

Crafting a crisis

How the genre of the justifying press conference constituted the Covid-19 pandemic as an emergency and legitimised the power of authorities in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

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Abstract

Why did citizens adhere to the strict measures imposed by national authorities during the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020? One part of the answer is the way the first press conferences constituted the situation as an urgent crisis and the authorities as legitimate leaders in charge. This chapter examines the rhetoric of government press conferences in Scandinavia during the initial outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. I discuss the press conference as a rhetorical genre and establish the studied press conferences as instances of a subgenre of the political press conference: the *justifying* press conference. Phases, procedures, and aims of this subgenre are defined, and the arrival phase is particularly examined. This chapter demonstrates how the multimodal aspects of the press conferences contributed to constituting the pandemic as an emergency and establishing the ethos of the authorities as active and responsible. This constitution functioned as a multimodal justification of the measures and actions taken and the legitimising of the power of the authorities in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

Keywords: ethos, multimodal event, Covid-19 pandemic, press conference rhetoric, Scandinavia

Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis that unfolded from the beginning of 2020, led to a remarkable increase in the use of legacy media and government press conferences. In Northern Europe and the UK, for instance, citizens turned to the public service broadcasters and mainstream media to follow the press conferences where national governments provided information and directions for action. In the US, the White House Task Force began daily press conferences that were covered extensively by the media.

In this chapter, I take a rhetorical genre approach to the mediated press conference as a multimodal event and a specific genre. I examine the press conferences given by Scandinavian authorities during the critical first period of the Covid-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020, when many countries decided to lock down. In this chapter, I seek to answer two research questions:

- RQ1. Which type of rhetorical genre does the examined press conferences belong to, and what phases and procedures does this genre include?
- RQ2. How do selected examples of this genre contribute to justifying measures and legitimising the power of the authorities?

I first discuss the press conference as a genre and explain my theoretical departure points, method, and choice of material. The analysis establishes the press conferences as instances of a subgenre of the political press conference: the *justifying* press conference. I define phases and procedures of this subgenre and demonstrate how the examined press conferences contributed to constituting the urgency of the crisis and the ethos of the authorities, thereby justifying the measures and legitimising the power of the authorities.

The press conference as an object of study

Press conferences may seem old-fashioned in a world where communication is carried out online, via social media and adapted through algorithms. However, the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that press conferences are still relevant and indispensable in high-risk situations and crises. The need to communicate important information to media and citizens quickly and directly led governments around the world to hold press conferences broadcast both online and in legacy media. Many countries even decided to give such press conferences daily.

Despite the lasting importance of press conferences, and their renewed relevance in the Covid-19 crisis, studies of press conferences are limited. Most research deals with the question-and-answer session (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017), or the time after the speech or presentation when questions are posed (Hernández, 2021). Such studies examine the interaction between speakers and

journalists: the adversariness of the questions (Eriksson, 2011), the strategical manoeuvring (van Eemeren, 2010) of politicians (Demir, 2016), the role of journalists' questions and moves to secure accountability (Hernández, 2021), and the confrontational manoeuvring in spokespersons' argumentative replies through dissociation (Wu, 2019a) or by declaring a standpoint either unallowed or indisputable (Wu, 2019b). Other studies examine the shamelessness or impoliteness of spokespersons (Wodak et al., 2021) or their strategies of evading questions (Gabrielsen et al., 2017). Research from Sweden has examined the historical development of governmental press conferences (Larsson, 2012), journalists' follow-up questions (Eriksson, 2011), and image-repair (Eriksson & Eriksson, 2012). Research from the US argues that former president Trump's so-called homestyle was not conducive to effective crisis governance, as enacted in his daily Covid-19 press briefings (Just et al., 2021).

The research, then, almost entirely departs from a pragmatic or argumentative approach studying the verbal interaction between spokespersons and journalists. Some research, however, does address the aspects of the press conference most relevant to this chapter. One relevant type of research examines the press conference as a rhetorical and television-mediated genre. Kumar (2003), for instance, looks at the history and variation in the basic elements of the presidential press conference. Kumar has also shown how the American presidential press conference as a genre changed considerably with the expansion of television beginning in the 1950s and 1960s. With television, the audience increased, and so did the rhetorical stakes, and the "press conference became a vehicle that presidents used to explain their policies and actions to the public, not reporters" (Kumar, 2005: 183). This is particularly relevant for many of the Covid-19 press conferences, because the communication was not only – not even primarily – directed to journalists, but instead to the audience.

Also relevant are studies of the generic and procedural aspects of press conferences. Hernández distinguishes between the first and second section of the press conference: In the first, the spokesperson makes their opening statements uninterrupted, and in the second, journalists pose questions and spokespersons answer, according to specific procedural rules (Hernández, 2021). Another genre-based study (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017) describes the historical development of the political press conference, mentions three subgenres, and describes three activities of the genre: the political speech, the question-and-answer session, and the post-interviews.

