

Retoryka zreinterpretowana

Rhetoric reinterpreted

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“Who said ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’?”: Crystallizing a public accusation across media platforms

„Kto powiedział »nowe szaty cesarza«”? Jak utrwała się publiczne oskarżenie na medialnych platformach

Abstract

In contemporary digital publics, rhetoric and culture intertwine, shaping collective understanding and moral judgement. Taking the public accusations against Katherine Diez as its point of departure, this article explores the rhetorical dynamics of a public accusation through which communities articulate and enforce shared norms while simultaneously reconstituting their own identities. By tracing and mapping how the accusation emerged, circulated, and crystallized across platforms, the article examines how rhetorical participation and cultural meaning-making unfold collaboratively in a networked media ecology. Drawing on theories of narrative rhetoric, accusatory rhetoric and participatory communication, the article demonstrates how a single accusation becomes a site where participants negotiate authority, moral legitimacy, and identity. The article contributes to recent research on accusatory rhetoric and offers a method for delimiting an object of analysis within a networked media ecology.

Uczestnicy współczesnej publicznej przestrzeni cyfrowej poprzez splot retoryki i kultury wpływają na zbiorowe pojmowanie spraw i ich moralny osąd. Na przykładzie sprawy Katherine Diez w artykule bada się, jak kształtowała się retorycznie dynamika publicznego oskarżenia. Stało się ono dyskursywnym polem do negocjowania norm i tożsamości. W nawiązaniu do koncepcji: sieciowej ekologii mediów, retorycznego uczestnictwa, retoryki narracyjnej i (współ)tworzenia kulturowych znaczeń w artykule odtworzono, jak omawiane oskarżenie pojawiło się w sieci, a następnie w niej krążyło i utrzymywało. Śledząc i mapując, jak oskarżenie się pojawiło, krążyło i krystalizowało na różnych platformach, artykuł ten analizuje, jak współpraca w zakresie retorycznej uczestnictwa i tworzenia znaczenia kulturowego rozwija się w sieciowej ekologii mediów. Zgodnie z teoriami retoryki narracyjnej, retoryki oskarżającej i komunikacji partycypacyjnej, analizowany przypadek pokazuje, jak jedno oskarżenie staje się przyczynkiem do negocjowania tożsamości i autorytetu, a także moralnej legitymizacji. Niniejszą analizą autorka włącza się we współczesny nurt badawczy retoryki oskarżeń (*accusatory rhetoric*), proponując metodę retorycznej analizy w ramach sieciowej ekologii mediów.

Key words

accusatory rhetoric, digital issue mapping, narrative rhetoric, networked media ecology

retoryka oskarżeń, cyfrowe mapowanie kwestii, retoryka narracyjna, sieciowa ekologia mediów

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“Who said ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’?”: Crystallizing a public accusation across media platforms

1. Introduction

With a screenshot of influencer, media provocateur and literary critic Katherine Diez’s Instagram profile, the anonymous Reddit user LittleMissUnperfect set events in motion across the Danish media landscape in January 2024. LittleMissUnperfect had discovered that Diez’ Instagram post contained a literary review that Diez took credit for, despite openly copying directly from other people’s texts without citing the sources. LittleMissUnperfect shared the discovery on the Reddit forum *r/influencergossipDK*¹ and invited forum members to engage with the accusation:

Cutting and pasting other people’s texts and without referencing sources? Ouchie. She struts in borrowed plumes on Instagram (filter) and IRL (surgeries) and her literary wit (translation of the quote above), who said “the Emperor’s New Clothes?” (*r/influencergossipDK*, LittleMissUnperfect)²

In the hours that followed, other Reddit users shared more examples of Diez’s plagiarism practices on *r/influencergossipDK*, and some quickly—and hopefully—sensed that a larger case might be brewing. User OkDinner276 commented on the original post: “A new low point for Diez. Hopefully, some journalists are reading this and can confront her with her stolen texts. Phenomenal detective work, OP!”. Before long, the plagiarism allegations were covered by many Danish news outlets, and Diez’s former and current collaborators distanced themselves from her one by

1. https://www.reddit.com/r/InfluencergossipDK/comments/194ad0o/diez_intellektuelle_skriverier/ (accessed 12.01.2025)

2. All citations from Reddit, *Berlingske* and *Kulturmonitor* are originally in Danish. For the sake of legibility, I have translated them into English. In the same way I offer my translation of quotes from theory originally published in Danish.

one with *Berlingske*'s³ reaction being the most notable. The newspaper quickly launched an “investigation of her work” (Kühn, *Berlingske* 17.01.24), conducted by an “experienced investigative journalist” (Kühn, *Berlingske* 24.01.24), justifying it with “our [*Berlingske*'s] credibility is paramount” (Kühn, *Berlingske* 17.01.24).

