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The Second Persona in Political Commentary

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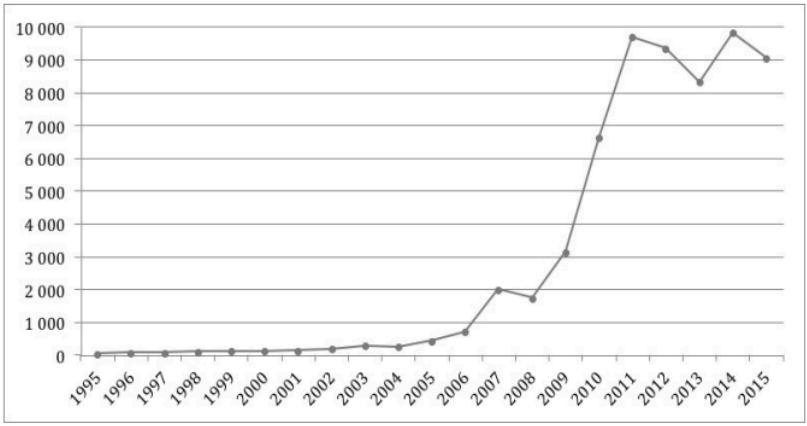
Abstract

This article offers a critique of the genre of political commentary, as found in a Danish context. Based on 90 specimens of political commentary from national newspapers published during the parliamentary election campaign in 2011, I present an analysis of the implied audience of the genre, using the analytical procedure proposed by Edwin Black (1970) in three steps: Frist, I analyze the dominant claims and stylistic tokens in the corpus to be able to draw a profile of the implied audience. Next, I relate this profile to various conceptions of democracy, including their conception of the role of the citizen, and I argue that the profile of the audience thus discursively implied coincides with a conception of the citizen's role in a democracy centered around competition. Finally, I offer a moral assessment of this construction of the audience, and on that basis, I discuss the implications of this construction with reference to two studies of mine, each of which presents an impression of an authentic audience's response to this construction of the audience. The article could be a point of departure for comparative analyses still to be undertaken in the rhetorical community in Scandinavia, and it could contribute to broader discussions of the role of the mass media in a democracy.

Within the last decade, the media genre 'political commentary' has expanded to such an extent that today, it occupies a central place in political journalism. The graph below shows how the

genre has grown from around 2005, with peaks around the parliamentary elections in 2007, 2011 and 2015.[1]



Graph showing the number of hits on the phrase 'political commentator' across all print and online media in the media base *Infomedia*, done on February 15, 2016. I interpret the role of "commentator" as an index of the establishment of the genre, since it is highly person oriented. In the present text I alternate between referring to the role (commentator) and the products of the commentators (commentaries).

When a journalistic genre expands to this extent, that in itself is a reason to show it some attention. Another reason is that there has been a certain amount of criticism of the genre in public debate,

1. In a study presenting a content analysis of 2,022 articles published around Danish parliamentary elections from 1994 to 2007, David Hopmann and Jesper Strömbäck (2010, 951-952) further show how the political commentator has been increasingly used as a source during this period.

but at the same time, there has only been a scant treatment of it in research and scholarship, with almost none in rhetorical research.[2]

Existing Research on Political Commentary

Existing research on the genre comes mainly from media studies, which offer various explanations for its growth. As for its initial phase in the late 90s, media scholars primarily see the rise of political commentators as a reaction against the accelerating professionalization of political communication (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Negrine 2008). The commentators are considered key figures in political journalism, which Blumler (1997) see as 'fighting back', while Brian McNair (2000) talks about 'counter-spin'. Similar explanations are also notable in the metacommunication from media and commentators themselves in their defense of the genre. For example, Anders Krab-Johansen, political editor at the national TV channel TV2, says this:

> Politicians have learnt to talk a certain way in the media that puts them in a favorable light, and that's why it is nice to have some political commentators who can explain why they suddenly change positions. After all, not all viewers are able to follow that (quoted from the daily *Information*, "DR and TV2: Politiske kommentatorer er uundværlige", October 6, 2007).

