

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# 'Well, That's Just My Opinion': The Principle of Expression and the Public Debate

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The public debate is commonly criticised for lacking deliberation. Therefore, I argue, we need a better understanding of the rhetorical modes occurring instead of deliberation. By examining the interaction in a particularly expressive arena for public debate, namely public comment fields on Facebook, I suggest the term 'principle of expression' to describe a discursive ideal that directly counteracts the ideal of deliberative disagreement by favouring subjective expression over reason-giving. According to this ideal, the public debate should not primarily play out as an exchange of opinions but, instead, accommodate authentic displays of opinion. Moreover, the beliefs and opinions voiced in the public debate are seen as purely expressive: they arise out of the individual's inviolable interiority and individuality and concern not the general but the particular. Thus, argumentation is not required, and criticism is unwarranted. In the article, I explicate the 'principle of expression' and discuss its implications for the democratic debate. In doing so, I offer a way to describe, interpret, and critically evaluate instances of public debate where deliberative justification and contestation is undermined by subjective expression.

**Keywords:** Deliberation; public sphere; rhetoric; the principle of expression; social media; subjectivism

## Introduction

In an interview with Fox News' host Sean Hannity on March 4, 2020, President Donald Trump dismissed the World Health Organization's (WHO) evaluation of the COVID-19 pandemic's death rate based on a hunch: 'I think the 3.4 per cent is really a false number – and this is just my hunch'. In another interview with Hannity on March 26, Trump questioned the hospitals' estimated need for ventilators: he had 'a feeling that a lot of the numbers are just bigger than they're going to be'. In a White House press briefing on March 22, the president suggested that malaria medicine could effectively combat the virus. That, too, was 'just a feeling'. In the same press briefing, he reassured the public that the pandemic would not have severe economic consequences. 'I think the economy is going to do very well. Now, that's just my feeling. It's a strong feeling. I've had good, proper feelings about a lot of things over the years. And I think we're going to do well', he said.

The former president was widely criticised for both his political and rhetorical handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. What interests me here, however, is not Trump's pandemic rhetoric and politics. His utterances serve as illustrative examples of the phenomenon I examine, namely rhetorical moves that displace reason-giving with subjective experience and thereby foreclose

the possibilities for deliberation. I suggest that such moves are enabled by the principle of expression—a discursive ideal favouring subjective hunches and feelings over deliberative justification and contestation.

In the article, I explore the principle of expression as a communicative ideal and discuss its implications for the democratic debate. To do so, I draw on a close textual-intertextual reading (Ceccarelli 2001) of a particularly expressive arena for public debate, namely the public comments section debates on Facebook. I study one debate—in two stages and three nations—specifically, discussions of humanitarian efforts to accommodate Syrian refugees in the three Scandinavian nations in the early fall of 2015 and then later the same fall and winter when the debate became more concerned with measures to control the influx of refugees. My analytical emphasis is on the interaction between participants in this debate, and I pay specific attention to instances where they sanction each other's contributions to the debate. In so doing, I reveal a set of options for rhetorical conduct that directly counteracts the ideal of 'deliberative disagreement' (Kock 2018) and that I argue are instead governed by the principle of expression.

Indeed, social media are a rather specific arena for public debate, where subjectivity plays a more prominent role than in the broader public debate. Still, when these options are available to the participants in the debate examined, it implies that they are generally available for human use and can be re-actualised in other discursive contexts (Leff 1980). As such, the interpretation and discussion

of the principle of expression as a communicative ideal evidenced in one specific debate offers insights that can inform interpretations of debate practices also within other discursive contexts.

As I put forth the principle of expression as a competing communicative ideal to the ideal of deliberation, I begin the article by discussing what deliberation is and why it matters for democracy. Then, I explain my analytical approach before explicating the principle of expression through analyses of selected interactions in the comment fields. Finally, I discuss the implications of this as a discursive ideal for the public debate.

### **The Deliberative Attitude – and Why it Matters**

In a recent article, John Dryzek and colleagues (2019: 1144) describe the current situation of democratic politics as 'far from the deliberative ideal'. They observe a 'marked decline in civility and argumentative complexity', the 'displacement of facts and evidence' by 'felt truth', 'a surfeit of expression', and a corresponding lack of 'listening and reflection' (Dryzek et al. 2019: 1144, 1146). They argue that these features of the contemporary public debate make citizens inclined to listen more to partisan cues than political messages' content. Political leaders, in turn, are cultivated to offer simple solutions that do not match the complex problems facing our societies. Consequently, popular belief in the political system and politicians' collective credibility may decrease and civic participation may decline.

