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# Defining functions of Danish political commentary

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**ABSTRACT:** In Denmark political commentary is still a relatively new phenomenon. This paper analyzes the metadiscourse in relation to political commentary to identify the different understandings that have coalesced around political commentary as a genre. I argue that people in different positions (e.g. citizens, politicians, journalists, political editors, chief editors and political commentators themselves) emphasize different explanations for the rise of the genre and thereby functions of political commentary as part of an argumentative strategy favouring their own interests.

**KEYWORDS:** Political commentator, pundit, public debate, democracy, persuasion, rhetoric, genre, function.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In The United States of America political commentators have been a well-established authority for decades—or what Nimmo and Combs call a “fifth estate” (Nimmo & Combs 1992: xvii)—whereas in Denmark they are still a relatively new phenomenon. Danish national TV (DR2) introduced the first program with political commentators assigned to give opinions in 2005, and in recent years the number of political commentaries have exploded with more shows broadcasted weekly and almost every newspaper employing its own political commentator on a permanent basis.

As a rhetorician interested in new genres, I ask why people want to read and see political commentary. What is its function? What social action does it perform? Is there somehow an explanation for why this genre is increasing right now? As an analysis of the metadiscourse in relation to political commentary will show, people in different positions put forward different explanations of the function of political commentary and use these explanations for different persuasive purposes: While some chief editors view the political commentator as an insider who can provide guidance to voters that would otherwise have no chance understanding politics, some researchers view the political commentator as a fill-in who is necessary for a medium filling out the 24 hour news circle. Others again suggest that the political commentator is better understood as a poster boy, lover of strategy, cuckoo bird or entertainer. Empirically, the paper offers a better understanding of the political commentator as a phenomenon. Not as an attempt to define the political commentator, but to outline the heterogeneity in which political commentary is interpreted.

## 2. RHETORICAL GENRE THEORY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I apply rhetorical genre theory as a theoretical framework in the analysis. By seeing political commentary as a genre –with a focus not only on *substance* and *form*, but also on the

*function* of texts—one directs attention to how a cluster of texts is a manifestation of the understanding of a *cultural kairos* and the expectations interpreted by the writer. Thus, genre theory becomes a constructive approach that relates text to social context (Miller 1984; Miller 1994).

This analysis uses Miller’s concept of *cultural kairos* as a starting point. In this context culture is defined with a reference to Raymond Williams as “‘a particular way’ of life of a time and place, in all its complexity, experienced by a group that understands itself as an identifiable group” (Williams 1976: 80), whereas *kairos* is understood as “a means by which we define a situation in a space-time and understand the opportunities it holds.” (Miller 1994: 71). This reading of *kairos* is not in line with the more traditional rhetorical interpretation in which *kairos* is closely connected to a rhetor and his or her ability to adapt to and take advantage of changing, contingent circumstances (Conley 1990: 20). Nonetheless, *kairos* is a useful way of describing that there might be a certain time when specific ways of writing and talking emerge, and that the emergence of these texts has to do with a cultural change. In this way a micro level of language is linked to a macro level of culture and human nature.

While *cultural kairos* may explain the rise of a genre, describing how this cultural *kairos* is negotiated is more interesting in relation to political commentary. In this way the explanation of the cultural *kairos* is seen as part of the same argumentative process as describing the functions of political commentary. Thus, I do not favour adding up several characteristics as one unifying explanation as Miller does in her article on the blog (in the article she describes the *cultural kairos* in which the blog arose and developed rhetorical power in the late 1990s as “a *kairos* of mediated voyeurism, widely dispersed but relentless celebrity, unsettled boundaries between public and private, and new technology that disseminates these challenges beyond capital and corporations to individuals.” (Miller 2004)). Instead, pointing at the different characteristics as a process of negotiation seems fruitful.

In this way I favour David Zarefsky’s view on social reality, not as given, but as something possible of interpretation. Zarefsky says:

Characterizations of social reality are not “given”; they are chosen from among multiple possibilities and hence always could have been otherwise. Whatever characterization prevails will depend on choices made by political actors. People participate actively in shaping and giving meaning to their environment, and they do so primarily by means of naming situations within it. Naming a situation provides the basis for understanding it and determining the appropriate response. (Zarefsky 2004: 611)

The *cultural kairos* is not an objective entity, but an entity shaped by the person who describes it. I don’t think Miller would disagree, but in my analysis I dwell to a higher extent on the negotiation of the social reality, or the different weight that people put on different circumstances.