The case of Diez's plagiarism practices—which originates on Reddit and spreads into traditional journalistic media as well as other social media—is not unique. It can be seen as a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg 2006), where accusations against individuals, organizations, or companies arise and develop in contemporary public debate under the conditions of a free press and easy access to information and interaction on digital media. In addition, the reactions to the plagiarism accusation against Diez also illustrate how “groups with very different agendas” (Polletta 2006, 19) can participate in and use the same accusatory narrative to constitute, re-establish, or promote their own identities – and reach their own ends. This article contributes to recent research on accusatory rhetoric which more explicitly than earlier theory focuses analysis and interpretation on the accusation and not exclusively on the defence. In the special issue “Kategoria: anklagens retorik” [*Kategoria: the rhetoric of accusation*] in *Rhetorica Scandinavica* (2021), several articles point out that, even though “defense and apology have been studied thoroughly in rhetoric and communication research in recent decades, their counterpart; the accusation has received surprisingly limited attention from rhetorical criticism” (Iversen & Nørremark⁴ 2021, 8, my translation).

This article contributes to research which not only includes the accusation in analysis of the defence (as, for example, H. R. Ryan [1982] and W. Benoit & B. Dorries [1996] suggest), but also argues that the accusation can be understood as an important rhetorical act “in and of itself, which does not first and foremost gain its value, function and significance by being answered by a defence or an apology” (Iversen & Nørremark 2021, 14, my translation). The article does so by examining how accusations—through an ambiguous narrative—can invite different actors to contribute to and use the same accusation as a tool to constitute their own identities and norms.

I will let two questions guide my work: Where and how does the accusation against Diez in LittleMissUnperfect's post crystallize? How do the different accusing parties use the ambiguous narrative in the accusation to constitute their own identity?

These questions invite an analytical approach that draws on multiple theoretical perspectives and methodological procedures. My object of analysis is an example of a complex communicative process in which a specific post “invite[s] others to

3. *Berlingske* is one of Denmark's oldest national newspapers and positions itself as a conservative-liberal daily with a focus on political, economic, and cultural news coverage.

4. Now publishing as Ringgaard.

collaborate,” and where “participation in the collaborative creation of meaning is facilitated.” (Gulbrandsen & Just 2011, 1104). On that basis, a medley of rhetorical situations is created in which texts, rhetors, audiences, and exigences become difficult to delimit and keep apart. Instead, what emerges is what Jenny Edbauer describes as a “circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events,” where “[s]ituation bleeds into the concatenation of public interaction [and p]ublic interactions bleed into wider social processes” (Edbauer 2005, 9).

The nature of the case means that my work begins somewhere else than readings, analyses, and evaluations—namely with the construction and delimitation of the object I intend to read. The accusations against Diez arise—as is often the case with current public accusations—in a dynamic media landscape, and the overarching accusation, which is first made and developed on a specific subreddit, quickly spreads to journalistic media and other digital platforms. It therefore requires several active choices and omissions to reach the point where textual readings become possible. First, the collection of key texts, which will constitute my object of analysis, must be delimited and specified on a well-reasoned and transparent basis. I do so in the first part of the article, where I also present my selection and delimitation process in three steps.

Next, my analytical work aligns with theory interested in the forms and functions of narrative in general and more specifically in relation to accusation as a rhetorical act. LittleMissUnperfect’s post invites collective meaning-making in a particular way by presenting a narrative about Diez’s actions that is highly ambiguous. The inviting post and the accusation against Diez therefore become illustrative of how the accusation as a rhetorical act depends on a narrative, as has previously been argued (Iversen & Nørremark 2021; Ringgaard 2024). The process that follows from LittleMissUnperfect’s post illustrates how narratives can serve as an important tool for constituting collective identities in a way that resembles Maurice Charland’s demonstration (Charland 1987; Charland 2001), while narratives can also engage and mobilize action across significant divides between such collective identities, as Francesca Polletta (2006) has pointed out.