In an English report, a commentator is quoted as saying: "There are hidden laws in politics just as there are in, say, physics. Our job is to explain how those laws work, bring them into the open" (Hobsbawm and Lloyd 2008, 21). In the first decade of the millennium, cable TV spread, and in many countries, 24-hour news channels appeared; as a parallel development, commentators became an increasingly central factor in political journalism, while research began to explain the genre with reference to changing

2. About the public meta-debate on this genre, see Bengtsson (2011); about the limited attention given to it in research, see Bengtsson (2015).

structural and production patterns.[3] Journalism professor Peter Bro, for example, sees commentators as cheap labor that can quickly deliver content of a certain quality, and he explains how commentators are increasingly used as sources because, unlike academic experts, they can deliver pronouncements across a wide range of subjects (Bro 2008; Bro and Lund, 2008). Meanwhile, a contribution from media studies has been a revised interpretation of roles. While many see the political commentator as a recent, media-generated role for a set of selected figures who comment, primarily on national politics, based on insider knowledge, Sigurd Allern (2010) presents a diachronous study covering three Norwegian election campaigns (1965, 1989 and 2010) and shows that there have always been personalities who have commented on politics, but also that their roles have changed from being ideological front figures representing political parties to being an elite of independent interpreters who function as billboards for their respective media. Characteristically, the approach taken by media scholars to commentators is primarily descriptive. Media research offers explanations for the rise and dominance of the genre and challenges assumptions about the understanding of roles, but it is extremely reticent in making normative assessments of the genre from a critical angle.[4]

In rhetorical studies, there is not a similar reticence in this regard, and there have been several criticisms of aspects of the commentary genre. For example, Christian Kock (2011) criticizes the way the genre focuses on spin and strategy, arguing that commentators push substantive political discussions to the rear. In a similar vein, Eirik Vatnøy (2010) takes the Norwegian parliamentary election in 2009 as a point of departure for questioning the way media select commentators, their privileged speaker positions, and the often-dubious qualifications of the commentators, who seem at times to have covert partisan motives. Both Kock and Vatnøy point to interesting aspects of the

3. In a Danish context, this development took off markedly with the advent of the first 24-hour news channel on TV, *TV2 News*. DR, the long-established public service channel, followed suit in 2007 with *DR Update*.

4. Lars Nyre (2009) has pointed to this as a more general tendency in media research.

phenomenon, but their criticism consists of short passages in books that aim to offer more general criticisms of political journalism. Thus, it would seem that rhetorical research still owes a contribution to a more sustained, critical analysis of the genre of political commentaries as seen on a background of civic and community-oriented values.

Genre-oriented Criticism Invoking the 'Second Persona'

First, I will analyze the substantive claims and the stylistic tokens of the genre to be able to describe its implied audience, its 'second persona' (Black 1970). I choose the 'second persona' as a key notion because it allows for a critique of the influence which, as I argue, is potentially exerted by the commentators through their rhetoric. In dealing with the commentary genre, I apply an understanding of genre derived from the theory of Carolyn Miller (1984), in which genres are seen as typified rhetorical acts through which people act together. Genres help identify urgent problems and types of social needs, and, on that basis, they also engender expectations concerning the roles of senders and receivers of the commentaries; in particular, expectations regarding the receiver role are central in the present context. As the analysis will make clear, and unlike Black, I have no ideological purpose in doing this but am inspired by the idea that texts and genres imply an audience as their second persona—which, in turn, has the potential to influence receivers.[5] The analysis will thus offer an example of how to look at discursive audience constructions from a genre perspective in contemporary political journalism.

Choice of Corpus

As mentioned, the analysis is based on a selection of texts representing the genre. The selection includes 90 political commentaries written by nine political commentators in the six

5. Others, too, have applied Black's ideas in this way. See, for example, Lund (2014).

largest national newspapers during the parliamentary election campaign in Denmark in 2011.[6] I chose texts published during an election campaign with the expectation that during such a period, we would see the genre practiced with particular intensity. By including all political commentators in the six largest national newspapers, I sought to establish a corpus based on clear criteria, where no examples were selected or deselected based on any particular features. This was an attempt to get a reasonably broad sample of the genre, but not broader than would allow for close reading. As for comparative analysis across national borders, media systems or time periods, this article lacks space for it. Also, analyses of differences between the individual commentators' texts must wait for later studies. The focus of interest is the genre as a whole—i.e., commentators as one uniform type of experts and their capacity for discursively influencing receivers (readers).

Commentators Explain, Evaluate and Advise on Strategic Action

We now turn to the analysis, beginning with the substantive claims made in the commentaries. A subdivision of these may either be based on themes or types of speech acts; I have tried to combine these two criteria.[7] The majority of the claims in the texts concern politicians' actions, which are primarily understood strategically;

6. The selection covers the period from August 26, 2011 (the day the election was called by the Prime Minister) to September 17, 2011 (two days after the election. The nine commentators are Mette Østergaard (*Politiken*), Peter Mogensen (*Politiken*), Kristian Madsen (*Politiken*), Ralf Pittelkow (*Jyllands-Posten*), Thomas Larsen (*Berlingske Tidende*), Niels Krause-Kjær (*Berlingske Tidende*), Hans Engell (*Ekstra Bladet*), Helle Ib (*BT*) og Søs Marie Serup (*Børsen*).
7. In regard to speech act theory, I rely on the classification in Searle (1975), which distinguishes between five types of illocutionary acts: "[W]e tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to do things, we express our feelings and attitudes, and we bring about changes through our utterances" (1975. 29). His five terms for these five types are representatives ('assertives' in an earlier version), directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives (performatives in earlier versions).

