left, as well as "fanatical religions" that seek to disintegrate democracy.

These utterances must be classified as hateful, right-wing radical and conspiratorial. The claims they make about reality and the evaluations of people who display an immigration liberal position they perform, have clear similarities to ideas that have inspired terrorism. In particular, there are striking similarities to the ideas subscribed to by the Norwegian terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, who massacred 69 members of The Labour Party's youth organisation, AUF, in 2011. The AUF-members were killed because they were, in Breivik's view, "cultural Marxists", who betrayed their nation by participating in a conspiracy to "Islamise" Norway. This is a conspiracy that, according to John Færseth, author of the book *KonspiraNorge* (2013), approximately three to four thousand people subscribe to. It entails an intense and extreme hatred against The Labour Party (Dyrendal & Emberland, 2019), and with Breivik's actions, gained fatal and real in-life consequences.

One can never be sure that such utterances performed in the newspaper's comment sections may not be intended or interpreted as encouragements to violence, as I will discuss also in chapter 8, in relation to the use of threats of force in the debates. This, then, demonstrates the difficulties in distinguishing a logic of expression from an action-oriented discourse, where utterances function as advice on future action. With this in mind, I will nevertheless advocate a view on these utterances, not as advice on future action, but rather as moral stance taking. This entails that, although the utterances signal what should be done with these enemies of the nation, they are unlikely to have real consequences for future action.

Without making invidious comparisons, there are some similarities to the so-called “berserker-speech”, discussed in chapter 2. The orator, Niels Hertzberg, apparently advocated war against the Swedes through the scorched earth strategy (Johansen, 2019, 156-157). The next day, he voted in favour of an union with Sweden. As such, the speech had no implications for future action. Instead, it was a demonstration of the speaker’s eloquence and moral stance. By contrast, the utterances in the news-generated social media debates are performed in a highly vernacular style, with few markers of rhetorical eloquence.

The similarity rather consists of these utterances’ substantial and functional features. What appears to be advices on future action (“punishment” and “preparation for civil war”), I argue, should probably not be viewed as proposals. I argue this because the measures proposed are so out of proportions and would entail consequences that few would be ready to support. For instance, to suggest that a person is “punished with many years in a labour camp” for having printed advertisements in newspapers is both to suggest a consequence that is unproportioned to the action performed, and that entails that the Criminal Code is changed. Similarly, to advocate “civil war” as a response to someone having printed an ad is not only out of proportions but also something that seems like an unlikely wish for anyone to have for the nation. As such, I argue, these utterances should probably be understood as performances by which the speakers take a moral stance and position themselves to the out-group. This does, however, not imply that I renounce that words have an effect, nor is it my intention to trivialise the spreading of hatred and conspiracy theories online, a discussion I will revisit in chapter 8, where I examine hostile attacks on other participants.

The accusations of “nation treason” show how the epideictic struggle can take shape as a schismogenetic conflict, where the expressions become intensified: The “other” has become an “enemy”. This, I argue, function as a form of moral stance taking, where participants perform a strong expression of their moral position. As such, these utterances can be understood through the form of moral “expression competition” described by Brox (1991, 2009). This expression competition does, however, not develop within the interactions in the news-generated social media debates. Instead, it develops in relation to the broader communication situation. These utterances do not

interact with other utterances in the debates, but rather with the newspaper articles about the “welcome-ads”. Only the fewest of these utterances relate to other utterances in the debates by either responding to a previous utterance or being responded to. The few that interact with other utterances do so, in the shape of brief interactions characterised by agreement. An example is an interaction caused by the utterance cited in example 60. The utterance is replied to with an acknowledgement and repetition of the condemnation performed: “The Muslims will take care of them. When they are no longer in need of the tactical alliance”. The first participant, then, acknowledges this response with the comment: “Very likely”. Thus, the strong expression of contempt can be viewed as part of an expression competition over moral positions. However, it is not an expression that functions to exceed the strength of other expressions of moral positions in the actual debate, but an expression that functions to exceed the ad-makers’ expressions of their moral stance through the welcome ads targeting refugees.

As argued, the accusations of national treason imply a definition of the immigrants as threats to the nation state: The immigration positive person can only be a “nation traitor” as long as the immigrants are threats to the nation. S/he is “evil” because, in helping immigrants, s/he not only neglects the Scandinavian (primarily Danish) “people”, which is the victim in this narrative, but intentionally tries to destroy it. By contrast, the enemy image invoked through accusations of “racism”, positions the immigration critical in the category of “evil”, and relies on a definition of the refugees as victims. As a consequence, the person who helps the refugees is constituted as “good”.

As argued by Hagelund (2003, 218), the concept of “racism” is an essential part of the immigration discourse, as it “forms the constitutive outside of immigration politics as a moral field”. Racism is a marker of what should *not* characterise the community. Thus, accusations of racism are potentially powerful rhetorical strategies that can define who are moral in- and outsiders of the community. Moreover, accusing someone of being “racist”, is not only to accuse them of immorality, but also illegitimacy.

In the debates examined in this study, accusations of racism function to ascribe opponents – either particular persons or groups – with attitudes and to position the

speaker across from this “other”. They function as expressions of negative evaluations, as well as moral condemnations that attempt to exclude attitudes and persons from the community. Rather than sanctioning actual instances of racism, however, most accusations of racism are performed as unaddressed attacks that express the speaker’s negative evaluation of the tone in the general immigration debate. An example is the utterance: “Usch, how many racists there are in society” (c. Aftonbladet 3.9.15).

Moreover, the accusations, in which a particular person is attacked – either for being racist or for expressing racist views, are written as responses to utterances that do not actually contain racism. Two comments that are responded to with accusations of racism may serve as examples:

**EXAMPLE 62:**

SD wanted age restrictions already from the start. But they were called racist. But now the government has gotten the same idea. Are they racist too, then?

*Reply: You are racist.* (c. Aftonbladet, 26.11.16).

**EXAMPLE 63:**

No they [the refugees] are not worse off than homeless children and not worse off than me. I slept in a tent in minus degrees as a teenager. They are better off than alcoholics and many Swedes. Numbskulls, my God, stupid Swedes who are feeding their neighbours’ children and telling their own that they are better off.

*Reply: no one is feeling sorry for you. I would rather welcome a refugee who fled from war and hunger into my home than you! Because the way you resonate is the way only a racist resonates! Usch!* (c. Expressen 5.9.15).

This shows how the participants in these debates are positioning themselves in relation to each other through ascribing one another with attitudes and qualities, rather than relating to one another through argumentation. Rather than relating to the views or arguments performed by an opponent, the debaters evaluate each other’s moral character and position each other into categories of “good” and “bad”. As such, the personal attacks also function as expressions of the speaker’s evaluations of what is “good” and

“bad” attitudes. These attacks are, then, instances of epideictic rhetoric through which society’s values are displayed through condemnations of persons and attitudes that violates them. We see this function of these attacks particularly well in utterances, in which racism – and representatives of this attitude – are explicitly contrasted with the community’s values. An example is:

**EXAMPLE 64:**

The ‘others’ are those who vote for the Danish People’s Party and the other racists – because they are really undermining the country and all the good Danish values about human compassion and kindness (c. Politiken, 3.8.15).

Racist attitudes are, in this utterance, ascribed to immigration critics, such as the national conservative political party The Danish People’s Party. Their attitudes are evaluated negatively and contrasted to the (national) community’s values, which is evaluated positively (“all the good Danish values”). The community is defined through the display of its values (“human compassion and kindness”), and the “racists” are constituted as an “other” that makes out the moral outside of the community. Thus, the utterance is an evaluation of what is good – about who “we” should be – as well as an evaluation of what is “evil” – about what is undermining the community.

As rhetorical moves in the debates, accusations of racism, generally creates two forms of interaction – both involving more evaluations. One is that the accusation is recognised and repeated, in a much similar way as the few accusations of “nation treason” that were responded to. The other is that the accusation is denied and the accuser attacked. When the accusation is recognised and repeated, the evaluation of what is good and bad is also recognised, and the attitudes that are accused are also recognised as violations of the community’s values. The following utterance, written as a response to a racism-accusation may serve as an example:

**EXAMPLE 65:**

Yes, it is sad that there is a lot of racists in Sweden. The only thing we can do is to apologise. However, most are better than that, even if racism is widespread. (c. Aftonbladet 3.9.15).

When the accusation is denied and attacked, this functions as a defence against the negative accusation (cf. Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Wells, 1996; Ryan, 1982), as well as an attack on the opponent for being “moralistic” and “oppressive”. As such, these interactions are negotiations, both of the concept of “racism” and of what are “good” and “evil” attitudes. This function, i.e. as attacks and evaluations, rather than defences, is evident from how the majority of the utterances that involve a version of the commonplace expression “I’m not racist...”, are not written as responses to accusations. Three examples, all preceding a potential accusation may serve as examples:

**EXAMPLES 66-68:**

The money could have been given to Danish homeless, or would one then be racist (c. Berlingske, 5.8.15).

[...] the debate is ridiculous, one is not xenophobic or racist because one understands that there is no room for all the refugees in the world in Denmark! (c. Berlingske, 5.8.15)

[...] we who have seen the problems with today’s asylum policies have been standing in a harsh storm. Either one is xenophobic, or one is racist. (c. Dagbladet 19.9.15)

As the accusations of racism, also the denials of racism, express the speakers’ negative evaluations of others’ – they are oppressors. Moreover, they express a positive evaluation of the speaker’s attitudes. These utterances do so in two ways: They evaluate these attitudes as “not racists”, and they indicate that the speaker has understood the realities and been brave enough to voice their concern, although there is a risk that one will be called a racist. As such, these utterances both perform accusations of the immigration debate being a “closed party”, where there is no room for legitimate immigration criticism, they disarm the opponent by forestalling a potential attack, and serve as a way for the speaker to assume a position as the oppressed, as well as superior to the other.

While I argued that the accusations of racism concerned evaluations of what is “good” and “evil” attitudes, because they were concerned with how certain attitudes were violations of community’s values, the denials of racism are, I argue, primarily concerned with evaluations of what is legitimate and illegitimate attitudes. They are so, because they are performed together with advice for future action (“The money could have been given to Danish homeless”), and about the realities in the asylum policies

(“there is no room for all the refugees in the world in Denmark” and “problems with today’s asylum policies”). As such, it is these particular claims that are evaluated as legitimate, by contrast to the accusations of racism, in which certain attitudes and persons are evaluated as “evil”.

Thus, the negotiations over the concept of “racism” concerns evaluations both over what attitudes are “good” and what attitudes are “legitimate”. The disagreements over these evaluations mainly function to bring about new evaluations – either supportive or condemning – of the initial evaluations. As such, both the negotiations over the concept of “goodness” and over the concept of “racism” are examples of how the news-generated social media debates are, to a large extent, taking place in the qualitative stasis, in which evaluations are responded to with new evaluations. The debates, then, could be described in terms of epideictic struggles over who and what are good, i.e. over who “we” are.

### **Chapter conclusion: Epideictic struggles over moral positions**

In this chapter, I have argued that a large part of the debate about the refugee crisis in the newspapers’ comment sections on Facebook is about conflicting definitions of the issue and evaluations of who and what is “good”. Consequently, the debate is characterised more by epideictic rhetoric than, through praise and condemnation, displays who “we” are, than of deliberative rhetoric.

Because there exists disagreement both about how the situation should be defined and about who “we” are and should be, these contributions in the debate do, however, not function to strengthen the adherence to community’s values and, in doing so, form a basis for argumentation about future action. Instead, the interaction mainly plays out as moral positioning, where persons are categorised as “good” or “evil”, and where epideictic struggles over these positions come into existence. This epideictic struggle often takes shape as – sometimes quite harsh – attacks on others’ personal morale. Nevertheless, I have argued, the epideictic struggles – and the positions in it – tend to be stable, i.e. they do not progress, neither towards a reduction of the conflict, nor towards amplification of it. As the constructions of enemy images, in particular of “nation traitors” demonstrate, the epideictic struggle sometimes also has the potential to



develop into a “schismogenetic conflict” (Bateson, 1935, 1958), where expressions are intensified, and divisions amplified, however, not within the debate, but within the broader communicative context.

Given that the struggle is over moral boundaries, it is not surprising that it often becomes contentious and harsh. Evaluated after normative considerations about what constitutes “good” political debate and deliberation, however, this moralisation of positions in the issue is a sign of “bad” debate. It is so for three reasons. First, the debate is unable to move forward, but is instead stranded on the evaluative level because the participants agree neither on the definitions of the issue, nor the values upon which argumentation about future action necessarily must rest. Second, these evaluations often have a character of personal attacks and domination techniques, as the speaker asserts a position of moral superiority and condemns others’ behaviour, as well as value as human beings. This is usually seen as a sign of a bad debate, as it diverts the attention away from the arguments in the issue and onto the participants’ personal traits (Jørgensen, 2011; Kock, 2011b).

Related to this, is the third reason for why these evaluations counteract communicative ideals associated with public debate, namely that they, due to their character of personal attacks and domination techniques, obstruct deliberation and, possibly, participation. Deliberation is commonly understood as a discussion that is open to all, where participants are equal, display mutual respect and consider the common good (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Steenbergen et al., 2003). When the discussion lacks an orientation towards mutual respect and instead gains an aggressive tone and people are attacked and attempted dominated, this may obstruct people from partaking as “equals” and may function to exclude some from the debate, in fear of being attacked and verbally abused. Thus, these features of the debate may potentially contribute to silencing deviant and marginalised voices.

In the chapter that follows, I look more closely at the particularly aggressive argument culture found in many of the debates, and examine how “expression competitions” that, in contrast to the epideictic struggles, are characterised by an acceleration of the hostility, develop.

## **Chapter 8: Attacks, aggressiveness and expression competitions**

In the previous chapter, I argued that much of the interaction in the news-generated social media debates concerns conflicts over evaluations and definitions that play out as epideictic struggles over moral positions. In this chapter, I examine another form of interaction characteristic of the debates, namely the personal feud, in which attacks and verbal abuse dominate. In contrast to the attacks discussed in the previous chapter, the attacks I examine here are, however, not concerned with moral evaluations. Rather, they are domination techniques and rhetorical moves to “win” the exchange.

In the interactions, attacks function both to put an end to the interaction and to accelerate its aggressive character. It functions to put an end to the interaction, as participants apply domination techniques to signal disinterest in what the other has to say and to legitimise that they do not relate to other participants through argumentation. When this does not function to silence the opponent, expression competitions develop, in which participants compete in performing the crudest attack on the other, and where the “winner” is, ultimately, the one who gets the last say.

### **The analysis**

Attacks constitute a large part of the utterances in the material. However, not all attacks should be seen as instances of verbal abuse and aggression. Some of the attacks in the debates concern other participant’s moral character and intention, and should, as discussed in the previous chapter, be seen as evaluations.<sup>46</sup> Some attacks are concerned with other’s arguments and claims and can be seen as more or less legitimate forms of critique, which is ultimately concerned with the issue. Some attacks target parties, policies and political actors. Although politicians are attacked quite often – both as parties, for their politics and as individuals – and some of these attacks are particularly

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<sup>46</sup> However, as also discussed in chapter 7, the devaluation of the opponent’s moral character also functions as a domination technique, evident from Berit Ås’ (2001) treatment of the infliction of shame and guilt as one of the five master suppression techniques traditionally applied by men to dominate women at the workplace.

aggressive and abusive<sup>47</sup>, these are not included in the analysis in this chapter, as I am primarily interested in the interaction between the participants who attack each other.

Moreover, attacks target other participants' debate practices, i.e. they function as sanctions of violations of debate norms and genre conventions, which I examine in chapter 9. Finally, a category of attacks are generic, i.e. they target a particular person, but do not concern anything particular to this person, such as his or her moral character, intention, debate-style, arguments or claims. Instead, they use name-calling or insults that could have been used to target anyone. An overview of the attacks in the material is found in the table below:

**Table 10:** Overview of types of attacks in the overall material (n= 2728).

<b>Codes in the material</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Attack: Moral character/intention	607
Attack: Claims/arguments	271
Attack: Generic	116
Attack: parties, policies and politicians	418
Sanction: Debate practices	777
<b>Total:</b>	<b>2189</b>

This chapter examines attacks from several of these categories but concentrates on attacks that function as domination techniques, either through ridicule, name-calling, insults, irony and sarcasm, as well as expression of hatred and threats. Many of these are found in the category “generic”. However, as will become evident, they also target other participants' claims and arguments, as well as the stylistic features of other participants' utterances, i.e. they are coded as “sanctions”.

The source of disagreement in the debates examined here is not always apparent. Rather than an actual disagreement, I argue, participants employ various domination techniques, such as ridicule, name-calling, insults, sarcastic remarks, and the dispute

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<sup>47</sup> In particular, the Norwegian Labour Party, and its leader, Jonas Gahr Støre, are subjected to many and often particularly hostile attacks. The Labour Party is attacked the most of all the parties (86 comments) and Jonas Gahr Støre the most of all the political actors (36 comments). By contrast, the Norwegian Progress Party, which is the second most attacked party in the material is attacked in 75 comments, and the Danish Minister of Integration and Immigration, Inger Støjberg from the Liberal party, who is the second most attacked political actor in the material, is attacked 28 times.

develops as competitions over who gets the final say. The analysis, for this reason, draws on rhetorical and linguistic concepts that allow for a description of the function of such instances of provocation (e.g. irony and sarcasm), as well as a framework articulated in social psychology to identify ways to suppress and humiliate opponents indirectly, i.e. “master suppression techniques”, also called domination techniques (Ås, 1979, 2001). Moreover, to discuss the mechanisms operative in the interaction that develops from these domination techniques, I introduce a theoretical concept initially developed in anthropology, namely “schismogenesis” (Bateson, 1935, 1958), and further develop this through a re-definition of the concept of “expression competition” (Brox, 1991, 2009).

### **An aggressive argument culture**

Online debates are commonly associated with a particularly aggressive argument culture, in which incivility, personal attacks and hate-speech flourishes (Anderson et al., 2014; Coe et al., 2014; Davis, 1999, 2005; Edström, 2016; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Jankowski & Os, 2004; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Wilhelm, 1998; Zhang et al., 2013). In particular, in relation to controversial issues, such as the immigration issue (Vatnøy, 2017, 212-213), online debates are found to be dominated by moral positioning, as discussed in chapter 7, as well as flaming, and polarisation, rather than deliberation (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Wales et al., 2010).

The aggressive argument culture is an important reason for why many people evaluate social media as poor arenas for public debate (Kruse et al., 2018; Moe et al., 2019). It is one of the most important reasons for why people avoid debates in social media (Lomborg, 2014, 167; Thorson et al., 2015; Vatnøy, 2017, 213; Vromen et al., 2016). The aggressiveness makes the arena lose its character as a “happy space”, and people do not wish to partake because they fear criticism, harassment and attacks (Kruse et al., 2018; Moe et al., 2019, 90).

The hostile tone associated with many online environments is also an important reason for the increased concern about what the emergence of social media does to democracy. One of these concerns is that hatred, threats and harassment spread in these channels, threaten people’s freedom of speech, as both “average” citizens, as well as journalists and political actors, may self-censor or avoid voicing their opinion at all, due

to the fear of being the object of hateful and threatening comments (Fladmoe & Nadim, 2017; Gustavsen & Sauer, 2015; Iversen, 2015; Midtbøen, 2015b; Toft, 2015; Wadbring & Mølster, 2015).

Another concern related to the aggressive argument culture characteristic of many online environments is related to how this may both be a result of, and contribute to, increasing group polarisation. As discussed in chapter 2, polarisation is seen as a possible outcome of the opportunities for the formation of echo chambers or trench warfare dynamics in online environments, where reinforcement of one's own beliefs may result, not only in more extreme opinions but also more extreme expressions of these (Karlsen et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2001). As such, the aggressive argument culture is seen both as a threat to opportunities for freedom of speech, and as a result of increased group polarisation, fostered by online environments, thus also constituting a threat to society's cohesion.

The prevalence of personal attacks, as well as other forms of verbal abuse, in debates in online environments, stands in stark contrast to normative accounts of public debate, which should ideally consist of arguments and counter-arguments that are acceptable, relevant and weighty (Kock, 2011a, 21; 2018). By contrast, ad hominem attacks are signs of a "bad" debate, as rather than being concerned with the arguments in the issue, they turn the public's attention to the person's traits (Jørgensen, 2000; Kock, 2011b). Moreover, attacks and verbal abuse counteract deliberative ideals such as mutual respect and understanding, may obstruct individuals and groups to participate, and contribute to stigmatise and polarise.

The aggressive argument culture has commonly been tied to an experience of lack of social cues and restraints when communicating online. Although one is not necessarily anonymous – for instance, to participate in debates on Facebook, one is required to participate under one's full name – one is "invisible", i.e. one does not *see* and *hear* the other person. The lack of eye-contact and background knowledge about those with whom one interacts may remove the experience of one's utterances to have real, in-life consequences, which may enable people to perform hostile, sometimes outright hateful, attacks on others (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2011; Suler, 2004).

The existence of invisibility, moreover, allows people to construct, not only representations of themselves but of other people as well (Suler, 2004). When reading messages written by others, humans commonly perceive these texts as a voice in their head. If the person with whom we are communicating is unknown to us, we invent a voice that fits the content and style of the message. In doing so, we also construct an image of the person conveying the message. Consequently, if the only information available to us is what a person says in the comment section, the character we create of that person may be based on typical characteristics, our stereotypes or prejudices, and by whether or not we agree with the content of the person's comment. This can lead to more hostility, as a person we disagree with is more likely to be given negative characteristics (Gonçalves, 2018; Suler, 2004).

The aggressive argument culture associated with online environments has also been seen in relation to the affordances of the medium that make audience's reactions readily available, i.e. as likes, shares and comments (Hoff-Clausen & Rønlev, 2016, 480, 484-485). Aggressive and abusive comments are found to encourage greater participation in online debates (Steinfeld, Samuel-Azran, & Lev-On, 2016), and provocations may thus be utilised to gain the public's attention (Marshall & Neil, 2016, 13).

Finally, aggressiveness is commonly related to the controversial nature of so-called "social media-friendly" issues, i.e. issues that are particularly suitable to create much debate on social network sites – for instance, the immigration issue (Vatnøy, 2017). Generally, such issues are found to invite moral positioning, flaming and pathos-based argumentation in online debates (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Wales et al., 2010), and to be less likely to enhance deliberation and more prone to create polarisation (Bächtiger, 2011; Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010; Steiner et al., 2004).

