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# Eager to Be in Touch with the World: The Practice and Study of Rhetoric in Scandinavia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the practice and study of rhetoric in Scandinavia. It describes the culture, political system, and media system of Scandinavia as a prerequisite for both the study and the practice of rhetoric in this region. The paper provides special attention to the Scandinavian researcher's sense of public obligation and to the study of egalitarianism and authenticity. The study and teaching of rhetoric in Scandinavia is multifaceted, however it is united by a common desire to be in touch with the world. The meaning of rhetoric is seen as a means to help people become active agents in their own lives, contribute to create better public debates, improve discussion, and reasoning in policymaking.

## KEYWORDS

Audience research;  
authenticity; egalitarianism;  
public communication;  
Scandinavia; rhetoric;  
rhetorical citizenship

## Introduction

On March 12, 2020, the Norwegian Government and Prime Minister Erna Solberg gave a press conference announcing the most far-reaching interventions in public life since the Second World War. The Corona-virus had become a serious threat to health and security, and the government announced the measures it would now take.<sup>1</sup>

In the national address that initiated the press conference, the Prime Minister encouraged all Norwegians to work together in combatting the virus. She said that “it is now absolutely crucial that all of the inhabitants of our country participate in a common *dugnad* to curb the virus.”<sup>2</sup> I have not translated the word “*dugnad*” because it is hard to translate into English, at least if one aims to translate it into just one word.<sup>3</sup> The terms that come closest to the original Norwegian is probably “voluntary work” or “communal work.” Germans would probably say “*Gemeinschaftsarbeit*” or “*Nachbarschaftshilfe*,” and in France they might use the term “*travail de groupe*.” In understanding the rhetoric dealing with the COVID-19 situation in Norway, this word is essential, because it represents the rhetorical constitution of the Norwegian citizens into a collective responsible entity that is eager to respond to the situation in the best possible way. This constitution hinges on the national understanding of the concept of *dugnad* in Norway. To do *dugnad*, means that all participate voluntary and on equal terms – rich or poor – to help one's community or a group to which one belongs. It might be baking or selling a cake at one's daughters' sports event or it could be painting or removing weeds for one's housing cooperative or community. The importance of this concept in the Norwegian consciousness becomes even more obvious when the Prime Minister later in her speech says: “In Norway we stand together when times are tough. We mobilize for *dugnad* and collaboration in small and large communities. Now, this is more important than ever.” Except for two instances, the use of the word “we” throughout the speech signifies a united national “we” that acts together and in unison. This is not a PM telling her subjects what she has decided or what they are ordered to do, this is a peer expressing what we know, who we are, and how we will work together on equal terms.

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The press conference was transmitted by the public service broadcasters, NRK and TV2, by the national newspapers, and was seen by most of the Norwegian population. In the days that followed, the message was repeated and expanded by commentators, other politicians the public, setting the agenda and the understanding of how Norway should meet the health treat of COVID-19. Agreement was dominant both between political parties and in the nation as a whole. It was based on a high level of trust in the Government, PM, and the legacy media in Norway – a trust and approval that increased substantially in the weeks that followed.

I begin with this example, because it vividly illustrates important aspects of Norwegian and Scandinavian politics, media, and rhetoric – and also points to how Scandinavian researchers study rhetoric. It shows that Norway, like Denmark and Sweden, is characterized by equality in rhetoric, ideology, and politics. It also illustrates that Scandinavia has less polarization in politics and media than bi-partial countries like the US, and that these small countries still share a common public sphere, and to a high degree retain a sense of shared national *we*. That polarization is less prevalent in the Scandinavian countries is partly due to a shared national public sphere but is also the result of the multi-party systems and proportional party representation (For features of Scandinavian elections, see Hopmann & Karlsen, 2021). In such systems “catch-all” rhetoric and bi-partisan hostility will be strategically less expedient than in the “winner-takes-all” systems of the UK and the US. Because Scandinavian voters have several alternative parties to pick from, voters may turn their backs on both the attacker and the attacked. Thus, traditionally, party political polarization in these countries is low; politics in Scandinavia is generally oriented toward compromise or, if possible, consensus (Kjeldsen et al., 2021). Such circumstances naturally affect the rhetoric performed in Scandinavia, the subjects which are studied, and the way they are studied.