Dryzek and colleagues' description of the state the public debate is currently in resembles concerns commonly voiced by scholars occupied with normative evaluations of the democratic debate. Arguably, the public debate suffers from a lack of arguments and adequate answers to arguments, thereby failing to help citizens make well-informed choices (Kock 2018; Palczewski 2019). Political speakers are charged with presenting personalities rather than options (Goodnight 1982; Sennett 1977), and the mass media are accused of contributing to the displacement of public deliberation by staged displays of opinion and private experience (Habermas 1989; Hirdman, Kleberg & Widestedt 2005). Moreover, data indicate that political engagement does not sit well with a truly deliberative attitude (i.e., the willingness to engage in the practice of reason-giving in cross-cutting conversation) (e.g., Mutz 2006). Instead, research suggests that, out of conflict avoidance, many hesitate to engage in deliberative argumentation with others with whom they expect to disagree and, rather, make use of various rhetorical protective mechanisms to avoid overt disagreement (e.g., Ryfe 2006; Sakariassen & Meijer 2021; Tatarchevskiy 2012). What, then, is a deliberative attitude and why does it matter for democracy?

Deliberation should here be understood as a norm-governed, interactive, and cooperative practise of rhetorical justification and contestation that enables citizens to reflect upon and choose between conflicting choices (Chambers 2009; Kock 2009, 2018). The public debate is concerned with decisions about future action and must, necessarily, accommodate uncertainty, conflicting

views, interests, and values (Goodnight 1982; Kock 2009). Usually, there will be irrefutable reasons on both sides, meaning that consensus cannot be expected even if the disagreeing parties argue reasonably. The disagreeing parties should, nonetheless, engage in deliberative argumentation, here understood as the practice of giving, listening, and responding to arguments. As such, the ideal for the public debate is 'deliberative disagreement' (Kock 2018; see also, Ivie 2002).

Norms of deliberative disagreement concern both how citizens and public officials advance their own claims and arguments (cf. Kock 2018, on acceptability, relevance, and weight) and how they listen to and accommodate the claims and arguments of others (cf. Booth 2004, on 'listening rhetoric'; Gutmann & Thompson 1996, on 'principle of accommodation'). More precisely, the ideal of deliberative disagreement require participants to give arguments for their claims. These arguments should, ideally, offer a truthful account of how things really are ('acceptability') and be relevant to the issue in question ('relevance'). Moreover, speakers should appeal to some shared warrants by connecting their particular concerns to general concerns that are also shared by others (Booth 2004: 46–50; Dryzek 2000: 68–69; Kock 2018: 486–488). Finally, participants in the public debate should be willing to listen and respond with 'adequate answers' to opponents' arguments, meaning that rebuttals of an opponent's argument should contain a justification for why the argument is either unacceptable or irrelevant or carries less weight than the counterargument (Kock 2018: 492).

The deliberative ideal has been criticised for privileging rhetorically privileged voices while excluding citizens who, out of conflict avoidance, lack of knowledge, or inadequate argumentation skills, are obstructed from participating in deliberative justification and contestation (e.g., Young 2000). Accordingly, less-norm-governed genres, such as personal storytelling and testimony, have been promoted as more egalitarian modes of public discourse that may empower non-dominant voices and, thereby, include marginalised perspectives in the public debate (Black 2009; Poletta & Lee 2006; Ryfe 2006; Young 2000). Personal stories can embody and convey individual and collective values and identities that otherwise remain implicit in the public debate (Barnes 2008; Black 2008). Thus, personal testimonies can induce identification and mutual understanding and, therefore, be important resources for developing and maintaining a sense of community (Ryfe 2006). As such, these genres may serve vital functions in the deliberative *process* (i.e., societies' ongoing collective rhetorical process of working through issues, positions, identities, experiences, and relationships) (Hauser 1999; Kjeldsen 2016; Mansbridge et al. 2012).