In the following section, I first explain how and why my object of analysis is constructed as it is. In the section “The forms and functions of narrative in the accusation,” I then outline perspectives from theory on narrative as structure, action, and cognitive tool, as well as theory addressing the constitutive potential of narrative. Both inform my analysis and interpretation of the accusation against Diez, which crystallizes in a dynamic process of which the object of analysis can only ever be a snapshot. The final part of the article presents my analysis and leads to a conclusion that both summarizes the analysis and shows how the article’s insights can refine existing theory on public collective accusations.

2. Delimiting an object of analysis in three steps

Unlike 30 years ago when most people consumed news via print media or multimedia channels with a certain monopoly status, today's media landscape is characterized by diversity, competition, and blurred boundaries between what was formerly considered private vs. public (Bruns & Highfield 2015), institutional vs. vernacular (Hauser 1998; Howard 2010), and rhetor vs. audience (Bruns 2008; Gulbrandsen & Just 2011). Content flows between media at unprecedented speed and is increasingly produced with deliberate spreadability in mind (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013; Hinck 2018; Ott 2018). This also applies to traditional media, which produce content that can be shared on social media, just as content or sources from social media are lifted into and gain attention in more traditional formats.

Communication that takes place online “has distinct features that separate it from more traditional modes of communication (mass and interpersonal communication)” (Gulbrandsen & Just 2011, 1098), and “must be explained in terms of its dynamic fluidity” (Gulbrandsen & Just 2011, 1104). Gulbrandsen and Just stress that the starting point for studying and analyzing online communication must necessarily be that the critic “admit[s] that what one is conducting is an analysis of a construct, a snapshot of a collaborative process, depicting how, at a specific and subjectively chosen point in time, two-way mass communication is unfolding online” (Gulbrandsen & Just 2011, 1105).

Concrete methods and procedures for identifying, delimiting, and freezing such an analyzable construct are as tentative as the delimitation of objects of analysis is surrounded by unique circumstances. In the chapter “Digital issue mapping på tværs af medier og digitale platforme” [Digital Issue Mapping across Media and Digital Platforms] (Nørremark⁵ 2020), it is illustrated how a rhetorical critic can make and communicate choices based on mapping the texts of a concrete case. The mapping aims to create an overview of the case so the critic can make an informed decision about which should be considered the key texts. For the method to add value to a rhetorical analysis and evaluation, choices and omissions must be communicated clearly and transparently. In other words, it is not enough that the critic makes informed delimitation choices; it is equally important that these choices are communicated clearly so a reader can see what the critique addresses. The method rests on three basic steps, which can be carried out in different variations depending on the case and the specific research questions.

The first step focuses on retrieving the texts that address the case to create an overview. This search can be as broad as possible or more targeted. In the case of the accusation against Diez, the inviting accusation from LittleMissUnperfect quickly develops in different directions, entirely in keeping with the rhetorical question:

5. Now publishing as Ringgaard.

“who said the Emperor’s New Clothes?”. This happens within different media formats, again in line with the appeals from many Reddit users hoping the accusation will get attention from journalists and established media: “This is just the thing for frihedsbrevet” (*r/influencergossipDK*, Temporary-Salary-400); “Anybody tipping off Ekstra Bladet?” (*r/influencergossipDK*, Kind-Imagination1694).

The first concrete step in my mapping process is a search in the *Infomedia* database⁶ for the word “Diez” in all national Danish daily newspapers for the period 11.01.24–16.02.24. The chosen criteria did not arise out of thin air. Before the search, I followed and read the relevant Reddit thread that sprang from LittleMissUnperfect’s inviting post on 11.01.2024. The end date, 16.02.2024, coincides with the day *Berlingske* published the conclusion of its investigation of all Diez’ texts for the newspaper.

As the method’s second step, I map the internal relations of the texts to understand how the case developed and which texts drove the development as “intertextual nodal points in the treatment and negotiation of the case” (Nørremark 2020, 177, *my translation*). I therefore read all texts from my search results and note in a table whether each text refers to other texts in the dataset or to texts not included in my *Infomedia* search—these are then added to the overall case overview.