In the following essay I first briefly describe the culture, political system, and media system of Scandinavia. I then provide an overview of Scandinavian research in rhetoric, with special attention to the Scandinavian researcher’s sense of public obligation, and to the study of egalitarianism and authenticity. As in other countries, the study and teaching of rhetoric in Scandinavia is multifaceted; however, if I should characterize it with one phrase it would be *a desire to be in touch with the world*. It is more *vita active* than *vita contemplative*, more Aristotle than Plato, more speechwriting than deconstruction. Of course, Scandinavian rhetoric has both a philosophical and a practical face. However, it tends to show the face of practical communication more often. The meaning of rhetoric is to help people become active agents in their own lives, contribute to create better public debates, improve discussion and reasoning in policymaking.

## **The framework for Scandinavian rhetoric: culture, political system, and media system**

### **Culture**

Scandinavia consists of the three countries: Sweden (10.2 million people), Denmark (5.8 million people), and Norway (5.3 million people). Naturally, these three countries are different in many respects, but they also share a common history and culture going centuries back. At several points in history and in different constellations they have shared the same monarch. They have different languages; however, all three tongues descend from Old Norse and are still so similar in writing and pronunciation that citizens are generally able to understand each other across borders.

In Hofstede’s cultural comparison scheme, Scandinavia is high on individualism and indulgence, and low in power distance and masculinity. This fits well with the three countries as egalitarian societies with small difference economically and socially. Scandinavia is also characterized by high levels of literacy and high levels of trust. Compared to, for instance, the United States, Scandinavian countries place a high value on relationships and quality of life over materialism and competition. This may be connected to their development of a dominant, and generally well-functioning, welfare system. Scandinavians also seem to have higher tolerance levels, less shame associated with failure, and a strong belief in common sense. They are, in short, “cooperative, egalitarian, and practical.”

Naturally, these cultural values color the practice and the study of rhetoric. They form the topoi on which most arguments are built in practical communication, and they inform the way research and teaching is done.

### **Political system**

The Scandinavian countries have *multi-party systems* with approximately 10 parties regularly winning parliamentary representation by courting diverse segments of the electorate. Voter volatility (i.e., voters changing party preferences from one election to the next) has increased in all three countries, and politicians will always attempt to “steal” voters from other parties. There is an actual possibility of new parties getting into parliament, especially in Denmark, where the threshold is 2%, compared to 4% in Norway and Sweden. As mentioned, all three countries have elaborate electoral systems that secure roughly proportional party representation, unlike the “winner-takes-all” constituency-based systems in Britain and the US (Hopmann & Karlsen, 2021). The resultant Scandinavian multi-party systems tend to render “catch-all” rhetoric less purposeful, as voters have several alternative parties to pick from on each side of the political spectrum. Arguably, we might expect less rhetorical hostility in a multi-party-system: many voters will tend to turn their backs on both the attacked party and the attacking party since the multi-party system always offers other choices.

The parties control candidate nominations, and elections install a cabinet that distributes executive power among its ministers. Both the party-centered focus of election campaigns and the collegiality between politicians make the Prime Minister’s character and leadership abilities secondary in election debates to the party’s policy positions. As the cabinet’s leader, the Prime Minister routinely meets other party leaders or opponents in public debates or interviews. The Prime Minister, therefore, tends to – or is expected to – excel at direct debate, confidently displaying command of government policy and skillfully countering the arguments of opponents.

Compared to members of congress in the US, for instance, Scandinavian politicians are in much more direct rhetorical contact with the public, and more engaged in rhetorical exchange with opponents, with the electorate watching.

### **Media system**

As elsewhere, most rhetorical communication in Scandinavia is mainly performed and experienced in the media, and the media system creates important rhetorical constraints. The Scandinavian media system is a prototypical example of Hallin & Mancini’s “Democratic corporatist model” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), characterized by high newspaper circulation, a strong party-aligned press (“political parallelism”), and a diverse, neutral, commercial press characterized by strong journalistic self-regulation; also, there is active state intervention and strong public service broadcasting. Political parallelism has coexisted with a strong mass-circulation press and a high level of journalistic professionalization and autonomy; in the last decades, however, the party alignment and political parallelism appear to have decreased in favor of more journalistic professionalization and autonomy. The democratic corporatist model and the relatively small population of the three countries have fostered a shared national public sphere with a high degree of newspaper reading and dominant public broadcasters. In practice, this has led to a marked proximity between politicians and the public: politicians, including party leaders, cabinet members and Prime Ministers, regularly participate in the public sphere with comments, interviews and debate pieces, and especially in broadcast political debates.

