

Session proposal for Rhetoric in Society 7, Ghent 11-13. September, 2019

Using comment sections, press photographs, and comedy as equipment for working through the immigration issue

Session abstract

How do humans make sense of political and controversial issues? How do we position ourselves and form our opinions? These are questions most often addressed by fields such as deliberative theory or argumentation theory, which mostly focus on explicit, deliberative issue-argumentation in traditional verbal texts. We argue that a rhetorical understanding of sense-making and opinion formation must take into consideration how people use a wide range of expressions as equipment in their rhetorical working through of political and controversial issues.

With the concept *rhetorical working through* we refer to three interrelated processes that humans engage in: 1) we deal with issues by seeking understanding, putting forward arguments and responding to counter-argumentation; 2) we deal with social relations by adjusting ourselves to others and fitting our dealings with issues into these adjustments, 3) we deal with identity and self by using our dealings with issues and relations to confirm and adjust our conceptions of self.

Rhetorical working through signifies the process of rhetoric as a continuous, open-ended, persuasive co-engagement whereby humans are involved in rhetorical interactions dealing with issues, social relations and identity. This process is especially significant in divisive public issues such as immigration, where individual attitudes and public opinion are formed by more than news, information, or verbal deliberative argumentation.

This session explores how comment sections, press photographs, and comedy is used as equipment for working through the immigration issue. We examine how these genres and forms of expression equips the audience to understand and work through the immigration issue – a complex political issue involving multiple subject matters and highlighting both social relations and our own identity. Thus, we examine how this working through equips the audience to act as citizen, expanding its conception of citizenship, or otherwise define and redefine its relationship to the issue, fellow citizens, as well as the political and national community.

Participants

Chair: Eirik Vatnøy, Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies, University of Oslo (eirik.vatnoy@iln.uio.no)

Presenter: Ida Andersen, Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen (ida.andersen@uib.no)

Presenter: Jens E. Kjeldsen, Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen (jens.kjeldsen@uib.no)

Presenter: John Magnus R. Dahl, Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen (john.dahl@uib.no)

Corresponding organizer: Jens E. Kjeldsen (jens.kjeldsen@uib.no)

Ida Andersen:

«My comment was not racist»: Working through immigration criticism in Scandinavian comment section debates

The rhetorical working through (Kjeldsen, 2016) of the immigration issue reflects conflicts not only over the principles for inclusion and exclusion of groups into the nation, but also over identities and social relations within the nation. In this paper, I examine how controversial positions, i.e. immigration critical positions, are negotiated in Scandinavian comment section debates about the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015.

Through two case studies of the comment section debates concerned with the a) arrival of refugees and 2) retrenchments in asylum policies in three national contexts, I examine the rhetorical strategies applied by immigration critics to claim a legitimate position in the community, as well as the strategies applied by opponents to exclude them from the same community. More precisely, I identify the speech acts through which immigration critical propositions and arguments are promoted, and how these, in turn, are responded to. In particular, the analysis draws attention to how the *topoi* of racism and xenophobia is introduced into the discussions, and what functions the introduction of this *topoi* serve for the immigration critic, on the one hand, and his or her interlocutor, on the other.

Preliminary findings suggest that racism and xenophobia is introduced as a secondary *topoi* into the discussions through attacks. Whereas the immigration critic claims legitimacy by attacking anyone inclined to call him or her “racist”, the opponent places the immigration critic outside of the socially acceptable by attacking him or her for being “racist”.

The paper contributes with insights into how controversial positions are worked through rhetorically through the negotiation of identities, values and social relations. It does so by examining the strategies applied to work through immigration criticism in the public debate, and what functions these strategies in turn serve in the debates.

Jens E. Kjeldsen:

Press photographs as equipment for working through the immigration crisis

Photojournalism is a vital resource for thinking about the problems of collective living, as Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites argue in *The Public Image* (2016: 3). Thinking in this sense, they continue, includes feeling, talking and acting. It turns out, then, that this use of images involves much more than mere thinking, which essentially means that we are talking about something different. Therefore, I propose that we use the concept ‘rhetorical working through’ (Kjeldsen 2016, 2018) for how photojournalistic rhetoric can be used as ‘equipment for living’ (Burke 1941).

I explore this kind of visual rhetorical working through by examining the visual representation of the 2015 refugee crisis in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. I study the press photographs from the largest tabloid and the largest broadsheet in all three countries from September 3 to September 16, 2015. The analysis entail visual *rhetorical topoi* (What is depicted? How is it depicted? What are the main visual appeals and arguments?); *rhetorical constitution* (How are the involved parties – refugees, citizens, and politicians – constituted?); and *rhetorical stases* (i.e. visual representations of stating, defining, evaluating, and advocating).

The preliminary results suggest that Norway depict refugees as something relatively distant and rarely makes politicians part of the picture. Some pictures exemplify Norwegians willing to help. Mostly, the photos are in the stating and defining stases. Denmark depict refugees as intruders and criticizes politicians for lack of control. Politicians are prominently

figured and the refugee-issue is connected to Danish policy. Mostly, the photographs are in evaluative stasis. Sweden address the refugee situation as a moral obligation to be taken on. Refugees are depicted as people directly asking Swedish citizens for help. Politicians are depicted as emotionally involved and pro-active in dealing with helping. Mostly the photographs are in the evaluative and advocating stases.

John Magnus Dahl:

The “Pig Democrats” and comedy as equipment for moral condemnation

"When the anti-immigration party *Sverigedemokraterna* (Swedish Democrats/SD) entered the Swedish Parliament in 2010, it caused many reactions in the Swedish public sphere. One of these reactions was in the form of a comedy show episode, "Svindemokratarna" (The Pig Democrats) by comedy group Grottesco. This episode is clearly a grotesque parody of the Swedish Democrats, exaggerating their rural roots as well as emphasizing their historical connectins to openly racists movements.

Being related both to party politics and questions of identity, this makes a good case for advancing the understanding the rhetoric of comedy. I argue that the comedy episode in question should be seen as an intervention in the public debate, and thus a part of the *rhetorical working through* of the Swedish Democrats' advent into national politics. Although comedy per definition is a non-serious mode of communication, it has certain aesthetic features that makes it especially well suited to carry out three rhetorical functions: Shaping of group identities, moral judgement and critical examination of societal dilemmas. Using Quentin Skinner's rhetorical method for the analysis of historical texts, I show how Grottesco in their show are othering both the SD party and their electorate, how they critically interrogate SD's own claim of representing the people, and finally how they morally condemn them for being xenophobic racists.

The paper contributes both to theory development regarding rhetorical working through and the rhetoric of humor, as well as methodological invention by applying Skinner's method originally developed to the history of ideas into the history of popular culture"