Number	Date	Title	References
01	11.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning"	
02	13.01.24	"Lærerne bedes undgå at blive medvirket i ..."	01
03	17.01.24	"Berlingske er indledt undersøgelse af ..."	01,04,05
04	18.01.24	"Berlingske er indledt undersøgelse af ..."	01
05	18.01.24	"Nyeste rygter om Diez' skandale ..."	01,02,04
06	18.01.24	"Der er rygter om Diez' skandale ..."	01,02,03
07	18.01.24	"Tag for sig selv Diez ..."	01,04
08	18.01.24	"Hvoldt pågrebet i en pub med ..."	01,02
09	18.01.24	"Katherine Diez er ..."	01,04
10	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,04
11	18.01.24	"Katherine Diez er ..."	01,04
12	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
13	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
14	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
15	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
16	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
17	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
18	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
19	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
20	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
21	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
22	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
23	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
24	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
25	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
26	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
27	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
28	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
29	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
30	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
31	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
32	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
33	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
34	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
35	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
36	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
37	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
38	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
39	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
40	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
41	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
42	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
43	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
44	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
45	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
46	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
47	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
48	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
49	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
50	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
51	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
52	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
53	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
54	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
55	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
56	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
57	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
58	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
59	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04
60	18.01.24	"Infomediaoplysning om Diez ..."	01,02,04

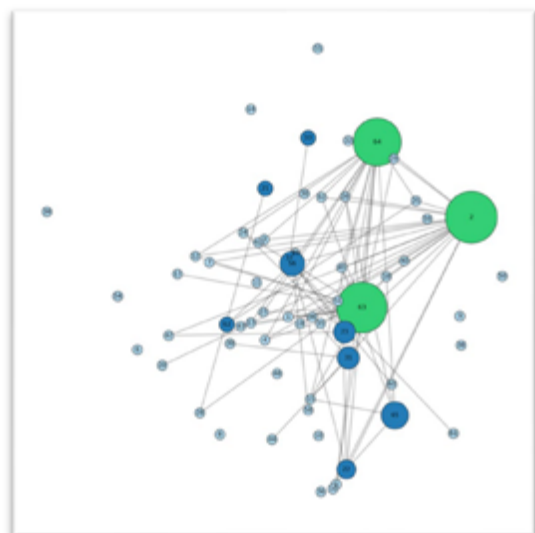


Fig. 1: Search result and intertextual relations

Fig. 2: Visualization of intertextual relations

6. A Danish database with fulltext articles from Danish newspapers.

As the third step, I visualize the results of steps one and two to clarify which texts stand out as hubs in the mapping (Nørremark 2020, 177). I therefore convert my table with texts and reference notes into a simpler graphic that illustrates which texts constitute the case's intertextual hubs and thus the key texts in my analysis.

In the visualization, each text in the search results is symbolized by a circle (node). The arrows between circles (edges) show directed intertextual relations between texts. The sizes of the circles reflect how many other texts refer to a given text. In this way it becomes clear that the three texts are particularly central to the case. The first text is the Reddit thread that arose from LittleMissUnperfect's post. It is itself a fragmented and composite entity with many hundreds of comments relating both to the initial post and to one another. It is therefore a text that is, from the outset, challenging to handle and delimit. In the analysis, I specifically address how the accusations against Diez develop and are used in the overall comment stream, and I weight the comments that receive the most upvotes and are thus highlighted⁷ by *r/influencergossipDK*'s own users⁸.

The second text is more delimited and traditional. Almost one third of the texts in the search results refer directly to the article with the headline "Did paid advertisement for audiobooks with other people's content: Former Berlingske critic is accused of plagiarism" (Lehman, *Kulturmonitor*, 15.01.24), which is the first text in a journalistic media outlet to reproduce and address the accusations against Diez raised on Reddit. The third text is *Berlingske*'s article with the headline "Berlingske initiates investigation after plagiarism accusations" (Kühn, *Berlingske*, 17.01.24), which is referred to by almost half of the texts in my search. This article prompts a series of follow-up pieces in *Berlingske* that specify who will scrutinize Diez's work for the newspaper and what consequences the investigation will have. I reference these texts sporadically in my analysis.

7. Alex Georgakopoulou, Stefan Iversen, and Carsten Stage explain in *Quantified Storytelling* (2020) how Reddit, through its affordances, structures the interaction that takes place on the platform. Unlike the structure of other social media platforms, anonymous Reddit users do not follow other individuals but instead follow issues and topics discussed within specific subreddits, each of which has its own moderators, rules, and norms. Georgakopoulou, Iversen, and Stage describe how, despite the anonymity of Reddit users, an economy nevertheless emerges around users and their individual posts. Each post can receive both 'upvotes' and 'downvotes' from other Reddit users; posts that receive many upvotes gain increased visibility, while the opposite occurs when they receive many downvotes. The total number of upvotes and downvotes a Reddit user receives determines the user's *karma* within the platform's points system, which measures the difference between upvotes and downvotes for each individual user. Karma thus functions as a form of social capital indicating the (perceived) quality of a user's contributions to the community (see Georgakopoulou, Iversen & Stage 2020, 62–68).