### 3. THE DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS OF POLITICAL COMMENTARY

As mentioned earlier the focus of this study is political commentators in Denmark and the meta-discourse in relation to the genre as it appears in Danish public debate from the mid 2000s until today. The text corpus is a sample of the discussion on political commentary from one of the first meta-reflective comments in 2007 through the present. The sampling was performed using different search strategies in Infomedia, which is a Danish database

containing more than 20.6 million digital articles in full text from 450 print and broadcast media. By using the search words “political\* commentator\*”, “political\* commentary\*” and “political\* expert\*” from February 2011 and back in time 547 texts were selected. The selection criterion was that the text should be a meta-reflective comment in relation to political commentary. Thus, this is an ethno-methodological approach in the sense that the focus is to identify the basic agreements that have coalesced around the political commentary (Miller 2004; Garfinkel 1967). When you use an ethno-methodological approach as a researcher you are concerned with the ethno-categories of discourse rather than with the theoretical classifications that for many years seemed to absorb most genre theorists. You don’t have a fixed understanding of the genre and its content and form, but instead you take peoples more general understanding into account. It is important to emphasize that the aim is not to do an exhaustive sample of these kinds of text, but a representative one as a basis for a critical perspective on the genre. It is also worth stressing that political commentators are not a new phenomenon. We have examples of opinion makers way back in history, but not as a group employed at different media with such a strong voice as we see now.

One of the initial explanations of the cultural kairos has to do with the development in the media. From one national TV channel and around ten national print newspapers in the 1980s, around ten Danish TV channels, cable TV, online newspapers and even free newspapers are now available, and the result is a cutthroat competition. In the earliest metadiscourse two needs are accentuated from this cultural kairos. One is that the media needs to produce news from early morning to late evening to survive, and in this way the political commentator is defined as a fill-in, one who can do a fast production of inexpensive texts: “The amount of major stories is not large enough to produce news on TV and websites everyday. In this way the political commentators come in handy.” (Researcher in Information, October 2007). Another is that print media needs a face to personify the business, which gives the political commentator another role as a poster boy: “In the time of digital media, print media must find new ways to attract readers. They have to give priority to opinion, perspective and analysis. The political commentator has become an important part of a branding strategy of the print media. Men with opinions are the new media stars.” (Journalist in Euroman, May 2007). These initial explanations come mainly from researchers. In their initial form they do not have an obvious positive or negative attitude towards the genre, but an observational one with a focus on the media and media history.

These understandings of the initial definition of the cultural kairos and in turn the potential functions of the political commentator are obviously provoking to the chief editors because it emphasizes the media as a business and not as a watchdog. At this early stage several chief editors seem to feel a need to defend this new genre as meaningful to the readers (and not only to the media itself) and emphasize that politics is now strategic decision-making, and therefore the readers need analysis from an insider who can unfold the political debate with all its motives: “Because politicians have learned to act in favorable ways, we need to have the political commentators explain why the politicians have all of a sudden changed their role. Not all voters can grasp this.” (Chief editor in Information, October 2007). Compared to earlier explanations of functions, we see how this is not necessarily an objective one, but a definition based on personal interest. Of course, it

is impossible to tell if the chief editor is sincere about his intentions, but nonetheless this view of the political commentator favors his or her perspective.

As time goes by, the public begins to question the audience construction implied by the chief editors. Is the political commentator an authority on the subject? Does he (or in a few cases she) know more than me? Should I accept this alleged asymmetric relationship? Several citizens do not see the texts as a fitting response to the rhetorical situation, but instead as a vicious spiral with the political commentator playing an important role in a development they do not like. They see the political commentator as a lover of strategy who twists the political debate dealing with tactics instead of substance. Thus, the texts are seen as a result of decadence of modern media and politics in imperfect harmony, and the texts function to uphold this decadence: “I find it tiring that politics is reduced to endless interpretations of strategies and processes where the political commentators pretend that they know exactly what is going on in the Parliament. Are the political commentators present? Are they psychic? Or are we just witnesses to silly talk that have more to do with self satisfaction than real political enlightenment and substance?” (Citizen in Ekstrabladet, October 2008). This critical statement is repeated over and over again during 2009, and when the Prime Minister himself expresses the same objections even more citizens join in: “Honestly, I’m really tired of political commentators ... It is an impediment for democracy when we have a debate, and the transmission from the debate is at a minimum, whereas people like you [political commentators] take up most of the time. If you are so talented, why don’t you run for a seat yourself? To me this is a huge democratic problem.” (Prime Minister in TV2, April 2009). This description becomes very dominant. It comes from an influential voice and is repeated within a short time frame.