Theory

My analysis builds on two theoretical approaches: first, rhetorical theories of situation, genre, and ethos, and second, theories of semiotics and multimodality.

Rhetorical situation, genre, and ethos

Press conferences are authorities' rhetorical response to an urgent situation in need of communication. Thus, they are a prime example of what rhetorician Lloyd F. Bitzer (1968) described as a rhetorical response to a rhetorical situation.

A rhetorical situation consists of three constitutive elements: 1) an exigence, which is "an imperfection marked by urgency" that "demands" (Bitzer, 1968: 6) a rhetorical response – for the problem to be rhetorical, it must be solvable (wholly or partially) with the help of rhetoric; 2) an audience, defined as the individuals or groups that the rhetor wishes to influence to think differently or to act – a rhetorical audience is limited to those who can be influenced by the rhetor and are able to solve or mitigate the problem; and 3) constraints, which are the mental, physical, practical, and cultural contingencies that the rhetor must relate to when addressing the exigence. The rhetor's central task is to "discover and make use of proper constraints in his message in order that his response, in conjunction with other constraints operative in the situation, will influence the audience" (Bitzer, 1980: 23).

Two things follow from this account: First, depending on changes in exigences, audiences, or constraints, the rhetorical situation will change accordingly. This, then, calls for different types of fitting responses. Second, similar situations will evoke similar rhetorical responses. In rhetoric, we know these recurring and resemblant responses as genres. Genres are considered as groups of responses which share a certain type of situation and exigence, and they also share certain types of content and stylistic traits (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). In this way, genres are a form of typified rhetorical action (Miller, 1984) that offers certain roles for speakers and audiences and helps us address and negotiate the social needs and exigences in recurring situations.

Just as situations and genres form the responses of rhetors, rhetors have the power to frame, form, and constitute situations and genres (Vatz, 1973). Thus, the way authorities act rhetorically during a press conference will constitute the character and urgency of the crisis as well as their own ethos. Understanding the rhetorical responses of the authorities, and the reception and ensuing approval and actions of the citizens, then, requires an understanding of how the authorities rhetorically constituted the situation and their own ethos.

Theories of ethos and credibility date back to Aristotle's (2004) distinction between three dimensions of ethos: good sense (*phronêsis*), good moral values (*aretê*), and goodwill toward the audience (*eunoia*). Contemporary persuasion studies have confirmed these three dimensions through survey experiments calling them competence (*phronêsis*), character (*aretê*), and caring, or goodwill (*eunoia*) (McCroskey, 2001; McCroskey & Young, 1981). In contemporary rhetorical studies, ethos is not an intrinsic property of a communicator, but the judgment an audience makes based on the communication and behaviour of the communicator.

The traditional and social psychological understanding of ethos (credibility) is almost exclusively developed based on verbal communication and individual sources (speakers). While we have research on the ethos of sources (speakers, for instance), organisations (Baumlin & Scisco, 2018), design, and online material such as web pages (Warnick & Heineman, 2012), there appear to be no studies examining ethos related to press conferences. Therefore, my analysis of ethos examines the press conferences multimodally, by looking for semiotic signs of competence, character, and goodwill or caring towards the audience. Thus, it is necessary to connect to theories of semiotics and multimodality.

Semiotics and multimodality

My analysis of the multimodal elements of the press conferences utilises the study of semiotics (Chandler, 2007; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), multimodality (Bateman et al., 2017; Jewitt, 2017; Kjeldsen, 2018), and visual rhetoric (Kjeldsen, 2018).

While verbal language is the dominant mode in press conferences, it is only one mode of those used. Therefore, I base my analysis on four assumptions of multimodal theory that leads the analysis beyond just language, to see the rhetorical meaning-making created through several different modes. The first assumption is that “language is part of a multimodal ensemble” (Jewitt, 2017: 15). Language is one mode among many (including body, voice, movement, imagery, different forms of technology, etc.) that are nestled into each other while working in unison when communicating in a situation such as a press conference. It is a theoretical tenet in multimodal theory that gaze, gesture, and posture not only function as a support to speech, but also provide communication in their own right (Jewitt, 2017). Consisting of several different modes, a press conference is a prime example of such a multimodal ensemble. The second assumption is that “each mode in a multimodal ensemble is understood as realizing different communicative work” (Jewitt, 2017: 15). In a press conference, the verbal mode mostly provides the informational work, while the procedural, non-verbal, and other visual modes are essential to the construction of communicative coherence and credibility. The third assumption is that “people orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes” (Jewitt, 2017: 16). Thus, when organising a crisis press conference, one will choose between different possible modes and combine them to achieve the specific aim of the press conference. The fourth assumption is that “meanings of signs fashioned from multimodal semiotic resources are, like speech, social” (Jewitt, 2017: 17). In accordance with this view, a press conference is rhetorically constructed in a way that is shaped both by the intentions of the organiser and by the norms and rules of the situation and the culture. Entering first to a press conference, for instance, is socially and culturally connected to importance.