8. The subreddit *r/influencergossipDK* is described by its founders and moderators as "a subreddit where we discuss Danish influencers, bloggers, and celebrities." It is specified that "[t]he people we talk about [...] must be Danish; however, A-list international stars and reality TV participants are also acceptable. They must have at least 10,000 followers on social media, be a public figure, have appeared on television, or have at least one clearly identifiable commercial collaboration on their profile [...]." It is also explicitly stated that "gossip about appearance is NOT allowed," although exceptions may be made if the language remains respectful. (*r/influencergossipDK*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/InfluencergossipDK/>, accessed 12.06.2024).

As is evident, neither the retrieval, selection, nor prioritization of key texts is a neutral or objective process, and quite different choices could have been made along the way. The mapping process described above is an attempt to design a procedure for assembling an object of analysis in steps that are both directive and exploratory and that suit the two questions guiding my inquiry: Where and how does the accusation against Diez in LittleMissUnperfect's post crystallize? How do the different accusing parties use the accusation's ambiguous narrative to constitute their own identity?

3. The forms and functions of narrative in the accusation

In the mapping, it becomes clear, that the interest in Diez's plagiarism practices is driven by LittleMissUnperfect's inviting post, which formulates a clear accusation against Diez and presents concrete evidence of her plagiarism. At the same time, the post also points in different directions by hinting that Diez has falsified herself in several contexts "on Instagram (filter) and IRL (surgeries) and her literary wit". Overall, LittleMissUnperfect's post is a condensed blend of narratives about Diez and her actions, tied together with a series of underlying narratives at different levels. I unfold, nuance, and examine the consequences of this below. This section first lays the theoretical foundation for understanding narrative's crucial importance to accusation more generally.

The accusation, understood as "(...) a situated statement where someone ascribes guilt to a group or an individual" (Iversen & Nørremark 2021, 56, *my translation*), is entirely dependent on narrative, understood as a representation of connected events in chronological sequences⁹. To ascribe blame, the accuser must retrospectively set out how the accused *did* such-and-such and thus incurred direct responsibility for a breach of the norms from which the accusation springs. The narrative in the accusation can therefore be viewed both as a semiotic artifact that retrospectively links events in causal cause and effect chains and as an intentional action in which "somebody [is] telling somebody else in some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (Phelan 2017, 5). The narrative in the accusation is used both to persuade someone that the accused committed and is responsible for a norm breach and to invite identification with a particular narrative defining which actions are acceptable as a member of a given collective and which are not. Elsewhere it has been pointed out how the accusation's dependence on narrative as semiotic artifact and intentional action ultimately ties to a particular

9. Stefan Iversen opens his article "Narrative" ["Fortælling"] (2026), published in *Nordisk Retorikkleksikon* by outlining three ways of understanding narrative: narrative as structure, narrative as communicative tool, and narrative as a way of understanding. These three perspectives align with my argument in this article regarding the relationship between accusation as narrative.

kind of logic (Iversen & Nørremark 2021, 57; Ringgaard 2024), namely narrative logic, “which is crucial to the ways in which humans understand the actions and lives of themselves and others” (Iversen 2026, np, *my translation*). This also means the accusation does not only—nor primarily—appeal to rational inferences where a claim must be supported by data and warrant. Instead, through the accusation, the rhetor seeks to persuade someone about the connection between action, person, and responsibility by offering cause-and-effect stories that the audience is invited to engage in.

Walter Fisher (1984) was among the first in rhetorical studies to lay the groundwork for talking about humans as beings who understand themselves and the world through stories. He describes narrative logic as more natural and fundamental than the kind of logic that characterizes traditional argumentation. Fisher’s description of narrative rationality concerns narrative’s ability to connect what would otherwise be separate: linking events in causal chains, individuals in communities, and concrete stories with larger cultural narratives. Another scholar who even more clearly than Fisher defines narrative primarily as a meaning-making and cognitive mode is narratologist Richard Walsh. He describes the essence of narrative logic as “the way in which we are cognitively disposed to discover pattern in processes, and to impose an order upon the flux of temporal phenomena” (Walsh 2018, 19), an order that arises through “the semiotic articulation of linear temporal sequence” (Walsh 2018, 12). Narrative logic thus functions as a mental process that permeates how humans organize what was previously some kind of chaos into temporal sequences.