the claims mainly constitute components of explanations (representatives), evaluations (expressives) or pieces of advice (directives). If we relate these speech act types to types of argumentative claims as treated in rhetorical theory, we have to do with claims regarding strategy of constative, evaluative and advocative types, respectively.[8]

A typical example of a strategic explanation is this, offered by Ralf Pittelkow in *Jyllands-Posten*:

> While there is uproar in the blue block, the reds are silent. They have learnt to manage their disagreements, but then again, there's more to it than that. Helle Thorning-Schmidt and Villy Søvndal have made a deliberate political strategy of silence. They know that their chance of winning the election rests more on disaffection with the VK government than on their own policies (…) 'Shut up and win the election'—that has been their battle cry."[9]

When politicians act—in this case by not saying anything—the commentator claims their acts are strategically motivated.[10] In almost every one of the 90 commentaries, we find examples of this kind of interpretation. It is close to becoming a type of standard theory, where commentators explain most actions by politicians by returning to the same motive: Politicians' actions are attempts to retain or obtain power for themselves or their party.

An example of a claim that is similarly strategic but which at the same time is more evaluative may be seen in the financial daily

8. More on claims of fact, value and policy in classical theories of argument, see Jasinski (2001).
9. In Danmark and in Europe generally, the use of the color terms blue and red is switched around compared to the US, so that 'red' means left-leaning, whereas 'blue' means right-leaning. The quote from Pittelkow also assumes the knowledge that Thorning-Schmidt and Søvndal are leading figures on the 'red' side of the aisle, both determined to defeat the incumbent coalition government of two 'blue' parties ("VK").
10. Aalberg et al. (2011) suggest distinguishing between a *strategy* frame and a *game* frame. I have decided against applying this distinction because these two frames are often intertwined. In the quote we just saw, for example, the explanation based on speculation about motives represents a strategy frame, but at the same time, the concept of "winning" is invoked, which represents a game frame.

Børsen, where Michael Kristiansen criticizes the Socialist People's Party and the alliance they have formed with the Social Democrats before the election: "As expected, the Socialist People's Party has turned out to be the weakest link. Obviously, their insistence that they would not extoll their attractions at the Social Democrats' expense could not be maintained in an election campaign" (September 7, 2011). I read this as an expressive speech act, among other things, because the commentator uses the evaluative adjective "weakest", the qualifier "obviously" and the ironical phrase "their own attractions"; but a reader could also read the claim as a representative speech act by focusing on the verb phrase "has turned out to be". This kind of ambiguity is typical of many assertions in the corpus: One has a sense of reading the expression of an opinion, yet the commentator rarely steps forward by adding a clear subjectivity marker to the assertion. Another circumstance also places the commentators' claims in a gray area between representatives and expressives, making it hard for a reader to know how to interpret them: There is a striking lack of illocutionary markers like 'I believe' or 'I think'. In the 90 commentaries, the phrase 'I believe' only appears eight times and 'I think' four times. One might argue that such illocutionary markers are implicit, and since these texts belong to an opinion genre, any pronouncements must be interpreted as opinions. On the other hand, it is remarkable that the commentators, in large measure, use phrases that give their pronouncements an air of pure reportage or summary.

One last category of claims concerned with strategy is the pieces of advice that commentators offer to politicians. They cast themselves in a role as advisers, telling politicians what they *ought* to do—a kind of consultancy for the entire world to witness. In other words, these directives are not addressed to the reader but the politicians, pushing the reader into a position as an onlooker. For example, Hans Engell—himself a former party leader and Minister of Justice—writes a whole commentary attempting to answer the questions "What Should Helle do?" and "What is Løkke's best bet?" ("Løkke" being the Prime Minister and "Helle" the leader of the opposition) (*Ekstra Bladet*, September 8, 2011). The

commentator advises Helle, the Social Democratic contender for the Premiership, to "be engaged, show emotions and enthusiasm", while Løkke, the Liberal Prime Minister, has to "get much better at conjuring up people and images before the voters' eyes. Less numbers and stats. He must be capable of communicating directly with people: What do the things he says mean to my family and me?"