All of these features of social media, I argue, may contribute to creating an aggressive argument culture. Here, I will, however, tie the prevalence of verbal attacks, insults and abuse to a particular type of interaction, namely the expression competition. By contrast to the *debate* as a form of interaction, participants in the expression competition relate to one another, not through argumentation, but rather through domination techniques. The "winner" of the expression competition is, not the one who

performs the most persuasive argument, manages to prove that s/he is right and the other wrong, or who manages to show that s/he is “good” and the other “bad”. Instead, the “winner” is the one who gets the last say.

### **Personal attacks and experiences of hostility**

In the news-generated social media debates, an aggressive argument culture manifests itself in the widespread use of personal attacks in the material. An experience of the debate arena as a hostile environment is also voiced in many of the utterances in the material examined in this study. A few utterances may serve as examples of how the debates are evaluated negatively:

#### **EXAMPLES 69-71:**

God help how petty some of these comments are! Shame on you!!! (Aftenposten, 5.9.2015)

Honestly people. When I read this comment section, I want to log out of Facebook, log out of the world and move to a pasture far away from everything and everyone. Everything is criticised, no matter if one gives or takes in this society, and it is obvious that half of you have only read the title of the article. [...] On behalf of humankind and us Norwegians I get nauseous. Usch! (c. Aftenposten 5.9.15).

Quite “entertaining” to read these comment sections, where evil is given free rein! Evidently, it takes this little before childish nonsense comes streaming out from the deepest underground! The former so proud and great Danish people evidently has some hideous “faces” and attitudes, in the shape of uncontrollable trolls (c. Ekstra Bladet 4.8.15)

In such utterances, we see how speakers commonly express negative evaluations of the tone in the debates. These evaluations express not only the speaker’s subjective evaluation of the debates but, as discussed in chapter 7, also perform negative evaluations of other persons’ moral character. As such, they engage in moral positioning. They do so through emotional expressions of shame and disgust (“Shame on you!!!!”, “I get nauseous. Usch!”). They create dichotomies between an “us” and a “them” (“proud and great Danish people”, “on behalf of humankind and us Norwegians”). They assert moral superiority by condemning others for being morally corrupt (“evil”). Moreover, they dethrone others by using labels such as “petty”,

“childish” and “uncontrollable trolls”, and assert themselves above this kind of behaviour (“I want to log out...”).

In rhetorical studies, attacks have primarily been examined as “persuasive attacks”, i.e. as rhetorical strategies for creating or strengthening negative attitudes towards the target by calling attention to offensive acts performed by the accused party (Benoit & Dorries, 1996). Attacks or accusations (*kategoria*) are commonly viewed as functional pairs with defences or apologies (*apologia*) and are found to arise as an accuser perceives and is motivated to expose an offensive act performed by the opponent (Ryan, 1982). Primarily, attacks have been studied in the context of political campaigns and debates, in particular in the United States (see e.g. Benoit & Wells, 1996; Hall Jamieson, 1992; Pfau & Kenski, 1990).

In the comment sections, the majority of the attacks performed are *personal attacks* directed at the other’s character, rather than his or her acts. As argued in chapter 7, many of the attacks performed in the debates studied here, function as moral de-evaluations of a person or a group and as moral positioning. Through these attacks, a pole of opposition manifests itself, namely between an immigration positive and an immigration critical “side”. The source of disagreement that materialises through the attacks performed by these two “sides” is a disagreement over evaluations, more precisely over evaluations of who and what is “good” and “bad”. As such, these attacks expose negotiations over who “we” are – and should be. These negotiations function both as expressives, i.e. expressions of the speaker’s emotions and evaluations of others, as well as epideictic rhetoric that displays community’s values, and seeks other’s recognition of these, through the condemnation of transgressions of values and norms.

The attacks discussed in chapter 7, thus, contain evaluations of what is “good” and “bad”. In this chapter, by contrast, I examine how attacks that do not concern such evaluations function in the interactions. I examine how the opponent is attempted dominated and defeated through ridicule, sarcasm and irony, name-calling, as well as expressions of aggression, hatred and threats. For this purpose, I draw on a theoretical framework developed initially by the Norwegian psychologist and philosopher, Ingjald Nissen (1945), and later elaborated on by the professor in social psychology, Berit Ås (1979, 2004), to describe ways in which men dominate women. Originally, Ås (1979,



2001) described five domination techniques: 1) making invisible, 2) ridicule, 3) conscious non-disclosure of information, 4) double punishment, and 5) imposition of guilt and shame. Later, she added two further techniques: 6) objectifying, and 7) threat of force (Ås, 2004).

In recent years, the framework has been extended to include additional “modern” master suppression techniques and applied to examine techniques used to maintain superiority and dethrone others in social media communication (Harr, Nyberg, Berggren, Carlsson, & Källstedt, 2016; Nyberg & Wiberg, 2015). These studies identify a variety of domination techniques, as well as counter-strategies applied in social media (Nyberg & Wiberg, 2015). However, they are not found to be particularly common. Rather, hostility is found to take the form of direct and harsh insults and expressions of hatred (Harr et al., 2016).

Although master suppression techniques are commonly understood as more subtle ways to exercise power through degrading others, I do not necessarily distinguish the performance of harsh and direct attacks on others from the application of a dominance technique. Rather than differentiating between these expression based on their formal qualities, I look at the function performed by them in the interaction. In the debates, several dominance techniques are used. Participants convey to others that their opinions are not interesting or valuable (make invisible), ridicule other’s utterances and person, withhold information – albeit not about the facts in the issue, but rather the intentions of the speaker – and perform threats. Moreover, as discussed in chapter 7, the imposition of shame and disgust, as well as accusations of moralism and goodness posing, serve as ways to dominate the opponent and maintain social superiority. In the following, I elaborate on the functions served by these domination techniques as they arise in the discussions. Moreover, I examine what these expressions do to the interaction, and argue that it is likely to either put an end to the exchange or develop into an expression competition. First, I discuss how name-calling and insults are used in the debates, and what functions these rhetorical moves serve in the debates.

## Name-calling and insults

Name-calling is often viewed as the lowest type of argument in a disagreement, or as the simplest form of personal attack. In the comment sections, a variety of creative and local versions of “idiot” and “fool”<sup>48</sup>, as well as names such as “troll” and “witch”, are used to attack others. Such attacks are generic, i.e. not concerned with the personal traits of the person who is attacked. Instead, they are insulting words that can be used to attack anyone. By contrast, ad hominem attacks are directed at a particular person’s personal traits, i.e. his or her competency, moral character or intentions.

Whereas both name-calling and personal attacks can be seen as competitive domination techniques, through which the opponent is attempted defeated, the name-calling and insulting remarks that I discuss here are, in contrast to the attacks on the opponent’s moral character discussed in chapter 7, not anchored in social norms and values. Three such attacks may serve as examples:

### EXAMPLES 72-74:

Too many drugs that have had negative effects? (c. Politiken 26.1.16)

Apparently a 7-year-old has snatched daddy’s keyboard and is commenting? Or perhaps a permanent prepubescent crisis. (c. NRK 8.9.15)

[tags another participant] ouch, experienced a mean foreign boyfriend, have you.. you’ve made your bed, now lie in it, is all I have to say. (c. Aftenposten 5.9.15)

All of the above cited utterances are examples of hostile verbal behaviour targeting another participant. They primarily rely on insults to dismiss an opponent’s contributions in the debate and to annihilate the person’s image. Whereas they are all quite similar in the sense that they attack another through implying – somewhat random – negative things about the other, they gain somewhat different functions in the actual interaction.

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<sup>48</sup> A selection of these variations is: *Idiot, dust, tomsing, dustemikkel, klovn, enstoing, pajas, gnällröv, född i farstun, fjols, tosse, sinke, klaphat, hængerøv, lusede amatører, latterlige skidesprællere impotente grødbønder, talentløse skiderikker*, to mention a few. The most creative names are found in the Danish debates.

The first of the three examples dismisses a personal anecdote about living on social security benefits. In contrast to many of the utterances, in which personal anecdotes about belonging to the society's weakest serve to justify an immigration critical attitude (see chapter 6), this personal anecdote serves as a counter-argument against a definition of the immigrants as a threat to the national welfare. It does so, by serving as an example of the conditions for so-called "weak groups in society" not at all being so bad, as well as that immigrants do not receive any "special treatment" and are not "better off" than Danish social security benefits receivers. This argument is dismissed through an insult (example 72). The insult is responded to with another insult, which also functions as a sanction of the previous insult, as well as a dismissal of the opponent's debate skills: "When one does not have anything to come with... why not just put something random out there to be sure that the world hears you? 😊".

While insults and abusive comments, generally, has a tendency to bring about more abusive comments and the hostility tends to increase throughout the interaction, this response, while performing an insult, is also characterised by a playful tone, indicated by the "wink" emoticon at the end of the comment, which signifies that the speaker is not hurt or feel anger as a result of the insult. Instead, the insult is dismissed as an attempt to "be heard", i.e. as a competitive domination technique aimed at provoking.

The second of the three examples above is one out of numerous attacks on a participant who, in response to an article about the hotel mogul, Petter Stordalen's, offer to house refugees in his hotels, has written "Boycot Stordalen and his hotels". The participant is, in the thread that follows, attacked both for his or her moral qualities (e.g. "Quite sad that a grown-up person wants to boycott a hotel because the owner tries to help people, among them CHILDREN, in need") and through insults, as in the example above (example 73), as well as comments such as "do you teach your children your idiocy so that they can become like you?". Thus, two strategies for expressing disagreement through annihilating the image of the person appear in the thread: 1) moral positioning, through which the person's moral qualities are dismissed, and 2) offensive remarks through which the person is depicted as less intelligent.

The latter of the three examples cited above functions as an interference in a personal feud between two other participants who call each other names (various versions of “idiot”), after first having participated in a disagreement over definitions of the refugees (“people in need” or “welfare migrants”). In contrast to the first example (72), in which an insult becomes a rhetorical move to sanction the other’s insult, this insult (74), does not sanction the name-calling earlier in the thread. Instead, the insult that targets one of the two participants whose interaction develops into a personal feud, functions as a way to “take sides”.

Name-calling and insults, then, function as a way to dominate an opponent by dismissing, not only his or her utterances, but also the person. The person is, however, not dismissed for his or her personal traits, such as his or her morale or competency, but instead for not being worthy of one’s attention and adequate response. As such, it functions both as a domination technique, which attempts to reduce the opponent and make him or her feel insignificant, as well as an avoidance strategy, i.e. as a strategy for renouncing obligations to respond to the claims and arguments of others. In many cases, name-calling and insults are brought about by and are responses to, what can be regarded as violations of norms of political debate, such as unwarranted claims, personal attacks, and assertions of highly personal truths (see also chapter 9). However, these strategies also appear as responses to utterances that do not violate general argumentation norms.

Name-calling and insults, then, are ways to demonstrate disagreement with another that does not lead the debate further. As we saw in chapter 7, disagreements over evaluations and definitions, has a tendency to stay put at a level of evaluations and does not create a room for argumentation about future action, but rather develop into epideictic struggles over moral positions. Nor do name-calling and insults function to create a debate between opponents, rather these rhetorical moves either effectively stops the interaction or turns it into an expression contest.

One interaction that, as a matter of fact, illustrates both of these outcomes, is the following:

**EXAMPLE 75:**

Cry on, Romson, no one cares. This is one step in the right direction 👍

*Reply:* No one cares about what you think either.

No one cares a shit about you. (c. Aftonbladet 24.11.15)

As we saw in chapter 6, the politician Åsa Romson was attacked for not being authentic, more precisely for crying what was called “fake tears”. The utterance in this example also attacks Romson for crying, albeit it is not evident that her tears are evaluated as “fake”. Rather, the attack functions as an expression of disagreement with her, and an evaluation of the retrenchments in the asylum policies as something positive. The attack that follows expresses disagreement with the speaker through an insulting remark, which is then responded to with another insulting remark.

As implied above, the interaction demonstrates how such insulting remarks function both to put an end to the interaction and to create an expression competition. On the one hand, the debate is stopped, as the interaction ceases after these three utterances. Both speakers effectively signal a disinterest with listening to and discussing with the other, they explicitly convey to the other that his or her opinions are not interesting or valuable, i.e. they attempt to make the other invisible (Ås, 1979, 2001). They say: I do not care about your opinions. Although the two participants signal disinterest with the other, the interaction, however, also has a feature of expression competition, evident in how the first insult is responded to with a stronger insult. During the brief exchange, a movement from expressing disinterest in what the other *thinks*, to disinterest in the other as a *person*, can be observed, and the latter utterance also contains stronger language (“shit”).

In other examples in this chapter, this feature that I call an expression competition will become more apparent, as the interaction continues over a longer course, and the attacks become stronger and stronger, however, with less and less substance. As such, I argue, they are expression competitions, i.e. competitions, not over who is right or wrong, good or bad, but rather over who is able to express the strongest attack on the other and gets the final word. As seen, this happens through insults and name-calling. It also, as I will now turn to, happens through ridicule, irony and sarcasm.

## **Ridicule, irony and sarcasm**

The existence of ridicule, irony and sarcasm in the debates bear witness of a playful attitude towards the debate. These substantial features are all associated with humour (cf. Berger, 1987), in particular with the genre of satire, as the laugh is often at the expense of another. These forms of humour are, moreover, found to be characteristic of political debate in online environments (Driscoll et al., 2013; Hartley, 2012; Highfield, 2016; Wells et al., 2016). While humour as a feature in political communication should not be viewed as unique to online environments, it is arguably “distinctly *of* the internet” (Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018, 2).

The prevalence of humour in online political debates have been linked to the rise and popularity of satirical political commentary in offline, as well as online, media (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Webber, Sarlos, & Eckhardt, 2013), and a particular “internet culture” where humour is both expected, encouraged, and rewarded (Baumgartner, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Leavitt, 2014; Milner, 2013a, 2013b; Phillips & Milner, 2017).

Moreover, actors in political debates online are not prone to view their participation to have any real impact on the political decision-making processes. Thus, they can take on a role as the detached, ironic observer and commentator of the political debate. According to Hartley (2010), the prevalence of humour in political participation online should be seen as a new form of citizenship, namely a “silly citizenship”, which indicates a lowering of the barriers to political participation. On the other hand, concerns have been raised that the prevalence of “silliness” and the ironic attitude in digital political engagement undermine the democratic potential of digital media, as it may lead to cynicism and exclusion (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Baumgartner, 2007).

In the debates studied here, ridicule, irony and sarcasm, while bearing witness of a playful and ironic attitude towards political debate, are also features that are prone to create a more aggressive tone. Primarily, these substantive elements function as a way to assert superiority over others by dismissing their intelligence and competency through ridicule. An example of how irony can be used as a domination technique, and how this, in turn, functions to bring about personal attacks, is found in the following interaction:

### EXAMPLE 76:

[12 comments by 6 actors removed from excerpt]

Thread starter: [Tags respondent 5] Are they coming from Turkey? I did not know that there was war in Turkey? When did it start? Why is this not in the news? I thought those who are coming are from Syria. I must have been entirely wrong then...

Respondent 5: [Tags thread starter], if you are not aware that many are coming from Turkey, among them the little three-year-old on the photos that have been published widely the past couple of days, then actually you should begin to read news. There has also been reports about organised groups of immigrants who are being sent up in Europe with fake Syrian passports.

Thread starter: [Names respondent 5] stop messing around. I refuse to believe that you have so little knowledge. What I wrote was irony.

Respondent 5: Idiot! [“Gjøk”, which means both “idiot” and “cuckoo”]

Thread starter: Cuckoo? Owl!!! That struck home, I suppose! Such high level...

(c. Aftenposten 5.9.15)

The source of disagreement in the interaction is over conflicting definitions of those who are coming to Europe as immigrants. As discussed in chapter 7, this is a central definitional dispute in many of the debates studied, and the definitions are evaluative, i.e. they do not merely *define*, they also *ascribe value* to the immigrants. One of the participants (thread starter) counters the other participant’s (respondent 5) claims that the immigrants are welfare migrants, travelling from countries that are not in a war (Turkey), not because they are in danger, but because they wish to improve their standard of life. In order to do so, s/he uses irony (“Are they coming from Turkey [...] I must have been completely wrong then”). The irony is, however, not detected by the other participant, who is ridiculed for not “getting” the irony. This is an attack on the opponent’s intelligence (“stop messing around. I refuse to believe that you have so little knowledge”), and as we see from the response from respondent 5, it also seems to be experienced as an attack (“idiot”).

Through irony, more precisely through ridicule of the person who does not “get” the irony, then, the speaker can assert intellectual superiority over the other. As such, irony may function as a domination technique through the conscious non-disclosure of

information. In contrast to how this master suppression technique is usually described, however, what is withheld is not information about the issue, but rather about the speaker's views and intentions. The ironic statement, thus, makes it challenging for the opponent, not to be able to make an informed choice about future action, but to respond to the others' utterances and to participate in the discussion, without facing ridicule. As such, irony signals that the speaker is "above everyday life and opinion" (Colebrook, 2004, 14f), as well as above those who do not "get" the irony. The audience who "gets" the irony will, in turn, consider both themselves and the rhetor to be clever (Booth, 1975, 42). Thus, irony creates a hierarchy between those who are skilful enough to interpret the remark in the way intended, and those who interpret it in its literal sense (Hutcheon, 1994, 90).

Sarcasm, in particular, has an *ad hominem* component to it, "as well as a certain intellectual arrogance" that can easily be interpreted as ill will from the rhetor (Gotcher, 2009, 43). As a phenomenon, irony and sarcasm, while strongly related (Attardo, 2007; Brown, 1980; Gibbs & O'Brien, 1991), and sometimes treated as the same phenomena (e.g. Grice, 1978), are not the same. Irony is, from a rhetorical perspective, commonly approached as a *trope*. In all its simplicity irony is defined as saying the opposite of what is meant (Quintilian, 1856 IX:ii, 44). Definitions of sarcasm are more ambiguous: Some view sarcasm as a "specific extension of a general concept of irony" (Reyes & Rosso, 2012, 755), more precisely as a particularly aggressive version of irony (Jorgensen, 1996; Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989; Lee & Katz, 1998). Others argue that:

irony must not be confused with sarcasm, which is direct: sarcasm means precisely what it says, but in a sharp, bitter, cutting, caustic, or acerbic manner: it is the instrument of indignation, a weapon of offence, whereas irony is one of the vehicles of wit (Partridge, 1987).

Moreover, what distinguishes sarcasm from irony is that sarcasm is always an intentional act, whereas it is possible to be unintentionally ironic (Haiman, 1998). Although some have argued that sarcasm is not necessarily hostile and offensive, but ranges all the way from attacks to banter and humour (Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995), the predominant understanding of sarcasm is that is an offensive, victimising and anger-provoking form of irony (Bowes & Katz, 2011). In a debate, both irony and sarcasm



may, thus, function as domination techniques. As such, irony and sarcasm may obstruct discursive cooperation, and function much in the same way as a personal attack. Research also suggests that sarcastic remarks make the subject of the sarcastic comment angry, disgusted and scornful (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000), and that actors who use sarcasm are perceived by the audience as verbally aggressive and offensive (Toplak & Katz, 2000).

In the news-generated social media debates, irony and sarcasm are rhetorical strategies that close to always cause misunderstandings and bring about personal attacks. This is not surprising regarding some of the characteristic traits of online communication. The fact that one cannot read the interlocutors' facial expressions and the tone in which the comment is delivered makes irony and sarcasm particularly vulnerable to misunderstandings. In oral communication, irony and sarcasm are often marked through tonality and body language. In written communication, authors cannot make use of such markers, which necessarily makes interpretation more difficult (Burgers, van Mulken, & Schellens, 2012; Gibbs, 1986; Giora, 1995). The speaker can, however, make use of linguistic markers for irony, such as hyperboles and rhetorical questions (e.g. "Or is it 'solidarity' they call it?").<sup>49</sup>

Another way to signal that one's comment should be read ironically is to use morpho-syntactic irony markers, such as exclamations and interjections (e.g. "And your source is very reliable hahahahahaha ..."), as well as typographic irony markers, such as the use of caps lock, quotation marks and emoticons (e.g. "Fucking racist government ;-)"). Commonly, the emoticon "Face With Tears of Joy", which shows a face with a big grin and tears from laughing hard, is used to compensate for the absence of body language. Moreover, actors sometimes explicitly mark their comments as sarcastic or ironic by including this information in the comment, as in the comment: "Oi, such racists the Social Democrats have become (NB sarcastic)". Despite this, ironic and sarcastic comments are often misunderstood, causing interlocutors who are actually in agreement to attack each other. An example of this is the following exchange:

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<sup>49</sup> This, and subsequent examples, are all found in the material.

**EXAMPLE 77:**

Has the Swedish government suddenly become racist!!!

*Reply: Ok, so in your opinion, all should be allowed into Sweden? IS and many others? Can they stay at your place then?*

I thought you would understand that I was ironic. The Swedish government calls the Sweden Democrats racists, and I wrote ironically that they are also racist for implementing border controls (c. Expressen 11.11.15).

Similarly, irony and sarcasm, when used as rhetorical moves to ridicule and dominate an opponent, also cause misunderstanding, which again brings about name-calling, as we saw in example 76. Moreover, sarcasm and irony often function as a domination technique, by which the opponent's wisdom and competency are ridiculed. Another example of this is the utterance:

**EXAMPLE 78:**

One becomes speechless over the wisdom you exhibit (c. Ekstra Bladet 4.8.15).

This same function is performed through sanctions of others' style, which I will now discuss. In chapter 9, I examine sanctions of violations of the norms and conventions for the debates, as these can tell us something about what expectations the participants have to them. Sanctions of bad style could also have informed us of the expectations to the contributions in these debates, namely their stylistic features. However, the examination of these, made it evident that these sanctions serve, not primarily as sanctions, but rather as domination techniques. In the debates, sanctions of bad style function, on the one hand, to dismiss all obligations to respond to arguments and criticism and, on the other hand, as a way to dethrone others.

Utterances in the news-generated social media debates are, generally, characterised by a vernacular style, characterised by plain, often foul language filled with swear words, frequent grammatical errors, as well as exclamation marks. Here, I am, however, not first and foremost concerned with the actual stylistic features of the utterances but rather with sanctions of violations of virtues of style. In the material, it is, primarily, the inappropriate and incorrect style that is sanctioned. Inappropriate stylistic elements are, according to the sanctions, primarily the use of capital letters ("caps

lock”), which is frequently sanctioned, as well as excessive use of exclamation marks and emoticons. Incorrect style, is here, synonym with grammatical errors. Some of these sanctions are unaddressed, as the following two examples:

**EXAMPLES 79-80:**

I establish that there are others than the refugees who could need better Norwegian language skills (c. NRK 29.12.15)

[...] it seems as many lacks some letters and a space-button on the keyboard, at the same time as something fat is keeping the !-button down constantly (c. Aftenposten 6.9.15b)

Other sanctions target a particular participant, as the two following examples:

**EXAMPLES 81-82:**

Are you that incompetent that you cannot set commas? (c. DR Nyheter 20.1.16)

<--- Caps lock!! (c. Dagens Nyheter 6.9.15a)

In the material, few of the sanctions of style are responded to, neither by the one which is sanctioned, nor by other participants. Of the four examples cited above, only one of the sanctions brings about a response, and this response neither expresses compliance with the conventions promoted through the sanction, nor acceptance of a sanction being performed. Instead, the sanction (example 81) is ridiculed: “Haha and you go on 😊 uha [tags respondent 1] is the next thing you will say something along the lines of my mother being stronger than your mother? 😊”. To this, the opponent responds “Your mother must be very strong”.