The necessity of a multimodal approach, then, is that emergency and ethos is not only constructed through verbal language alone, but through an orchestration of different modes. Studying this requires a multimodal analysis building on the notions of modes and semiotic resources. I use Gunther Kress's (2017: 60) definition of mode as "a socially shaped and culturally given resource making meaning". Common modes used in press conferences are speech, gesture, writing, imagery, and different forms of typographic communication (e.g., charts and graphs). I use the term semiotic resource in a similar way as the definition offered by van Leeuwen (2005: 285): "the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes". Semiotic resource is sometimes understood as a kind of mode, and sometimes as a kind of media. I construe semiotic resources as meaning-making manifestations of certain aspects of modes. While gesture is a mode, different types of gestures constitute different forms of semiotic resources. Such resources, then, are parallel to the concept of code in traditional semiotics (Chandler, 2007), which is seen as the rule combining signifier and signified. Calm and composed gestures, for instance, may signify control. I write *may* signify, because the use of the term semiotic resource instead of the term code is a way of acknowledging that such meaning-making and semiotic systems are not fixed and stable. In some situations, calm and composed gestures may signify timidity or nervousness. Thus, meaning-making is both established through previous use and actual application in specific situations. When looking at the manifestations of semiotic resources for ethos-making, some resources – or signs – stand out as particularly relevant (Vigsø, 2017). In examining the dimensions of character and competence in ethos, for instance, multimodal signs of importance will be particularly relevant. In most situations, it would be unsuitable for a politician or a health representative to explicitly state verbally that they are important; thus, such rhetorical work is often done multimodally and is thereby less conspicuous.

Theories of visual grammar and semiotics teach us that various resources may indicate importance (Arnheim, 1974, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Placing an element in the centre of a visual representation, for instance, can be a sign of importance (Arnheim, 1982). In the same way, certain verbal and non-verbal signs may signify importance in press conferences: standing up, being close to the centre or the person placed in the centre, entering first, being serious, being brief and precise in delivery, and using a manuscript.

As any other temporal human communication activity, the order and structure of press conferences are conventionalised in the genre. This ascribes meaning and importance to the elements. Just as the centre in visual rhetoric is imbued with importance (Arnheim, 1982), so may the first arrival, or the first person in a line, be imbued with importance. If such ideological structures follow the common and accepted norms, they are not noticed. However, when events deviate from the normal, or are compared with other examples and cultural

norms, their rhetorical significance becomes evident. Looking closely at such procedures and norms in press conferences, then, allows us to see how they assign importance and urgency to situations and ascribe ethos to participants and communities.

Material and method

Material

The analysed material consists of twelve videos of the most watched and important press conferences in the middle of March 2020, which was the most critical period in the early lockdown phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. I have examined the following press conferences:

- Danish authorities on March 6, 10, 11, and 12
- Norwegian authorities on March 10, 11, 12, and 13
- Swedish authorities on March 10 (two instances), 11, and 13

These press conferences were chosen because of the urgency communicated and the presence of the most important political representatives. In all three countries, these briefings involve either the prime minister or the minister of health, or both.

Method

My analysis builds on all of the aforementioned press conferences, but this chapter only features the most relevant examples. I have carried out interpretative, rhetorical criticism of the videos. Hence, they are analyses of what television viewers and online viewers saw, to establish an understanding of the genre and its general forms of phases and procedures, as well as an understanding of how selected multimodal elements may contribute to constitute urgency and the ethos of the authorities. The excerpts quoted in the chapter have been translated by me to English.

First, I applied the theory of rhetorical situation and genre on the situation and the press conferences. Then, I examined the videos several times to establish the order of events and norms of procedure in the press conferences. This allowed me to establish four phases (arrival, presentation, interaction, and closing). I then analysed each phase by looking for signs of urgency and ethos of importance. I looked at five multimodal resources:

1. Mise-en-scène (e.g., physical composition of the room and background imagery)
2. Television presentation and camera work (e.g., use of banners, angle, shot position, and movement)
3. Non-verbal rhetoric (the body language, movement, and non-verbal communication of the actors, including clothing)
4. Props (devices used to facilitate communication)
5. Verbal rhetoric (the spoken words)

The account below is structured according to the four main phases; however, my analysis and results only deal with the two first phases (arrival and presentation). The interaction and closing phases, as well as the pre- and post-phases, are only dealt with briefly to explain their framing of and relevance to the two phases examined.