Like the explanations and the evaluations, the pieces of advice offered to politicians involve a cynical view of politics, where voters' preferences are regarded as fixed and where political communication is viewed as a strategic means to accommodate those preferences. Others have offered such an analysis concerning political journalism in general; for example, Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1997) speak of a 'spiral of cynicism', while Christian Kock (2009) refers to a 'cynicism syndrome'. Similarly, Aalberg, Strömbäck and de Freese (2011) have presented an overview of research about the understanding of politics in news journalism, noting the growing literature documenting how strategy framing gains ground in relation to issue framing. The present reading of the commentary genre concurs with this general tendency, but it also supplements it with other themes which seem to be more specific to commentaries; more on this below.

Commentators Predict Potential Alliances and Politicians' Futures

Commentators not only make claims about strategy as components of explanations, evaluations and advice; they also make claims as to what will happen in the future—about such subjects as what political deals will be struck or what possible alliances will emerge between parties, as well as what the future will bring for the individual politician or party. For example, Niels Krause-Kjær writes:

> Regardless of left-right orientation, a new government will have to cut back and economize everywhere. This practice is one at which the Social Democrats have nearly 90 years of experience. They will have no problems with it. The Socialist People's Party has never tried it before, and much seems to suggest that they will find it hard (*Berlingske Tidende*, September 6, 2011).

Explanations and advice-giving typically involve arguments in which the warrant has to do with strategy, whereas predictions are not based on warrants that invoke such themes. At times, commentators argue for their predictions with reference to the past—which we see in the example—but often enough, their predictions are more like postulates. Commentators are sometimes sarcastically referred to as oracles, which may be because of their unsupported predictions; I will return to this under the heading of 'stylistic tokens'. The media scholar Stig Hjarvard, in his characterization of the commentators, emphasizes their predictions and their oracle-like posturing: "Today, journalists and political commentators have evolved into fortune-tellers who can predict the future and read politicians' thoughts" (Hjarvard 2010, 32).

Commentators' Coverage of Current Affairs and Politicians' Positions

Finally, a portion of the commentators' output is their coverage of selected current events, including topical debate issues and the general positions that various parties and politicians take. This category has not until now drawn much attention as a significant ingredient of their output, but it is interesting in relation to the implied audience construction. For example, Hans Engell writes in *Ekstra Bladet*:

> Yesterday was not exactly Pia Kjærsgaard's day. Yesterday was the day her proposal for a tightening of the much-debated border control and for placing reception centers for asylum seekers in the geographical regions from which refugees come rather than in

> Denmark was shot down by the Liberals and the Conservatives seconds after they were presented. After ten years of close collaborations, with these two parties responding to ideas from Kjærsgaard's People's Party by intoning, 'That looks interesting, we'll look at it,' the tune they played this time was very different: Kjærsgaard's ideas were instantaneously gunned down (*Ekstra Bladet*, August 30, 2011).

Helle Ib writes:

> The mumblings from the Socialist People's Party's Villy Søvndal about the rule that prohibits family reunification if one spouse is less than 24 years old has probably delighted some in the party rank and file, but apart from that, the current signals on immigration policies cannot possibly bode well for the leftist opposition's chances of winning the election. First, Søvndal said his party was against the controversial rule and wanted it canceled after the next election (…) Then, however, he backpedaled somewhat. But the past leader of the Radicals, Marianne Jelved, whose respect for international conventions is as great as her flair for bad timing, managed to help make old wounds bleed again. Yesterday, she stated that the Socialist People's Party had been unwise in allying themselves with the Social Democrats on the issue of family reunifications, and she also found that Søvndal's maneuvers completely gave his game away. 'Now Søvndal makes a small concession. Let's see where that gets him in a negotiation,' Jelved said yesterday (*BT*, September 3, 2011).

The commentators cover conflicts in the dealings between the parties and how their pronouncements are dictated by the alliances they have struck. Also, they give us a picture of the parties general positions and of how the other parties respond—often in combination with selected quotes from those politicians to whom the commentators pay special attention. But it is significant that the commentators in their coverage of the general stances hardly ever mention the reasons and considerations underlying the politicians' views. Only the resulting standpoints of the various parties are outlined. In the last example, we also find clear evaluative signals from the commentator, who disparages Søvndal's and Jelved's

utterances—an example of how different types of speech act are often mixed in the commentators' texts.[11]

Commentators Postulate

After considering the types of claims found in the texts, we now turn to the stylistic tokens in them. So far, I have referred to *claims* to preserve Black's terminology. However, using that term in the sense current in argumentation theory is primarily relevant to explanations and pieces of advice since this is where we tend to find actual argumentation that justifies talking of "claims"; where evaluations and predictions are concerned, on the other hand, the commentators tend to resort to postulates.

An example of a postulatory style that involves evaluation and prediction in equal measure is found in Hans Engell, who writes as follows about one of the so-called TV 'duels' between the two main contenders for the premiership:

> Last night, Helle Thorning-Schmidt nearly floored Lars Løkke Rasmussen. But the leader of the Liberals was saved by the bell and several liters of water. He will probably get back on his legs before the next round, but Løkke was far from fit to encounter the blonde machine gun (*Ekstra Bladet*, September 12, 2011).