As indicated by the responses, the participant has already performed a sanction, this time of a spelling error in the opponent’s utterance, also this time suggesting that it is a sign of incompetency: “More competent than writing “fatten their own house in order”? The opponent replaced a letter in the Danish word which would, in this commonplace expression, be translated to “put”, and thereby the meaning of the phrase changed. However, it would not be hard to understand what the participant meant, suggesting that these sanctions do not primarily function as corrections that will improve

the other's style, and thereby the debate, but rather function to dethrone him or her. Moreover, by sanctioning spelling errors and lack of commas, the participant dismisses obligations to respond to the argument promoted by the opponent.

The same can be said for the sanction of the use of capital letters, as well as the unaddressed sanctions in the material. They do not, first and foremost, function as corrections of inappropriate behaviours but rather as a way to ridicule and dominate the opponent, as well as to express disagreement without offering an adequate response. Thus, these sanctions primarily function as a way to attack opponents competency, rather than their arguments, and thereby legitimise that one does not respond to their arguments. It functions as a domination technique by which one ridicules the other and asserts oneself.

Albeit ridicule, irony and sarcasm can be associated with a playfulness in how the participants in the news-generated social media debates relate to political debates, these features of the debates also contribute to creating an aggressive argument culture. They do as they function primarily as domination techniques that serve to legitimise that one does not listen and respond to others' arguments and claims, as we saw was also the case with name-calling and insults. When these domination techniques do not serve to put an end to the interaction, they are often repaid in kind, namely with attacks on the other's intelligence and competency.

I have suggested that the aggressive argument culture in these debates commonly manifest itself in expression competitions, where the battle is not primarily over the issue and the arguments, definitions and evaluations in it, but rather over who can "win" by performing the crudest attacks and endure the longest. In the following, I discuss how this develops into pure personal feuds.

### **Expression competitions**

I have suggested that I, by "expression competition", understand a verbal competition over the strongest possible expression. Here, I will elaborate on the concept by relating it to Ottar Brox's (1991) use of the concept in his critique of the Norwegian immigration debate, as well as to George Bateson's (1935, 1958) concept of "schismogenesis", and discuss this based in some examples from the debates studied.

As also discussed in chapter 7, Brox defines the concept “expression competition” in terms of a discourse in which “participants compete in finding the “strongest” or “clearest” *expression* for values that the competitors share” (Brox, 1991, 33, it. in original, my translation). As we see, Brox’s use of the concept of expression competition relates to the expression of values, and, as becomes apparent when he later applies the concept to the immigration debate, where it manifests itself in a “moral competition”, in which participants compete in having the strongest possible expression of their moral qualities (Brox, 1991, 53-54). This, Brox argues, creates a “discourse that runs wild”, as “arguments (and other contributions to the discourse)” are evaluated based on their “strength as *expressions* of values that the participants share, and not based on their *content*, such as validity or practical relevance” (Brox, 1991, 34, it. in original, my translation).

This form of expressive battle is facilitated and maintained by the type of discursive mechanisms described through the concept of “schismogenesis”. The concept was originally developed by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1935, 1958) to account for certain forms of social behaviour among the Iatmul people in Papua New Guinea. Literally, the word, created by the two Greek words *skhisma* (cleft) and *genesis* (creation), means *the creation of division*. And this is precisely what Bateson understands with the concept, namely the creation and maintenance of division through interaction: It is “a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behaviour resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals” (Bateson, 1958, 175).

Bateson differentiated between two different types of schismogenesis: complementary and symmetrical. Complementary schismogenesis refers to how cumulative interaction between two individuals with opposite behaviour, results in the exaggeration of the behaviour of both. For example, the interaction between an individual with an assertive behaviour and an individual with a submissive behaviour drives the already assertive individual to behave more and more assertive, while the submissive individual behaves more and more submissive. Thus, the two individuals’ different behaviours exaggerate one another, contributing to increasing the division between the two individuals.

Symmetrical schismogenesis, which would describe the discursive mechanisms at play in the expression competition, refers to how the behaviours of the divided parties elicit similar behaviours from the other parties. The cumulative interaction between the parties exaggerates the same behaviour from both parties as if one individual were to speak loudly, and the other responds by speaking louder, which then leads the first one to speak even louder (Bateson, 1958, 176-177). Although the parties who interact in a process of schismogenesis are not relating to one another through argumentation, they are nevertheless interacting and affecting one another, as the utterances from one party may contribute to accelerate the utterances from the other.

As discussed in chapter 7, conflicting moral evaluations result in moral positioning, whereby participants position themselves into categories of “good” and “evil”. As such, the struggles over evaluations have a definite character of being a “moral championship”. However, I argued, the evaluative struggle does not primarily develop as a competition over having the *strongest possible expression* for one’s moral qualities. Thus, it does not necessarily develop into an expression competition, where an intensifying of expressions’ strength in one camp, leads to an acceleration in the other camp. Instead, what I called “epideictic struggles” tend to lack progress, evident in how utterances are either not responded to at all, or are responded to – not with increased strength – but rather counter-evaluations and –definitions, as well as reappropriation.

Here, I will use the concept of expression competition to describe a discourse, in which participants compete in performing the strongest expression, not of values or moral qualities, but instead of aggression, contempt for the other, and, above all, commitment to the competition. With this, I refer to how the interaction develops as a process of symmetrical schismogenesis, where increasingly harsh measures are applied, by both parties, to dominate the other. This materialises, for instance, in increasingly cruder names and attacks, swearwords, as well as in expressions of pure and share hatred, conspiracy theories and threats. Moreover, this manifests itself in an expressed emphasis on not being the one who “quits” first, i.e. in a strong commitment to winning the competition. As such, the discourse develops into a personal feud, where the battle is no longer about conflicting evaluation and definitions of the issue (and about who is

right or wrong) or about moral evaluations (i.e. about who is good and bad), but rather over who can “ride it out”.

This commitment to “ride it out” manifests itself in utterances in which it is insinuated that the other has “given up”, as well as utterances that deny that the speaker has “given up”. An example of such an interaction is found below (example 83). The excerpt starts after two participants have interacted for a while, one of them asking the other to give arguments for his or her claims, the other repeatedly renouncing such obligations. The exchange is accounted for more fully in chapter 9 (there appearing as example 104), where I discuss how two conflicting communicative ideals manifest themselves through this interaction, but to in order to keep it short, here only the parts that shed light on how a commitment to continue the interaction, but without accepting the encouragement to give arguments, are included.

**EXAMPLE 83:**

Thread starter: [...] Have a nice evening, I cannot bother to waste more time on you. You disagree, fine, leave it at that!

Respondent 4: [...] it is easier to give up than to acknowledge that it is just symbolic politics.

Thread starter: [...] But have a nice evening, [tags respondent 4], I cannot bother with you anymore 😊

Thread starter: [...] Have a good evening, [tags respondent 4], we are done here.

Respondent 6: You surely give up easily. One does not get far when one is unable to give grounds and arguments for one’s attitude.

Thread starter: [tags respondent 6] I do not have to give arguments or explain why I am of the opinion that I am, and certainly not to you. But if it saves your day, then let it be, then we will just say that I gave up 😊

[The interaction continues in a similar manner for 8 comments, before one of the participants, again, says:]

Thread starter: Goodbye, I cannot bother with you anymore....! Have a good evening! What a fucking slow person. 😊

(c. Berlingske 26.1.16)

The interaction is here characterised by how one participant repeatedly signifies that the interaction is over. This is justified by reference to the other participant's insignificance ("I cannot bother with you anymore"). Thus, the participant attempts to reduce the opponent and make him "invisible" (Ås, 1979, 2001). S/he does so, however, not by ignoring his or her utterances and presence altogether, but rather by explicitly expressing this ignorance. As such, the opponent's presence is acknowledged; nevertheless, the content of his or her utterances is ignored.

Despite signalling his or her retreat from the exchange, as well as an ignorance of the other, the participant, however, continues to talk back, sometimes even without the other having intervened. In particular, the two accusations of having "given up" – one by the other participant, and one from another participant who intervenes only to point this out – seems to contribute to that participant continues. These accusations are, in other words, not ignored. Instead, they seem to strike a nerve in the participant, who refuses to have "given up" ("But if it saves your day, then let it be, then we will just say that I gave up").

This example demonstrates one of the two features of the expression competition, namely how participants compete in getting the final word, and thereby not be the one who "quits". In the example, this expression competition is primarily driven by one of the participants (thread starter), whereas the other attempts to hold the other responsible for his or her claims, and thus relate to him or her through argumentation. Moreover, the exchange demonstrates how attacks on and ridicule of the other person serves as a domination technique that justifies not responding to arguments and criticism. Attacking the other for being "slow" and bothersome, and also giving the impression that one has better things to do than to "bother with you", the speaker attempts to justify his or her retreat from the exchange, and still be able to get the final word. When this does not succeed, however, the speaker is forced to continue posting comments, that is, if s/he wishes to "win" the competition.

The other characteristic feature of the expression competition is the acceleration of abusive and hostile attacks, which I will demonstrate through another example (example 84). In the exchange that follows, the expressions of contempt for the other become more and more hostile during the course of the interaction. At the same time,



the attacks come to hold less and less substance. Moreover, as in the previous example (83), the commitment to getting the final say manifests itself at the end of the interaction.

#### **EXAMPLE 84:**

Thread starter: After a little more than two years in government = Europe's strictest asylum policies. Apparently, new brooms sweep clean 🍷 And fortunately, the Labour Party cannot claim the honour for this. If they could, they would probably have done this sooner. All times the Labour have been in government, 16 periods since 1946 in total. Incredibly well done by the Progress Party's 29 representatives.

[7 comments by 7 participants removed from excerpt]

Respondent 7: The Progress Party cannot claim the honour for this either. This is an agreement that the parties agree on, proposals from all parties are included. Whether it is good? Well, time will tell. They are not even close to having enough man-power or other things to gain control over the influx of people over the borders to Russia. The Progress Party have always had big mouths but been bad at acting.

[2 comments by 2 participants removed from excerpt]

Thread starter: [Tags respondent 7] You should go and be ashamed under your bed! ... You Labour voters have blindly opposed the Progress Party so that this could not happen until today. I should have sent you a load of bitter pills to swallow now.

[11 comments by 8 participants removed from excerpt]

Respondent 7: Yes, personal attacks have always been your best defence. ... So you continue to harass your political opponents when you lack other arguments. ... Besides, Norway does not have Europe's strictest refugee policies. That is something Sandberg<sup>50</sup> is trying to convince you fanatic believers of.

[1 comment by 1 participant removed from excerpt]

Thread starter: YOU ARE FUCKING OUT OF YOUR MIND. TAKE YOUR FUCKING PARTY BOOK AND WIPE YOUR ASS WITH IT. DAMN, IT'S NOT MORE WORTH THAN THAT.

[1 comment by 1 participant removed from excerpt]

Thread starter: COMMUNISTS AND FAR LEFTISTS ARE GARBAGE. GARBAGE AND NOTHING ELSE. FUCKING COMMUNIST, GO TO HELL. YOU AND YOUR PARTY FRIENDS ARE TO BLAME FOR THE SOCIETY

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<sup>50</sup> Per Sandberg is a politician from the Progress Party.

WE HAVE TODAY, IN WHICH WE, ETHNIC NORWEGIANS DO NOT FEEL AT HOME IN OUR OWN COUNTRY.

Respondent 7: Perhaps it's time to put the lid on the bottle soon?

Thread starter: Should have met you face-to-face and I should have told you the story about the Labour Party. ... You think you know their history. The truth is that you only know the socialist propaganda that you have swallowed, that is social-democratic lies.

Respondent 14: [Tags respondent 7] I think you should have kept that comment to yourself. Do you know that he drinks??? Rude is what you are. I think I know him better than you.

Thread starter: If you dare to repeat that, I will take care of you properly here in the comment sections regarding the Labour Party's history.

Respondent 15: The Labour Party-gang are annually training youth in drunkenness and philandering at Utøya. Weird that Muslims want their children to be radicalised in drunkenness and philandering, they who have such strict rules from Allah. But now the whore-island is open to new recruitment.

Respondent 7: [Addressed to respondent 14] What should I have kept to my self? No sober, normal persons write comments like you do. It is critique worthy and I am considering to report it. These are indirect death threats. So there you go, enjoy your paranoid view on the Labour movement.

Respondent 7: [Addressed to respondent 14] I am starting to wonder what kind of people you are, who comment like this. Cheering on the Progress Party, fascism and Nazism.

Respondent 7: Is that a threat? ... I am sure the Progress Party are very proud of you and your friends' comments in here. My God, that such people can be in government.

Thread-starter: You are no better, yourself, just so you know it. You and your friends in the Labour Party, who everyday slander, accuse and claim things about the Progress Party. Both about xenophobia, Nazism and racism. [...] At some point, it is enough. [...] You are welcome to send me your books about the Labour Party and the Labour movement. I need kindling now as the winter is here. [...] And do you yourself think one should accept being called xenophobic, Nazis and racist, as one is every day? Just because one does not belong to the Labour Party. Do you?

[7 comments by 3 commentators removed from excerpt]

Respondent 7: I will not comment any more of your comments. You are not worth it.

Thread-starter: Likewise. But I will pay close attention to what is said about xenophobia, Nazism and racism against people, as you do every day. You know – equality before the Law. No threat, just to inform you.

[1 comment by respondent 14 removed from excerpt]

Respondent 7: I see that you have removed the comment about wishing to implement prescriptions on free ropes for people like me. Did you by that mean that all «like me» should hang themselves or what? And did you chicken out and delete the post?

Thread starter: I think you should calm down a bit now. I did not chicken out, why should I? Ropes can be applied in many ways. Do not come here with your usual delusions again. People like you, hehe, thank God everybody is not like you. And good is that.

Thread starter: I am awaiting you bookcases, I need kindling.

Thread starter: [tags respondent 7] But send me your boxes with Labour-propaganda, and I will use it as kindling wood ☺ I assume you will pay for the shipping? ☺

(c. Dagbladet 19.9.15)

The interaction in question begins as a disagreement over reality: The two participants promote different conjectures over what has happened, more precisely over who has made the stricter asylum policies possible. The first two utterances in the thread also show disagreement over evaluations, namely over the parties' politics and capabilities. One of the participants (thread starter), claims that the retrenchments in the asylum policies are results of The Progress Party's politics and capabilities, and performs positive evaluations of the party and the new policies, and negative evaluations of The Labour Party. The other participant (respondent 7), claims that the asylum agreement is a cross-party deal and performs negative evaluations of The Progress Party. In the utterance, the asylum agreement is also evaluated: The evaluation is ambivalent ("Whether it is good? Well, time will tell"), but predominantly negative.

Then, the disagreement, quite quickly, develops into a personal feud, when the two participants begin to attack one another. First, the attacks are concerned with the other's party political sympathies ("You Labour voters have blindly opposed the Progress Party...", "fanatic believers"), debate behaviour ("Yes personal attacks have always been your best defence"), as well as debate skills ("harass your political opponents when you lack other arguments"). At this point, the disagreement over

descriptions of reality and evaluations of the political parties transforms into a battle, not primarily about these disagreements, albeit caused by them, but over the ability to perform the crudest attack on the opponent. In particular, the utterances from the thread starter express aggressiveness, through excessive use of caps lock and swear words (“FUCKING OUT OF YOUR MIND”, “WIPE YOUR ASS WITH IT”, “GARBAGE”, “GO TO HELL”). However, both participant’s perform repeated attacks on one another (e.g. “fascism and Nazism”, “your usual delusions”, “put the lid on the bottle”). These can all be seen competitive domination techniques, by which the opponent is attempted defeated.

Another such competitive domination technique is the use of threats of force (Ås, 2004). The thread starter performs what can be seen as threats – and which is interpreted as threats by the other participant (“These are indirect death threats”, “Is that a threat?”). As we see, one of these utterances in which threats are, allegedly, performed has been removed from the debate – either by the participant him- or herself or by a moderator (“I see that you have removed the comment about wishing to implement prescriptions on free ropes for people like me”).

This interaction, I argue, should be viewed as an expression competition, in which it is not vital neither to solve the disagreements in terms of coming to an agreement, neither in terms of being right about the disagreement. Rather, the utterances in the interaction are aimed to defeat the opponent. This is suggested by how the attacks performed are largely without substance, i.e. accusations of drunkenness, encouragements to send the party books, because one needs “kindling”, as well as accusations of “chickening out”, indicating that one lost.

The interaction serves as an example of how a disagreement either over descriptions of realities or evaluations (or both) may develop into personal feuds oriented towards defeating the opponent. The interaction seizes to be about the disagreements, and the personal attacks are not primarily about the persons’ actual qualities. Instead, participants apply the crudest attacks and words available to them, in order to perform the crudest attack and thereby defeat the opponent. Moreover, as in the previous example, a commitment to “winning” the competition by getting the final word manifests itself, both in accusations and refusals of “chickening out”, as well as in how

one of the participants' continues to provoke through encouragements to "send me your boxes with Labour propaganda", which will be used as "kindling", after the other has stopped responding.

This example, then, demonstrates how the expression competition follows the logics of symmetrical schismogenesis, where the cumulative interaction between the parties exaggerates the same behaviour from both parties. In principle, this process could go on forever, as the medium in which the interaction takes place holds no technical constraints concerning time spent or number of comments allowed. The expression competitions do, however, end after a while, as one of the participants opts out. In both of the two examples above (83 and 84), one participant in the expression competition seems to be more invested than the other, and this participant also gets the final say in the interaction.

There could be many different reasons for why a participant retreats from the exchange: It could be that other things occupy one's time, or simply that one realises that the other is not intending to stop any time soon, and does not want to trouble oneself with the interaction anymore. It is more unlikely that the one who opts out of the interaction, does so for reasons commonly associated with the avoidance of public debates on social media, namely in fear of attacks, harassment and threats (Kruse et al., 2018; Moe et al., 2019). This is unlikely, I argue, as the participant who eventually quits, is still partaking in the interaction after having been subjected to many hostile attacks and threats. While objecting to the other participant's use of threats ("it is critique worthy, and I am considering to report it"), s/he does not first and foremost express discomfort or fear facing such instances of verbal abuse, but instead use them as justifications for degrading the opponent ("Is that a threat? I am sure the Progress Party are very proud of you...."). Thus, I suggest that there may be other reasons for why the interaction does not continue, albeit the participants themselves are indeed the only ones who can know them. This points to a challenge of examining the functions of various rhetorical moves in a debate through close-reading of the texts alone, namely how to assess the speaker's intention and the effects utterances have on different audiences. In the following, I will address this challenge concerning the very idea of the expression

competition as a form of aggressiveness based in a logic of expression, rather than seeing it as action-oriented discourse, i.e. as utterances that will have real, in-life consequences.

### **A logic of expression or invitation to action?**

The expression competition, as I have described it here, is a type of interaction where participants do not relate to one another through argumentation, but through – often quite hostile – expressions. Moreover, the participants do not relate to one another through evaluations or definitions. Thus, the competition is not over who is right or wrong or over who is good or bad. Rather, what is at stake is who is capable of expressing oneself in the strongest way possible and over who is able to get the final say. This feature of the debates, I argue, may help explain the aggressive argument culture that characterises them. It is precisely in this type of interactions that many of the abusive comments appear.

By this, I do, however, not seek to trivialise instances of hate speech and threats as “just words” with no real, in-life consequences. By discussing these attacks as performances in a discursive battle, I have suggested that they are not action-oriented, i.e. oriented to encourage physical violence. Instead, the logic of expression suggests that, because these battles are not fought over who is right/wrong or good/evil, but over who gets the final say, the adversary is no threat to the society one wants, and thus must not be physically eliminated and hurt. Rather, the adversary is standing in the way of one’s ability to get the final say, and thereby express one’s authentic self without intervention (see also chapters 6 and 9), as such, it suffices to defeat, i.e. *silence*, the adversary verbally.

Having studied only the texts, however, it is not possible to know whether some speakers mean something more than to defeat the opponent verbally, or whether others will interpret it as an encouragement to act. Much of the public debate about social media has been about the relationship between words and action, and the words have commonly been ascribed with potentials of having awful consequences: The hateful words may create violence. In the past years, Western societies have also experienced a number of extreme right-wing terrorist attack, where hateful utterances in online forums inspired the terrorist.

The Norwegian right-wing extremist and terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, subscribed to and promoted this hatred and conspiracy when he shot and killed 69 members of The Labour Party's youth organisation, AUF, on Utøya July 22, 2011. Another eight people were killed by the bomb that went off in the government quarter the same day. As discussed in chapter 7, Breivik subscribed to conspiracy theories and hatred against The Labour Party, as well as Muslims, which is spread online. Moreover, he was himself active in various online forums where such content flourishes.

In the “manifesto”, where he “explained” his actions, there were many references to and citations of content on radical right-wing blogs and white supremacy-forums, one of them the blogger Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen, blogging under the alias “Fjordman”. In the manifesto, the terrorist himself promoted the blogger a role model, and in the public debate about the terrorist attacks, the blogger was said to be an inspiration to the terrorist, albeit Jensen himself distanced himself from and condemned the actions of the terrorist.<sup>51</sup>

The so-called “Christchurch-terrorist”, Brenton Tarrant, and the terrorist who performed the “Bærum mosque shooting”, Philip Manshaus, who both performed terrorist attacks against Mosques in 2019, were both active participants in alt-right communities online, such as 8Chan, 4Chan and EndChan. Moreover, they both streamed the terror attacks live on Facebook. In the public debate that followed, a direct relationship between these forums' content, namely celebration and dark justification of violence, and actual physical violence was commonly made.<sup>52</sup> Here, it should probably be noted that these terrorists were active in online communities very different from the news-generated social media debates. These forums are made out by groups of like-minded, they can be seen as “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2001), in contrast to public Facebook-debates that are inhabited by participants who hold different views. Moreover, participation in these forums is done anonymously, i.e. through nicknames,

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<sup>51</sup> Medalen, Sindre G. and Astrid Meland. (2011). Dette er terroristens store politiske forbilde. *Dagbladet*, Aug. 25, <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/dette-er-terroristens-store-politiske-forbilde/63566611>.