Analysis and results

Since Ekström and Eriksson (2017) have not provided names for the subgenres of press conferences they have mentioned, I have coined the subgenres in the following way: First, the announcing press conferences, where “government press relations officials invite journalists to press conferences to announce policies, reforms and other political initiatives” (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017: 345); second, the diplomacy press conferences, where there is a joint session with a primary objective to “display mutual relationships between governments, states, and international organisations” (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017: 346); and finally, the crisis press conference, a “political press conference that is organised to manage criticism and political crises in the context of media scandals” (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017: 346). Each of these subgenres constitute groups of similar rhetorical responses to distinct situations with specific constraints (Bitzer, 1968). None of them, however, share the special rhetorical circumstances of the press conferences during the early phase of the Covid-19 crisis.

A new subgenre – the justifying press conference and its modes

The pandemic press conferences are best seen as a combination of the announcing and the crisis press conference. They are a response to a crisis, but not a crisis for the speaker or organisation; instead, they are a response to a shared national crisis that the speaker and authorities are expected to inform about and deal with. Thus, the types of press conferences during the Covid-19 pandemic stand out as a yet undescribed genre, which I call the *justifying press conference*.

It is justifying because the main exigence of the genre is to explain and justify the measures and actions taken. It does so by describing the situation and the need for strict measures – as I will demonstrate – through rhetorically constituting urgency. Since this type of press conference is a type of recurring situation with similar responses, it must be seen as a specific rhetorical genre (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). There is also a need to address the citizens' uncertainty, worry, and alarm. A fitting response not only needs to provide knowledge and justification, but also reassurance and comfort. The audience is the population in general, because the situation and measures concern all citizens. The main constraints will differ depending on the phases of the pandemic; however, in the phase I examine, which we may call “crisis hits” (Mølster & Kjeldsen, 2022), important constraints are a lack of full knowledge of the situation, and thus an inability for the authorities to know and communicate the circumstances and consequences for certain (Kjeldsen et al., 2022). In Scandinavia, it is also an important constraint that all three countries have high levels of trust, particularly evident during the early phases of the pandemic (Helsingen et al., 2020; Ihlen et al., 2022; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 13).

As a multimodal ensemble, the justifying press conference utilises a variety of modes. I examine the following: verbal speech, physical movement, positioning of spokespersons, props, and slides.

The media framing of the justifying press conference

Most people encounter the justifying press conference in the news media; therefore, it is necessary to examine the televised mediation of the informative-justifying crisis press conference. In Scandinavia, this primarily means experiencing press conferences through the public broadcasters: SVT (Swedish national broadcasting), NRK (Norwegian national broadcasting), and DR (Danish national broadcasting). The constitution of the urgency and the initial ethos of the communicators, then, is formed by the way the television broadcasts frame the situation.

In the minutes – even hours – before the press conferences, the news media makes time for direct broadcasting: They announce that the press conference will happen and make time for discussion and speculation in advance. A pre-broadcast of discussions in the studio and with reporters waiting for the press conference builds up anticipation and a sense of importance, which is intensified when the speakers arrive and the reporters immediately stop the conversation and direct their attention towards the action.

The broadcasting companies not only transmit the press conferences, they also offer information and interpretations through banners, words, graphics, and colours on the screen. In this way, they constitute the situation as serious and urgent even before the press conference starts. The broadcast of the

11 March press conference from DR, for instance, presented a banner at the bottom of the screen with a yellow band that read “BREAKING”. A blue band provided information during the briefing about the number of those infected with Covid-19, and below this, the largest banner read: “DENMARK CLOSES DOWN” (see Figure 5.5). In the same way, the transmission from NRK had banners stating that the broadcast was directly from the prime minister’s office (see Figure 5.2). During the transmission, the broadcast companies selected certain bits of information, which they stated on banners. DR, for instance, wrote, “1,303 Danish citizens in quarantine”, on their transmission on 11 March (see Figure 5.1).

In the pre-phase, then, the banners and the television pictures of the press room and podiums with logos, the waiting and expectations, and the discussion and speculation all contribute to ascribing importance to the event and to the speakers and constitute their ethos as important actors that will address the urgency. After the press conference, in the post-phase, new banners showed quotes of what the spokespersons said, and the presentations were discussed, interpreted, and evaluated in the studio, confirming the importance of the event and the position of the spokespersons as national leaders and experts.

The four phases of the genre and the multimodal constitution of urgency and ethos

Through the examination of the material, four distinctive phases emerged: arrival, presentation, interaction (Q&A), and closing. These phases are not particular to this specific genre but are valid for all types of press conferences. In practice, not all press conferences go through all phases. Some press conferences, for instance, avoid questions, and thus do not have an interaction part.

The phases necessarily happen in the ordered sequence, with only a theoretical possibility for reordering the presentation and interaction phases. The phases each have their distinct objectives and characteristics. In the justifying crisis press conference, the phases of arrival and presentation are the most watched and are central in the constitution of ethos and expertise. This is the case because the authorities are in control of the staging of the events.