However, the case can also be made that political disagreements are best handled through norm-governed deliberation. According to Dryzek and colleagues (2019), the current state of the democratic debate will not improve unless citizens are involved as participants and critics in deliberation. In contrast to personal storytelling, deliberation requires us to be mindful of political

decisions' implications beyond the individual case: The 'question is not how each person feels, but how systemic issues that have personal impacts can be addressed' (Palczewski 2019: 88–89; see also, Berlant 1997; Schudson 1997; Tonn 2005). As such, deliberation requires a certain attentiveness to the commitments, needs, and sentiments of others, while not 'asking us to leave our particular commitments behind' (Garsten 2006: 210). The deliberative exchange of arguments for and against a certain action brings to view the competing interests, values, and considerations that are at stake and, thereby, makes participants and audiences to the debate better equipped to make considered judgements consistent with their values (Niemeyer 2011; Price, Cappella & Nir 2002). Moreover, deliberation's reason-giving helps participants in the debate to understand why others act the way they do, although disagreeing with and disliking their actions (Garsten 2006; Palczewski 2019). Therefore, deliberation is a communicative mode that enhances possibilities for 'liv[ing] together productively under conditions of dissensus' (Kock & Villadsen 2017: 573–574; see also, Ivie 2002).

The principle of expression describes a communicative mode that directly counteracts the ideal of deliberative disagreement by favouring authentic expressions of subjective experiences over argumentation and listening. As I show by drawing on a study of comment fields debates, the central topics are those that do not require reason-giving and cannot be criticised, namely what the speakers personally feel, experience, and believe. I suggest that such subjective expressions are enabled by the idea that individuals' experiences are wholly subjective and that individuals can, therefore, only speak for their particular situation and subjective experience. As an ideal for the public debate, the principle of expression, thus, undermines the base for deliberative justification and prevents cross-cutting debate.

After first accounting for the material and my analytical approach, I show how the principle of expression materialises in the concrete debate. Then, I discuss the ideal's foundation in a subjectivist view on truth and morale and its implications for the democratic debate.

## Material and Method

The study is a textual-intertextual close reading of comments and interactions in news-generated comments field debates on Facebook. The debates concern two closely related rhetorical episodes in the Scandinavian public sphere, specifically the discussions of the reception of Syrian refugees in the early fall of 2015 and then later in the fall and winter that year as the public emphasis shifted from reception of refugees to retrenchments of asylum policies.

A total of 32 Facebook posts, shared by 12 different Scandinavian news outlets, and their associated comment fields, were collected using a combination of the tool *Netvizz* (Rieder 2013) and manual searches in the Facebook archive.<sup>1</sup> The sample consisted of posts from the largest national news providers and included both tabloid and quality newspapers and the national broadcasters in the

three Scandinavian nations (see, Supplementary file 1; see also, Andersen 2020: 77–85).

The selected posts were news items that, after a thorough orientation in a more extensive selection of news items from the periods, were judged to be 'key texts' (i.e., 'especially concise fragments' in the larger material (Hoff-Clausen 2008: 65, my translation)). This entails that the texts be characteristic of the overall media coverage of the two rhetorical episodes in the two periods and three countries. The news items included as key texts from the first rhetorical episode employed a humanitarian frame, often focusing on individuals' efforts to help refugees. In the early fall of 2015, this frame dominated the Scandinavian countries' media coverage of the Syrian refugee situation (Hovden, Mjelde & Gripsrud 2018). The news items selected from the second rhetorical episode were oriented towards political conflict and employed security or economy frames. These frames dominated the media coverage in the three Scandinavian nations later the same fall and winter (Hovden, Mjelde & Gripsrud 2018).

The analysis examines the *interactions* in the comment fields below the selected Facebook posts. In total, 953 such interactions, involving all from two to over 20 participants, were analysed. The aim of the study is, however, not to produce quantitatively representative insights about the Facebook debates but to explore and critically discuss one prominent feature of these debates, namely the displacement of deliberative argumentation by subjective expression. Therefore, the analysis describes and critically evaluates general tendencies in the material and demonstrates these with particularly poignant examples.

My analytical and critical approach is textual-intertextual close reading (Ceccarelli 2001), best characterised as a form of rhetorical criticism (Campbell & Burkholder 1997). In line with a rhetorical approach to discourse, the analysis aims to identify and critically evaluate how the formal and substantial elements of given texts *function* in the context they are conveyed and received. Compared to other approaches to discourse, the rhetorical perspective 'places particular importance on seeing discourse as action, not just as propositions or meaning-making' (Kock & Villadsen 2017: 576).