In addition to the political commentator as a lover of tactics, which according to the Prime Minister is a huge democratic problem, some researchers start seeing the political commentators as a threat to their own positions as experts. Just as cuckoo birds expropriate the nests of other birds, some researchers view political commentators as expropriating their work and taking over their role in the public debate: “Are the use of political commentators getting out of hand? Have the real experts in economics, law and social science been crowded out?” (Journalist in P1, July 2009). By labeling researchers as real experts, the political commentators are indirectly defined negatively in relation to real experts. Other researchers moderate this claim by explaining how the political commentators are experts by virtue of practical experience in the field, while researchers are experts by virtue of their knowledge on a certain subject. Nevertheless, what we see here is researchers describing the political commentator with a more personal interest in mind.

Around 2010 the political commentators themselves enter the metadiscourse. Apparently, a handful of the political commentators have now gained status as celebrities, and especially one political commentator, Peter Mogensen who is employed at major center-left newspaper, gives personal interviews to a range of newspapers (see e.g. “Min karriere som politisk kommentator” in *Journalisten*, 4 November 2009; “Peter Mogensen: Politik skal være sjovt!” in *Moment*, April 2010; “Det handler om ren, rå magt” in *Kristelig Dagblad*, 24 September 2010). In these interviews he highlights the chief editors’ earlier explanation of the commentator as an insider, and along with the definition of the political commentator as a lover of tactics, this is one of the most dominating definitions. Peter Mogensen says: “I know what the world looks like behind the thick wall of the Parliament. I know exactly what is going on and what they think.” (Political commentator in

Kristelig Dagblad, September 2010). Helle Ib, one of the few female commentators, says exactly the same a couple of month later also in an personal interview: “As a political commentator you can’t avoid gambling like in a horserace, but the focal point is to enlighten the audience so that they can understand what is really going on in politics. That is to cut the flab from more or less obvious manipulations” (Political commentator in Information, November 2010). Being the center of attention in the debate the political commentators apparently feel a need to defend themselves and their work.

As a last example, one of the more recent explanations of the cultural *kairos* is that we live in a culture of entertainment. People find it tiresome to watch an hour-long debate among politicians and instead they turn to these entertaining texts. Thus, the political commentator is defined as an entertainer who wraps up politics in glittering paper and thereby maintains the public interest in politics. This explanation comes primarily from researchers, but also from politicians and members of the public who enjoy reading political commentary:

Why do we want to read political commentary? It is hardly because of the insight or the qualified political debate. For that purpose the commentator’s so-called analysis is too fluttering, without risk and objections. Maybe, our joy of reading has more to do with a fascination—or a need for entertainment—grounded in our interest in other people or a simple inquisitiveness. Exactly the same duality that makes The X Factor such a popular and brilliant TV concept. (Journalist in Weekendavisen, February 2010)

Whereas the first five definitions can be found every now and then from 2007 and forth as responses to one another, this explanation is only manifest within the last couple of years. Apparently, this definition is a post-rationalization, because an explanation is needed as to why these severely criticized texts are still here. Another thing that differs from the other definitions is that this comes from a wide range of people—researchers, journalists, citizens and politicians. This is a definition they can all agree on.

To sum up, an overview of the negotiation of the understanding of the cultural *kairos* and thereby the functions of political commentary as described in the above text might be useful:

	<b>Fill-in-argument</b>	<b>Poster boy-argument</b>	<b>Insider-argument</b>	<b>Lover of strategy-argument</b>	<b>Cuckoo-argument</b>	<b>Entertainer-argument</b>
<b>Cultural kairos?</b>	The media development with around ten new Danish TV channels, cable TV, free and online newspapers	The media development with around ten new Danish TV channels, cable TV, free and online newspapers	Politics as strategic decision-making	Decadence of modern media and politics in imperfect harmony	Decadence of modern media and politics in imperfect harmony	Culture of entertainment
<b>What need springs from the cultural kairos?</b>	A need to produce news from early morning to late evening to survive	A need for a face to personify the business to survive	A need for an insider to explain the political strategic game to the public	A need for a qualified political debate (not a debate on strategy as suggested by political commentators)	A need for scientific expertise (not political commentators)	A need for entertainment
<b>What function of political commentary is emphasized?</b>	A fill-in who produces inexpensive news and stay in the game	A poster boy who brands a media	An insider who makes the political game comprehensible to voters	A lover of strategy who disqualifies the debate with a focus on spin, tactics and strategy	A cuckoo who makes a more superficial debate	An entertainer who can entertain the public
<b>Who says so?</b>	Researcher, but later also the public	Researcher, but later also politicians	Political commentator, chief editors, political editor	The public, politicians	Researcher	Researcher, politician, journalist, the public
<b>Positive or negative attitude toward political commentary?</b>	No obvious positive or negative attitude toward political commentary	No obvious positive or negative attitude toward political commentary	Positive attitude toward political commentary	Negative attitude toward political commentary	Negative attitude toward political commentary	Positive attitude toward political commentary
<b>When?</b>	2007→	2007→	2007→	2008→	2009→	2009→