Scandinavian political rhetoric and the democratic corporatist media model function within a political system characterized by moderate pluralism (often with minority governments seeking consensus or compromise), democratic corporatism, and a strong welfare state with constraints on capitalism – including the commercial media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 67–68, 144–145; Strömbäck et al., 2008). Compared to, for instance, the United States, then, some of the most important

differences in the framework for rhetoric in Scandinavia, is 1) a culture of egalitarianism, trust, and high levels of literacy and education for the population in general; 2) a political system with more parties and compromises, and less polarization, and 3) a media system that is a democratic corporatist model dominated by public service broadcasting, and frequent visits by politicians in national media – even by cabinet ministers and prime ministers. Obviously, these traits are important constraints for rhetorical communication: Egalitarianism does not approve of soaring and visionary oratory, but listens to everyday practical argumentation. More parties and less polarization reduce hostility, and increase the tendency to seek alliances. Frequent visits in news media establish a shared national public sphere, and increase political accountability.

## Scandinavian research in rhetoric

The three Scandinavian countries have closely related languages and cultures and very similar political and media systems. Thus, the rhetoric is rather similar, which is also true of research fields, objects, and methods. The recent history of the study of rhetoric in the Scandinavian countries is striking in many ways. Originally, research and education developed independently in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Being able to read each other's work, researchers soon tied the three different beginnings together into one story. This cord is now increasingly woven into a European and international fabric. The rhetorical research community is now tightly integrated through conferences and research collaboration.

### *Beginnings of rhetorical research in Scandinavia*

I will say more about this, and my account on rhetorical research in Scandinavia will focus on the last two decades. However, in order to understand the foundation that the research community was built on, it is necessary to first give a few words on the beginnings of rhetorical research in Scandinavia (readers interested in the full history may consult the introductory chapter in the book *Scandinavian Studies in Rhetoric. Rhetorica Scandinavica 1997–2010* (Kjeldsen & Grue, 2011). As a field of teaching and research, rhetoric began in the years after the Second World War. At the University of Copenhagen rhetoric was introduced in 1958 with the Laboratory of Metrics and Public Speaking (“Laboratoriet for Metrik og Foredragslære”), a section under the Department of Nordic philology. The laboratory developed into an independent education in rhetoric in 1970. Jørgen Fafner (1925–2005) became the department's professor, and it is mostly due to him that rhetoric in Denmark became an education and a recognized scholarly subject. Through the 70s and 80s the study grew steadily, and a canon of scholarly books was established; most notably Fafner's theoretical introduction, *Rhetoric. Classical and modern*, (in Danish “Retorik. Klassisk og modern”, Fafner, 2005, originally from 1977) and his historical account of the rhetorical tradition in Western Europe, *Thought and speech* (in Danish “Tanke og tale”, Fafner, 1982).

In Sweden, studies in rhetoric began in the 60s and mostly grew out of literature studies (cf. Johannesson, 1997). In the late 70s, rhetoric became an approach for studying aspects of 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century literature. The key figure in this new approach to literary studies was Kurt Johannesson. Johannesson, who debuted with a study in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Swedish propaganda and politics (Johannesson 1969–70), in many ways became the founding father of the study of rhetoric in Sweden. Johannesson gave the first courses in rhetoric at the Department of Literature in Uppsala, and in 1988 he became the first Swedish professor of rhetoric at that university. In 1990, he published his still widely used textbook, *Rhetoric – or the art of persuading*.

Norway was a late starter in the field of rhetoric studies. Translations of classics such as Cicero's speeches and of Pseudo-Longinus's *On the Sublime* appeared, but, disregarding a number of practical and more or less historically informed handbooks in the art of “eloquence” throughout the century, it was not until 1981 that a Norwegian produced a book featuring the word “rhetoric” in its title. This book was *On the Norwegian Way of Writing. Examples and Counter Examples to Illuminate Recent*

*Norwegian Rhetoric* (Johannesen, 1981) written by the poet, scholar and free intellectual Georg Johannesen (1931–2005). In 1987, Johannesen published *Rhetorica Norvegica* (Johannesen, 1987) a three-hundred pages introduction to the subject of rhetoric based on earlier manuals used at the Department of Nordic Languages and Literature at the University of Bergen. Although written in the style of a “modernist florilegium” (in the vein of Ezra Pound or Marshall McLuhan) and thus not easily read, the book contributed to making “rhetoric” in the classical and scholarly sense of the term known to Norwegian teachers and scholars, and even to a wider public (it received considerable media attention due to the author’s position as a modernist poet and political intellectual). Johannesen and his students in Bergen organized a study group, *Rhetorical Forum* (Retorisk Forum), which organized lectures and meetings, and published a study series, from 1996 to 1999 entitled *Rhetorical yearbook* (“Retorisk årbok”). In 1996, Johannesen was awarded a three-year position under the auspices of Rhetorical Forum, making him Norway’s first professor of rhetoric.