The first phase, arrival, may seem obvious and superfluous to examine, since speakers must necessarily arrive at the press conference. However, arriving can be done in various ways and with different rhetorical significance. For the justifying press conferences in the early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, this is particularly relevant, since these events had several speakers, which allowed for rhetorical manipulation of their arrival. Even though this chapter examines Scandinavian press conferences, it is informative to compare them with the rhetoric of arrival at the press conferences of the White House Coronavirus Task Force. At the first press conference on 16 March, reporters in the White House

Press Room waited for the press conference to start. Then, the door slid open and six members of the task force came in and moved towards the only podium, with two people on the right and four on the left of the podium, standing in a rather disorderly group. Then, they waited in silence. Thirty seconds later, the door slid open again and President Trump entered followed by Vice President Pence. The president walked to the podium and put down a folder, while the vice president edged in between the task force members, causing movements and uneasy bodily adaption behind the president. The same occurred on the press conference the next day (17 March). This time, seven people arrived and waited one minute before the president entered.

In contrast to such split arrival, it is characteristic for the Danish press conferences that all participants arrive at the same time.

Figure 5.1 Screenshot from Danish prime minister's press conference on DR1 announcing first lockdown in Denmark, 11 March 2020



Source: DR, 2020

At the meetings on 6 March and 11 March, for instance, reporters waited in front of five podiums all marked with the logo of the prime minister's office, and the background wall displayed the same logo in large format. At the exact announced time for the start of the press conference on 11 March, the prime minister, Mette Fredriksen, arrived with representatives for the health authorities, police, and government. She walked directly to the centre podium and waited until the other participants were at their podiums and ready. On her right stood the minister of health, Magnus Heunicke, and the director general

of The Danish Health Authority, Søren Brostrøm, and on her left, the national police commissioner, Thorkild Fogde, and the state secretary of ministry of foreign affairs, Erik Brøgger Rasmussen.

While the split arrival of the American press conference underscores the importance of the president and puts less emphasis on the urgency of the situation, the united arrival of the Danish authorities underscores the urgency of the situation and puts less emphasis on the importance of the prime minister. The united arrival of a full team of senior authorities of the major national functions clearly constitutes an urgent situation and demonstrates a united response.

The Danish press conference also displayed internal power in a more subtle way. Hierarchy was established through the prime minister literally walking in front and arriving first (sequence). In both Scandinavia and the US, the leader moves to the centre (centring), thereby signifying importance and hierarchy. Still, compared to the US, the Scandinavian display of hierarchy was toned down in several ways. Even though the prime ministers or the leading health authority experts walked in first, they still arrived simultaneously with the other participants. After arrival, the prime minister was placed at the most centre podium; however, all podiums were similar and aligned the participants in a way that provided equality. The American press conferences only had one podium, which placed the president both in the centre and in front of the other participants.

The Danish and the American way of arriving, then, display two different ideologies: The American arrival signals clear hierarchy and superiority of the president, while the Danish arrival more subtly signals a hierarchy, but simultaneously equalises it through a less marked sequence (arriving as a group) and a visual alignment (of the podiums). With all the authoritative representatives arriving at the same time, the Danish arrival also signals unity and teamwork. Thus, the arrival and subsequent placing of the Danish authorities serves not primarily to signify the importance of the prime minister, but especially to signify the importance of the issue, the urgency, and the unity to combat the challenges facing the Danish society. At the Danish press conference on 11 March 2020, for instance, the parading of representatives of four central authorities, in addition to the prime minister, made it obvious that the situation was urgent. The fact that the national police commissioner wore his uniform visually adds to the sense of seriousness.

Like Denmark, Norway is considered a highly egalitarian country. Thus, it is peculiar to notice that the arrival at the Norwegian press conference on 12 March began similarly to the American arrival.

Figure 5.2 Screenshot from Norwegian prime minister's press conference on NRK announcing first lockdown in Norway, 12 March 2020



Source: NRK, 2020

The rhetoric of the *mise-en-scène* of the Norwegian press conference was like the Danish, with several podiums for the participants. On the centre podium and at the back wall, the audience could see the national coat of arms and the writing “The Prime Minister’s Office”. In contrast to the Danish arrival, the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, entered the scene alone and immediately moved to the centre podium. She stood a moment, letting reporters find their places, and then delivered her speech. Upon finishing the speech, Solberg said: “And then the minister of health will guide you through the specific measures that have been decided today”. The minister then arrived and walked to the podium to the right of the prime minister. When he finished, the prime minister said, “And then I give the word to the director of the Norwegian Directorate of Health”. The director, Bjørn Guldvog, then arrived and delivered his remarks. Finally, the same happened with the representative for the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Camilla Stoltenberg. Even though the representatives arrived one at the time, beginning with the prime minister (thereby positioning her more clearly as the main authority) the rhetoric of the arrival and *mise-en-scène* still signified urgency and unison among the responsible authorities. This was primarily done through the alignment of podiums and the allotted speaking time for the three other representatives.