Here the commentator acts as a referee, evaluating the confrontation between the two rivals the day before. He declares Thorning-Schmidt to have done best but does not support that judgment. He finds her to have been the winner, thereby assuming such a claim to be of interest to the reader. Likewise, the assertion that Løkke will get back on his legs again before the next round is unsupported. Although this is a prediction and thus does not have the same status since it cannot be supported with observable facts alone, Hans Engell might easily have explained why he

11. The commentators' speech acts include explanation, evaluation, advice, prediction and reportage—a preliminary typology that is not necessarily exhaustive but covers the dominant type of speech act in the corpus. Also, the present analysis offers no quantification—an obvious task for further studies.

thinks this will happen. In the prediction by Niels Krause-Kjær quoted above that it will be hard for the Socialist People's Party to be represented in the government, he similarly offers no data in support; he simply says, vaguely, that "much seems to suggest" it. The commentator may have good reasons to think this, but he chooses to omit them in his text. Thus, the commentators tend to demonstrate a postulatory manner, casting themselves in an authoritarian and omniscient role: When they explain, they have the ability to see what the politicians think and what their motives are; when they predict, they can see into the future and offer confident pontifications about it; and when they opine, they assume that they do not have to offer supporting reasons. In these respects, their status as experts alone will have to function implicitly as a supporting reason for what they are saying—an implicit argument from authority.

Commentators Blur the Source

An element of the commentators' postulatory manner is blurring the source's identity in various ways. One form of blurring happens through what we may call *undocumented, unspecified arguments of quantity*, in which commentators use grammatical subjects involving quantifiers like *several*, *numerous* or *none*. For example, Hans Engell refers to Helle Thorning-Schmidt's tax case, in which her husband, Stephen Kinnock, has been accused of tax evasion: "No one understands why Helle did not present all this formation openly last year" (*Ekstra Bladet*, September 10, 2011). Who exactly are the people who don't understand this? A majority of the commentariat or the population? And what is Engell's view? Such quantifying arguments add to the postulatory nature of the commentators' manner, as quantity is made to substitute for more substantial reasons. Engell might instead have used a real argument by saying: "I think it would have been smarter for Helle to have presented this information last year; that way, it wouldn't dominate so much now."

Another form of blurring is caused by the use of *passive verb forms*. Ralf Pittelkow writes: "Løkke is felt to be the most competent of the two, Thorning as the most human" (*Jyllands-Posten*, August 28, 2011). Here too, the commentator exalts himself to the role of interpreter and reporter of general attitudes whose holders are, however, blurred and where the substantial evidence for the claims is absent. As in the first form of blurring we saw, the reader may well wonder about the commentator's own view and attitude. What principle underlies the selection? Why does the commentator choose to give particular views special attention? Do the selected perceptions cover the commentator's own attitude? One gets the impression that the commentators prefer to advance something as prevalent views rather than stand by them openly as their own.

One last form of blurring happens through vague source attributions. For example, Mette Østergaard writes: "That is why we are beginning to hear conversations *internally in the Liberal party* about the possibility of a one-party Liberal government" (*Politiken*, September 3, 2011). Similarly, Thomas Larsen writes:

> *Distinctly without attribution*, several supporters of the Social Democratic leader are venting some relief that the yield from the curtailment of the early retirement program will make it much more doable to make the economic ends meet under a new Social Democratic government (*Berlingske Tidende*, September 11, 2011; my emphasis).

Here, the commentator reports statements that apparently can only be reported if they are attributed to a larger and more indistinct group rather than the actual source(s) in question. The practice of referring to well-informed, anonymous sources is a respected journalistic principle, but instead of using it with care and with a professional assessment of the source's credibility and the circumstances, political commentators seem to take it to excess. One explanation might be that commentators like to dramatize and create an illusion that the reader gets confidential information (thus Loftager 2004, 189). The genre rests precisely on the assumption

that the reader needs the benefit of the sender's knowledge to make sense of the political world, and the form of blurring we see here helps assure the reader that the commentator has access to the inner circles of power and thus possesses intriguing inside knowledge. Another explanation could be that it is a time-saving method since commentators in this way need only use themselves as sources and present their generalizing impression of the situation, thereby avoiding comprehensive research and actual journalistic interviews. The resulting problem is that the commentators often use phrases that make the status of their pronouncements opaque: Is this a *bona fide* claim or mere guesswork by the commentator? Also, avoiding specific source attribution makes it difficult to detect and document possible distortion. Who is to react? And where should one go to test the claims? When this practice is allowed to expand, commentators are given an ever-wider space to maneuver.