The beginnings of rhetoric in the three countries were first national and then Scandinavian. In recent years, however, Scandinavian research in rhetoric has shown itself to be a force to be reckoned with in Europe and internationally as well (Kjeldsen, 2012; Kjeldsen & Grue, 2011). Even though it only publishes articles in Scandinavian languages, an early milestone was the launching of the research journal *Rhetorica Scandinavica* in 1997, whose content demonstrates that the study of rhetoric in the region is diverse and pragmatic. It has reflected international and American trends, while also developing distinctive approaches.

The majority of researchers practice rhetorical criticism, analyses of rhetorical practice in political communication, and historical studies. Their rhetorical criticism generally take a pragmatic approach to methodical purity. Instead of following one “authorized” procedure, most scholars integrate several rhetorical theories and methods, combining them with methods adapted from neighboring types of analysis (cf. Kuypers, 2016, pp. 239–252, on eclectic criticism), e.g., discourse analysis or linguistic pragmatics. The guiding factor has been the specific object of study: the method, in any given case, should be chosen in order to best answer the research question. Textual analyses focusing on argumentation, gender, attitudes, or ethos call for different tools, as does the study of interaction and decision-making in the discussion of political issues.

Recently, scholars have turned toward work rooted in political science and deliberative theory. Rhetoricians are increasingly aware that they not only have distinctive contributions to make to the understanding and assessment of political rhetoric, but also something to learn from disciplines that typically apply empirical, systemic, and quantitative approaches. Still, the rhetorical scholarship differs in distinct ways from these fields: 1) Rhetoricians are more likely to look closely at individual texts (or other artifacts), using tools related to those developed in other humanistic fields such as linguistics and literary scholarship; 2) rhetoricians often tend to apply a functional and sometimes more normative view of the artifacts they study, typically ascribing a potential social function to them and asking whether they are apt to have a positive or negative function in relation to concepts of democracy, societal cohesion, and the like. In an overview over the study of political rhetoric, Kjell Lars Berge (2014) argues in line with the main Scandinavian tradition that political rhetoric should be understood as a normatively anchored as well as a situated phenomenon.

### ***Recent research and the scholarly sense of public obligation***

Scandinavia seem to differ somewhat from contemporary American rhetorical research published in journals such as *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, which generally appears more theoretical and concerned with political engagement on behalf of groups considered disenfranchised or marginalized. Scandinavian rhetoricians usually seek to write and communicate as accessibly and plainly as possible, even in research journals. This is considered not only as belonging to a scholarly ethos, but also as a public duty. Thus, alongside academic publications, rhetorical scholars regularly comment on political rhetoric in the media and contribute critical commentaries and analyses in print, broadcast, and online media aimed at a general audience.

Many Scandinavia researchers in rhetoric carry a feeling of obligation that research must be relevant, understandable, and of value to the general public. A researcher is expected to share results and insights with people outside academia, and do it in a way that may enlighten or help them in their everyday lives. This sense of public obligation affects both the topics chosen for research and the way research is written. Plain understandable prose is the preferred writing style. One source of this tradition is probably the Danish pastor, poet, philosopher, and politician Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872), who was a devoted Lutheran and a spokesman for the so-called “living word,” advocating that it is the oral exchange between people and not the dead words on the page that forms the existence of Christianity. This is echoed in one of the central tenets of Professor Jørgen Fafner (1925–2005, cf. above). He often told his students: you have only understood something properly, if you are able to explain it to others, so that they may also understand it (cf. Fafner, 2011).

This is what most Scandinavian rhetoricians try to do: Examine issues that are relevant to the public, write research papers as accessible as possible, and participate in the public debate by communicating the scholarly insight in an enlightening and educational way to the population. Such communication is done by writing articles for newspapers, being interviewed in broadcast media, participating in debates, and giving talks to the general public – from pupils to pensioners. There is even a specific Scandinavian word for this kind of communication: “formidling.” Germans would say “Vermittlung,” but the word does not really exist in English. Normally, it is translated to dissemination, mediation, or simply communication. However, none of these words captures the sense of translation from research to everyday prose, or the informing and educational character of this kind of public communication. Actually, such communication, “formidling,” is one of three duties established by law for Scandinavian scholars: research, teach, and communicate (“formidle”).