The press conference of the Swedish authorities on 11 March followed the same mode in the rhetoric of arrival (see Government Offices of Sweden, 2020). Here as well, the logo of the government was obvious on the four podiums

and the back wall. Like Norway, there were four podiums, but like Denmark, the representatives – the Swedish prime minister, Stefan Löfven, the minister of health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren, the minister of justice, Morgan Johansson, and the national police chief, Anders Thornberg – arrived at the same time. Notably, in contrast to the Danish and Norwegian press conferences, no representatives from the health authorities were present. Instead, the minister of justice informed about advice given earlier the same day by the Public Health Agency of Sweden. While the Norwegian and Danish press conferences visually demonstrated that the health authorities and the political authorities stand side-by-side, the Swedish press conferences practically separated these two institutions. In Sweden, the absence of politicians at the health authority press conferences as well as the absence of health representatives at the political press conferences is a clear signal of the social division of administrative labour in the Swedish handling of Covid-19 (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021). Thus, while the appeals at the press conferences in the three Scandinavian countries were similar, the separation of competencies was visually manifest in Sweden. The press conferences by state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell and the Public Health Agency demonstrated medical expertise (Hartelius, 2011) through competence in epidemiology and basing forecasts and recommendations on scientific knowledge and evidence; the press conferences with politicians demonstrated political expertise through competence in practical matters and knowledge about the core of the nation as well as proper recognition of those “whose voice should be heard” (Hartelius, 2011: 16). The separation also constrained the possible displays of hierarchy. Had the Swedish state epidemiologist participated in the press conferences with the political leadership, he would have had to be placed in a sequence of importance when given the chance to speak. As it was, he remained largely free of such hierarchy by being given separate press conferences.

So, already the arrival and order of speech signifies urgency, importance, and hierarchy. This is also done through the formal and highly structured fashion of the events, the many representatives for the authorities, the separation of forms of expertise, and through the construction of the *mise-en-scène* as a formal, national place of importance. Adding to this is the presence of an interpreter for the deaf in the Danish and Norwegian briefings, making it clear that it was essential that every citizen receive the message from the authorities.

Before the authorities uttered a word, the multimodal arrival infused the situation with an importance that helped establish the perception of urgency, preparing the ground for the public to acquiesce to the advice and measures from the authorities (Hartelius, 2011). In the same way, the arrival formed the initial ethos (McCroskey, 2001; McCroskey & Young, 1981) of the authorities as in control, determined, and well prepared, despite the uncertain situation. This multimodally communicated ethos and sense of urgency in the arrival was immediately given substance in the remarks and speeches of the press conferences.

All the press conferences began with the the remarks of the main political representative for the presentation phase. In all instances the representatives read their remarks from a prepared manuscript, which underlines the seriousness and urgency. After the arrival at the Danish press conference on 11 March, the Danish prime minister waited a moment to make sure that everyone was at their podiums and ready to begin before starting her speech. With approximately 1,800 words, the speech was long in comparison with the average of speeches in crisis press conferences. The urgency and seriousness enacted in the arrival was immediately verbalised in her first words, delivered in a calm, firm, and insisting tone of voice, restrained body language, and no hand gestures:

What I will say tonight will have major consequences for every Dane. A lot of citizens will meet very difficult situations, and we need to help each other. Before I get to that, I would like to start by addressing the situation we are looking at now, and the background for this. (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2020)

The speech was similar to those of national leaders when war has been declared and leaders must unite the nation and take precautions. However, there was no explicit use of war rhetoric. Instead, the prime minister talked about “giant consequences”, “difficult” and “extraordinary” situations, and possible “solutions”. Rhetorically, the speech performed three main tasks: It established the dire and threatening situation, informed about the measures to counter it, and constituted the nation as a community that would stand together and act in unison to counter the crisis.

The speech of the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, on 12 March was much shorter, with only around 800 words, since she left it to the minister of health to describe in detail the measures the government and parliament decided. Like the Danish prime minister, Solberg delivered her words calmly, in a slow tempo with clear pauses and restrained body language. She said in her introduction:

Dear everyone, we are in a difficult time for Norway and the world. Norway is tested. Both as a society, and as individuals. In this period, we will all have a different everyday life. The drastic measures we now implement are done in the hope that we may stop the virus. The coronavirus spreads rapidly. It brings fear and horror to children and adults. I understand that fear. (Government of Norway, 2020)

After establishing the seriousness of the situation, and mentioning some of the main measures, the prime minister verbally constituted the national unity needed to address the urgency:

We stand together in this period – not with hugs and handshakes – but by keeping distance. This will require a lot of each of us. We need to care for each other and help each other as best we can. We have made it through difficult times before – and I am absolutely certain that we will make it again. (Government of Norway, 2020)

At the Swedish press conference on 11 March, on the day of the first Covid-19 casualty, the Swedish prime minister began his speech by extending his commiseration to the bereaved. He then immediately went on to say, “The risk of general dissemination of the virus is high. Tonight, the WHO has declared the coronavirus a pandemic. We have a very serious situation” (SVT, 2020). He said that the fight against the virus had been the top priority of the government and the nation since February and assured that the nation stood together in the difficult time. Then the prime minister gave thanks to the health workers – the many men and women in the whole nation making important efforts to combat the virus and take care of the sick. He informed that he met the leaders of the other parties in parliament and “listened to their contributions and viewpoints”.