<sup>52</sup> Mogen, Trym, Tor H. Ueland and Alexander Prestmo. (2019). Slik var hans terrordøgn. *Dagbladet*, Aug. 15, <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/slik-var-hans-terrordoggn/71487510>; Tollersrud, Emma, Bjørn S. Kristiansen and Anniken C. Mohr. (2019). Tror det kommer flere, Klassekampen, Aug. 13, <https://www.klassekampen.no/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20190813/ARTICLE/190819986>.

in contrast to the public debates on Facebook, where utterances can be seen, in principle, by all. Furthermore, utterances on Facebook are to a more considerable extent subject to surveillance, not only by other users, but also by the company, and the debates, although allowing hostile attacks and indirect threats, are to some extent moderated, in contrast to these forums that the terrorists navigated.

Although I cannot say anything sure about the intentions and consequences of the strong expressions in the news-generated social media debates, I still find it reasonable to view these hostile attacks as part of a logic of expression, where the words are not oriented to action. I argue this, as the battles fought in the expression competitions seem not to be about who is right/wrong or good/bad – in other words: they are not concerned with how we want our society to be. Consequently, the adversaries are not threats to one another's vision for the "good" society; rather they are obstructing one another's possibilities to express their authentic self. As such, it suffices to defeat each other verbally; the action need not be carried out in the real world.

### **Chapter conclusion: A logic of expression**

In this chapter, I have examined a particular type of interaction where participants do not relate to each other through argumentation, but rather attacks, and where the feud concerns neither conflicting advice for future action, evaluations, definition or claims about reality. The hostile and aggressive form of interaction manifests itself in various domination techniques, such as name-calling, insults, ridicule, sarcasm and irony, as well as through expressions of hatred and in threats. These function as domination techniques, I have argued, as they serve mainly to dethrone the other and assert oneself.

As I have shown, these domination techniques may function both to put an end to the interaction and to accelerate its aggressiveness, i.e. to develop into expression competitions, where the aim is to get the last say. Either way, these domination techniques counteracts general argumentation norms, norms of political debate, as well as the deliberative ideal, as participants do not relate to one another through argumentation about the issue, but rather perform attacks on each other's' person in order to defeat him or her.



This suggests that not all utterances in the news-generated social media debates are oriented towards *debate*, but rather *expression*. In the chapter that follows, I elaborate on this, when I discuss two contradictory, yet co-existing, communicative ideals that manifest themselves through participant's sanctions of others' debate practices, namely the principle of deliberation and the principle of expression.

## Chapter 9: Norms and genre conventions

Thus far, I have argued that the technological conditions, as well as the nature of the issue, contributes to shaping a debate characterised by personal, epideictic and contentious rhetoric. Moreover, I have suggested that both the technological structure of the debate arena and the complexity of the immigration issue enables many different types of rhetorical responses and, thereby, creates ambiguous genre conventions. The affordances of Facebook make possible both argumentation, displays and management of identity, as well as expressions of emotions reactions. Moreover, the arena, in which public debate is facilitated, is closely interwoven with other, personal spaces on the social network site. The immigration issue is both about “realpolitik” and idealism and, as such, it actualises questions both of practical political solutions and personal, as well as social identities and values. In other words, it facilitates personal engagement, epideictic rhetoric, as well as political rhetoric.

In this chapter, I examine what norms and conventions are present under these conditions. To do so, I examine sanctions. I do so, as sanctions make visible processes of social recognition and negotiations of the genre. Thus, what is sanctioned can tell us something about the users’ understanding of what are appropriate and inappropriate rhetorical practices within the genre. Moreover, I examine not only what is sanctioned, but also how sanctions are performed, as well as what functions different sanctions gain a rhetorical moves in the debates.

In doing so, I identify, not only an on-going negotiation between contradictory expectations to the genre but also two conflicting communicative ideals. While some utterances articulate norms that imply an understanding of the genre as a political debate, other utterances articulate conventions that imply an understanding of it as a genre of expression. These two contradictory expectations to the genre, while also being consequences of the issue and the arena, bear witness of two contradictory, yet co-existing communicative ideals, namely the *principle of deliberation* and the *principle of expression*.

Before arriving at this, I first offer a brief overview of the types of sanctions in the material. Then, I account for what I mean by norms of political debate and the

principle of deliberation, before examining how these manifest themselves in the material through sanctions of violations of these norms. Following this, I account for how social media are viewed and used, not only as arenas for political debate but is often associated with sociable conversation and self-presentation. Here, I will also introduce the principle of expression, which I argue is in direct opposition to the principle of deliberation. Following this, I demonstrate how this principle manifests itself in the news-generated social media debates, through examining expressions of discomfort in the face of criticism and counter-arguments, as well as an aversion to giving, listening and responding to arguments.

**Types of sanctions in the material**

In the overall material, 28.48% of the comments are sanctions of other actors’ debate practices (Table 11). The utterances coded as sanctions are not the same as utterances that perform attacks on other actors’ moral character or views, which are attacks on who the person *is* or what she *says*. By contrast, the utterances that are here coded as sanctions are attacks on *how* it is said.

**Table 11:** Number of comments sanctioning other actors’ debate practices in the overall material. Broken down by nation and the two periods examined in the study (n=2728).

	<b>Period 1 (Aug-Sep)</b>	<b>Period 2 (Nov-Jan)</b>	<b><i>Sanctions, total</i></b>	<b><i>Comments, total</i></b>	<b>%</b>
Denmark	96	168	264	927	<b>28.5</b>
Norway	145	142	287	1000	<b>28.7</b>
Sweden	114	112	226	801	<b>28.2</b>
Total	355	422	777	2728	<b>28.5</b>

The sanctions are somewhat evenly distributed in the material, suggesting that such utterances are not particularly prevalent in certain types of news articles or national contexts. Instead, the practice of sanctioning others’ debate behaviour is something that is done in all of news-generated social media debates examined. Broken down on subcategories, we gain an impression of what is sanctioned:

**Table 11:** Overview of types of sanctions in the material (n=777).

<b>Sanctions</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Misunderstanding	63
Irrelevant contribution/argument	327
Personal attack	111
Style	66
Generalisation	54
Incorrect information	33
Source criticism	123
<b>Total, sanctions:</b>	<b>777</b>

From this categorisation, we get an impression of there being four types of sanctions in the material: 1) sanctions of utterances that are irrelevant to the issue (irrelevant contribution/argument and personal attack); 2) sanctions of utterances that convey incorrect information or convey information in incorrectly (incorrect information, generalisation, source criticism); 3) sanctions of stylistic elements that violate decorum (style); and 4) sanctions of utterances that obstructs the conversation's flow and obscures its tone (misunderstanding and personal attack).

Sanctions of personal attacks can, in this classification, serve two functions. On the one hand, personal attacks are sanctioned for being irrelevant contributions, as such utterances are concerned with the opponent's personal qualities, rather than the issue and the arguments in it. On the other hand, sanctions of personal attacks may serve as sanctions of the conversation's flow being obstructed or tone obscured, as personal attacks produce discomfort, which may ultimately lead participants to abstain from participating (Thorson et al., 2015; Vromen et al., 2016). When the sanctions are examined not only isolated from the context but as rhetorical moves in the debate, it, however, becomes apparent that many of the utterances sanctioned as personal attacks are performing legitimate critique and counter-argumentation. This cannot be extracted from the coding of the utterances alone but becomes evident through the close textual-intertextual analysis of the material.

Leaving the sanctions of style out of the analysis<sup>53</sup>, I will thus argue that there are two main types of sanctions, namely sanctions of violations of 1) the principle of deliberation and 2) the principle of expression. Moreover, I will argue that the sanctions mainly serve three functions in these debates, namely to 1) dethrone the opponent; 2) disclaim obligations to respond; 3) attempt to improve the debate.

To examine and discuss the norms and conventions expressed through sanctions, I, in this chapter, revisit and elaborate on normative accounts about political debate and deliberation, as well as the sociable conversation, discussed in chapter 2. When an utterance sanctions a violation of what is regarded to be a norm of political rhetoric or public debate, it is, in other words, taken as a sign that the speaker understands the debate as a public debate. Similarly, when an utterance sanctions a violation of what are regarded to be conventions of the sociable conversation, it is taken as a sign that the speaker understands the debate as a digital form of “everyday talk”. Moreover, I will re-introduce the principle of expression discussed in chapter 6 in a discussion of the expectations expressed through sanctions of criticism and argumentation for violating the individual’s freedom of expression.

### **Norms of political debate and the principle of deliberation**

Political rhetoric or *deliberation* is, both in rhetorical theory and deliberative theory, understood as the careful consideration of arguments for future action. This takes place in a public forum and, ultimately, it is the public who is to decide on what choice for future action to pursue. The overall aim of the public debate is to explicate all sides and arguments in a given issue and, thereby, arrive at the better solution. As such, the principle of deliberation implies that people relate to one another through argumentation.

And here, deliberative and rhetorical theory part ways. Whereas this endeavour, according to deliberative theory, should ideally move the interlocutors towards

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<sup>53</sup> In chapter 8, I examined how sanctions of style were primarily a strategy to dominate the opponent through ridicule. In this chapter, I will, for this reason, not elaborate on this category of sanctions, but rather concentrate on the categories of sanctions that produce insights into the norms and genre conventions that are in force in the debates.

consensus (Habermas, 1972), it should, according to a rhetorical ideal, bring forth the disagreements in front of a third party who shall decide on who promotes the better solution (Jørgensen, 1998). This difference relates to how normative rhetorical theory has often been concerned with political debates in which political actors promote their claims and arguments in front of an audience, where the audience function as judges through voting. The ideals promoted in deliberative theory are primarily concerned with debates more broadly, i.e. among the citizens who actively participate in the public sphere and *together* pursue the solutions for the future. Furthermore, it is a consequence of rhetorical theory's emphasis on the debate genre as *practical reasoning*, as I will elaborate on in due time. By contrast, the discourse ethics articulated in much deliberative democracy theory, begin from an understanding of public debate as *theoretical reasoning* (as argued by e.g. Kock, 2018).

As discussed in chapter 2, these differences necessarily lead to somewhat diverging norms of good political debate. In deliberative theory, the ideal speech situation secures that the discussion is open to all and that participants can partake as free and equal citizens. Participants should mutually respect both each other and each others' views, and strive towards mutual understanding. Claims and arguments should be grounded in knowledge and be universally warranted (Steenbergen et al., 2003). According to also to normative rhetorical theory, arguments and claims should be universally warranted, i.e. justified by reference to the common good, rather than special interests (Jørgensen, 2011; Kock, 2011a). As discussed in chapter 2, this does not, however, imply that "the public" can be grounded in shared interests, nor that participants are "disinterested". Instead, it refers to the existence of some form of shared understanding of abstract values and communicative norms, such as, for instance, "reasonableness" (Hauser, 1999b, 55-56; Kock, 2011a, 28-29).

Concretising this, Kock promotes three communicative norms that should apply to political debate, namely that it contains arguments that are *acceptable*, *relevant* and *weighty* (Kock, 2011a, 21; 2018). Kock derives these norms from general argumentation norms articulated in the field of informal logic (e.g. Johnson & Blair, 2006), and applies them to political debate. While the original articulations of these argumentation norms concern argumentation in general and apply to each argument, Kock's adaptation of

these norms concerns argumentation in public debates. As such, they apply not to every single argument evaluated in isolation from the context, but rather to how arguments function within their context. Moreover, while inspired by the works of informal logicians, Kock also criticises their underestimation of “the distinctive differences between arguments about truth (often called “theoretical” reasoning), and arguments about what to do (“practical” reasoning)” (Kock, 2018, n.p.). Because arguments in political debate are concern with choices, not truth, arguments in political debates cannot be true or false. Instead, there will usually be good, irrefutable arguments both for and against any given choice (Kock, 2009, 2018).<sup>54</sup> Thus, while arguments in theoretical reasoning, i.e. reasoning about what is true or false, “invites us to *infer* a certain conclusion”, which will be either true or false, arguments in practical reasoning, i.e. reasoning about what to do, “invites us to *prefer* a certain action”, however, the preferred action does not have a character of being true or false (Kock, 2018, n.p. it. in original).

As such, “acceptability” implies that “factual propositions offered as reasons should be “true and fair””, meaning that alleged facts promoted as reasons, should provide a truthful and trustworthy account of how things really are (Kock, 2018, n.p.). This also means that inferences are not to be based on generalisations, presuppositions or presumptions that offer an incorrect account of reality (Andersen, 2014, 28; Kock, 2011a, 38-44).

“Relevance”, in this application, means both that arguments should be concerned with the issue discussed – they should be on-topic – and that actors are required to respond to opponent’s actual standpoints and arguments, rather than making use of straw man-arguments, raising suspicion about the opponent’s motives or perform personal attacks (Jørgensen, 2000; Kock, 2011a, 81-86).

Finally, that an argument is “weighty”, does in Kock’s definition, imply that claims should be substantiated with reasons. It does not mean that an argument is logically valid, and thus “decides the issue” as either true or false as in “theoretical” reasoning. Rather, a “weighty” argument in practical reasoning, does not necessarily

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<sup>54</sup> This is also central in Kock’s critique of much of deliberative democracy tradition that finds it inspiration in the works of Jürgen Habermas (see e.g. Kock, 2008, 2009, 2018).

outweigh another countervailing reason (Kock, 2018, n.p.). As discussed in chapter 2, the norm that suggests that an argument is to be “weighty” requires an orientation to the common good, i.e. the reason for why this is a preferable action, should be warranted by reference to shared values.

Based on this, the principle of deliberation requires that people relate to one another through argumentation, in which one is “true” to the issue, and one’s interlocutor, by making use of correct and relevant knowledge, and by promoting arguments that are oriented to the common good. This also means that arguments are listened and responded to in an adequate way. To be adequate, Kock argues:

an answer must *either* give good reasons why the counter consideration it addresses is unacceptable or irrelevant; *or*, if this cannot be done, it must *recognize* that the counter consideration it addresses is in fact acceptable and relevant – and then address its weight (Kock, 2018, n.p. it. in original).

The lack of such adequate answers is, according to Kock, “one of the dominant vices besetting public political debate in Western democracies” (Kock, 2018, n.p.; see also, Kock 2011a). As I will show, not only the lack of *adequate* answers but the lack of answers *at all*, is something that, as I will show, also characterises the news-generated social media debates.

### **Norms of public debate in social media**

In many studies of social media and discussion forums as arenas for public debate, various operationalisations of discourse norms found in deliberative democracy theory have been used as a starting point for evaluations of the quality of the debate (see e.g. Bimber, 2003; Brants, 2005; Brundidge et al., 2008; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlberg, 2004; Ruiz et al., 2011; Santana, 2014; Silva, 2013; Suzuki, 2006; Winsvold, 2013; Wright & Street, 2007; Zhou et al., 2008). Generally, such endeavours have resulted in negative evaluations of these sites ability to facilitate deliberation and “good” debate.

Studies of people who are active participants (“expert citizens”) in political debates have also identified a shared experience of these arenas as characterised by a “lack of argumentation norms” (Vatnøy, 2017, 212). Nevertheless, conventions that



correspond with general argumentation norms in political debate, are also found to exist: Participants expect others' contributions to be both relevant, logically concise and to produce new knowledge (Vatnøy, 2017, 212-213).

Here, I examine what norms prevail in the news-generated social media debates, by scrutinising instances in violations of these are sanctioned. Generally, two types of norms associated with political debate and argumentation manifest themselves through sanctions, namely norms of "acceptability" and "relevance". Norms of acceptability manifest themselves in sanctions of contributions that convey incorrect information or use the information at hand in a misleading way. An example of how incorrect information is sanctioned is the following comment:

**EXAMPLE 85:**

Someone seems to have gotten the wrong number book down from the shelf.... (c. Berlingske 6.1.16a)

The utterance sanctions an earlier comment for conveying incorrect information. It does, however, not correct the allegedly wrong information by offering the right numbers or explaining what makes the numbers incorrect. The sanction is, moreover, neither accepted nor rejected in the further exchange. Instead, the exchange continues between other debaters, without the sanction being noticed by the participants. This suggests that the sanction does not gain (at least not an observable) effect in the debate.

Information is not only sanctioned for being incorrect, but also for being misused to make claims that the facts do not support. The following utterance may serve as an example:

**EXAMPLE 86:**

The statistics you refer to are entirely useless. Yes, there has been an increase in asylum seekers, but that is all the statistics say. Other than an arrow that points, nothing can tie this to the Labour Party's party conference (c. Dagbladet 9.11.15)

The statistics sanctioned are conveyed through a hyperlink to an image on the Facebook-page of The Progress Party's youth organisation. The graph relates The Labour Party's initiative about receiving 10 000 refugees to Norway, which later was reduced to 8 000, to the increase of asylum seekers coming to the nation during 2015. What is sanctioned

is, thus, that an untenable inference is made, i.e. that *due to* The Labour Party, the number of asylum applications lodged has risen. The sanction is, as the previous example, neither accepted or rejected in the exchange that follows, rather a debate between other participants than the two who respectively conveyed and sanctioned the statistics, about a slightly different matter, continues. As in the previous example, then, the sanction does not gain any observable effect in the debate.

Misleading presentation of facts can, moreover, be done through generalisations, which is also sanctioned in the material. Two examples may serve as examples of this category of sanctions:

#### **EXAMPLES 87-88:**

This guy! Don't speak about facts, when you yourself are unable to come up with anything reasonable. The fact is that most people are civil and well-behaved, but you are just yet another example that people are generalising insanely and that all others shall suffer from that because a few do not behave well. (c. Politiken 26.1.16)

Great. You are so competent! Particularly because you use the most stupid argument ever! You define the general from one single event. I would eat my hat if it is wrong that foreigners commit around 0,1 per cent of all sexual assaults in the country, the natives commit the rest. Turn off your computer and stop getting your information from Ekstra Bladet's propaganda (c. Berlingske 6.1.16a)

The two utterances both sanction an opponent's utterance for not offering a true and fair representation of reality, but instead promote general claims about reality based on particularities. Moreover, not only the generalisation is sanctioned, but also the opponent's person. The first utterance attacks the person both for lacking reasonable arguments and for not behaving in a civilised way. The latter of the two utterances attacks the person's knowledge directly, through a sarcastic remark ("You are so competent"), as well as by raising doubt about his or her critical abilities with sources ("stop getting your information from Ekstra Bladet's propaganda").

A rather large share of the sanctions fall in the category "source criticism" (see Table 12). This category contains both utterances that question the correctness of information conveyed by requesting evidence and that criticise the source's reliability. Two examples of the first, are the utterances:

### **EXAMPLES 89-90:**

Can't you refer to some sources before you spread false rumours. (c. VG 8.9.15)

Please provide a source on that! (c. Aftonbladet 3.9.15b)

Generally, such sanctions are rejected. The first of the two utterances (example 89), sanctions an undocumented claim about refugees' bad behaviours: "Busses that have transported refugees have been devastated. And there are also many articles about what houses look like after they have left". In the debate, the sanction is rejected: A source is not provided, but the claim is nevertheless asserted as "true":

What you say, I have heard many times over the last couple of days, and all of it turned out to be true. I myself do not understand why Norwegian media do not write about this, but fortunately, foreign media do.

The latter of the two sanctions (example 90) in the examples above, is partly accepted but, nevertheless, not complied with. The utterance that is sanctioned claims that "only 10 % of the money you donate benefits the persons in need of help". This is first sanctioned through a request for evidence. Then, the same participant who performed the sanction, follows up with information that counters the claim:

Otherwise, I can give you something to read, namely the rules for the 90-accounts, which among other things say that AT LEAST 75 % of the donations should be spent on what the fund-raiser relates to [hyperlink to the regulations for fund-raisers].

Thus, the utterance does not only sanction the previous comment but also corrects the false information. This is rarely done, rather most sanctions function primarily as a critique of an opponent. In this example, where the information is corrected, the sanction is partly accepted. However, it does not have consequences for the opponent's evaluation and stance in the issue. Instead s/he responds to the sanction in the following way: "Sounds good. Yet, I will keep my own money to myself".

Moreover, source criticism is performed through questioning the reliability of the source, commonly when this source is a hyperlink to an article on a so-called "immigration critical alternative media"-site (cf. Nygård, 2019). Additionally, utterances are sometimes sanctioned by suggesting that the facts others use come from these sites, thus weakening the credibility of the speaker who promotes them, by

invoking the weak credibility of these sites. The following series of sanctions of the claim that Alan Kurdi's family were not genuine refugees, supported by a hyperlink to a Youtube-video posted by the user "RobinHoodUKIP", may serve as examples:

**EXAMPLES 90-92:**

And you are providing a very reliable source.  
Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha

Oh my God, you are just embarrassing. I suppose you get your facts from *Fria Tidar* and *Avpixlat* as well?

Do you believe in everything that you hear and read!? (all from Expressen 5.9.15)

The first of the three sanctions (example 90), suggests that the Youtube-video is not a reliable source, and ridicules the opponent ("haha..."). Thus, it performs criticism both of the source and attacks the opponent's credibility. The second sanction also attacks the opponent's ethos through ridicule ("you are just embarrassing"), and by inferring that s/he is informed by the alternative immigration critical media, *Fria Tidar* and *Avpixlat*. Indirectly, then, the sanction suggests that the opponent is less intelligent, as s/he believes in "alternative facts". The third sanction also attacks the opponent's intelligence, more precisely his or her critical ability, by suggesting that s/he will believe in anything.

The sanctions, then, primarily function to dethrone the opponent by depicting him or her as less knowledgeable. Rather than correcting the false information, they attack and ridicule the speaker who conveys it. As such, they function as a domination technique, as discussed in chapter 8. The responses from the opponent show that s/he does not accept the sanctions, rather s/he argues that the source *is* reliable – it shows the "words that come directly from Abdulla's [Alan Kurdi's father] mouth". Repeatedly, the speaker encourages the participants who performed the sanctions to "listen to the tearful aunt", to "listen to what she says". Moreover, s/he substantiates the claim that Alan Kurdi's family were not genuine refugees, first by accounting for the generous welfare schemes in Sweden, to which the family were allegedly going, and then, by arguing that the father would not have returned to Syria to attend the funeral of his late

family if the family was really in danger in Syria: “Why would you return to the place from where you fled if your life was in such grave danger?”.

These utterances are, again, sanctioned for being incorrect, this time for being preposterous: “Seriously, do you believe that someone who flee from Syria, make it all the way through Turkey, and embark on a perilous journey to a Greek island to get free dental care???”. Moreover, the utterances are sanctioned, not for being incorrect, but for callous: “How tragic to even wonder about what and how the child died. Where is your heart?”.