Of course, not all rhetoric research and scholars in Scandinavia fit the picture I have described.<sup>4</sup> Still, it is a picture that does help distinguish the study of rhetoric in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden from the study of rhetoric in other countries. For instance, Scandinavian research seems to be less abstractly theoretical than research in the US. Traditionally, most studies are about political rhetoric examined through rhetorical criticism.

This has been the case for Denmark, where the main approaches in the study of political rhetoric are either rhetorical criticism of selected specimens, representing genres or themes, or theoretically informed approaches, leaning on political theory and practical philosophy, but still based on qualitative studies of examples (Kock, 2011). In both approaches, an evaluative orientation is often central in the sense that the scholar seeks a normative assessment of the studied discourse. Scholars apply concepts and criteria for democratic communication that they seek to develop in a combination of analysis and theory. This is also the case for a recent project in Denmark called *Danish Political Speeches* (“*Danske politiske taler*,” led by Marie Lund at University of Aarhus). The project examines the genres of political speechmaking in Denmark. Among other things, it demonstrates the convergence of traditional speechmaking and contemporary image staging and visual rhetoric (Lund, 2020).

Sweden has focused on historical and pedagogical studies as well as studies of climate rhetoric, which is dominant at Södertörn University. Literary studies was the field that rhetorical research first began in the 1970s and 80s at the Universities of Uppsala and Stockholm. Today, these institutions continue this approach, but also do historical and political work, as well as philosophically oriented work inspired by Chaïm Perelman (Rosengren, 2011) and Cornelius Castoriadis. The University of Lund, on the other hand, has specialized in didactics and pedagogy; Örebro has a tradition of feminist rhetoric and studies on non-verbal rhetoric.

In Norway, research and teaching in rhetoric is primarily done at the University of Oslo and the University of Bergen. At the Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies (University of Oslo), the main interests are texts norms and text cultures, conversations analysis, and the study of nonfiction prose. In Norwegian, this field is termed “saklitteratur,” which does not have an English equivalent, but in German would translate into “Sachliteratur.” These studies look at a wide range of everyday prose texts ranging from children’s drawings, to documents from public authorities, or speeches by politicians (cf. Berge, 1997). The department also focus on rhetoric in the public schools. At the

Department of media studies (University of Oslo), interest in rhetoric has been in the areas of PR and in political communication. In 2019 a project on *Pandemic rhetoric* began led by Øyvind Ihlen at the department of Media and communication. Not long after project start, the COVID-19 pandemic spread, making the research eerily relevant.

At the University of Bergen the study of rhetoric has been focused on political speechmaking and speechwriting (e.g., Johansen & Kjeldsen, 2005; Kjeldsen et al., 2019), political broadcast debates, and political rhetoric in general. The interest in public speaking has developed into several forms of public communication (“formidling”). One is a public accessible database with political speeches called *Words that work* (“Virksomme ord”). Another is the project *Seize the word* (“Ta ordet!”), which is a speaking competition for high school students organized by The research group for rhetoric, democracy and public culture (at Department of information science and media studies) and. In the same department, a large project on the Scandinavian immigration debate, called *Scanpub*, has several researchers examining rhetorical aspects of the debate, such as argumentation and the rhetorical constitution of actors in the debate. Another theme in Bergen has been visual and multimodal rhetoric (Kjeldsen, 2018c).

A recent move in the study of rhetoric initiated and lead from the rhetoric group at the University of Bergen is the project *Rhetorical audience studies*. This project involved scholars from Denmark and Norway, as well as the UK and US. It is worth mentioning, because it illustrates the Scandinavian inclination toward the practical and the empirical, and the orientation toward the public and the rhetorical life of the everyday. At the same time, it breaks with parts of the dominant tradition of rhetorical studies in both Scandinavia and, I believe, the US. It does so by introducing the field of *rhetorical reception studies*, and insisting that rhetoricians should more often study rhetorical audiences empirically. This is done in the book from the project: *Rhetorical Audiences and the Reception of Rhetoric* (Kjeldsen, 2018b). This approach has especially been developed by the research group for Rhetoric, Democracy and Public Culture at the University of Bergen, Norway. It aims at studying not only rhetorical text and context, but also how empirical audiences accept, negotiate or reject political rhetoric (Kjeldsen, 2016, 2018a). The approach acknowledges the impact of rhetoric but rejects a simple transmission model of communication. The aim is to understand the interaction between the rhetorical situation, the characteristics of the utterances, and the audience’s uptake and negotiation of them. Instead of moving conjecturally from textual traits to assumed effect, reception studies allow researchers to move from response to text and point to rhetorical traits that may have shaped the response. Studies deal with press photographs (Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2018), Facebook (Vatnøy, 2018), political advertising (Iversen, 2018), and television debates (Vatnøy et al., 2020). In Denmark, similar approaches have been used to examine political commentary (Bengtsson, 2018) and how political debate in online media is curated by journalists (Rønlev, 2018).