Moreover, the rhetorical perspective views discourse as situated and contingent, entailing that it sees rhetorical praxis as governed by the rhetor's interpretation of what constitutes a fitting response to the situation (Bitzer 1968), including what makes a good argument, what makes a speaker credible, and what makes a message rhetorically attractive to the audience. A critical focus on the particularities of specific texts can thereby inform us of the speakers' understanding of the communicative context and what they deem appropriate, credible, effective, and ethical within a particular discursive context. To examine how something is expressed is, essentially, to ask how it could be possible to express oneself in such a way (Johansen 2019: 21; Leff 1980: 235–237).

The textual-intertextual close reading's distinctive feature is that the critic uses the audience's written reactions to validate and nuance her interpretation of

the texts' rhetorical functions (Ceccarelli 2001: 6). As such, the analytical approach is characterised by a critical focus on specific texts' particularities and the intertextual responses they bring about. For this study, this means that I examine the interaction between the participants, paying special attention to instances where comments are sanctioned, as these can reveal what the participants expect from the interaction and the norms that govern their rhetorical praxis.

### Competing Expectations to the Debate

Two competing expectations to the interaction manifest in the debates: Some participants expect deliberative disagreement. More precisely, they expect that claims are substantiated with reasons, that participants do their best to base their arguments on truthful and relevant knowledge, and that they respond to criticism and counterarguments (cf. Kock 2018). These expectations are expressed through sanctions of other participants for evading reason-giving requirements and criticism of others' contribution to the debate for being unacceptable or irrelevant.

The ideal of deliberative disagreement competes with a conflicting, apparently more widespread, ideal for the debate, namely, the principle of expression. The ideal, I argue, favours subjective expressions over deliberation and manifests as an aversion to argumentation, listening, and criticism. This aversion to deliberative justification and contestation becomes apparent as the participants evade reason-giving requirements and dismiss counterarguments and criticism by insisting on the subjectivity of their claims.

As the examples discussed in the analysis will show, the two contradictory expectations to the debate often materialise within the same interactions. It is not incidental that they do: when conflicting expectations to the debate are present, these expectations are explicitly articulated. When one debater gives and demands arguments, the others' unwillingness to give and listen to arguments becomes apparent.

#### *Aversion to argumentation*

At the beginning of the article, I showed how the former US president framed his assertions about several facts as feelings and hunches, thereby evading reason-giving requirements. Many participants in the comment fields make use of similar rhetorical tactics as Trump when advancing their claims. Commonly, participants insist on the subjectivity of their assertions about the world with formulations such as '... well, that is just my opinion' (e.g., VG 2015/9/8)<sup>2</sup> or '... but that is just how I feel' (e.g., Berlingske 2015/9/29). The presentation of one's assertions as subjective expressions enables speakers to free themselves from reason-giving requirements and forestall potential counterarguments on the basis that 'what was said was not an assertion about the world, it was an expression of what one genuinely feels'. This functions as an argument-repellent—as a signpost that counterarguments are not welcome and will not bite.

Participants in the debates also explicitly renounce obligations to argumentation. An illustrative example is the following comment, written as a response to an

opponent's efforts to make the speaker give reasons for his claims:

I do not have to give arguments or account for why I hold the opinion that I do, and especially not to you (Berlingske, 2016/1/6).

The comment is part of an interaction where two participants disagree about the consequences of the legislative amendment L87 being passed by the Danish parliament. The law was—both in national and international media—commonly referred to as the 'jewellery law' because it, among other things, granted the police authority to confiscate money and valuables from asylum seekers upon arrival. The interaction begins when one participant advances two arguments against the amendment. First, he argues, the expenses related to the confiscation of valuables will exceed the expected payback. Second, he argues that the amendment gives Denmark much negative mention internationally and, thus, damages the nation's reputation. The other participant criticises the opponent's claims about the effects of the amendment. However, his criticism does not concern the opponent's claims and arguments but, instead, states that his opponent is not in the position to 'tell us something about the L87's effectivity rate' but is, like everyone else, merely conveying his subjective opinion about the amendment.

Responding to this, the first participant requests counterarguments. The other does not comply with these requests. Instead, he rejects the obligation to give arguments, for instance, by claiming that he has not advanced any claims ('But I have not advanced any claims'). When the opponent, nevertheless, insists on reason-giving as a norm ('One does not get far when one is unable to give reasons and arguments for one's attitude'), the other displays irritation and anger, expressed through swearing ('for fuck's sake'), and attacks the opponent for being 'a quarrelsome person of the deepest dye!' However, the only thing the opponent has done is to expect from the interlocutor that he gives reasons for his claims or, in other words, that he *debates*.