Although it is legitimate and reasonable to sanction the use of an unreliable source, which the Youtube-video in question is, the sanctions, in this example, primarily function to as a way to dominate the opponent, both through accusations of the sources s/he uses being unreliable, the speaker being unreliable and incompetent, through ridicule, as well as attacks on the opponent’s morale. Thus, not only the information conveyed by the speaker is attacked for being incorrect or misleading, but also the person who promotes this information.

Another way in which genre conventions related to political debate manifest themselves is through sanctions of irrelevant contributions. This category of utterances contains sanctions of contributions that are viewed as irrelevant to the current discussion because they are off-topic. Moreover, it contains sanctions of utterances that are made without careful inquiry into the issue. For instance, a contribution may be sanctioned for being irrelevant when it does not relate to the information provided in the newspaper article, or to information and arguments posted earlier in the thread.

First, a common type of sanctions is those who ask the opponent to “read the article/comment” before commenting, or imply the utterance’s irrelevance by asking “what does this have to do with...”. Whereas some of these sanctions relate primarily to norms of acceptability, i.e. by pointing out that claims promoted are refuted in the newspaper article (e.g. “if you read the article, not just the title, you will see that they will not send a bill, although it costs 650,- a night”), others relate to the norm of relevance. An example is the following sanction:

### **EXAMPLE 93:**

If you had read my comment, you would have seen that it was about family reunification, read what people are writing before you comment and everything will be easier (c. NRK 29.12.15).

Through this category of sanctions, an expectation to the debate is made visible, namely that participants are to respond to previous claims and arguments and contribute with claims, arguments and objections that are pertinent to the current discussion. Thus, sanctions express expectations that correspond directly to the “maxim of relevance” initially articulated by the pragma-dialectician Herbert Paul Grice, namely that one’s interlocutor’s contributions are “appropriate to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction” (Grice, 1975, 68). Moreover, it corresponds well to Kock’s application of this principle as a general norm of political debate, in which participants are required to contribute with arguments that are pertinent to the issue discussed, and counter-arguments that are pertinent to the opponent’s arguments (Kock, 2011a, 21-22).

Whereas Kock’s application of the norm of relevance to political debate should contribute to producing a debate which will be enlightening for a third-party, Grice’s conversational maxims shall secure the cooperation of the interlocutors. In this particular example (93), the latter application of the norm seems the most accurate: The sanction is primarily performed because the interlocutor disturbs the flow of the conversation by not relating to the speaker’s previous contributions in the thread. If s/he had, by contrast, it would be much “easier” to discuss. Thus, this expectation also aligns with conventions of interpersonal communication in general, which also apply to such communication on social media, which users expect to be about relevant matters (Lomborg, 2014, 157).

In contrast to previous examples of how sanctions are met, either with no response or by refutation, the sanction above is accepted. The interlocutor conforms to the norm by citing the particular part of the other’s utterance that s/he was criticising and apologises for not having done so earlier: “I apologise for not specifying that it was this part of your utterance that I was commenting on. I am happy to be able to clarify this”. Upon this clarification, the speaker repeats the criticism of the utterance, and the opponent responds to this by offering a counter-argument. In this particular case, the

sanction thus functions to clarify and improve the debate. This is, however, not the case with most sanctions in the material. More commonly, sanctions are not responded to at all or dismissed. More often than not, sanctions do not primarily function as sanctions of utterances, but rather of the persons who promote them.

An example is a sanction of an utterance which is off-topic (i.e. it is about halal-slaughtered meat being sold at the supermarket, when the article is about helping the refugees):

**EXAMPLE 94:**

And that has a lot do with children drowning in the Mediterranean, or what? Is your message that if we stop buying halal at Ica there will be peace in the world? You are fucking stupid, your stupidity knows no limit (c. Aftonbladet 3.9.15a).

Indeed, the utterance sanctions the comment about halal-slaughtered meat for not being of relevance to the issue discussed. However, it also performs a personal attack on the speaker who promoted it (“You are fucking stupid, your stupidity knows no limit”).

Many of the sanctions in the material, while sanctioning others for performing personal attacks or ascribing others with motives and views they do not have, are performed, precisely, through personal attacks. That sanctions function as personal attacks is evident also in many of the examples already cited (87-88; 90-92; 94), but two more may serve as examples:

**EXAMPLES 95-96:**

Awesome, straight to personal attacks. That is how a person without reasonable arguments speak. (c. NRK 8.9.15)

Personal attacks show that you are as stupid as what you write. Good luck with your analysis, you need to practice (c. Aftonbladet 26.11.15)

The two examples demonstrate how even participants who sanction others for performing a personal attack, do so themselves. Personal attacks should be viewed as violations of the norm of relevance, as the opponent’s personal qualities and motives are irrelevant objections to the arguments in the issue (Kock, 2011a, 97-140; see also van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1987, 286-288). As will become apparent in the following section, however, such sanctions also relate to violations of conventions for civility in

interpersonal conversation, as well as violations of the individual's right to express him- or herself in an authentic way.

In both of the two examples cited above (95-96), an opponent is sanctioned for attacking others, and attacked for his or her level of knowledge: S/he is “a person without reasonable arguments” and “stupid”. This suggests that sanctions of violations of norms do not necessarily indicate that people view these as norms to which one has to adhere. Rather, the sanctions primarily function as a way to assert oneself and dominate the other.

By sanctioning others for being unable to adhere to the norms and conventions of the discourse, one can effectively weaken their ethos. By sanctioning someone for conveying incorrect or misleading information, one can, at the same time, undermine their intelligence (*phronesis*). By sanctioning someone for not contributing with arguments and claims relevant to the discussion, one can suggest either that they lack the intelligence and ability to discuss, or that they do not have noble intentions in the discussion (*eunoia*). Furthermore, by sanctioning someone for behaving in an uncivil way, one can imply both that they do not have noble intentions and attack their moral qualities (*arête*). At the same time, one can exhibit oneself as intelligent, i.e. as the one who possesses the correct information and can reveal the other. One can appear as a person who is preoccupied with the quality of the discussion and knows how to behave in a civil way. Thus, sanctions can, in the context of the news-generated social media debates, often function as a way to dominate the other.

There are, however, also examples of sanctions that are performed in a more or less civil way, are accepted by the part that is sanctioned, and ultimately lead to a better debate – although such examples are rare. The prevalence of sanctions of violations of norms commonly associated with public debate in the material, nevertheless suggests that many of the participant's view the comment sections on the newspaper's Facebook-pages as arenas for debate, with a set of genre conventions that, to some extent, correspond with debate norms found in argumentation theories in informal logic (Walton, 2010; Walton, 1987, 1995), pragma-dialectical rules for argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984, 1987, 2016), and rhetorical categories of dishonest



debating (Andersen, 2014, 2016; Kjeldsen, 1997; Kock, 2009, 2011a), as well as in general guidelines for ethical argumentation and reasoning.

This is, however, not the only understanding of the genre that manifests itself in the participants' utterances. In many utterances, conventions that are in direct opposition to an understanding of the discourse as a political debate materialise. In what follows, I will discuss this against the backdrop of conventions of the sociable conversation, as well as a logic of expression.

### **Conventions of sociable conversation and the principle of expression**

While most people recognise social media as an arena for political debate, few view it as a *good* arena for political debate (Kruse et al., 2018; Moe et al., 2019). Many people refrain from participating in public debates on social media, and the most common reasons to avoid such debates is fear of criticism and harassment, and that what one says will be misinterpreted, taken out of context or misused (Kruse et al., 2018; Moe et al., 2019, 90). Generally, many people dislike how public debates on social media often lose the personal, informal and entertaining dimension that they associate with their personal uses of Facebook, and instead gains a harsh, ugly and polarising tone (Lomborg, 2014, 167; Thorson et al., 2015; Vatnøy, 2017, 213; Vromen et al., 2016).

Rather than a debate arena, many view social media as a “happy space”, used for staying in touch with friends and family, sharing and encountering entertainment, time-passing, and for self-promotion (Kruse et al., 2018, 74; Lomborg, 2014, 155; 175). Used primarily for such personal and interpersonal purposes, genre conventions that directly oppose norms of political debate come into play. Some people tend to view argumentation, as well as an occupation with controversial or sensitive topics altogether, as violations of the genre conventions of social media (Kruse et al., 2018, 74). Moreover, many of those who actively *do* use social media for political debate, expect that issues are debated on the basis of individualised political opinions, expressed in an informal, personal and, preferably humorous tone (Vatnøy, 2017).

As such, the conventions in debates, as well as other communicative genres, in social media, come to resemble conventions for sociable conversation, i.e. a type of

conversation oriented towards mutual respect and understanding, and with no explicit purpose besides talk for talk's sake (Mansbridge, 1999; Wyatt et al., 2000).

In this regard, criticism and counter-arguments potentially violates the users' experiences of social media as a "happy space" and produces discomfort in the sociable conversation. Moreover, I argue, it violates the *principle of expression*. In contrast to the principle of deliberation, the principle of expression implies that each person is to be *authentic*, i.e. true to his or her personal beliefs, values and feelings. As discussed in chapters 2 and 6, the principle is, essentially, founded on a relativist view – both of reason and morality – in which views are seen as relative in perception and consideration. Consequently, neither universal, objective truth, nor a universal morality exists.

In its simplest form, the relativism of reason manifests itself in ideas about everyone's right to an own, highly personal truth, and gains currency through concepts such as "alternative facts" (cf. Wikforss, 2017). As previously argued, a relativist view has also influenced contemporary understandings of morality, proposing that each individual is entitled to pursue his or her "true" way of life, and that there are no standards after which others' may criticise his or her way of life (Bloom, 1988). This implies, as suggested by both Bloom (1988) and Taylor (1991), that it is immoral to criticise others' choices and beliefs because, in doing so, one interferes with their possibilities to be their authentic self.

As a communicative ideal, then, the principle of expression directly counteracts a principle of deliberation, according to which participants are required to approach each other through argumentation. Rather than giving, listening and responding to arguments, the principle of expression requires the dismissal of arguments in two ways. First, as discussed in chapter 6, individuals are not required to give arguments for why they hold the views that they do, because these views are expressions of what they *genuinely* feel and believe – they are expressions of who they *truly* are. Moreover, as I will discuss in the following, it renders criticism and counter-argumentation impossible, because this entails that one interferes with the individual's way of life and, thus, obstructs his or her possibility to be authentic. As a consequence, I will argue, what would be legitimate

criticism according to a principle of deliberation may, according to a principle of expression, be experienced as a hostile attack.

### **The discomfort of debate**

Previous studies of sociable talk on social media, as well as other online discussion forums, have found these conversations to be oriented towards mutual understanding and respect, to be civil, as well as experienced as inclusive to people who usually would not express their political views publicly for fearing criticism and ridicule (Graham, 2010, 2012; Graham & Wright, 2013; Stromer-Galley, 2002).

The debates examined in this study do not develop the ways described by these studies. However, many of the sanctions performed suggest that many expect them to do so. As argued in Chapter 6, many of the utterances in these debates are performed as highly personal “truths” and opinions and, as such, function as expressions of the person’s “authentic” self. Here, I take a closer look at how expectations to be allowed to do so, without being met with criticism and counter-arguments, manifest themselves through sanctions of critique, attacks, and encouragements to be “nice”.

The first type of sanctions, in which expectations to a pleasant conversation manifest themselves, are sanctions of incivility and a harsh tone. Two examples of this type of sanctions are:

#### **EXAMPLES 97-98:**

Hug each other instead of fighting! (c. Dagens Nyheter, 6.19.15a).

You are quite crude and bigmouthed right now, just so you know (Aftenposten 6.9.15b).

None of the two sanctions is directly addressed at a particular participant. Instead, they gain an element of a moderator’s voice, sanctioning the involved parties for violating the norms, without the speakers themselves participating in the debate about the issue. What they sanction is the hostility found in other participant’s utterances. While abstaining from personal attacks is also a norm of political debate, these utterances, additionally, promote civility and friendliness as conventions in the conversation. Most clearly, this is expressed in the first of the two sanctions (example 97), where other

participants are encouraged to “hug each other”, rather than debating (“fighting”). The second of the two examples (98), does not promote friendliness per se, but rather sanctions participants for acting uncivil and being hostile, which is something political debate will often be (Jørgensen, 1995; Jørgensen, 1998; Schudson, 1997).

In the material, there are many such instances of participants who intervene in the debate, only to point out that others behave uncivil. These participants, thus, take on the role of moderators of the debate, engaging only to improve the debate. Whereas some of these “moderator”-sanctions encourage other participants to change their behaviour to the better, others ask them to abstain from the debate. An example of the first is the comment: “It does not help to swear and act out, mind your P’s and Q’s, otherwise you are no better than your opponent” (c. Dagens Nyheter, 6.19.15a). An example of the latter is the comment: “Read a book instead” (c. Dagens Nyheter, 6.19.15a). These self-proclaimed moderators, however, seldom have any impact on how the debate develops, rather their sanctions usually are overlooked, and the debate continues in the same tone, without them intervening again.

The discomfort associated with political debate on social media due to a hostile tone, identified in various reception studies (e.g. Kruse et al., 2018; Moe et al., 2019, 90), also manifests itself in these debates. In some sanctions of personal attacks and name-calling, the participant also makes it clear that s/he, for this reason, will no longer participate in the debate. The following sanction may serve as an example:

**EXAMPLE 99:**

Why not discuss without name-calling others? I do not “imagine” anything, I am promoting my views in a discussion. I have not said a word about what I do or not do as a volunteer. It is great to discuss, but when it tips over into name-calling, I resign. (c. Aftenposten 29.12.15)

As established earlier, the hostile and polarising tone of many social media debates is an important reason for why people choose to avoid them (Lomborg, 2014, 167; Thorson et al., 2015; Vatnøy, 2017, 213; Vromen et al., 2016). This feature of the public debates on Facebook, thus, counteracts a deliberative ideal by preventing people from participating in the debates, which should, ideally, be open to all and where participants should display mutual respect (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Steenbergen et al., 2003).

But whereas ad hominem attacks and name-calling, which is what is sanctioned in this particular example, are signs of a “bad” debate (Jørgensen, 2000; Kock, 2011b), the truly democratic debate will also sometimes play out as “fighting” and, thus, exclude some for participating, by contrast to the sociable conversation (Schudson, 1997, 300). It will because there exist opposing views of what is the best choice for future action, how values should be interpreted and prioritised, and whose interests should be defended. As a consequence, political conflicts can, usually, not be solved through sociable conversation, in which participants are “nice” to each other. When participants encourage others to “hug each other instead of fighting”, they are, in other words, not promoting an understanding of the debate as a *debate*, but rather as a pleasant conversation, or, alternatively an arena for self-presentation.

This expectation to the genre becomes particularly evident in utterances that sanction others, not necessarily for being crude or for performing personal attacks, but for criticising their utterances. An example is an exchange, which starts with one commentator stating what s/he has done to help the refugees, upon which many others express, predominantly negative, opinions about helping. Upon this, s/he sanctions the other commentators for interpreting the utterance as a contribution to a political debate:

**EXAMPLE 100:**

- Thread starter: I have donated to a good friend who is helping at the site.
- Respondent 1: The Red Cross is not getting a penny from me since it was revealed that misappropriation had taken place.
- Respondent 2: The refugees or the IS? [Hyperlink to the alternative immigration critical media site Den korte avis]
- Respondent 3: How much is Aftonbladet donating to these organisations?
- Respondent 4: Unfortunately, after having worked hard and paid my taxes for approximately 40 years, I barely have money to make it, so I gladly would accept contributions from all these generous people who care more about refugees than people in Sweden!
- Respondent 5: Fuck how tired I am of all this beggary
- Respondent 6: The EU is doing nothing, ordinary people shall give!

Thread starter: But hello, I do not want lots of “opinions”, all I want is to help. I am a pensioner, so my income is nothing to brag about, but my heart is in the right place. I think I am able to put myself in others’ shoes and picture how it feels to have to leave everything, lose everything. I only came with an offer and if you do not have anything to donate, you do not have to express opinions about it. Just be silent. This does not have a political side to it (Aftonbladet 3.9.15b).

As argued in chapter 6, statements such as the one that brings about this exchange, primarily function as expressions of the individual’s subjective evaluations and authentic self. As such, many utterances function as self-presentation (cf. Goffman, 1956a; Goffman, 1956b), that seldom invites debate. Rather than facilitating debate between opposing ideas and views, such statements primarily encourage other participants to applaud or condemn the person who promotes the issue.

In this example, the utterance brings about criticism. However, this criticism is not performed as a condemnation of the person. Rather, the criticism is directed to the newspaper (“How much is Aftonbladet donating...”), the aid organisation (“The Red Cross is not getting a penny from me...”), and the EU (“The EU is doing nothing”). Moreover, counter-arguments are performed, that is, the utterance “The refugees or the IS”, may function as an enthymeme, combining the commonplace expression *they are not genuine refugees*, and the topos *cultural/security threats*, to argue against helping the refugees. Another utterance performs a counter-argument from the commonplace expression *weak groups at home* by using a personal anecdote as evidence (“after having worked hard and paid my taxes for approximately 40 years, I barely have money to make it...”).

Indeed, many of the responses to the thread starter’s statement also have a character of self-presentation, more precisely of exposing one’s “side of the story” (Eliasoph, 1998, 6) and taking a “stance” in the issue in opposition to another (Brandt, 1970). Many of the utterances convey highly personal opinions and evaluations (“Fuck I am tired of all this beggary”), and use their personal experiences as arguments. While such types of utterances are, as we have seen, not particularly well-suited for creating debate between opposing views, they do contribute to politicise the issue and to present several different objections to the humanitarian response to the refugee crisis from an economic, security, as well as a supranational perspective. And this is precisely what

the thread starter sanctions, namely that the issue is made political and, as such, an issue for debate. S/he claims that the issue “does not have a political side to it” and expresses an aversion to debate “I do not want lots of “opinions””. Thus, the reaction from the thread starter to the criticism and counter-argumentation s/he is met with, suggests an interpretation of the communicative context, not as a public debate, which will necessarily involve “lots of opinions”, but rather as an arena for self-presentation and -expression, where others, i.e. those who disagree, should “just be silent”. This claim is supported, by how the participant’s utterance also draws attention to his or her personal identity and moral qualities (“my heart is in the right place...”), thus, functioning as a performance of the self, through which s/he expresses her or his identity (Goffman, 1956b).

The discomfort of being criticised expressed in the debates is also evident in another example. In contrast to the previous example (100), the criticism is, in this example, directed at the person (101). The criticism is, nevertheless, performed mainly in a civil tone. Still, the person who is criticised expresses an experience of the criticism as an attack on his or her person.

#### **EXAMPLE 101:**

Thread starter: What about us here at home?? When is one going to start donating money to us who are ill or poor here at home??

Respondent 1: All who live in Sweden have the opportunity to receive some kind of contribution, no one has to starve to death here unless they want to. And no one is forcing you to donate money to the refugees, you are welcome to help all the poor Swedes who cannot survive on their social security benefits.

Thread starter: I myself am ill, and I do not receive much in social security benefits. I have a chronic disease. And no, I am not going to donate money to them. Most of the money I receive, I spend on my medicines, and they are not fucking cheap, living off 1000 kr monthly is not fun.

Respondent 1: I am sorry to hear that you are ill. If you have a chronic disease, you are never required to pay full price for the medicine. That you are only given 1000 to live off, sounds a bit off, given that those who live on a minimum level of existence have more than 3000. In that case, you have a home, food and probably internet. And you think we should donate money to you, when there are many refugees who

die every day. Either you missed all the news, or you are insanely egoistic.

Thread starter: That is not what I meant, but why shall I donate my money when I need them for myself. Everyone has their own view, that does not mean that YOU have to jump on me. (c. Aftonbladet 3.9.15b)

In the exchange, the thread starter's utterance, which draws on the commonplace expression *weak groups at home* to oppose the newspaper's encouragement to donate money to the refugees, is criticised for its unreasonableness. The respondent counters the claim that weak groups in Swedish society should be prioritised over the refugees, by arguing that the refugees are *people in need*, whereas Swedes already have opportunities to receive help. The thread starter responds to this counter-argument by using a personal anecdote ("I myself am ill...") as evidence for the claim that weak groups in the Swedish society are in need of help. To this, the opponent responds by arguing against the personal anecdote, which allegedly is not trustworthy ("sounds a bit off"). Moreover, s/he performs a personal attack on the other participant's competence ("missed all the news") and/or moral character ("insanely egoistic").

Apart from this personal attack, the criticism is promoted primarily in a civil tone: The claims from the opponent are countered through arguments and performed in a predominantly accommodating tone, by which understanding of the other's situation is displayed ("I am sorry to hear that you are ill"). The other participant, nevertheless, experiences this criticism as an attack on her or his person ("jump on me"). And, admittedly, it is a personal attack. In this case, the personal attack is, however, not primarily provoked by the political nature of the debate, but rather by how the issue is personalised and individualised to the extent that the arguments and claims are not weighty.

Tales of personal experiences may, as argued, serve important functions in public debates, as they can transform private experiences into a shared reality (Glasser, 1991, 235-236) and, in doing so, create identification, understanding and solidarity (Ettema & Glasser, 1994, 5; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, 317). However, as we saw in chapter 6, such utterances in the news-generated social media debates, generally do not. Instead, they tend to bring about personal attacks. This demonstrates how the personalisation and



individualisation of the political makes argumentation and criticism difficult, as a critique of a personal anecdote necessarily also entails criticism of the person.

As suggested earlier, personal attacks do not only obstruct the pleasantness of conversation; they are also signs of a “bad” debate (Jørgensen, 2000; Kock, 2011b). Still, the sanction performed by the participant who is subjected to attack, functions, not primarily as a sanction of a violation of norms of political debate. Instead, it is a sanction of criticism being performed, as this prevents people from expressing their highly personal opinion. The participant’s reaction to being criticised (and attacked), implies an expectation of being allowed to express one’s view, without being opposed: S/he says: “Everyone has their own view, that does not YOU have to jump on me”. Essentially, then, what is said is, that one should be allowed to voice one’s opinion, without having to defend it from criticism and counter-arguments, which is precisely what a debate is.

Many of the utterances in the news-generated social media debates express discomfort and dislike of being opposed through arguments and criticism. As previous studies have shown, not only aggression but also argumentation and criticism is, by many, experienced as something negative on social media (Kruse et al., 2018; Moe et al., 2019). This suggests that many view public spaces on social media, not first and foremost as arenas for debate, but as arenas for the immediate expression of a reaction to a news item, one’s personal opinion or one’s values, beliefs and identity, and to engage in sociable conversation with others. Being opposed and criticised, thus, violates an expectation to social media as a “happy space” (Kruse et al., 2018, 74).