As these studies suggest, from being mostly preoccupied with theory and textual analysis, Scandinavian rhetoric studies have moved toward a greater interest in new research methods. Before the publication of *Rhetorical Audiences and the Reception of Rhetoric*, textbooks in rhetoric almost exclusively dealt with either rhetorical theory or rhetorical criticism and analysis (Kjeldsen, 2015; Lund & Roer, 2014; Viklund et al., 2014). However, a general interest in method have emerged in both research and textbooks. In 2020, for instance, the book *Rhetoric and Method* (“Retorik og metode”) was published (Bengtsson et al., 2020). Here a group of Scandinavian researchers demonstrates an array of methods for rhetorical research: interview studies, ethnographic work, action research, issue mapping, and others.

### ***The Scandinavian rhetoric of egalitarianism, authenticity, and pragmatality***

Much of the rhetoric studied in Scandinavia is of political communication, and much of this political communication, especially in Norway and Denmark, is characterized by an ideology emphasizing egalitarianism, authenticity, and practicality. We see this in visual political rhetoric in print ads (Kjeldsen, 2008, in Denmark), in political video advertising (Iversen, 2018, in Norway), in political

speechmaking (Kjeldsen & Johansen, 2011, in Johansen, 2002, 1999, 2007, 2019), and in online communication (Krogstad, 2013, 2014). In Scandinavia, the institutions of power – unions, parties, and politicians – do not want to appear to elevate themselves above ordinary people. The lowering of the political hero's status caused by television (Meyrowitz, 1985), weeklies, and popular culture has made the ethos of “the ordinary” a central democratic value and a main factor in political communication. This phenomenon, of course, goes beyond Scandinavia. In the US, for instance, we have witnessed the casual, conversational fireside chats of Franklin Roosevelt and the colloquial styles of Ronald Reagan (Jamieson, 1988) and George W. Bush. In countries such as Denmark and Norway, appearing ordinary and unassuming seems even more valuable. A Danish study of public spokespersons found that besides credibility (ethos), and charisma, public communicators were appreciated when displaying a “one-of-us” appeal, consisting of qualities such as sensitivity, warmth, folksiness, and capability of admitting mistakes (Kock & Hansen, 2002).

In Norway, Anders Johansen has defined authenticity in political communication as expressing yourself with a “lack of style and form in the traditional sense” (Johansen, 1999, p. 162, 2002). Already in 1966, the American social scientist Harry Eckstein described the particular authority and legitimacy of a Norwegian politician. Although his observations were made more than 40 years ago, they describe a style still prevalent in Scandinavian politics – especially in Norway and Denmark: “The great thing even among parliamentarians, for example, is to appear to be a regular fellow, practical and commonsensical, well versed in dull facts, rather inelegant, unimpressed, indeed embarrassed by success. One displays . . . a monotonous delivery, a bare style, a lack of ‘manners’ (although not of courtesy)” (Eckstein, 1966, p. 156f.). Prime Ministers, Eckstein explains, “cultivate equality more than primacy.” These descriptions suggest, we claim, a general Scandinavian appreciation of equality through uniformity and artlessness noticeable in advertising and speeches, as well as in television debates and online presence. We find this kind of egalitarian rhetoric in Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's New Year's speech on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002, where he launched an attack on the “chartered arbiters of taste, who determine what is good and right”. Even though this part of the speech concerned the freedom to determine one's own life, it still – paradoxically – supported the egalitarian inclination: “There are tendencies toward a tyranny of experts, which risks suppressing free popular debate. The population should not put up with the wagging fingers of so-called experts who think they know best.”<sup>5</sup>

We find similar egalitarian rhetoric in print and television ads (Kjeldsen, 2008), depicting the “ordinary Dane” or something typically “Danish” – such as the Danish countryside. When advertisements do show the politician, they address the viewer as an equal through eye contact, normal perspective, and small conventional portrait photos. Generally, ads refrain from conspicuous statements or symbols. Instead they just present the politician as a friendly, ordinary person. Compared to ads in France, UK or the US, Scandinavian ads remarkably lack appeals to leadership capabilities or international experience. Another study suggests that while female French politicians seek to project *effortless superiority*, their Norwegian counterparts seek to demonstrate *conspicuous modesty* (Krogstad & Storvik, 2012).