Table 1. Overview of functions of political commentary

#### 4. CONCLUSION

So, what can this analysis tell us? First, it tells us something about political commentary and the diverse ways in which the genre is understood. In Denmark the genre is still at its early stage, and people still question and discuss the use of these texts (compared to for example inaugurals or other well-established genres). In relation to definition Schiappa refers to degrees of denotative conformity: “Do different observers agree that it is appropriate to use a given term to describe a particular phenomenon?” (Schiappa 1993: 405) In this case different observers have agreed to use the term political commentator, but they do not describe the phenomenon in the same way. They do not agree on the essence of the phenomenon; the *cultural kairos* that it emerged from and thereby the function of the political commentator.

Second, it is evident that different understandings of the *cultural kairos* and thereby the understandings of the function of political commentary serve different interests. As David Zarefsky puts it: “There are interests at stake in how a situation is framed.” (Zarefsky 2004: 612). The chief editors define the political commentator as an insider and thereby argue that the media produces meaningful texts to the readers while some researchers define the political commentator as a cuckoo and thereby defend their own status as ‘real’ experts. One explanation is not more true than another; they exist as argumentative positions side by side in a deliberation on the genre.

Third, the case tells us about the power of framing. Who has the power to do so? Frames function as strategies of social influence. As the cognitive linguist George Lakoff puts it as an advice to the Democrats: “Reframing is changing the way the public sees the world. It is changing what counts as common sense. Because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently.” (Lakoff 2004: xv). In opposition to the ordinary assumption in media framing theory, where one assumes that the media has major influence on the public’s understanding of the world, the media does not succeed in their attempt to frame the understanding of the political commentator. Members of the public, researchers and politicians offer different explanations and thereby question the media frame. Again, this may have to do with the genre’s early stage, but it can also be because there is something problematic about it. It is obvious that different ideals of democracy are at stake.

Finally, what has been described in the analysis above are the apparently descriptive functions that people use, but one can also find normative functions in the texts. From a more constructive point of view some debaters also talk about what a good political commentator should do. For example when people criticize the political commentator as an insider some of them suggest another and better function, namely as an enlightener. The following quote comes from two young politicians: “We wonder why Thomas Larsen [Danish political commentator, ed.] and Berlingske Tidende [Danish newspaper, ed.] wish to present superficial conclusions on strategy instead of commenting on current political proposals and the central themes of the discussion.” (Politicians in Berlingske Tidende, October 2009). In this regard a description of a function can be used in a normative manner—as a directive rather than a descriptive speech act. In relation to the differentiation between speech acts one could reconsider the functions from the analysis again to see if some of the functions may fall under other categories than descriptive speech acts. Perhaps the chief editors know very well that the definition of the political commentators as an insider is a cover-up for the real function as a fill-in. In this way the chief editor’s attempt to define the political commentator as an insider is better categorized as an evasive speech act.

## 5. OUTLOOK

In future investigations the ambition is to compare the different functions to a selection of political commentaries. Do the texts function as described? Are some functions more striking than others? The position in this paper is between the extremes of relativism and objectivism: a political commentary is not necessarily making politics comprehensible to voters just because the chief editor says so; just as a chocolate bar does not become healthy because you are told so in a commercial. One could get the impression that the negative reaction to the description of the function of the political commentator as an



insider may have to do with two things. First, that the actual insight may be limited, and what we get is therefore a pseudo-insight where the political commentator is making random guesses. In this way the alleged function is not consistent with the substance. The public is obviously distrustful, and the fact that the chief editors and the political commentators themselves feel a need to be so explicit about the genre is striking. Why is that? If the function were all that clear, why would there be a need for being explicit? Second, the members of the public who criticize the political commentator as an insider may find the idea of democracy within this explanation problematic. Within the different descriptions of the *cultural kairos* is also an understanding of the way democracy should function. People who question the function of the political commentator as an insider may be sceptic towards a political system without transparency.