This could, however, also be understood as something more profound than criticism and counter-argumentation violating people’s expectations to social media as a “happy space”, namely an expectation to what expressing one’s view entails, which is contradictory to an understanding of debate as argumentation. In the news-generated social media debates, I argue, it is possible to identify two contradictory principles at work, namely the *principle of deliberation* and the *principle of expression*. Deliberation should here be understood broadly, as both deliberative rhetoric (i.e. political rhetoric), and as deliberation as defined in theories of deliberative democracy. The principle of deliberation implies that people relate to one another through argumentation and

attempts to be “true” to the issue, as well as to the other, i.e. one makes use of “true” and relevant knowledge, as well as strive to make one’s arguments reasonable, i.e. generally acceptable to a universal audience.

The principle of expression, by contrast, implies that every individual should be allowed to find and express his or her truth and morality and, by doing so, be authentic. As previously argued, the principle of expression is a consequence of “moral relativism” (Bloom, 1988), and the development of “authenticity” as a moral ideal (Taylor, 1991, 2007). It implies that each individual should strive to find his or her way of life, based on subjective values, beliefs and desires, and be allowed to express this authentic self without obligations to reason, reality or a shared morality. In chapter 6, I suggested that the ideal of authenticity as a communicative ideal could be viewed as a principle of expression, rather than of deliberation.

In contrast to the principle of deliberation, which requires that people relate to one another through argumentation, argumentation is, according to the principle of expression, a violation of the individual’s ability to be true to him- or herself. Counter argumentation and criticism is an offence, as it violates individuals’ possibilities to be and express themselves in a true, authentic way. Following this principle, opposition and criticism will be experienced, not only as an offence but also as a violation of one’s freedom of expression. Freedom of expression, in this sense, is understood not only as the ability to speak freely but to do so without being opposed. Opposition and criticism mean to impute an opinion to others, thus obstructing their abilities to pursue and express their personal desires, beliefs, values and motives. In other words, it obstructs them from exerting their freedom of speech to express their true self. Thus, argumentation violates the principle of expression.

Understood as such, it is perhaps possible to understand why participants in the news-generated social media debates express aggression and frustration when met with criticism and counter-arguments. Moreover, it suggests that this is not only due to an expectation to social media as arenas for self-expression and maintenance of personal relationships, but rather due to an expectation to what expressing one’s view entails altogether.

## **The aversion to listening**

Political debates are confrontations between opposing ideas and views. This implies that participants in a political debate are required, not only to give arguments but also to listen and respond to counter-arguments. These counter-arguments should adhere to the same norms that apply to arguments: They should be acceptable, relevant and weighty (Kock, 2011a, 2018).

As argued earlier, the genre conventions that manifest themselves through the participant's utterances in the debates – in particular through sanctions of others' utterances – suggest that the news-generated social media debates are not only an arena for political debate but also for self-presentation and “everyday talk”. Criticism and counter argumentation is sanctioned for disturbing the pleasures of participating. Moreover, as I will now turn to, many utterances make it evident that there exists an aversion to listening and responding to the other side. This is apparent, both in how many utterances in the material are not responded to at all, as well as in how many participants brush others' arguments aside without giving counter-arguments (for example through domination techniques, as discussed in chapter 8). Moreover, some of the utterances explicitly attempt to exclude others from the debate, i.e. they encourage opponents to stay away from the debate or they encourage others to ignore their contributions.

The first type of utterances in which an aversion to listen and respond to counter-arguments is expressed, functions as dismissals of the others' arguments and claims. These dismissals are performed without counter-arguments that explain why the argument or claim should be dismissed. Instead, the utterances express an unwillingness to do so. The two following utterances may serve as examples:

### **EXAMPLES 102-103:**

blah blah blah blah. I have heard it before. As you understand, I disagree. Very much (c. Aftenposten 29.12.15).

That's your opinion, then. Luckily we are different (c. Berlingske 26.1.16)

Such utterances demonstrate an attitude towards the other's arguments and claims as something that one does not bother with. They are rhetorical moves that function to shut down the debate by signalling to the opponent that further arguments will not be responded to. And this is, unsurprisingly, also the most common outcome of exchanges in which such dismissals of the others' claims and arguments are performed: The exchange ceases. Sometimes, however, the exchange continues, not as a debate about the issue, but rather as a meta-debate and a contest over whether one of the participants' "lost" the debate, or not. An example of this is an exchange in which the Danish government's law proposal, L87, which included the so-called Jewellery-law (see chapter 4) is discussed.<sup>55</sup> The exchange, consisting mainly of acclaims or condemnations of the politician, Inger Støjberg, is already underway when a participant – respondent 4 – enters the exchange and starts discussing with the thread starter. The excerpt begins here:

**EXAMPLE 104:**

Respondent 4: This is nothing but symbolic politics, again, it does not befit us economically but instead gives us much negative mention.

Thread starter: Okay. You must be a sharp analytic [tags respondent 4] ☺

Respondent 4: [tags tread starter] we compare the Danish model to the Dutch, they confiscate valuables worthy of 700 000 kr yearly, which far from covers the expenses related to confiscating the valuables. It does not even suffice to two full-time positions, and I wonder if the politicians have not already spent about be equivalent to ten years of confiscations.

Thread starter: There is much more to L87<sup>56</sup> than just the confiscating of valuables.

Respondent 4: Yes, but it can still not go around, far from it, and is, thus, a total waste of money and time.

Thread starter: Sorry [tags respondent 4], I don't believe you have insight or competency to present analyses and calculations that can tell us something about the full L87 policy's effectivity rate.

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<sup>55</sup> Parts of the exchange is also discussed as an example of the expression competition in chapter 8 (see example 83).

<sup>56</sup> L87 refers to the law no. 87, i.e. the "Jewellery Law".

- Respondent 4: Ok, and you do, or what? In that case, I would love to hear it. To put off family reunification will not give much, besides that is up to the courts to decide, and there the proposal will probably be rejected, together with the proposal to suspend the refugees' residence permit and a fixed duration of residence permits of unfixed duration.
- Thread starter: No, I do not. Besides, it is not I who am making claims. That's you. Have a nice evening, I cannot bother to waste more time on you. You disagree, fine, leave it at that!
- Respondent 4: Yes, and I give ground for my claims, by contrast to you. And then it is easier to give up than to acknowledge that it is just symbolic politics.
- Thread starter: Well, I have not made any claims, [tags respondent 4]. Nor have I the competency to analyse the economic aspects in the law proposal in question, which I also strongly doubt that you have. Therefore, I do not comment upon them. But have a nice evening, [tags respondent 4], I cannot bother with you anymore ☺
- Thread starter: Okay [tags respondent 4]. Where, then, I have claimed anything, I do not know. All I have written is that the law proposal covers more than the confiscating of valuables. I guess that was a bold claim, then ☺ Have a good evening, [tags respondent 4], we are done here.
- Respondent 6: You surely give up easily. One does not get far when one is unable to give grounds and arguments for one's attitude.
- Thread starter: [tags respondent 6] I do not have to give arguments or explain why I am of the opinion that I am, and certainly not to you. But if it saves your day, then let it be, then we will just say that I gave up ☺
- Respondent 4: [tags thread starter] It is nothing uncommon with having to justify one's claims.
- Thread starter: [tags respondent 4] For fuck's sake, show me where I made any sort of claim in this thread? You are a quarrelsome person of the deepest dye! (c. Berlingske 26.1.16)

This example demonstrates an aversion to debate, through the thread starters' expressed unwillingness both to listen to the arguments of others, and to give arguments. Rather than responding to arguments with counterarguments, the opponent is dismissed through attacks on his or her competency ("you must be a sharp analytic" and "competency ... which I also strongly doubt that you have"). Moreover, an unwillingness to even listen to these arguments is expressed through repeated attempts to shut the exchange down

“I cannot bother to waste more time on you. You disagree, fine, leave it at that!” , “have a nice evening, I cannot bother with you anymore”, and “we are done here”).

The exchange, however, does not cease, rather the opponent insinuates that ending the debate is to “give up”. In other words: to lose the debate. Furthermore, s/he sanctions the thread starter for violating the genre conventions of political debate, i.e. to give arguments for one’s claims. Moreover, the opponent invites the thread starter to participate in a debate, and signals that s/he will listen if arguments are given (“I would love to hear it”). The thread starter, however, renounces obligations to give arguments, both by claiming not to have made any claims and, thus, is not obliged to give arguments (“it is not I who am making claims” and “well, I have not made any claims”), as well as opposing the norm that one should give arguments altogether: “I do not have to give arguments or explain why I am of the opinion that I am”.

The opponent, as well as another participant who intervenes in the exchange, by contrast, insist on the norm of giving arguments for one’s claims (“One does not get far when one is unable to give grounds and arguments for one’s attitude” and “It is nothing uncommon with having to justify one’s claims”). The insistence on argumentation as a genre convention, and the attempts to hold the thread starter responsible for his or her utterances, creates irritation and anger, expressed through swearing (“for fuck’s sake”), as well as an attack on the opponent for being “a quarrelsome person of the deepest dye!” The only thing the opponent has done, however, is to expect from the other that s/he gives reasons for his or her claims, or, in other words: to debate.

The example demonstrates a confrontation between the conflicting expectations to the debate identified throughout the chapter: One of the participants promotes the principle of expression, the other the principle of deliberation. Respondent 4 promotes the principle of deliberation, in which interlocutors meet through correct, relevant and weighty argumentation about the issue. According to the principle of expression, by contrast, this is experienced as an offence, as it violates the thread starter’s possibilities to be and express him- or herself in a truly authentic way. This may explain the frustration expressed by the thread starter, and the aversion both to listen and respond to counter-arguments. By giving arguments and expecting the same from others, one is essentially violating their right to pursue and express their true self.

The aversion to listen and respond to counterarguments, and to engage in debate with the other side also manifests itself in attempts to exclude others from the debate, either by encouraging other likeminded to ignore the contributions of others or by encouraging opponents directly to stay away from the debate. An example that illustrates this is the following utterance:

**EXAMPLE 105:**

Dear you who answer [Tags another participant], arguments do not work here. You only feed his ego and energy by answering (c. Dagens Nyheter 6.9.15a).

Whereas this utterance encourages *others* to ignore a particular opponent's contributions, and thereby indirectly excluding him or her from the debate, other sanctions function as attempts to silence opponents. The following example, in which, not a particular participant, but rather a specific group, are encouraged to stay away from the debate, may serve as an example:

**EXAMPLE 106:**

Thread starter: It would be nice to be without racists who try not to express in a racist way but who instead fight and fight with other types of reasoning? That you support SD is still apparent. Stay put at Avpixlat [immigration critical alternative site] instead.

Respondent 1: They have no discussion at Avpixlat – all are of the same opinion☹!

Thread starter: It is easier that way ☺

Respondent 2: A little bit of discussion exists there, but as the majority are of the same opinion one is jumped on too much if one does not think as they do (Dagens Nyheter 6.19.15c).

In the example, a group of opponents, i.e. immigration critics, are asked to stay away from the debate arena (“Stay put at Avpixlat instead”). Moreover, another exclusion strategy is also applied: They are labelled “racist”, and, thus, illegitimate opponents. It is evident from the first utterance in the exchange that the opponents’ utterances are not straightforwardly racist, but the speaker claims to see through their non-racist arguments, and reveal them as racists (“who try not to express in a racist way but who rather fight and fight with other types of reasoning?”). The utterance, thus, should be

viewed as an attempt to delegitimise all immigration criticism and to exclude the “other side” from the debate.

The utterance only functions to bring about celebration and support from likeminded, who participate in the condemnation of the immigration critics and ridicule them for being likeminded (“They have no discussion at Aypixlat – all are of the same opinion” and “It is easier that way 😊”). As such, the utterances in this exchange promotes self-contradictory debate ideals, in contrast to the previous exchange (example 104), in which two participants disagreed on the ideals. On the one hand, the interlocutors in this exchange express an ideal suggesting that opposing views and arguments should meet, whereas too broad agreement is seen as obstructing debate. On the other hand, they wish to exclude their opponents from the debate and refrain from responding to their arguments with counter-arguments. This seems to be an attitude shared by many in the comment sections: They want to be able to express their own opinions and to criticise others’, but they are less willing to hear other’s opinions and take criticism from opponents.

### **Chapter conclusion: The clash of ideals**

Through examining sanctions, I have, in this chapter, demonstrated how the news-generated social media debates are subject to constant genre negotiations. I have argued that the sanctions bear witness both of an understanding of the newspapers’ comment sections on Facebook as arenas for political debate, which adheres to certain argumentation norms, and as arenas for self-presentation and sociable conversation, in which criticism and counter argumentation creates discomfort and disrupts the sociability.

These contradictory understandings of the genre can be viewed as a consequence both of the conditions for communication created by the immigration issue and the social network site’s affordances, both contributing to blurring the lines between the personal and the political. Moreover, I have suggested that this might not only be a consequence of entanglement of the personal and the political facilitated by the arena and the issue. I have proposed that some of the utterances in the debates can also be seen as expressions



of a communicative ideal which is in clear opposition of the ideal of deliberation and debate, namely the principle of expression.

While social media, in which the threshold for expressing one's views – and to do so to a group of likeminded – is lowered, may have strengthened this communicative ideal's potential, observations of this cultural pattern long predate the emergence of social media (Bloom, 1988; Taylor, 1991). This shows how the technological affordances of a medium are not only deterministic of social practices but also a symptom of already existing social needs and practices. People's perceptions of situations, and of what makes a "fitting" response, are influenced by what the environment affords them to do, as well as by their motives, their understanding of the particular situation, and their knowledge of already established practices (Miller & Sheperd, 2009, 280).

Although an aggressive argument culture, with many personal attacks, has been identified through the analysis performed in this study, it has also become evident that some of the utterances that are interpreted as personal attacks are, in fact, instances of legitimate criticism and counter argumentation. As such, the pervasiveness of the principle of expression as a communicative ideal, and the expansion of it allowed by the emergence of arenas that facilitate for "authentic" expression, may nuance our understanding of why so many people associate public debate on social media with discomfort, and why many, for this reason, avoid them.

If it is true that freedom of expression is understood in terms of a right to express oneself, without being opposed and criticised, and if a social need to express one's authentic self exists, then, all attempts at argumentation and debate will, necessarily, be experienced as violations of one's possibilities to exert one's freedom of speech. As such, several originally non-aggressive rhetorical moves may also come to be experienced as hostile and uncalled for attacks.

## **Chapter 10: Discussion, findings and contributions**

The dissertation has examined what characterises the rhetorical culture of public social media debates. More precisely, it has studied how “average” citizens discussed a controversial and social media-friendly issue, namely the immigration issue, in news-generated debates on Facebook – a social network site that comparably little research has dealt with, despite its superior position in terms of use and relevance in people’s lives.

The main research question that motivated the empirical studies and the theoretical reflections in the dissertation is:

*What characterises the rhetorical strategies in news-generated social media debates about the immigration issue?*

As discussed, the word “strategy” is here used to signify an understanding of utterances as constituted by both substance and form, the speaker’s stance on the issue, and the utterances’ performative functions in the situation in which they occur. Thus the dissertation has examined both what characterises the substantive, formal and functional features of the texts that constitute the debates, as well as the contextual frames of the debate, i.e. the affordances of the medium and the issue in question.

In this final chapter, I reflect on how the different chapters relate to each other and contribute to answering the research question.

### **The contextual frames of the debates**

In part II, I argued that the issue and the medium constitute the two most important contextual frames for the debates studied and discussed how they influence the ways in which the debates develop. To include a study of how the immigration issue and the medium’s affordances facilitate certain practices is crucial to understand the nature of the debate, I argue, given that specific utterances will always be situated and, thus, contingent on the context. As such, it will only be possible to understand the performative functions of a given utterance when it is seen in relation to the situation in which it appears.

Moreover, the immigration issue is seen as an issue that is particularly suited for, and able to create much engagement in, social media. This suggests that there is something about this issue, on the one hand, and this medium, on the other, that requires closer attention.

In this part of the dissertation, I argued that the issue and the medium facilitate 1) the personal engagement and expression, 2) strong emotions and controversy, and 3) a fusion of several rhetorical practices and genre conventions.

In chapter 4, I suggested that the immigration issue, and the Syrian refugee crisis, in particular, facilitates personal engagement and expression. It does so, as it actualises, not only questions of practical political solutions but also of morale, identity and values. As such, positions on and evaluations of the issue become closely related to people's personal experiences and emotions. The issue's ability to create personal engagement is evident both in how the Syrian refugee crisis was able to mobilise large groups of volunteers, often through social media, as well as in how the issue was presented in the newspaper articles discussed. The articles often promoted and saluted individuals for their private contributions to help the refugees. Moreover, many of the articles advanced direct appeals to the newspapers' readers to do the same. The private engagement was emphasised, and it was underscored that each of "us" should find the way to contribute that best suited one's own needs and desires. Also when reporting on the political decisions to make retrenchments in the asylum policies, the emphasis was commonly on individual political actors, sometimes even their personal feelings, as the articles about the tears of the Swedish vice prime minister, Åsa Romson.

In chapter 5, I argued that also the medium's technological structure contributes to making personal engagement and expression easily attended to. Facebook, like most social network sites, is structured around personal profiles and pre-existing relationships. Although the news-generated debates are profoundly *public*, they are, thus, taking place in a highly personal environment. The boundaries between the public debate and personal uses of Facebook are porous, evident, for instance in how participation happens through one's personal profile, which can, in turn, be visited by other participants and be used as a source for making assessments of their person.

Moreover, participants are afforded to “tag” their Facebook-”friends” in the discussion, thereby, inviting members of their personal network to observe and partake.

Furthermore, I argued that the medium facilitates emotive and controversial content. This follows, on the one hand, from the abundance of content and opinions that characterise, not only social network sites but the digital era altogether, which makes it difficult to be seen and heard. On the other hand, Facebook is organised after a “popularity principle”, where engagement through “likes” and comments makes content more visible. Such engagement is readily available and can be expressed with little effort, and, as a consequence, provocateurs can utilise this to gain visibility. This is also evident in the newspapers’ evaluations of what content is most suitable for publication in social network sites, where conflict-oriented, controversial and emotive content prevails, commonly explained by reference to such contents’ ability to create engagement and, thereby, produce “clicks”.

As such, the immigration issue – and issues related to immigration – seem suitable for publication in the newspaper’s social media channels. In chapter 4, I argued that immigration is a particularly controversial issue because it involves moral evaluations and positions. This makes the issue capable of arousing strong emotions, and discussions about it will often be full of conflict, as one’s position and opinions in the issue are interpreted as signs of one’s personal morale. The orientation to conflict was also evident in the news articles that were discussed, i.e. the articles that reported on the retrenchments in the nations’ asylum policies. These retrenchments were often presented as controversial and much attention was given to the party political conflicts surrounding the issue.

Moreover, I argue that the controversial nature of the immigration issue also relates to how it facilitates fusion of deliberative and epideictic rhetoric. As argued in chapter 4, immigration is, as a political field, an issue both about “idealism” and “realpolitik”. Thereby, it, at the same time, actualises questions of practical political solutions, and of who “we” are as a nation and the values the members of the community share.

Finally, in chapter 5, I suggested that the medium also facilitates the fusion of several different practices and purposes, and that genre conventions, therefore, become

unclear. Ambiguous genre conventions should be seen as a consequence both of the blurred lines between the public debate and other personal arenas on the social network site, and that different affordances allow for different practices within the arena for public debate. On the one hand, argumentation is facilitated, for instance, through hyperlinks that participants can utilise to substantiate their claims. On the other hand, “expressions” are facilitated, for example through emoticons and “likes”.

The examination of the contextual frames of the debates, then, points in the direction of both the medium and the issue contributing to create a debate that is personal, full of conflict, characterised by a fusion of deliberative and epideictic rhetoric, as well as by a fusion of argumentation and expression. This image is, to a large extent, supported by the analysis of the utterances and interactions in the debates, which I will now discuss.

### **What characterises the rhetoric in the debates?**

Part III examined what characterises the rhetorical expressions and modes of interaction in the news-generated social media debates. This was done by studying each utterance, both in isolation and as a rhetorical move in the debate. Utterances, then, were seen in relation both to preceding utterances that elicited them and in relation to the utterances they, in turn, elicited. Often this movement between single utterances and interactions contributed to modify the interpretation of the utterances as rhetorical strategies, as what an actual utterance actually meant and was intended to do, as well as how it was received by others, became evident through participants’ responses to each other’s utterances.

The analysis identified the sources of disagreement that were in force in the debates by examining the stasis of the interaction and found that the contentious question in the debate often was concerned with conflicting evaluations of the issue and the situation, persons and actions, as well as community’s values and morale.

Still, the debates actualise a number of other issues for discussion, all of which concern public debate, namely: personalisation and individualisation of political engagement, the relationship between epideictic and deliberative rhetoric, the presence of personal attacks and aggressiveness in public debate, as well as norms and conventions for public debate.

The four analysis chapters in part III each address one of the dominant features of the debates, which also correspond well to the types of rhetorical practices that I, in chapters 4 and 5, argued are facilitated by the issue and the medium, namely the personal engagement and expression, struggles over moral positions through acts of epideictic rhetoric, an aggressive debate culture, and the fusion of different norms and genre conventions.

Chapter 6 examined how personal engagement and self-expression materialise in the debates. The analysis identified an orientation to the participants' personal identity, opinions and feelings, manifested in subjective evaluations, personal anecdotes, expressive language, as well as how participants often explicitly assume personas as "average" persons in the debates. The orientation to the personal, I argued, hinders a debate where opposing ideas and views meet through argumentation. Instead, expressions of personal engagement and subjective evaluations create modes of interaction where utterances are either not responded to at all, celebrated or condemned. Moreover, the analysis suggested that the aim of the debate was, for some participants, not to contribute with utterances that would be an object of discussion but rather to be able to express one's authentic self. This observation emerged from studying utterances that promoted subjective evaluations and highly personal "truths" in ways that did not invite discussion. They did so, through an emphasis on how what is uttered is "just my opinion", as well as by renouncing obligations to respond and give arguments when opposed through counter-arguments and criticism.

A similar observation emerged from the analysis of the prevailing norms and genre conventions in the debates in chapter 9, where the analysis uncovered two concurrent, yet contradictory debate ideals, namely the principle of deliberation and the principle of expression. The principle of deliberation, I argued, implies that interlocutors meet through argumentation. The principle of expression, by contrast, implies that argumentation is illegitimate, as it intervenes with the individual's possibilities to express his or her authentic self. By examining sanctions – and what they target – the analysis found that both of these ideals were active in the debates. On the one hand, utterances that violate norms of political debate are sanctioned. For instance, participants are sanctioned for not justifying for their claims, for making use of incorrect

information, and for contributing with irrelevant claims and arguments. On the other hand, counter-arguments and legitimate criticism of utterances are sanctioned, often for being personal attacks. This bears witness both of how social media are viewed as places for sociable conversation and pleasant experiences, as well as to a general aversion to being opposed. That legitimate critique and counter-argumentation are sanctioned as personal attacks, suggests that a common understanding of social media as a particularly aggressive debate culture, which leads many to abstain from participation in fear of attacks, harassment and threats, should be nuanced. It suggests that rather than *being* particularly aggressive argument cultures, they are perhaps *experienced* as such because the debate genre violates an expectation of being able to express one's authentic self without being opposed.