Commentators Speak in Unison

Another significant feature, besides postulatory style and a blurring of sources in various forms, is that commentators seem given to speaking as a *unified block* with one shared view of things rather than discussing with each other. For example, during the 2011 election campaign, several commentators declared that it was all about the economy: "This election is about money" (Hans Engell, *Ekstra Bladet*, August 30, 2011); "Take the economy—the main theme of the election" (Helle Ib, *BT*, September 4, 2011); "For more than a year it has been known that the economy would be the totally dominant issue in this election" (Søs Marie Serup, *Børsen*, September 8, 2011); "The paramount theme in this election campaign is the economy" (Mette Østergaard, *Politiken*, August 28, 2011); "Today, politicians' battle is about three things: economy, economy, economy" (Thomas Larsen, *Berlingske Tidende*, September 13, 2011). Are the commentators here reporting their impression that many people—in which case, who?—are talking about the economy, or will the election be

about the economy because the commentators talk about it as a unified block? In media, one finds from time to time headlines beginning 'the Commentariat' or 'Commentators' followed by a colon—which implies that readers should be persuaded by the fact that the commentators say something in unison. Exemplifying this implication, Mette Østergaard writes: "The election campaign will be dirty, as politicians themselves and commentators have said for a long time" (*Politiken*, September 15, 2011).

In connection with the first presidential debate between John Kerry and George W. Bush in 2004, Paul Hitlin (2005) documented the same tendency for American commentators to speak in unison. He shows that there was great diversity in what the 'television pundits' were saying during the day after the debate, but after just a few days, the assessments are harmonized. In Norway, Sigurd Allern sees this consensus-seeking practice as a way for commentators to win power: "commentators have limited power when alone, but they become influential when standing together, for example by 'declaring a political leader dead' after a scandal" (*Morgenbladet*, September 11, 2009). Likewise, Pia Wold (2013) notes the same tendency in a study of references to the Conservative leader Erna Solberg in Norwegian media, where a sudden, unsupported, collective change of attitude is in evidence and gains weight thanks to its collective nature—hence the title of Wold's article: "A Pack of Watchdogs". In particular, I would point to how the commentators' collective actions strengthen an unreflecting assumption that they can persuade their audiences by postulating something in unison. It becomes their consensus *as such* that is to persuade their readers, rather than substantive arguments.

The Implied Audience—and How It Coincides with the Idea of the Citizen in a Competitive Democracy

Given all this, what is the image of the implied audience in the commentators' texts? Based on the dominant types of claims found in them, the implied audience member is primarily a person (or

a *persona*) interested in the people who do politics and how they maneuver strategically to gain power. It is a person who doesn't care about substantive discussions about specific political proposals but is satisfied with a general idea of what topics are being discussed and the positions that politicians and parties take to them. When debated issues are commented on, the arguments for the positions are not presented, which implies an assumption that the reasons for the different positions are irrelevant to the audience. Based on the stylistic tokens, we may imagine a reader who is extraordinarily given to accepting authority and who will uncritically believe opinions and statements about the world when they come from an expert. This suggests an asymmetrical communication situation in which the sender has knowledge superior to the addressee's and where nothing invites a discussion or critical reflection on the claims that are made. The addressee is an onlooker to the political debate; politicians and commentators are the agents, while the reader watches more or less passively. Christian Kock is among those who have noted that the genre's typical pronouncements passivize the addressee; the present analysis shows that this passivity is brought about by a dual mechanism in which stylistic tokens also help fixate the reader in a passive role.

While Black in his criticism (1970, 112-115, 119) sees the discursively fashioned second persona as defined by ideology, it seems more obvious to see it as involving different conceptions of democracy, including the roles assigned to citizens. What we see may not necessarily be an unequivocal picture. Still, in many ways, the construction of the audience in political commentaries seems to coincide with the conception of the citizen in a competitive democracy.[12] In a competitive democracy, elections are central, and the focus is on politicians and their acts. Also, the agency

12. Modern democracy theory distinguishes between various understandings of democracy. Some of the most debated conceptions or models of democracy are, respectively, competitive democracy, participatory democracy and deliberative democracy. See, for instance, Held 2006. See also Strömbäck 2005, 334-338. Strömbäck includes procedural democracy as a fourth, somewhat less debated model of democracy.

of citizens is limited to voting in elections.[13] Strömbäck sums it up: "It is the political elites that act, whereas the citizens react" (2005, 334). The citizen needs to know the political candidates and their positions on fundamental issues, but not to be more actively involved in specific political discussions or to participate in public life. That commentators hardly ever present the reasons for the politicians' positions on various issues is because it is considered unimportant. The citizens at the receiving end of political discourse only need to know the politicians' positions, and then they can react accordingly. The implicit assumption is that voters have fixed preferences. Thus all that matters is that their knowledge of the political candidates is sufficient to find one whose attitudes they share and who will be a suitable representative for them.