The parliaments of the three Scandinavian countries are arenas of public political rhetoric. In all of them, it is fair to say that the rhetoric generally heard is mainly unmemorable and often noticeably underprepared. MPs are often absent and, when present, often read newspapers or write Twitter messages. Although everything possible is done to bring debates in Parliament to the general public (direct TV, a separate TV channel, official transcripts available after a few hours, an elaborate website with all debates and many subcommittee meetings available on video), most citizens take little interest, and media coverage is spotty. A constraint on Scandinavian parliamentary rhetoric is that parties have generally taken firm stands on all issues before public debate in Parliament takes place, and MPs are under strict party discipline and nearly always toe the line.

The egalitarian democratic trend in rhetorical studies can also be found in the concept of rhetorical citizenship (Kock & Villadsen, 2012, 2015). In 2005–2006, the research network *Rhetorical Citizenship* was created by Lisa Villadsen and Christian Kock. It formed a community of interest between

rhetoricians and researchers from other subjects, focussing on the rhetorical aspects of the notion of citizenship. The network was concerned with the role of democratic citizens as participants, receivers and consumers of public debate and communication.

The issue of rhetorical citizenship is both directly and indirectly present in Christian Kock's many works on rhetorical deliberation and argumentation. Here, as in much Scandinavian research, the pragmatic aspects of rhetoric is at the forefront. Throughout his career Kock has argued that the domain of rhetorical argumentation is not truth and falsity, but choice of action in the civic sphere. On this basis he has, among other things, developed his rhetorical views on "norms for legitimate dissensus" (Kock, 2008). In a collection of his most central essays, he argues that argumentation theorist have "paid to little attention to the category of practical argumentation. Underlying this neglect is a failure to pay sufficient attention to a basic distinction, namely, that between epistemic and practical reasoning – or, respectively, reasoning about what is true and reasoning about what to do" (Kock, 2017, p. 1).

Rhetoric, then, as we know from the ancients, is a practical art, and for many Scandinavian rhetoricians, it is an art that can and should be used to make citizens better at discovering and countering dishonest and deceitful rhetoric *as well as* helping them to engage and persuade others with their own constructive rhetoric. This is also reflected in the teaching of rhetoric in higher education, where courses cover philosophical questions of ethics and epistemology as well as practical advice in persuasive communication. Thus, the student of rhetoric are offered to contrasting faces: the face of the philosopher and the face of the sophist.

## The two faces of rhetoric

The study of rhetoric has become very popular in Scandinavia. This is most obvious in Denmark, where very good grades are required to get into the university courses, and good jobs in communication are available for the graduated candidates. The main attraction for the employers – it seems fair to say – is the graduates' competencies and abilities in practical and strategic communication. Companies hire the sophist, not the philosopher. However, these two faces are on each side of the same coin. At least, they should be.

The two faces of rhetoric invites us to contemplate what is the role and function of studying and teaching this art: What is the *raison d'être* for rhetoric? Once again, we are back to the quarrel Plato had with the sophists. The study of rhetoric is beneficial because it makes people better at persuading and at judging other people's attempts of persuasion. However, if we just pay attention to the immediate practical value of rhetoric, we limit this fundamentally humanistic art to a mere tool. This is a present risk. These days – at least in Scandinavia – there is much talk about "outcome" and "impact" in research. Any scholar applying for funding must describe in detail what the proposed study will lead to. Research is required to strengthen the "national knowledge preparedness." Studies should meet societal challenges and make a difference, preferably immediately. They should not only demonstrate excellence in "scientific creativity and originality," "novelty and boldness," but also explain clearly the expected "outcomes," and show "the extent to which the planned outputs of the project address important present and/or future scientific challenges," and potential "for societal impact."<sup>6</sup> The impact should be demonstrated through "Communication and exploitation," and researchers must carry out "Quality and scope of communication and engagement activities with different target audiences, including relevant stakeholders/users."