This claim about the hostility of the debate arena is, however, modified in chapters 7 and 8, where the harsh tone of the debates is scrutinised.

The analysis presented in chapter 7, demonstrated that a large part of the debates takes shape as epideictic struggles over moral positions. Rather than argumentation, the debates examined largely consist of evaluative definitions, primarily about whom the immigrants are, displays of shared values through praise of persons and actions that embody these, as well as moral condemnations of the "other". The participants in the debates both assume moral positions and ascribe moral positions to others. This moral positioning manifests itself in accusations of "moralism" and "goodness posing", expressions of "shame" and "disgust", as well as in the creation of enemy images, through accusations of "nation treason" and "racism". As such, the debates gain a harsh tone, and ad hominem attacks flourish.

Moreover, what characterises the interactions studied in this chapter is that they get stranded in this evaluative track. The evaluation expressed by one participant is met, either with acclaims or condemnation, in which a different evaluation is promoted. Depending on how the immigrants are defined, i.e. either as "threats" or "victims", the immigration critic becomes either the "good" or the "evil" – and the same goes for the immigration positive person. Thus, the moral positions follow from the definitions of the immigrants. Thereby, also the poles of opposition manifest themselves, namely as a conflict between the immigration critical "side" and the immigration positive "side",

and the debate becomes about where one positions oneself accordingly. As argued in chapter 4, the moral questions immanent in the immigration issue and its controversial nature contribute to polarisation and heated debate. Much is at stake when one's opinions become signs of one's moral character. Thus it is more important to defeat the opponent and assert moral superiority than to approach each other through argumentation.

The hostile tone in the debates can, however, not be explained by the immigration issue's character alone. Chapter 8 examined attacks as domination techniques that, in contrast to the attacks discussed in chapter 7, are not concerned with evaluations of others' personal qualities. The analysis showed that many of the attacks performed in the debates are characterised, precisely by, their lack of substance. Rather than being concerned with anything specific about the particular person who is targeted, these attacks are domination techniques that function to dismiss the opponent and to assert oneself. The analysis examined how this was done through name-calling, insults, ridicule, irony and sarcasm, as well as threats of force, and showed how these rhetorical moves function in the debates, either to put an end to the debate or to accelerate the hostility. I argued that the latter of these two outcomes creates "expression competitions", where the goal is to perform the crudest attack to defeat the opponent and, thus, get the final say. As a consequence, the intensity in expressions increases on both "sides" of the debate, while the expression, at the same time, loses more and more substance. In these expression competitions, it is often unclear what the source of disagreement is – if there exists one at all. The battle is fought out neither over who is right and wrong nor over who is "good" and "evil". Instead, participants compete in who is able to perform the most stinging attack and get the final say.

I suggest that this feature of the debates – the expression competition – could be seen as a consequence of the medium, which, as argued in chapter 5, not only facilitate but encourages the strong expression. In an environment characterised by the abundance of content, it is necessary to shout loud in order to be heard. Moreover, I argue, this could be seen in relation to the principle of expression identified in chapters 6 and 9, which implies an understanding of these debates as arenas for authentic and subjective expression, rather than argumentation. If it is true that opposition obstructs one's



possibilities for expressing one's authentic self, and if there exists a social need to do so, then one way to safeguard one's own expression would be to secure the last word for oneself.

My research question was: *What characterises the rhetorical strategies in news-generated social media debates about the immigration issue?* Through the analysis of the debates, I have identified a number of traits that characterise the news-generated social media debates about the immigration issue. The rhetorical strategies that prevail in these debates are strategies that 1) express the speaker's personal engagement and authentic self, 2) place people and attitudes into moral positions, and thus serve as confirmations both of one's "goodness" and that "I" am not "them", and, 3) dominate the opponent, assert oneself and, as such, secures that one gets the final say.

Throughout the analysis, "expression" is a recurring concept that I argue describes both what characterises much of these particular debates, and the expectations to the arena. This is, however, not to say that the debates are void of argumentation, or that none of the participants displays expectations to the arena as an arena for political debate. Still, the debates are, to a minimal degree, characterised by arguments in favour or against future action. Efforts to approach one another through argumentation are few, and orientation to a mutual understanding is close to absent. Instead, the rhetorical practices that prevail bear witness of an aversion to listen and respond to others' arguments. Given that political debate is usually understood as argumentation about future action, and requires that one substantiates one's claims and listens and responds to the arguments of others, this has implications for how we can understand social media as arenas for public debate. In the following, I discuss how, by revisiting some of the assumptions about public debate discussed in chapter 2, and by relating these to the findings presented above.

### **Implications for viewing social media as arenas for public debate**

In this dissertation, I have argued that news-generated social media debates about the immigration issue are characterised by personal, hostile and epideictic rhetorical expressions and that rhetorical practices in this genre are governed, both by norms of political debate and argumentation and an ideal of expression. This, I argue, has

implications both for how we understand social network sites as arenas for public debate and for our understanding of public debates.

In the dissertation, I have introduced a variety of theoretical perspectives that may help us understand the nature of these debates. Doing so has allowed me to better describe the functions and scope of participation in public debate in these digital, participatory environments. Many of these perspectives pre-date the emergence of social media, suggesting that many of the tendencies that prevail in public social media debates are not unique to, or merely consequences of, the medium. Instead, the medium brings together several phenomena that have earlier been observed in the public sphere, amplifies them, and fuses these elements into a new genre. As such, I argue, the medium both *determines* practice, i.e. by affording particular possibilities for (rhetorical) practice (Gibson, 1979; see also Vatnøy, 2017), and is a symptom of an already existing social need, i.e. it creates a room for performing actions that were already in demand (Miller & Sheperd, 2009).

That I, in the dissertation, have chosen to see the news-generated social media debate as a genre does, however, not imply that all users of the genre share the same expectations to the practices that constitute it. Instead, the genre conventions are, as demonstrated in chapter 9, continuously negotiated. As discussed in chapter 2, this implies that technological and societal structures, while affording and guiding individual's practices, do not determine practice. Instead, through rhetorical practice, individual actors shape, re-produce, transgress, and change genres, and, genre conventions will, for this reason, never be fixed (Miller, 1994; Miller & Sheperd, 2009).

In the dissertation, I have discussed how an ideal of authenticity has gained currency, which, in this genre, materialises in a principle of expression. The development of a principle of expression as a communicative ideal, I argued, necessitates the emergence of authenticity as a moral ideal, which implies that moral positions cannot be grounded in reason but must arise from each individual's desires, ideals and beliefs, and thus cannot be opposed or discussed (Taylor, 1991, 18). Observations of this moral ideal precede the emergence of social network sites, suggesting that this should be viewed as a more widespread cultural pattern, rather than a particularity of social media.

Social media can, however, be seen as a driving force that amplifies this general cultural tendency. Many have argued that political engagement online is characterised by the personal engagement and expression, and have related this to more wide-spanning structural transformations of society in the postmodern era (Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Rasmussen, 2016; Vatnøy, 2017). The orientation to an individualised and authentic expression of engagement, characteristic of contemporary political debate has, for some, been a source of concern, as it is thought to render people passive consumers rather than active citizens (Habermas, 2002, 2006; Sennett, 1977). Others, by contrast, argue that we are witnessing a new form of citizenship that may lower the threshold for participating, as it does not require one to subscribe to a particular ideology or group identity (Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, 2012; Dahlgren, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012a; Wellman et al., 2003).

Anyhow, the ways in which the subjective and authentic political expression manifests itself in the news-generated social media debates have implications for how we understand these as arenas for public debate. As argued, the principle of expression stands in direct opposition to what we usually understand by political debate, namely argumentation about future action - aimed either at “reasonable disagreement” (Kock, 2008) or moving the participants in the direction of consensus (Habermas, 1972).

Moreover, I have discussed the prevalence of personal feuds and a particularly aggressive argument culture. As discussed in chapter 2, claims about the unmatched hostility in these debate arenas can, however, be disputed. The aggressive debate form found its parallels in other historical periods when the political debate was individualised and personalised, for instance in the Norwegian public sphere in the 1820s and 30s (Johansen, 2017, 143-144). In contrast to the expression of the personal opinion in the news-generated social media debates, the personal feuds in that historical period can, however, not be explained through an ideal of authenticity where each individual should be allowed to express their “true” self. Instead, the personal feuds resulted from a prevailing deliberative ideal, where political issues were to be discussed by disinterested and cultured individuals (as described, for instance, in Habermas, 2002). Through rational deliberation, where the most reasonable person gained the adherence of others, the debate would move in the direction of consensus about what best secured

the common good. When the participants in the debate, despite their independence, morale and competency, did not manage to come to an agreement there, necessarily, had to be something wrong with them as persons. Because the participants debated the political issues by virtue of their competency and moral qualities, then, criticism of arguments, necessarily became personal attacks (Johansen, 2017, 143-144).

The participants in the news-generated social media debates, partake in these debates, not by virtue of their competency or moral qualities, but rather by being their authentic self. Therefore, criticism of what they say will necessarily be an attack on them as persons. In contrast to the personal feuds between the cultured and competent men of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the attacks do not target their personal qualities, such as competency and morale, but rather who they “truly” are. As such, personal attacks may be experienced as more severe. Moreover, the personal feuds develop into expression competitions, where what counts is to get the final word in, as this secures one in expressing one’s true self, without opposition.

In the dissertation, I have also discussed the prevalence of epideictic rhetoric in these debates. I have seen this as a feature of the immigration debate, which has typically been characterised by a fusion of deliberative and epideictic rhetoric (Bjontegård, 2017; Brox, 1991; Hagelund, 2003; Kjeldsen, 2020), as well as a trait of political rhetoric in social network sites, where the debate often is not oriented towards future political action (Vatnøy, 2017).

Vatnøy (2017) has argued convincingly that epideictic rhetoric is an inherent part of all political rhetoric, as argumentation about how “we” should act to change the situation, necessarily requires that we establish who “we” are and define the situation. The study of the news-generated social media debates presented in this dissertation shows how the debate often stands still in this epideictic track and gains a character of moral positioning. As such, it demonstrates how epideictic rhetoric cannot only consolidate the values that “we” share, and thereby prepare the grounds for future action (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, 50), but can also function as a domination technique, and to sustain polarisation and obstruct debate. In the debates, practices associated with epideictic rhetoric often gain a character of moral stance taking. This function of epideictic is not novel to the social media debates. Rather, it has been

observed as a feature of the immigration debate, which arguably often has developed as a “moral championship” (Brox, 1991). More broadly speaking, epideictic rhetoric’s function as moral stance taking can be observed in questions that concern the identity of the national community, evident, for instance in the so-called “berserker-speech” (Johansen, 2019, 157), discussed in chapter 2. Rather than functioning as advice on future political action, this form of political rhetoric should be viewed as rhetorical performances, whereby speakers demonstrate their stance.

I have argued that debates in social media have little influence over the political decision-making processes and, therefore, facilitate such forms of stance-taking and moral positioning, where speakers – by asserting themselves and dethroning the opponent – may seek recognition and confirmation of their identity and morale. The social need to do so should also be seen in relation to the decline in hierarchical institutions and rigid social norms, characteristic of the postmodern era (Inglehart, 1997). When people, increasingly, develop individual identities away from traditional group identities, the need for performing and seeking recognition of that identity also increases (Bauman, 2000, 2005; Giddens, 1991).

By drawing these parallels between the characteristic features of the rhetoric in the news-generated social media debates and those of rhetorical cultures in other historical contexts, I have subscribed to an understanding of the emergence of digital participatory media as not contributing to change democracy and democratic practices fundamentally. Rather than proposing that social media represents a radical transformation of the public sphere and the rhetorical practices embedded in it, this dissertation follows a line of scholars who have argued that new media technologies are likely to take up, disseminate and amplify existing forces and patterns in our society and culture (e.g. Gripsrud, 2009, 6; Hill & Hughes, 1998, 182; Miller & Sheperd, 2004; Schudson, 2006).

This is, however, not to say that there is nothing novel about social media as arenas for public rhetoric. Albeit it is not difficult to find parallels to the practices that characterise the rhetoric in the news-generated social media debates in other historical contexts, the particular fusion of these characteristic features, i.e. personal, hostile and epideictic forms of rhetoric, within the same genre, seems to be something new.

Moreover, in contrast to the historical examples of personal feuds and epideictic rhetoric as moral positioning, the utterances in the news-generated social media debates are characterised by a markedly vernacular style. As such, it lacks the literary and rhetorical qualities found in previous times' moral and personal feuds and, perhaps, this lack of eloquence may contribute to that we regard them as more crude and aggressive than we – at least with contemporary eyes – regard similar verbal battles taking place in previous times.

With regards to the impression of online debates as particularly aggressive argument cultures that people preferably avoid (Kruse et al., 2018; Moe et al., 2019), I have also suggested that we cannot, based on reception studies of users' experiences alone, conclude that these arenas are particularly hostile environments. Indeed, I have shown that these debates *are* arenas where personal attacks and verbal aggressiveness flourish. I have, however, also argued that much of what is sanctioned and, thus also presumably experienced, as personal attacks are, in fact, legitimate criticism, when evaluated based on an ideal of deliberation. It is, however, violating the principle of expression, as it obstructs the individual from expressing his or her true self.

By introducing the principle of expression as a concept, I have, thereby, proposed a possible shift in what is experienced as hostility and verbal aggressiveness. Through this emphasis on the authentic expression as a communicative ideal, I have also proposed a possible explanation for why the debates are characterised by this aggressiveness, namely that hostility is a mean to securing oneself the final say and, in doing so, be able to express one's authentic self without other people interfering.

The pervasiveness of the principle of expression, moreover, represents a challenge to viewing these exchanges as debates. As argued, the logic of expression stands in direct contrast to ideals of debate and deliberation, where interlocutors approach each other through argumentation. A debate where each participant insists on his or her right to hold and express his or her personal opinion, without having to consider others' views and arguments, can, as a matter of fact, hardly be called a debate.

It is, however, not unthinkable that these interactions may perform pre-political functions. It is possible to imagine that, by performing and seeking others' recognition of one's identity, individuals may acquire the confidence and interest to engage in the

public debate. On the other hand, it is also possible that having been able to express one's opinions publicly in these news-generated social media debates, for many, suffices and replaces other forms of engagement.

Furthermore, the logic of expression may continue to spread in our culture and, thus, come to be a formative influence on the political discussion in the public sphere in the future. On that note, the persuasiveness of this communicative ideal should not be exaggerated. In the debates studied, the ideal lives alongside the principle of deliberation, evident in the continual negotiations of the genre.

### **Contributions, limitations and implications for future research**

This dissertation has examined the characteristics of, and discussed the conditions for, public debate in news-generated Facebook debates. In doing so, it has contributed to a vast and fast-growing body of research that examines digital technology's influence on political rhetoric and the public sphere.

The dissertations' contribution to this field of study is its rhetorical approach to these debates, implying an orientation to texts, however, not merely as isolated utterances but as rhetorical moves in an interaction, as well as part of a larger context. Where many previous text-oriented studies have analysed isolated utterances quantitatively, or small samples of utterances qualitatively, this study has aimed to form as complete an impression as possible of these debates. Moreover, where many earlier studies have given us valuable insights into people's experiences of these debates arenas through surveys and qualitative interviews, the insights produced through a close examination of the debates, give us a better understanding of what causes people to experience these environments as they do. By examining the interactions in these debates, this dissertation has, for instance, identified features that suggest that practices that may be experienced as transgressions of social norms, may not be particularly hostile, but may be experienced as such when opposition and criticism are seen as aggression.

The approach to the texts alone, however, also has its limitations. This becomes particularly evident in the discussion of the "expression competitions". I have argued that the logic of expression implies that the words do not have real, in-life consequences,

but instead are performances in a discursive battle. Because these battles are not fought over who is right/wrong or good/evil, but over who gets the final say, even the most hostile attacks and threats are not considered to be an encouragement to physical violence. As the adversary is not standing in the way of the society the other person wants, but merely in the way of his or her ability to express his or her authentic self, I have argued, it suffices to defeat the adversary verbally, s/he does not have to be physically eliminated or hurt. By only studying the texts, however, I cannot know whether some speakers mean something more than to defeat the opponent verbally, how the target of the attack experiences this, or whether others will interpret it as an encouragement to act out. Necessarily, the occurrence of particularly harsh attacks and indirect threats, which are regarded to be significant challenges to democracy and the possibilities for freedom of speech today, cannot be trivialised. Instead, we should in the future strive to obtain more knowledge about these features of the debates, which can enable us to distinguish between a logic of expression and an action-oriented discourse, i.e. between a savage attack performed in order to secure the final say for oneself, and a threat or invitation to violence.

The dissertation is also a contribution to the vast body of research of social networks sites that have studied a platform that comparably few have examined as an arena for public debate, namely Facebook. When we, at the same time, know that Facebook is the most popular social network site in many countries, it is obvious that we should make inquiries both into how it facilitates public debate, and what, in turn, characterises this debate. That few studies have done so, is likely to be a consequence both of the methodological challenges it poses, both in terms of data collection and ethical consideration, and that other platforms, most prominently Twitter, are commonly considered to be more closely related to the public debate.

As this dissertation has demonstrated, public debates are, however, also taking place on Facebook, and these debates hold distinctive traits. In particular, these debates are characterised by a highly vernacular style, the participation of “average” citizens, and a tight interwovenness with other, personal and private uses of the medium. In order to truly understand the nature of the public debate on social media, it is, thus, crucial that we possess knowledge about several different arenas.



Indeed, the study in this dissertation is limited to one platform (Facebook), one debate arena within this platform (the newspapers' comment sections), and one debate (the Syrian refugee crisis) – in two stages and three national contexts. Comparing several different debates, about several different issues, and on several different platforms, would have allowed for the discovery of similarities and differences and, as such, to identify issue-specific characteristics and medium-specific characteristics. This has, however, been beyond the scope of this dissertation, but is, obviously, an issue for future research.

Still, the news-generated Facebook-debates about the Syrian refugee crisis in the three Scandinavian nations has turned out to be a rich case. By including two stages of this debate, in which different perspectives were prominent in the public sphere, as well as three nations that, on the one hand, share many similarities and, on the other hand, has handled the immigration issue differently, it has been possible to form a comprehensive impression of this particular debate.

The immigration issue is, as previously described, an issue considered to be particularly suited for debate on social media, and is found to create much engagement. The refugee crisis represented an event that not only dominated the public agenda but also actualised the immigration issue's inherent character of being both about "realpolitik" and "idealism". Moreover, the three nations appear suitable to this study, given the established press' strong position and the high amount of daily Facebook-users in these three countries. The three nations are, furthermore, most similar-cases, considering their close ties and historical, political and cultural similarities and, at the same time, different with regards to the different paths they have pursued in their handling of the immigration issue.

When I have not paid more attention to how the debates differ between the three nations but instead treated them as one case, this is a consequence of the relative absence of such differences in the material. Instead, the rhetorical strategies that I have discussed recur across the three contexts. Thus, the study of social media nuances the general impression of the Scandinavian immigration debate formed on the basis of studies of other forums for debate, where the national differences often have been highly visible.

Rather than having produced insights that are generalisable across cases, this dissertation has provided in-depth knowledge about one particular debate, in one particular historical context, and on one particular platform. As such, it adds a piece to the big puzzle that is social media. Considering the great interest for these relatively new media, due to their potential to contribute to induce cooperation and give the voiceless a voice, as well as their potential to do the opposite, all studies of the conditions for and characteristics of public debate in social network sites, should be seen as welcome contributions, not only to the scholarly literature but also to the public conversation.

Although many of the practices commonly identified as threats to democracy, such as fake news, misinformation, smear-campaigns, hate speech and threats, are not examined directly in the dissertation, the analysis has also uncovered instances of such content. The analysis has identified threats and hateful utterances (see e.g. example 84 in chapter 8), the spreading of false information and content from so-called “alternative” news sites as sources (see e.g. discussions of examples 86, 90-92 in chapter 9), as well as conspiracy theories (see examples 58-61 in chapter 7). By studying such utterances, not in isolation, but as part of interactions, it has, however, also become clear that other participants commonly sanction these practices (see chapter 9).

The most striking about these debates is, nevertheless, not these practices that are often seen as threats to democracy. Instead, it is that people do not approach each other through argumentation, but rather utilise these arenas to express themselves. As such, these arenas, I argue, can be viewed both as an expansion of the public sphere, where more people are given a voice and, at the same time, shrinkage of it, as people to a small degree are using this opportunity to talk and listen to each other.

As such, the dissertation also offers new ways to describe the scope and functions of public debates in these digital environments. While public debate has often been approached as opinion formation, political rhetoric or deliberation, the types of rhetoric and modes of interaction that characterise debates in these relatively new media, cannot, I have argued, be understood through such approaches alone. Instead, these debate arenas are characterised by the fusion of a variety of practices, many of them not captured by an emphasis on political rhetoric as argumentation. By introducing the “principle of expression”, the dissertation has offered a way to describe a particular

characteristic of these debates that can help us better account both for when and why these arenas fail to facilitate argumentation, what causes attacks and to understand why they, by many, are experienced as particularly hostile argument cultures.

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## Appendix A: Complete list of categories coded for.