Whereas the previous example illustrates the aversion to argumentation through a participant's explicit renunciation of reason-giving requirements, another example demonstrates the aversion to argumentation through a participant's sanctioning of counterarguments:

But hello, I do not want lots of opinions, all I want is to help. I am a pensioner, so my income is nothing to brag about, but my heart is in the right place. I think I am able to put myself in others' shoes and picture how it feels to have to leave everything, lose everything. I only came with an offer and if you do not have anything to donate, you do not have to express opinions about it. Just be silent. This does not have a political side to it (Aftonbladet 2015/9/3b).

The comment appears as a response to several other participants' objections to an earlier utterance by the

speaker, in which she demonstrated her engagement for the refugees ('I have donated to a good friend who is helping at the site'). Responding to this, other participants intervene with various objections to private donations as the right response to the refugee situation. These objections concern the aid organisations' trustworthiness, the EU's responsibility, the refugees' status as 'genuine refugees', and the reasonableness in asking 'ordinary' citizens to pay for refugee aid. As such, they contribute to politicising the issue and opening it up for debate. And that is precisely what the above-cited participant sanctions (i.e., that the issue is made political and thereby liable for debate). She sanctions other participants' interpretation of her utterance as a political statement, claiming that the issue does not have a 'political side to it'. Moreover, she dismisses opponents' claims and arguments as unwarranted meddling into the privacy of her feelings.

There can indeed be good, legitimate reasons for not wanting to engage in political discussion—on Facebook and elsewhere. Many primarily use social media for personal purposes (Rasmussen 2014) and may experience the incursion of political discussion into this personal space as intrusive and uncomfortable (Kruse, Norris & Flinchum 2018; Thorson, Vraga & Kligler-Vilenchik 2015). Deliberative disagreement can be uncomfortable (Schudson 1997), and, both online and offline, many avoid discussing contentious political topics, such as issues related to immigration, with people with whom they expect to disagree (Mutz 2002, 2006; Sakariassen & Meijer 2021; Tatarchevskiy 2012). When expecting disagreement, it can indeed be easier to say, 'Well, that's just my opinion', thereby discouraging counter argumentation, than 'This is my opinion, and here is why', thereby inviting critical engagement (Palczewski 2019: 88). As such, the participant's insistence of the subjectivity of her claims may be seen as a rhetorical protective mechanism that allows her to avoid and handle the discomforts of controversy (Black 2009; Polletta & Lee 2006; Ryfe 2006).

However, the participant's dismissal of counter considerations as unwarranted interference also suggests an aversion to hearing the other side. While she seems to feel entitled to display her opinion in public, she does not tolerate others doing the same. Instead of hearing 'lots of opinions', she seemingly expects others—at least those who disagree—to 'be silent'.

The two examples discussed in this section reveal an aversion to argumentation and counter argumentation evidenced in dismissals of other participants' attempts at justification and contestation as irrelevant and intrusive contributions to the interaction. Reason-giving requirements and counterarguments are rejected through refusals of having made any (political) claims, thus making argumentation irrelevant. Moreover, deliberative contestations of claims are dismissed as intrusive interventions in others' private business, indicated by the speakers' expressed frustration when others request justification or promote counterarguments. I suggest that we see this aversion to argumentation as a manifestation of the principle of expression, according to which the individual's utterances—also when publicly

promoted—merely express the individual's subjective feelings, beliefs, and experiences. Therefore, one is not required to justify one's claims, and one's claims are not liable for debate. Moreover, as I demonstrate by turning to an interaction where a personal testimony is contested, the subjectivity of opinions also causes civil criticism to be experienced as an attack on the person advancing claims.