In many ways rhetorical research is well equipped to do this. When it puts up the face of practicality it may help seek solutions to challenges of trustworthy and effective health communication in crisis such as the COVID-19. It may examine the problems of public and political communication and propose solutions – or at least provide the citizens with tools to understand when they encounter dishonest and deceitful communication. It may demonstrate how communication from authorities – the job center, the municipality, the government – are difficult for citizens to understand and leads to confusion and mistakes, which could have been avoided. These are important and useful functions,

and Scandinavian researchers in rhetoric are eager to engage in this. At the same time, such demand for immediate usefulness tend to show only one of the two faces of rhetoric: The focussed and narrow-minded stare. This is the face of the orator with his eyes locked on to the goal of persuading, allowing him to see clearly, but limits him to only seeing one thing. The other face is that of the rhetorician – the scholar who seeks many perspectives and rarely let’s his eyes rest or fixate on one thing. The first seeks to prove the already assumed, the second to uncover the unknown.

In the era of new public management, the value of the kaleidoscopic perspectives of the humanistic rhetorician have been devaluated. It is difficult to point to the concrete “results” it produces, and the outcome can never be quantified. Looking at the Norwegian rhetoric of *dugnad*, as I did in my introduction, does not solve an immediate problem, it does not provide an “impact” or a specific “outcome,” it does not engage specific “stakeholders,” but it does teach us something about who we are – both as Norwegians and as humans.

Demonstrating the rhetorical use of the term *dugnad* in a health crisis situation is not “a result” that we can establish once and for all, it is not even a “finding” in a scientific sense. It is a making clear how certain actors communicated in a certain situation. It is a perspective, a way of looking at the world that enables us to understand it better. Other people would have acted differently in the same situation, and the same actor differently in other situations. This is why the study of rhetoric, like philosophy, is ongoing work that never stops. We constantly find ourselves in new and different situations; and we must rethink as time changes cultures, values, and norms. Thus, we continuously need to engage in new conversations about the nature and value of rhetoric. The situations are new, but the questions remain the same: What is rhetoric? What convinces people? What is credible? Why do people listen to one speaker but not to the other? Why did a certain style inspire and engage people centuries ago, but feel empty and excessive to us?

So, in Scandinavia, in the US, as in the rest of the world, the value of rhetorical research is both practical and philosophical, it is both scientific and humanistic. It may provide both immediate benefits and outcomes, *and* it may help us in a continuous contemplation of the nature of humankind. The practical advice and solutions offered by rhetorical insights are useful. However, in a complex and ever changing world, fixed and instrumental rules of communication are rigid tools that never really fit perfectly. The most important contribution of the study of rhetoric, then, is not developing rules of thumb for persuasive communication – even though that is practical. The main contribution is providing us all with rhetorical *phronesis*, a general ability for sound judgment; “krisis” as it is called in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (cf. Farrell, 1993, p. 79).

Thus, the most fundamental value of rhetoric is the constant engaging of people in a rhetorical working through of issues, relations, and identity. Rhetoric, as Thomas B. Farrell has pointed out, “is an acquired competency” (Farrell, 1993, p. 16). It is a competency that may provide citizens with sound judgment (*phronesis*) and rhetorical citizenship – the ability to critique the rhetoric of others and to create persuasive rhetoric themselves. If we are to secure this competency, then we must continuously engage every new generation in an ongoing conversation on the nature, function, and value of rhetoric.

## Notes

1. This paper draws on some of my previous articles on the subject (e.g., Kjeldsen, 2012, 2020; Kjeldsen & Grue, 2011; Kjeldsen et al., 2021).
2. All quotations attributed to Prime Minister Erna Solberg are from this source unless otherwise noted. Transcription of the address in Norwegian can be found here: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/statsministers-innledning-pa-pressekonferanse-om-nye-tiltak-mot-koronasmitte/id2693335/>. A video of the address can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/168637133541281/videos/1079717112363619>. All translations by Jens E. Kjeldsen.
3. On “dugnad” in Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal\\_work#Norway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal_work#Norway).
4. For an account of the study of rhetoric in Scandinavia see (Kjeldsen & Grue, 2011) The introductory chapter, “The Study of Rhetoric in Scandinavia” (7–38), provides a historical overview from the 1970s to 2010.

5. The speech (in Danish) can be found at: <http://www.stm.dk/Index/dokumenter.asp?o=2&n=0&h=2&d=79&s=1&str=stor>.
6. All quotes here and below are from the website and documents of the Norwegian Research Council. See <https://www.forskningsradet.no/en/>.

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