As we see from these three examples, the primary speech is not as much an informative piece of rhetoric as it is a national alarm, a call to action, and a constitution of urgency and national unity. The prime minister set the stage, and the minister of health informed about the situation and the measures taken. In declining order of importance, the remaining representatives informed about the situation in their area of responsibility. In all three countries, the political authorities presented first, then the health authorities, and finally, in Denmark and Sweden, the police authorities.

As mentioned, the Swedish division of social labour led to the health authorities and the political authorities giving different press conferences. Thus, the state epidemiologist was not present at the main press conferences with the prime minister. Furthermore, the Swedish prime minister was the only Scandinavian prime minister who gave an individual press conference (on 22 March 2020). In this way, the Swedish separation of responsibility, power, and knowledge was visually expressed in the presence and absence of actors at the different presentations. In contrast to this, the director general of the Danish health authority was frequently present to deliver information. At the press conference on 11 March, for instance, he was the third to talk after the two most important speakers: the prime minister and the minister of health. At the Norwegian press conference on 12 March, the political is represented by two persons: the prime minister and the minister of health. The medical is also represented by two persons: the leader of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the leader of the Norwegian Directorate of Health. Still, the visual representation of these four authorities indicated primacy of the political, since they were placed in the centre with the health representatives on either side.

The use of props and presentation tools

Generally, the examined press conferences did not use any form of presentation tools or props. Using such technology tends to put the communicator in the dark – literally. By leading audiences to slides instead of the speaker, the use of programs such as PowerPoint tend to tone down the leadership of the communicator and undermine the sense of urgency (Kjeldsen et al., 2019). In a crisis, it has a stronger rhetorical effect when the national leader looks the citizens in the eyes than it would have if the same leader had used the instructional style of PowerPoint.

On 24 February 2020, for instance, a Swedish press conference used slides to inform about the situation at that point (see Figure 5.3 for an example).

Figure 5.3 Slide from Swedish press conference, 24 February 2020



Comments: The slide show, given by Lena Hallengren, shows the national preparedness and tasks for different national institutions.

Source: Regeringskansliet, 2020

The minister of health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren, and the minister for international development cooperation, Peter Eriksson, informed about the situation in the world and in Sweden as well as how the government was prepared to meet coming challenges (see Figure 5.4). Hallengren said:

We thought that we should provide an account of the present situation in relation to the new coronavirus and the sicknesses that it causes, which has been given the name Covid-19. I want to begin with an image, and briefly

go through what the preparedness of the Swedish government in relation to Covid-19 looks like. (Regeringskansliet, 2020)

Figure 5.4 Screenshot from press conference with Swedish minister of health and social affairs and minister for international development cooperation, 24 February 2020



Comments: The image shows Lena Hallengren, Swedish minister of health and social affairs, and Peter Eriksson, Swedish minister for international development cooperation.

Source: Regeringskansliet, 2020

In the room, the image was displayed on a screen placed to the right of the ministers, which meant that it could not be seen on screen when the ministers were talking: When Hallengren presented the first slide, it filled the whole screen in the broadcast, and we could no longer see the ministers.

The slide had a map of Sweden on the right side, and on the left, it had several bullet points showing which units – the government, the Public Health Agency, the National Board of Health and Welfare, and the different regions in Sweden – were responsible for which tasks. Without seeing her, the audience could hear the minister talk about issues not directly related to the slide, then the slide was removed. The minister appeared to be using a fair amount of “fresh talk” (Goffman, 1981) and attending only partly to her notes. A good minute later, she returned to the issues on the slide, and the slide was presented on the television screen again. She continued her informative speech, and another slide came up. When the minister for international development cooperation spoke, another slide was presented. The whole press conference was held in an

informative style focusing on facts and actions. There was no emphasising the seriousness of the threat, no direct address to the citizens, and no constitution of a national “we”, the way it was later done in the press conferences in March. These press conferences – as with almost all the press conferences involving political authorities during the pandemic – were performed without the use of any kind of presentation tools.

In general, the spoken word formed as a prepared speech is the preferred rhetorical form for crisis situations that require communication of urgency, cooperation, collective action, and identity. Thus, using presentation tools implicitly signifies an informative genre, while abstaining from such tools carries with it a sense of more urgency and explicit leadership (Kjeldsen, 2021). This is demonstrated in the press conferences that used a simple placard instead of complicated slides, such as the Danish press conference on 11 March (see Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5 Television frame from DR1 broadcast, 11 March 2020



Comments: The image shows Magnus Heunicke, the Danish minister of health, presenting a placard with a graph entitled “Flattening the curve”.