### *The difficulty of criticism*

Social media are commonly discussed as particularly hostile debate environments (cf. Andersen 2021). In the debates I examine, many comments are sanctioned as hostile ad hominem attacks. However, rather than attacking the personal qualities of others, many of the comments that are sanctioned as personal attacks appear to constitute 'adequate answers': They are rebuttals of the trustworthiness, relevance, or weight of others' arguments (Kock 2018: 493). They are, in other words, not personal attacks but are, nevertheless, sanctioned as such. An example is the following exchange between participants A and B, starting when participant A opposes the humanitarian frame employed in the newspaper's coverage of the refugee crisis:

- A: What about us here at home?? When are people going to start donating money to us who are ill or poor here at home??
- B: All who live in Sweden can receive some kind of contribution, no one has to starve to death here unless they want to. And no one is forcing you to donate money to the refugees, you are welcome to help all the poor Swedes who cannot survive on their social security benefits.
- A: I myself am ill, and I do not receive much in social security benefits. I have a chronic disease. And no, I am not going to donate money to them. Most of the money I receive, I spend on my medicines, and they are not fucking cheap, living off 1000 kr monthly is not fun.
- B: I am sorry to hear that you are ill. If you have a chronic disease, you are never required to pay full price for the medicine. That you are only given 1000 to live off, sounds a bit off, given that those who live on subsistence minimum have more than 3000. In that case, you have a home, food and probably internet. And you think we should donate money to you, when many refugees die every day.
- A: That is not what I meant, but why shall I donate my money when I need them for myself. Everyone has their own view, that does not mean that YOU have to attack me (Aftonbladet 2015/9/3b).

Participant A opposes the call to donate to the refugees because, arguably, there are people already in Sweden needing donations, including herself. Her contribution to the debate happens mainly through testimony, where her experience of the Swedish welfare system is presented as

truth claims about the reality for all 'ill and poor' Swedes. The other participant (B) rebuts these claims. She argues that there are already generous social security schemes to help Swedes in need; whereas, the refugees need aid. She also contests A's claims about her financial situation, arguing that the welfare state subsidises medicine for the chronically ill and that the subsistence minimum is more than 3000 Swedish kroner monthly. Furthermore, she points out that no one demands participant A to donate her money, thus rebutting the relevance of the opponent's arguments. As such, the criticism is performed in a civil way: it concerns the acceptability and relevance of the opponent's arguments, not the person. Still, participant A experiences the criticism as a personal attack.

Participant A's response to criticism illustrates the difficulty in criticising arguments and claims based on subjective experiences without verbally abusing the person. This worry is often expressed about the so-called reality literature, which many critics find challenging to criticise for its aesthetic qualities without attacking the author personally and coming across as unempathetic to the painful experience often disclosed in such literature (Beddari 2020). A similar worry has been expressed in relation to justice movements, such as the #MeToo movement, where criticism of the movement is typically taken to be an attack on the experiences of the oppressed (Burgess 2018). Thereby, the possibility of critical engagement is shut down and the demand for justice becomes 'unanswerable (and unquestionable)' and, thus, depoliticised (Burgess 2018: 349).

Authentic expressions of individuals' subjective experience may be important contributions to public deliberation about political decisions that affect people's lives (Gastil & Black 2008). The authentic testimony about an individual's experience can exemplify concerns and views shared by many and, thereby, call attention to general problems (Barnes 2008; Young 2000). However, unless the particularities of an individual's story are made relevant to others' lives, then there is really 'no political point in hearing it' (Dryzek, 2000: 69). Moreover, when claims and arguments in the public debate become inextricably linked to the 'self', criticism of these opinions will often be difficult to distinguish from an attack on the person. Consequently, criticism of claims and arguments may be experienced as instances of hostility (see also, Andersen 2020: 273; Fladmoe & Nadim 2017: 58–59). Consequently, counter voices that contest the truthfulness and relevance of a subjective experience may be delegitimised as abusive and excluded from the interaction.

Moreover, participant A's response to criticism suggests that criticism has no legitimate place in the public debate. Because everything is subjectively experienced—because 'everyone has their own view' on factual, as well as moral questions—no one can reasonably dictate what arguments are acceptable or relevant or carry more weight than others. Again, we can find parallels in the debate about the art critic's role in the public sphere. The critic's authority is challenged by the idea that taste, and hence quality, is subjective. Consequently, there is no legitimate place for critique in the public sphere, as

proposed by Norway's former Minister of Culture, who made the following statement about the art critic's place in the public sphere: 'The time is past for having someone tell us what constitutes good and bad culture' (Hofstad Helleland 2017, cited in Vassenden 2021, my translation). If aesthetic quality is merely a matter of personal taste, then the critic's judgement is only a subjective opinion, and there is no reason for others to listen to it. Similarly, if truth is merely a question of subjective experience and morale is only a question of personal preference, then no one has the authority to criticise the acceptability, relevance, and weight of arguments in the public debate.

