

# Rhetorical constructions of 'us' and 'them' in online debates about the photos of Alan Kurdi

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## Abstract

As Condit (1985) observed, definitions of a collective 'we' are often contrasted with 'others' that are not part of the shared community. Correspondingly, definitions of 'the other' necessarily entail constructions of a collective 'we'.

In this paper, I examine how collective identities are formed within and across Scandinavian societies through rhetorical constructions of refugees as the 'others'. I do so by analyzing the comment section debates in the Norwegian, Swedish and Danish press on the photos of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who became the face of the refugee crisis.

The commentary sections are first and foremost arenas for vernacular debate between 'regular' citizens. Many of the utterances in these debates are not *deliberative*, i.e. concerned primarily with the question "What should *we* do about *this*?" Rather they are often concerned with questions usually associated with epideictic rhetoric: "Who are 'we'?" and "What is the issue?" (Vatnoey, 2015). In the debates studied, conflicting answers to these questions are voiced. The participants' endeavors to define the refugees and their situation, reveal competing notions of the collective Scandinavian identity. Constructions of the refugee as a distant 'other' are contested by expressions of identification with the 'others', placing 'us' in 'their' situation. Thus, the rhetorical struggle to define 'them', plays a crucial role in the formation of a collective 'we'.

This paper, then, demonstrates how we can gain valuable insights into the underlying values and beliefs that shape the discourses on identity within a society, by studying how the 'other' is constructed rhetorically.