Category	Description	Example
1	Arguments/counter-arguments in favour of or against future action	Utterances that advice for or against future action and consist both of a claim and a justification of that claim. These arguments are further broken down on sub-categories of topoi and commonplace expressions.
1.1	<i>Collective responsibility</i>	Arguments in favour of action to help the refugees from the topos “collective responsibility”.  <i>(c. Politiken 3.8.15)</i>
1.2	<i>Make demands</i>	Arguments in favour of restrictions in the immigration and integration policies from the topos “make demands”.  <i>(c. Aftenposten 29.12.15)</i>
1.3	<i>Nearby areas</i>	Arguments in favour of restrictions in the immigration and integration policies from the topos “help in the nearby areas”.  <i>(c. Aftenbladet 3.9.15)</i>
1.4	<i>Other countries</i>	Arguments in favour of restrictions in the immigration and integration from the topos “other countries”, suggesting either that other countries should contribute more, or that one’s nation should pursue the same policies as other nations.  <i>(c. DR 20.1.16)</i>
1.5.	<i>Weak groups at home</i>	Arguments in favour of restrictions in the immigration and integration from the topos “weak groups at home”, suggesting that these are prioritized.  “What about all young people – and elderly too, for that matter – who are placed in filthy rooms in Dal, Ullensaker. Isolated, poor and lonely. No one cares about them. Often held down by low social

			security benefits, which gives them payment remarks, which in turn results in them being unqualified for housing. This group is forgotten in Norway.”
			<i>(c. Aftenposten 6.9.15)</i>
1.6	<i>Economy</i>	Arguments either in favour of or against restrictions in the immigration and integration from the topos “economy”.	“We should spend the money in a way that benefits the Norwegian people [...] Open your eyes before the Norwegian welfare state goes bankrupt”
			<i>(c. NRK 8.9.15)</i>
2	Personal action frames	Expression of personal engagement in the issue, where this engagement is framed through the sharing of one’s own experiences, hopes and grievances. The cause is framed in terms of the individual’s own personal cause.	“I would like to help at least one child to come to Sweden and live with my family ♡.”
			<i>(c. Aftonbladet, 3.9.15b)</i>
3	Subjective evaluations	Performing a subjective evaluation of the issue, either by emphasising the speaker’s point of view (3.1.), promoting personal evaluations or “truths” of the issue (3.2), or personal anecdotes (3.3). The category is broken down on three sub-categories.	
3.1	Assuming the role of an “average” citizen	The role of the speaker/the position from where s/he speaks is emphasised.	“As a pensioner, I do not have any money left after tending to my own needs. As such, it is sort of good that the pensions are not increased”
			<i>(c. Aftonbladet 3.9.15a)</i>
3.2	Personal evaluation/truth	Utterances that present highly personal evaluations or “truths” about the issue/reality.	“I do not believe if I should believe anything Stordalen says, I believe he profits from everything and everyone”
			<i>(c. VG 8.9.15)</i>

3.3	Personal anecdote	Anecdotes from the speaker's own life is used either as a reason in an argument or as self-disclosure. In the first case, the anecdote serves to justify either the speaker's claim or position; in the latter, it merely discloses personal information about the speaker.	"I myself am ill and I do not receive much in social security benefits. I have a chronic disease. And no, I am not going to donate money to them. Most of the money I receive, I spend on my medicines and they are not fucking cheap, living off 1000 kr montly is not fun."  <i>(c. Aftenbladet 3.9.15)</i>
4	Acclaims	Acclaims of persons, utterances or actions. The category is broken down on sub-categories after who is acclaimed.	
4.1	Person or action that contributes	Acclaims of persons/actions that contribute to helping the refugees/expressions of willingness to do so.	"All honour to Stordalen"  <i>(c. NRK 8.9.15)</i>
4.2	Participant in the comment sections	Acclaims of person/utterance participating in the comment sections.	"Thank you for your contribution [names another commentator]!"  <i>(c. Expressen 5.9.15)</i>
4.3	Political actor	Acclaims of political actor.	"Go Listhaug, du are just great 🙌🙌🙌🙌"  <i>(c. Aftenposten 29.12.15)</i>
5	Evaluative definition	Evaluative definition of the issue, the situation, persons or actions, in which the value of these is defined. The category is broken down on two sub-categories.	
5.1	Definition of the immigrants	Evaluative definition of the immigrants. This includes evaluations where they are defined as "convenience refugees", "people in need", as well as economic or cultural resources, or threats to the national security or culture. Primarily, the immigrants are defined either in terms of "convenience refugees" or "people in need".	"Well, I see that they refuse to stay in other countries. They hitch on and scream that they are not going there and there, but we are going to Norway, Germany, etc. Funny that they know where they are going. They say it themselves: They are only going to nations with good welfare schemes. Speaks for itself....."  <i>(c. Aftenposten 5.9.15)</i>



5.2	Definition of the nation's economy	Evaluative definition of the nation's economic situation. This includes evaluations where the nation is described in terms of a "small nation", with little resources, and as a "rich nation", with many resources.	"We are relatively rich and have relatively much room, and once upon a time a wish to help people in need"  <i>(c. Dagbladet 9.11.15)</i>
6	Attacks	Attack on a person or a person's utterances. The category is broken down on four sub-categories, after what the attack targets.	
6.1	Morale/intention	Attack on a person's moral character or intention, both other participants in the debates and the people who appear in the newspapers. When a political actor is attacked for his or her moral character, the attack will be coded both in this category and in 6.4. The category includes accusations of "racism", "goodness posing", "moralism", "nation treason", as well as expressions of "shame" and "disgust".	"I think you must be Evil with a capital E. Hatred is a scary thing that you should rid yourself of."  <i>(c. Aftenposten 6.9.15)</i>
6.2	Claims/arguments	Attack on another person's utterances. When the attack/criticism is justified, i.e. explained, it is coded in category 7.	"When are you going to wipe off the shit you spew out?"  <i>(c. Aftenposten 5.9.15)</i>
6.3	Generic	Generic attack on another person. The attack does not concern anything in particular about the person who is attacked or his or her utterance. The category includes name-calling, ridicule and insults that could be used to attack anyone/any utterance.	"Too many drugs that have had negative effects?"  <i>(c. Politiken 26.1.16)</i>
6.4	Attack on political actors	Attack either on particular political actor's <i>person</i> or the <i>party</i> .	"Romson is a power-crazed fake person and if one does not realise that, one should not be allowed to vote, as one is too naïve and thus damaging to the nation."  <i>(c. Aftenbladet 24.11.15)</i>
7	Sanctions	Sanction of other participant's debate practices/behaviour. The category is broken down on	

seven sub-categories after what is sanctioned.

7.1	Misunderstanding	Sanction of a participant for misunderstanding the speaker's utterance.	"You obviously missed my point by several miles. Good job"  <i>(c. Dagens Nyheter 6.9.15b)</i>
7.2	Irrelevant contribution	Sanction of a participant for uttering something that is irrelevant to the current discussion, either for being off-topic, for commenting without sufficient knowledge about the context (e.g. for not having read the article to which the comment is written) or raising irrelevant points in his/her argumentation.	"Where do the social security benefit receivers fit in to this? This is about refugees and nobody else"  <i>(c. Ekstra Bladet 26.1.16)</i>
7.3	Personal attack	Sanction of a participant for performing a personal attack.	"Awesome, straight to personal attacks. That is how a person without reasonable arguments speak."  <i>(c. NRK 8.9.15)</i>
7.4	Style	Sanction of a participant for not adhering to virtues of good style, primarily for lack of correctness in writing, lack of clarity, and inappropriate use of stylistic elements such as emoticons or caps lock.	"I establish that there are others than the refugees who could need better Norwegian language skills"  <i>(c. NRK 29.12.15)</i>
7.5	Generalisation	Sanction of a participant for relying on generalisations in his/her argumentation.	"You should not feel too sure about that" Watch out for generalisations."  <i>(c. Berlingske 29.9.15)</i>
7.6	Incorrect information	Sanction of a participant for conveying incorrect information.	"Some seems to have gotten the wrong number book down from the shelf...."  <i>(c. Berlingske 6.1.16a)</i>
7.7	Source criticism	Sanction of a participant for conveying or relying on information from an unreliable, biased source.	"And you are providing a very reliable source. Hahahaha[...]"  <i>(c. Expressen 5.9.15)</i>
8	No self-produced text: Only hyperlink	Comment contains only a hyperlink without any additional text produced by the speaker to	" <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gE5VjC2DhP8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gE5VjC2DhP8</a> "

guide the reading of the content to which it is linked. *(c. Dagens Nyheter 6.9.15c)*

9	No self-produced text: Only emoticons	Comment contains only emoticons without any additional text produced by the speaker.	“❤️👍👍👍👍” <i>(c. Expressen 5.9.15)</i>
10	No self-produced text: Only tag	Comment contains only a tag to another Facebook-user without any additional text produced by the speaker. The tag consists of the Facebook user’s name and makes a comment visible to him or her by appearing as a notification.	“[tags another person]” <i>(c. Politiken 26.1.16)</i>
11	Content incomprehensible	Comment has too little or too ambiguous content to make interpretation possible.	“Vibb” <i>(c. Aftonbladet 26.11.15)</i>
12	<i>Sequence: 1<sup>st</sup> comment in thread</i>	The comment is written as the first comment in a thread, i.e. not as a response to previous comments in the comment sections. All comments are coded in either this category or the category “Reply to another comment”.	
13	<i>Sequence: Reply to another comment</i>	The comment is written as a reply to another comment in the thread, i.e. it is not the first comment in the thread. All comments are coded in either this category or the category “1 <sup>st</sup> comment in thread”.	

## Appendix B: Newspaper articles referenced in the analysis.

*VG*, Sep. 8 2015: “Stordalen about hotel help for the refugees: - Not possible to profit from this”.

**Original title**<sup>57</sup>: Stordalen om hotellhjelp til flyktningene: - Ikke mulig å tjene penger på dette.

**Number of comments (total)**<sup>58</sup>: 221

**Access:** <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/6bnwz/stordalen-om-hotellhjelp-til-flyktningene-ikke-mulig-aa-tjene-penger-paa-dette>

*NRK*, Sep. 8 2015: “Stordalen wants to house 5000 refugees”.

**Original title:** Stordalen vil huse 5000 flyktninger.

**Number of comments (total):** 344

**Access:** <https://www.nrk.no/norge/stordalen-vil-huse-flyktninger-i-5000-gjestedogn-1.12541161>

*Aftenposten*, Sep. 5 2015: “UDI rents hotel rooms from Stordalen. Price: 650 per night”.

**Original title:** UDI leier hotellrom fra Stordalen. Pris: 650,- per natt.

**Number of comments (total):** 471

**Access:** [https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/3p7e/UDI-leier-hotellrom-fra-Stordalen-verdt-65000-kroner?fbclid=IwAR0qTtkXQo1HA0U-ksYvxIHGcE5eKRxLneB8-i\\_5LWG8oMMLhu0O1kpeKYg](https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/3p7e/UDI-leier-hotellrom-fra-Stordalen-verdt-65000-kroner?fbclid=IwAR0qTtkXQo1HA0U-ksYvxIHGcE5eKRxLneB8-i_5LWG8oMMLhu0O1kpeKYg)

*Aftenposten*, Sep. 6a 2015: “Stordalen praised by humanitarian organisations, but is criticised in social media”.

**Original title:** Stordalen roses av humanitære organisasjoner, men møter kritikk i sosiale medier.

**Number of comments (total):** 362

**Access:** [https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/jb6L/Stordalens-roses-av-humanitære-organisasjoner\\_-men-moter-kritikk-i-sosiale-medier](https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/jb6L/Stordalens-roses-av-humanitære-organisasjoner_-men-moter-kritikk-i-sosiale-medier)

*Aftenposten* Sep. 6b 2015: “Had to get diapers for the asylum children in a hurry”.

**Original title:** Måtte hasteskaffe bleier til asylbarna.

**Number of comments (total):** 293

**Access:** <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/00V6/Matte-hasteskaffe-bleier-til-asylbarna>

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<sup>57</sup> These are the titles at the time of the data collection. Note that some titles may have been updated later by the newsrooms.

<sup>58</sup> These are the number of comments at the time of the data collection. Note that some comments may later have been removed or added as the debate is still open for participation.

*Aftonbladet*, Sep. 3a 2015: “Here is how you can send money to help the refugees – like Vi hjälper [We are helping] for more initiatives”.

**Original title:** Så kan du skänka pengar för att hjälpa flyktingarna –Gilla Vi hjälper för fler tips på initiativ.

**Number of comments (total):** 90

**Access:** <https://www.facebook.com/aftonbladet/photos/a.481446411865566/1081112755232259/?type=3>

*Aftonbladet*, Sep. 3b 2015: “Vi hjälper – here is how you can contribute in the catastrophe”.

**Original title:** Vi hjälper – så kan du bidra i katastrofen.

**Number of comments (total):** 51

**Access:** <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/7lxQ84/nya-katastrofbilder--sa-kan-du-hjalpa>

*Dagens Nyheter*, Sep. 6a 2015: “#jagdelar [Ishare]”

**Original title:** #jagdelar

**Number of comments (total):** 95

**Access:** <https://jagdelar.dn.se/?fbclid=IwAR1LXUjIxUh0r3HINfiPisQeVsEiTeCrgjg3TSncwEK-IdpWlzfj4eNrreg>

*Dagens Nyheter*, Sep. 6b 2015: “Kerstin Ekman: There exists a gold reserve of humanity in Sweden”.

**Original title:** Kerstin Ekman: Det finns en guldreserv av humanism i Sverige.

**Number of comments (total):** 26

**Access:** [https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/kerstin-ekman-det-finns-en-guldreserv-av-humanism-i-sverige/?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=page&utm\\_campaign=dn](https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/kerstin-ekman-det-finns-en-guldreserv-av-humanism-i-sverige/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=page&utm_campaign=dn)

*Dagens Nyheter*, Sep. 6c 2015: “This is #jagdelar”.

**Original title:** Det här er #jagdelar.

**Number of comments (total):** 19

**Access:** [https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/det-har-ar-jagdelar/?fbclid=IwAR3GQVjJQvOlmrnL-8\\_1AvCB3VfCll6Lu\\_2s9I80Li91kKsaEj1Ie4N68](https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/det-har-ar-jagdelar/?fbclid=IwAR3GQVjJQvOlmrnL-8_1AvCB3VfCll6Lu_2s9I80Li91kKsaEj1Ie4N68)

*Dagens Nyheter*, Sep. 6d 2015: “#jagdelar [Ishare] the faith in humanity and human compassion”.

**Original title:** #jagdelar tron på humanitet och medmänsklighet.

**Number of comments (total):** 17

**Access:** <https://www.dn.se/ledare/peter-wolodarski-jagdelar-tron-pa-humanitet-och-medmansklighet/>

*Expressen*, Sep. 5 2015: “Swedes show their support for the Red Cross and Expressen’s effort”.

**Original title:** Svenskarne visar sitt stöd för Röda korsets och Expressens insats.

**Number of comments (total):** 81

**Access:** [https://www.expressen.se/jagvillhjalpa/svenskar-som-vill-hjalpa/?fbclid=IwAR2\\_TGG6TLUTOq3IyvKdQGoTOW\\_ygTk0aIXvbXRf11-TxeKn7ezLYjv9JQ](https://www.expressen.se/jagvillhjalpa/svenskar-som-vill-hjalpa/?fbclid=IwAR2_TGG6TLUTOq3IyvKdQGoTOW_ygTk0aIXvbXRf11-TxeKn7ezLYjv9JQ)

*Berlingske*, Aug. 5 2015: “Welcome ad addressed at refugees to be printed in big British newspaper”.

**Original title:** Velkomst-annonce til flygtninge kommer nu i stor britisk avis.

**Number of comments (total):** 94

**Access:** <https://www.berlingske.dk/politik/velkomst-annonce-til-flygtninge-kommer-nu-i-the-guardian>

*Berlingske*, Sep. 29 2015: “Here is the counter-move to Støjberg’s ad”.

**Original title:** Her er modtrækket til Støjbergs annonce.

**Number of comments (total):** 64

**Access:** <https://www.berlingske.dk/politik/her-er-modtraekket-til-stoejbergs-annonce>

*Ekstra Bladet*, Aug. 4 2015: “Swindled Støjberg. Advertise for Denmark as amazing asylum country”.

**Original title:** Snød Støjberg. Reklamerer for Danmark som fantastisk asylland.

**Number of comments (total):** 86

**Access:** <https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/snoed-stoejberg-reklamerer-for-danmark-som-fantastisk-asyl-land/5671930>

*Politiken*, Sep. 9 2015: “New ad in Libanon. Danes apologise for Støjberg’s campaign”.

**Original title:** Ny annonce i Libanon: Danskere undskylder Støjbergs kampagne.

**Number of comments (total):** 163

**Access:** <https://politiken.dk/kultur/medier/art5588708/Ny-annonce-i-Libanon-Danskere-undskylder-Støjbergs-kampagne>

*Politiken*, Aug. 3 2015: Danish chairwoman to refugees in a British newspaper: Please come to Denmark.

**Original title:** “Dansk formand til flygtninge i britisk avis: “Vær sød at komme til Danmark”“

**Number of comments (total):** 98

**Access:** <https://politiken.dk/indland/art5584437/Dansk-formand-til-flygtninge-i-britisk-avis-Vær-sød-at-komme-til-Danmark>

*VG*, Nov. 11 2015: “Here is how Labour Party-Jonas will stricthen the asylum policy”.

**Original title:** Slik vil AP-Jonas stramme inn asylpolitikken.

**Number of comments (total):** 237

**Access:** <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/rQvGR/slik-vil-ap-jonas-stramme-inn-asylpolitikken>

*Dagbladet*, Nov. 19 2015: “These are the asylum agreement’s 29 points“.

**Original title:** Dette er asylavtalens 29 punkter.

**Number of comments (total):** 162

**Access:** [https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/norge-far-europas-strengeste-asylpolitikk/60461396?fbclid=IwAR1mvf2\\_8VCMUL9j8XiWtmr3sxptbcWyAphjLAY8U\\_Hc6RKGfVZR4CARxjM](https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/norge-far-europas-strengeste-asylpolitikk/60461396?fbclid=IwAR1mvf2_8VCMUL9j8XiWtmr3sxptbcWyAphjLAY8U_Hc6RKGfVZR4CARxjM)

*Dagbladet*, Nov. 9 2015: “- One cannot just come here and have welfare benefits that Norwegian taxpayers have built.”

**Original title:** - Ikke bare å komme hit og få velferdsgoder som norske skattebetalere har bygd opp.

**Number of comments (total):** 392

**Access:** <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/norge-skal-ikke-vaere-noen-fristad/60591914?fbclid=IwAR2NZaLrRHcp20noR5oLQ8bC1Pc7Lt-iWH1dJKjKbuAhHzK4VaNQDUcT7mw>

*NRK*, Dec. 29 2015: “We will have an asylum policy among the strictest in Europe”

**Original title:** Vi kommer til å få en asylpolitikk som er blant de strengeste i Europa.

**Number of comments (total):** 337

**Access:** <https://www.nrk.no/norge/-vi-kommer-til-a-fa-en-asylpolitikk-som-er-blant-de-strengeste-i-europa-1.12724216>

*Aftenposten*, Dec. 29 2015: “Here are Sylvi Listhaug’s (Progress Party) demands to immigrants”

**Original title:** Her er Sylvi Listhaugs (Frp) krav til innvandrerne.

**Number of comments (total):** 326

**Access:** <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/y88E/listhaug-foreslaar-nye-innstramminger-for-innvandring>

*Aftenbladet*, Nov. 26 2015: “The government has decided to implement medical age determination tests of alone-coming children”.

**Original title:** Regeringen har beslutat att införa medicinsk åldersbestämning av ensamkommande barn.

**Number of comments (total):** 54

**Access:** <https://www.facebook.com/aftonbladet/videos/1126542467355954/>

*Aftonbladet*, Nov. 24 2015: “Romson in tears when the government implements temporary residencies”.

**Original title:** Romson i tårar när regeringen inför tillfälliga uppehållstillstånd.

**Number of comments (total):** 523

**Access:** <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/6nVJ7e/regeringen-presenterar-atgarder-pa-migrationsområdet>

*Dagens Nyheter*, Nov 24 2015: “Sweden adapts the migration policy to EU’s lowest level”.

**Original title:** Sverige anpassar migrationspolitiken till EUs lägstanivå.

**Number of comments (total):** 195

**Access:** <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/sverige-anpassar-migrationspolitiken-till-eus-lagstaniva/?forceScript=1&variantType=large>

*Expressen*, Nov. 11 2015: “THE MESSAGE: The government implements border controls.”

**Original title:** BESKEDET: Regeringen inför gränskontroller.

**Number of comments (total):** 1215

**Access:** [https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/regeringen-infor-granskontroller/?fbclid=IwAR2N29W\\_n81fswx-xM55iBNUgB578rBHZyPjuqM-SxUsdBsrNgbNmD3G3po](https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/regeringen-infor-granskontroller/?fbclid=IwAR2N29W_n81fswx-xM55iBNUgB578rBHZyPjuqM-SxUsdBsrNgbNmD3G3po)

*SVT Nyheter*, Nov. 26 2015, “The voters’ verdict on the new hard refugee policy: - Necessary, but way too late”.

**Original title:** Väljarnas dom om nya hårda flyktingpolitiken: - Nödvändigt – men alldeles för sent.

**Number of comments (total):** 68

**Access:** <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/valjarna-om-nya-flyktingpolitiken-nodvandigt>

*Ekstra-Bladet*, Jan. 26 2016: “Controversial asylum retrenchments passed”.

**Original title:** Omstridte asylstramminger er blevet vedtaget.

**Number of comments (total):** 99

**Access:** <https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/politik/dansktopolitik/omstridte-asylstramminger-er-blevet-vedtaget/5925458>



*Politiken*, Jan. 26 2016: “Today the Parliament votes on the controversial immigrant law no. 87”.

**Original title:** I dag skal Folketinget stemme om den kontroversielle udlændingelov nr. 87

**Number of comments (total):** 86

**Access:** [https://politiken.dk/udland/fokus\\_int/Flygtningestroem/art5608180/I-dag-skal-Folketinget-stemme-om-den-kontroversielle-udl%C3%A6ndingelov-nr.-87](https://politiken.dk/udland/fokus_int/Flygtningestroem/art5608180/I-dag-skal-Folketinget-stemme-om-den-kontroversielle-udl%C3%A6ndingelov-nr.-87)

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**Original title:** Nu er asylstramningerne vedtaget.

**Number of comments (total):** 342

**Access:** <https://www.berlingske.dk/politik/nu-er-de-nye-asylstramninger-vedtaget>

*Berlingske*, Jan. 6 2016: “Støjberg wants to make it more difficult for unwanted immigrants [Støjberg vil stramme skruen om uønskede invandrere]”.

**Original title:** Støjberg vil stramme skruen om uønskede udlændinge.

**Number of comments (total):** 192

**Access:** <https://www.berlingske.dk/politik/stoejberg-vil-stramme-skruen-om-uoenskede-udlaendinge>

*DR Nyheder* Jan. 20 2016: “Denmark asked to explain jewellery law in the EU”.

**Original title:** Danmark bedt om at forklare smykkelov i EU.

**Number of comments (total):** 189

**Access:** [https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/danmark-bedt-om-forklare-smykkelov-i-eu?fbclid=IwAR2Bb6Z6hff8mwn2UL0033PW3ZSoaaHmUBcgIRKqd\\_inImNy3S2oKIXeWKQ](https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/danmark-bedt-om-forklare-smykkelov-i-eu?fbclid=IwAR2Bb6Z6hff8mwn2UL0033PW3ZSoaaHmUBcgIRKqd_inImNy3S2oKIXeWKQ)





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