Participant A, then, displays an aversion to cross-cutting debate. By turning the critic into a perpetrator and insisting on the subjectivity of all claims in the public debate, she undermines the possibilities for deliberative contestation. I suggest that we understand this aversion to cross-cutting debate and criticism as a manifestation of the principle of expression, where public opinions are inextricably tied to subjective experiences that are particular to the individual. The lack of any intersubjective understanding implies that no one is in the position to criticise others' opinions—and to do so is an assault on their integrity. In what follows, I discuss how we can understand the principle of expression as a communicative ideal and its implications for the democratic debate.

### The Principle of Expression as Discursive Ideal

The analysis of the interactions in the comment fields demonstrates how expectations to deliberative disagreement compete with a contradictory ideal for the interaction, namely the principle of expression, which favours subjective expression over deliberative justification and contestation. Being structured around personal profiles and facilitating and rewarding the sharing of personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences, social network sites constitute a rather specific debate arena, where subjective expressions can be expected to play a more prominent role than in the larger public debate. Thus, the persuasiveness of the principle of expression as a contemporary ideal for rhetorical conduct should not be exaggerated. The discussion of this as a debate ideal in social media is, however, not without consequences for the study of other discursive contexts. As argued, the examination of how something is uttered can tell us something about the world in which these utterances can be expressed and can be effective (Johansen 2019: 21; Leff 1980: 235–237). How, then, should we understand the advent of the principle of expression as a discursive ideal?

I suggest that the favouring of subjective expression over deliberative disagreement evidenced in comment fields debates is enabled by a subjectivist doctrine, according to which truth and morals are matters of personal preference and, thus, private matters. Subjectivism can be described as a form of relativism in which both truth and morals are relative to *individuals'*, rather than communities' or culture's, attitudes. As an epistemological doctrine, subjectivism assumes that the individual has an inherent capability to discover and articulate what is true (Bisecker 2018). As such, 'what is true for any one person need

not be true for everyone or anyone else' (Biesecker 2018: 332). Whereas objective truth makes assertions 'true depending on how things *are*', relativism makes assertions 'true depending on how people *take* things to be', and subjectivism makes assertions 'true depending only on how *individuals* take things to be' (Prado 2018: 2, emphasis in original).

Epistemological subjectivism is most prominently circulated through concepts such as alternative facts and post-truth. It also manifests in a particular form of identity politics' claims that subjective experiences of oppression must always be true and beyond contestation because such experiences represent the individual's unquestionable and inviolable truth (e.g., Berlant 2001; Burgess 2018). The persuasiveness of a subjectivist view on truth has been questioned, for instance, by Simone Chambers (2021), who argues that there is ample evidence that most citizens care about accuracy and factual truth. As also evidenced in the analysis, some participants are concerned with the truthfulness of the claims made by others. However, such contestations of the acceptability of others' claims are typically sanctioned as unwarranted interventions in others' private business and the critic turned into a perpetrator.

We can, I argue, see this aversion to deliberative contestation as an indication of moral subjectivism (cf. Sinclair 2020) and an associated ideal of authenticity (Taylor 1991). In contrast to both a deontological and consequentialist morality, where the morality of an action depends either on the action's immanent moral character or the moral character of its consequences, subjectivism entails that there are no universal moral standards after which an action can be evaluated. Instead, morale is relative to each individual—it is a matter of personal taste (Bloom 1988; Gamlund 2021).

The advent of this view on morality is often associated with the secularisation and liberalisation of Western societies in late modernity. Arguably, the absence of moral authorities and strict social norms have given citizens increased freedom to define themselves and their life projects and to develop their own moral compass, free of the influence of others (Gamlund 2021: 30; Taylor 1991). Accordingly, increased importance is ascribed to individuals, who are encouraged to seek self-fulfilment and to develop their own way of life based on their subjective perception of what is important and valuable. As a result, authenticity has developed as a modern moral ideal (Taylor 1991), influencing both contemporary popular culture (e.g., Miller & Sheperd 2004) and political culture (Johansen 1999).

According to Charles Taylor (1991), the ideal of authenticity is founded on the belief that everyone has a unique way of being human, implying that everyone has unique experiences that no one else can truly understand. By virtue of its experiences, the individual becomes the ultimate yardstick for both truth and morale and each of us can potentially be a speaker of insights that lies beyond others' access. As Charles Taylor (1991: 29) puts it: 'Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover'.