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# Commentary on “DEFINING THE POLITICAL COMMENTATOR” by Mette Bengtsson

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This is an excellent paper and a very interesting dissertation topic, so I thank Ms. Mette Bengtsson for sharing her ideas with us today. My job is such an easy one—making some suggestions that might help her to extend her considerations regarding political commentary in Denmark. So let me begin with a few remarks about genres; their forms, functions and frames. I have only three main points.

## 2. POLITICAL COMMENTARY AS GENRE: A CONSIDERATION OF FORM

One of the absolutely critical questions that Bengtsson poses at the beginning of her paper is: “What is the function” of political commentary. And much of her work in this study is rightly designed to answer this inquiry. I would suggest that she might profitably begin with a prior question, which is: “What are the hallmarks and forms of political commentary—what, in essence, are the defining characteristics of this genre?” As Campbell and Jamieson (1978: 415) have written, genres are identified by their unique and distinct “constellation of substantive, situational, and stylistic elements,” so I think it may be appropriate to interrogate the content and languaging characteristics that mark a genre of political commentary.

The contours of the genre of political commentary could be mapped by examining the various forms of political commentary that exist: in the United States, for example, there are seemingly many more diverse forms than there are currently in Denmark. This fact alone makes the question an important one, because it underscores the form/function relationship that is so critically important in genre studies. In the United States, for instance, one can observe that the “talking heads” on CNN, MSNBC, and on Fox News offer significant political commentary, but that this commentary is very different in kind than that which is offered by *The Daily Show’s* Jon Stewart or by Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*. And then there is the question of delivery: does the print form of this genre depart from the televised form? If so, in what ways and with what potential results? These matters, basic definitional matters, should also have significant bearing on any questions of function.

### 3. POLITICAL COMMENTARY AS GENRE: A CONSIDERATION OF FUNCTION

Next, turning now for a brief moment to the matter of function, it might be helpful to ask how political commentary parallels Aristotelian forms of discourse. That is, does such commentary inform, or persuade, or entertain? Or, as is more likely the case, does it accomplish some combination of all three? Whether the political commentator is viewed as an “insider” or as a “cuckoo,” as Bengtsson applies these labels, may well depend on the purposes she/he is attempting to fulfill. Put another way, it is likely important to unpack the relationships between the characterizations, definitions, or labels for these political commentators and the multiplicity of functions that they serve within a particular social context. I suspect that Miller (1984; 1994) would certainly agree with this proposition, for it is an echo of her views on cultural *kairos*.

### 4. POLITICAL COMMENTARY AS GENRE: A CONSIDERATION OF FRAMES

My next series of observations involve the 24-hour news cycle and its effects both on politics and on political commentary. It is very likely the case, as Bengtsson suggests, that a certain amount of political commentary fills the void in the seemingly unending succession of news programs. But I would also look beyond the 24-hour news cycle for the impetus for this increase in Danish political commentary. What I find fairly singular is that the impact of the Internet is not considered here. As Gainous and Wagner (2011: 1) argue in their new book on the Internet revolution and politics, “The Internet presents... a significant change in the very structure and operation of our society and governance.” They observe that it has changed “what it means to be a politician and a voter in an age of instant communication on an often uncontrollable, interactive, multifaceted, evolving network.” The Internet has also dramatically changed the platforms and thus the frames of political commentary; many pundits now have their own blogs, wikis, and Facebook pages. Moreover, as Tuman (2008: 251) suggests, the increased usage of hyperlinks within the content of most blogs and wikis creates a proliferation of framing devices that offer audience members a marked variety of potential experiences from the same platform. Moreover, as Trent and Friedenberg (2008: 399-401) have so aptly observed, politics often makes first and best use of new technology, so any study of political commentary should likely attempt to account for the new electronic frames within which it operates, as well as considering the standard modes of print and televisual journalism.

### 5. CONCLUSION

Bengtsson notes that the relatively new role of the Danish political commentator has evolved within a remarkably short period of time and that this evolution has not always been met with approval. The very fact that the current Danish Prime Minister has characterized political commentary as somehow threatening to democracy is quite interesting—frighteningly so. But if the genre is evolving, so too must the purposes it serves. So I invite our author to consider the following questions as she moves forward with her research on this topic: Do commentators make political affairs more or less transparent? What impact do political commentators have on making the public sphere more inclusive? Do they actively participate in what Page (1996: 5) calls a “division of labor” be-

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tween the mass public, professional politicians, and selected experts to convey information and a diversity of perspectives upon which public deliberation necessarily relies? These are big-picture questions and need not be answered by the current study, but they certainly grow from it. I applaud Bengtsson for her work on this subject and offer my encouragement for her continuing research endeavors.

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