If one searches in the commentaries for explicit terms referring to the citizen, it is not surprising that one primarily comes across terms like *voter*, *audience* and *observer*. For example, Hans Engell writes: "With several hundred thousand *voters* as the *audience*, everything is at stake for them both" (*Ekstra Bladet*, September 8, 2011); also: "But the most important factor is surely *the voters*? Yes, absolutely. And we don't really know how they will *react*" (*Ekstra Bladet*, September 10, 2011). Likewise, Thomas Larsen writes: "The crux of the matter will be *the reaction of the voters*" (*Berlingske Tidende*, August 30, 2011), and a week later: "In short, the *voters observe* the candidates, and they are not beside themselves with enthusiasm" (*Berlingske Tidende*, September 7, 2011). Mette Østergaard writes along the same lines: "Before that materializes, the *voters* have to cast their votes, and we have still to see how they *react* to the new alliance, which seems to have resurrected the middle in Danish politics" (*Politiken*, August 29, 2011) (all italics in these quotes are mine). These formulations help confirm the assumption that the commentators consider voting at elections to be a citizen's primary act; in fact, the citizen's agency is more or less limited to that act. While the

13. See Schumpeter 1975 [1942]. Giovanni Sartori (1987) uses the term 'election democracy'.

pronouncements and stylistic tokens noted in the commentaries implicitly convey certain conceptions, the quotes we have just seen directly express certain expectations of the citizen's role. In that connection, it is obvious seeing the commentators' rhetoric as a form of what Maurice Charland (1987) calls 'constitutive rhetoric'. In their texts, the commentators fashion an identity for citizens that offers them rather few opportunities for agency. The example in Charland's article is the *people québécois*—an audience that did not previously have any agency because it is only the discourse that constitutes this *peuple* as a group in the first place; in our case, the commentators' rhetoric may be seen as constitutive if we use that term in a wider sense. Here, the emphasis is on a certain conception of the citizen's role; it coexists with other citizens' roles, but the discourse invites readers to assume that role and act accordingly.

Assessing the Commentators' Discourse

Existing evaluations of the genre have considered partial aspects of it, for example, in criticizing commentators for their failing predictions.[14] Based on the audience *persona* drawn by the discourse, one may go further and question the genre's underlying view of democracy and its conception of the citizen's role. Seeing the citizen as a spectator to the political debate whose agency mainly involves voting in the next election is not easily reconciled with a notion of a rhetorically well-functioning democracy—a notion which recent scholarship has coupled with the concept of rhetorical citizenship and which places itself in close alignment with the idea of deliberative democracy (Villadsen and Kock 2012, 1-2). In that perspective, the citizen cannot be satisfied with an involvement that consists of casting a vote but would want to be more actively involved, for example, by engaging in selected debates on civic issues, in public and private. In a deliberative democracy, the default assumption is not that a person has fixed

14. See, e.g., "Politiske kommentatorer sigter godt – men rammer skidt" ["Political Commentators Aim Straight—and Miss"]. *Mandag Morgen*, November 26, 2001.

preferences but that humans are susceptible to argumentation and may, in principle, change their attitudes to things if they encounter new, persuasive arguments (Loftager 2004, Kock 2009, Nielsen 2012). For a society to have cohesion, it is required that citizens have an ongoing debate on the common good—on the norms and values that should guide their decisions. This process will not necessarily lead them all to agree. Still, the process is crucial because it provides an opportunity to hear arguments—also for positions that one does not necessarily share. If, as a citizen, one must live with decisions with which one disagrees—and that will happen for most people—then the deliberative process will hopefully have contributed to one's acquiescence with them. In the deliberative understanding of democracy, citizens' trust that there is a deliberative process in which it is possible to hear and be heard is quite central to a well-functioning democracy. It is precisely this process that political journalism can help facilitate. The postulatory manner of the commentators is highly problematic in a deliberative democracy because citizens should not be encouraged to postulate but to argue. Good grounds for one's views are central, and in that regard, the commentators are poor role models.