Following this, it becomes possible to argue that everyone should be entitled to express their unique subjective feelings and convictions, rather than being required to give reasons and listen to what others have to say. Moreover, to criticise the actions and opinions of others is to intervene in others' freedoms to define and realise themselves and their life project (Bloom 1988; Gamlund 2021). To pass judgements is a refusal to acknowledge others 'as real, morally accountable human beings' (Taylor 2005: 153–154). As such, criticism can be dismissed and sanctioned as unwarranted meddling into others' lives and an assault on their freedom and integrity. Finally, criticism becomes pointless: because a person's opinions arise from his or her subjective experience of the world, these are not up for debate. Thus, criticism can be discouraged and disregarded because 'everyone has their own view'.

As a discursive ideal, then, the principle of expression requires the dismissal of reason-giving in two ways. First, individuals are not required to give arguments for their claims because these claims are inseparable from individuals' subjective experience and authentic self. Second, counterargumentation and criticism of claims are uncalled for, because an intersubjective understanding of the situation does not exist and because criticism is an attack on their authentic experience. Consequently, I argue, the principle of expression does not facilitate a debate that may serve as input for citizens' deliberations 'among' and 'within' themselves (Kock 2018: 496, see also, Chambers 2009; Goodin 2000).

First, a debate governed by a principle of expression must necessarily be less informative than a debate governed by the ideal of deliberative disagreement. When claims in the public debate become merely about what an individual *feels*, it does not give the debate's participants and audiences an accurate impression of society's shared problems and the means to make informed choices on how to remedy these. As such, the principle of expression obstructs discussion about how political questions with personal consequences can be addressed and, thereby, obscures the possibilities for the public debate from inducing 'considered reflection about a future action' (Chambers 2009: 335; see also, Kock 2018).

Furthermore, the principle of expression may prevent mutual respect and tolerance for difference and dissensus. When participants in the public debate commit to giving reasons for their views and do their best to be veracious and attentive to their fellow citizens' needs and interests, the exchange of opinions helps the debate's participants and audience understand why others act the way they do, although disagreeing with their actions. Absent such reason-giving, it becomes more difficult to understand and, thereby, tolerate the views and actions of others (Palczewski 2019). As such, I argue that the more the principle of expression is accepted as a communicative ideal in the public debate, the more it may obscure both possibilities for considered reflection about decisions that bear on people's lives and the possibilities to co-exist productively in societies necessarily characterised by difference and dissensus.

## Conclusion

Today, the public debate is often charged with lacking deliberative argumentation. Therefore, I have argued, we need a better understanding of the rhetorical modes occurring instead of deliberation. By examining how the participants interact in one specific arena for public debate, distinctive for its possibilities for expressive subjectivity, I have revealed how the ideal of deliberative disagreement competes with the principle of expression—a communicative ideal that favours subjective expressions over deliberative argumentation. By doing so, I have offered insights that enable us to understand the aversion to deliberation evidenced in this debate and the means to describe and interpret such rhetorical moves if they occur in other discursive contexts.

Further research is needed to assess the persuasiveness of the principle of expression in other parts of the public sphere and to evaluate its implications for the deliberative *process*, through which citizens individually and collectively work through not only issues and arguments but also positions, experiences, identities, and relationships (Hauser 1999; Kjeldsen 2016; Mansbridge et al. 2012). However, in the concrete debate, this discursive ideal undermines the base for deliberative justification and contestation. It does so by encouraging the displacement of reason-giving by subjective expression. Moreover, it makes issue-oriented criticism illegitimate by presupposing that claims made in the public debate are inextricably linked to the person promoting them. Finally, criticism is made irrelevant, as it presupposes that all claims are subjective and, therefore, not liable for debate. Consequently, I have argued, the principle of expression may obstruct considered reflection on political problems and their solutions and may decrease our tolerance for dissensus on these matters.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The practical and ethical challenges of collecting material from Facebook, both using services such as Netvizz and manually, are discussed in Andersen (2020: 79–80, 100–106).

<sup>2</sup> This and subsequent references refer to the comment field below the news item. All quotes are translated into English (more or less literally) by the author.

## Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplementary File 1:** Appendix. Comment Fields Included in the Material. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.958.s1>

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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