Source: DR, 2020

The Danish prime minister introduced the minister of health, Magnus Heunicke, who then informed about the situation in Denmark, which was, at that point, the country with the most dramatic increase of people infected with Covid-19: “We are at the foot of the epidemic. The coronavirus has been seeded in our society. Therefore, what we do now is critical in relation to how the develop-

ment will be in the coming weeks and months” (Danish Prime Minister’s Office, 2020). The minister of health then grabbed a placard from his podium (see Figure 5.5) and said: “And now I would like to show these two graphs” (Danish Prime Minister’s Office, 2020), showing the image of “flattening the curve”. This chart was used in several countries (A *New York Times* article describes the chart; see Roberts, 2020) and shows a red curve signifying an overstraining of the healthcare system capacity and a green (or blue) curve demonstrating how protective measures would flatten the curve. The chart was used because it offered a mode of communication that was more expedient in explaining than verbal language alone. The minister continued, while his finger traced the curves:

We have two possibilities – two scenarios here in Denmark. One scenario is a steep rise in infection. We have already begun to see a steep rise. If this steep rise continues, then the rise in the number of infected continues here.

While following the red curve with his index finger above the crossed line, he said:

It will then break through the normal capacity of the National Health Service. What does this mean? It means that the cancer sections, the sections for heart diseases, the sections for pulmonary medicine, sections for children, will be brought down.

Thus, it is critical, he said, while pointing at the placard,

that we enter into the green scenario, the other curve here, where we with the arrangements we now implement [...] do not have the drastic rise but come into the green scenario. [...] If we do that, then we will avoid what we have witnessed in the Italian health service.

In contrast to the slides of the Swedish minister, the placard is simple, easy to understand, and the Danish minister directed the understanding of the meaning both with his words and voice and by pointing and touching the relevant places on the placard directly. Thereby, he not only provided information, but he also signified the importance and urgency of the situation. After having explained the graph, he held the placard with both hands, looked up at the audience while rhythmically “beating” the placard in time with his words: “We have in Denmark a health crisis, it is ourselves who determine how we get through this health crisis”.

Conclusion

My analysis of the press conferences in the early period of the Covid-19 crisis has provided several results.

First, it has established a specific genre – the justifying press conference – described its phases, and pointed to the importance of mediated framing by the news media. In the media landscape of today, the press conference as a genre is constituted partly by being mediated by legacy media. The framing by the news broadcasters and the multimodal representation during the press conferences work in unison to establish a rhetoric of importance and national urgency.

Second, it has demonstrated how dominant multimodal elements and modes of communication in the genre (verbal speech, physical movement, positioning of spokespersons, props, and slides) contribute to constituting both the urgency of the situation and the ethos for the authorities (the spokespersons). The elements and modes work together to establish a rhetoric of urgency, which constitutes the spokespersons as legitimate leaders and endows them with authority. Their use of carefully prepared remarks support this, while the use of “fresh talk” and slides offers less sense of urgency and leadership. Modes such as movement and positioning also create distinctions between spokespersons establishing hierarchies of importance, which – especially in Denmark and Norway – promotes the political leadership.

In relation to this, the verbal and nonverbal rhetoric of the delivered speeches work in unity to create both a common national exigence and simultaneously constitute the nation as a unified agent that acknowledges the crisis and is prepared to contribute to a common national endeavour. This constitutive national rhetoric makes the appeal of the justifying press conference in a crisis different from other types of crises press conferences.

Further studies should examine in more detail the genre traits of the justifying press conference and study how the multimodal rhetoric of this genre varies in different stages of the crisis. The constitution of urgency and legitimacy is natural in the first phase, where authorities for the first time acknowledged through rhetoric and active measures the severity of the crisis. This led to higher levels of institutional and interpersonal trust (e.g., Esaiasson et al., 2021). Some research has argued that lockdown measures generated political support and legitimacy for measures and authorities, while others have argued that the intensity of the pandemic and the collective angst made people rally around political institutions (Schraff, 2021). While both these points are reasonable, I suggest that measures are not automatically accepted, and angst is not a reaction to bare realities. Acceptance and worries are constructed through the rhetorical constitution of the urgency of the situation and the legitimacy of the authorities. In the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, as I have shown, the authorities did this though the multimodal ensemble of the justifying press

conference, creating a narrative that the media participated in. Naturally, other kinds of communication contributed to this as well. Together, these appeals prepared the ground for a national understanding of the Covid-19 crisis and the communication that followed. This communication rhetorically worked from the foundation of the constitution of situation and authorities that was created in this early phase (see more about the phases in Mølster & Kjeldsen, 2022).

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