Audience Responses to the Second Persona in Commentaries

In conclusion, I will report on two studies showing how an authentic audience reacts to the audience construction implied in commentaries. In this context, it is worth noting that Black, in his article on the second persona, speaks of "actual auditors" and explains that an actual audience will look for signs in a discourse telling them how they are to view the world (1970, 113). Referring to a debate about integration in schools, Black asserts that even if auditors disagree with the claims made, they will still be influenced by the ideology of the discourse, an effect that Black designates, e.g., "vector of influence" and "the pull of an ideology" (1970, 113). In media scholarship on political journalism, one may

see studies of media effects as falling into two camps: There is, on the one hand, a pessimistic camp offering studies that show how citizens accept the strategic framing of the media, which again results in a cynical view of politics among citizens. In this category, we find, among others, the experiments by Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson mentioned above (1997). On the other hand, in a more optimistic camp, various studies show that this is not always the case. For example, Kim Schrøder and Louise Phillips (2005), in a study in which they compare the discursive conception of politics in the media and among citizens, question the defining power ascribed to the media. They conclude that the power of definition is not a one-way process but that the media and the citizens negotiate power in a complex discursive game.

If we maintain a focus on the potential influence of the commentators rather than on political journalism in general, one might point to a study by Sigge Winther Nielsen *et al*. (2011), in which some 2,000 respondents, drawn from a representative panel of voters, were asked to associate freely on the open question "What comes to your mind when you think of a political party?" The conclusion is that the voters reflect the commentators' way of talking about politics. In the answers, many respondents embark on their own analyses of the parties' handling of given issues and their actions in Parliament. The authors introduce the concept of the 'second-order voter'. This voter understands politics as spin and strategy and primarily approaches politics by observing how others observe it to imitate their stance. Nielsen *et al*. explain this by pointing to the voter's need for a viable approach to the complicated political sphere: "The population learns from elite discussions and integrates it in their understanding of the political landscape. This implies that many voters become political commentators themselves searching for a way to create some order in a complex political reality" (2011, 19).

While the study by Nielsen *et al*. offers evidence for the influence of commentators' rhetoric on citizens, a more nuanced conclusion emerges in a qualitative receptions study of my own, in which eight respondents read aloud from political commentaries.

The study is influenced by protocol analysis but has an unique design that I refer to as *think-aloud-reading*, combined with qualitative interviews in which respondents stop reading at given markings in the texts and think aloud about their immediate responses to it.[15] In these readings, it becomes evident, both how respondents accept the audience construction inherent in the texts and also how they respond negatively to it. For example, two of the respondents begin to assume the commentator role during the reading, offering explanations and advice. There are examples of respondents imitating the commentators' stylistic tokens; for example, one respondent uses an undocumented, unspecified argument from quantity, saying: "*There has been* talk that there might be a rivalry between Mette Frederiksen and Helle Thorning-Schmidt, so it is probably more likely that …" (respondent 3; my emphasis). On the other hand, some respondents react by distancing themselves from the claims made in the commentaries and the stylistic tokens in them. For example, one respondent very distinctly decries the commentators' claims about strategy: "They should focus on some of the issues and what happens—not so much the political game in Parliament … Of course, they are trying to put each other down all the time … I damn well couldn't care less." Also, seven out of eight respondents take a skeptical attitude toward the commentators' postulates, in varying degrees. For example, one of them says: "He [the commentator] is not very good at making an argument for why this should be the case. It's like, this is just his opinion, and it's kind of without support of any kind … and that's not good enough." Jay Blumler talks about commentators 'fighting back' at politicians; my study may be seen as an example of how citizens, in turn, begin to fight back at commentators.

15. On protocol analysis, see Ericsson and Simon (1993 [1984]). In developing the method into think-aloud-reading, see, for example, Lewis (1982).

Future Research Perspectives

In this analysis, I have drawn a picture of the second *persona* in the commentary genre, and I have questioned it critically with reference to various understandings of democracy—keeping the norms and ideals in deliberative democracy as a yardstick. In future research, it would be natural to move from considering generic features of the genre towards looking at individual commentators and their different ways of enacting the genre. One might assume that although the view of democracy as competitive characterizes the genre generally, there might be individual commentators who enact the genre differently. These different enactments of the genre might then function as a point of reference for a qualitative evolution of it.

The rhetorical scholarship also seems to have something to offer journalism research regarding discursive audience constructions. While much media scholarship looks at the reception in isolation, the rhetorical scholarship might contribute to studies that integrate reception *and* text.[16]

In their work on pundits in the USA, Dan Nimmo and James Combs wrote that *punditocracy* is a significant threat to democracy. They used the notion of a 'surrogate democracy', in which elite conversations replace a democratic conversation among citizens (1992, 171). As I see it, one of these conversations need not exclude the other, but the elite should realize what a view of democracy they serve, including what an understanding of the citizen is implied. Furthermore, they should be aware of how they manifest all this in their rhetoric, potentially influencing their audience of citizens.

16. Jens E. Kjeldsen has repeatedly called for rhetoricians to integrate reception studies into rhetorical research. See, for example, Kjeldsen (2008, 2015).

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