Two consequences of narrative as a structuring mental mode, according to Walsh, are that we ascribe both causality and normativity to sequences of events. Narrative orders and binds events causally—A leads to B and therefore C occurs—and perspectival normativity arises because “narrative necessarily imposes order upon phenomena from a specific spatial and temporal point, which is that of the telling or articulation (the semiotic act) rather than that of the told” (Walsh 2018, 19).

On the one hand, narrative can be seen as something utterly individual—a tool the person uses to organize her world and experiences based on the experiences, values, and imaginings she brings into the cognitive ordering process. On the other hand, scholars like Fisher (1984) and Maurice Charland (1987; 2001), inspired by Kenneth Burke, have convincingly illustrated how narratives bind individuals into communities, constitute shared norms, and endow individuals in a collective with agency:

Narrative is fundamental to the rhetoric of constitution because narratives open *diagetic* [sic] spaces, story spaces, which are meaningful because they produce identification with a point of view. Narratives constitute subjects, protagonists, and antagonists. (Charland 2001, n.p.)

Charland also notes that constitutive narratives “must presume an audience that is already consubstantial with the very identity they seek to prove” (Charland 2001, n.p.). These are rhetorical utterances that simultaneously presuppose, invoke, and create identities and normative communities that did not exist prior to the invocation (Charland 1987).

This may seem paradoxical, and it is further nuanced by the fact that the same narrative in practice often serves to create and mobilize a plurality of different communities. That paradox guides Francesca Polletta’s investigations into how concrete narratives are used to mobilize social movements within which different individuals and groups engage around the same story in such a way that the parties need not compromise their own standpoint (Polletta 2006). This is possible, she writes, because narratives are always, to some degree, both ambiguous and open to interpretation. These are features we not only accept but also expect when encountering narrative, Polletta writes. Precisely by virtue of narrative’s inherent “ambiguity,” it invites interpretation and co-creation without closing off the differences—large or small—that must necessarily exist between the people who each invest their own experiential world in the process of understanding and creating coherence in and between stories. The ambiguity of narrative and “[t]he possibility of interpreting the story in different ways” thus create the possibility for individuals and groups to “forge coalitions across difference” (Polletta 2006, 172).

This point is useful as I move into my analysis of how the accusation against Diez crystallizes—starting from LittleMissUnperfect’s inviting post, which not only contains an ambiguous story of how Diez is guilty of plagiarism but also alludes to a plurality of already existing narratives. These narratives are interpreted and used by quite different actors as tools to constitute their own identities, all in contrast to the actions Diez is accused of.

4. The circulation and crystallization of an accusation across media and platforms

For years, Katherine Diez has been a public figure in Denmark whom many have loved—and others have loved to hate. From 2018–2022, Diez was affiliated with *Berlingske* as a literary critic and columnist, and she has at times collaborated with various publishers and audiobook streaming services. Public attention around Diez as a literary critic grew especially after she wrote a column titled “I don’t eat bœuf bourguignon with you before I have seen your bookshelf” (Diez, *Berlingske*, 01.09.19), in which Diez stated she would not date men whose intellectual level did not surpass her own. The piece generated significant attention and criticism—but also support. It even earned Diez a pay raise from *Berlingske*’s then literary editor

who wrote: “Many have demanded that Katherine Diez is fired. On the contrary. The way I see it, her columns are about the most essential in life. Therefore, I have given her a pay raise.” (Hermansen, *Berlingske*, 10.09.19).

Diez has primarily communicated via Instagram, where she has posted hundreds of updates, often combining two elements: a more or less sexualized image of herself and references to—and often very critical reviews of—literature, classical music, or other (high-)cultural products. Many praised Diez for insisting on the fact that one can be an ultrafeminine, uncompromisingly feminist, and a well-read intellectual. Others publicly disparaged Diez and more than hinted that she was not well-read, not intellectual, and primarily maintained attention through relationships with various famous men. Diez has also been a favorite topic on Danish-language sub-Reddits for years. There, anonymous Reddit users—particularly on *r/influencergossipDK*—have debated whether she was actually named Katherine Diez, if she really had a degree from the University of Copenhagen as she claimed in columns and on LinkedIn, which parts of her body had been cosmetically enhanced, whether she had actually read the books she reviewed, and what she gained from her various romantic relationships. As I return to below, these are discussions that LittleMissUnperfect’s post alludes to in a way that clearly invites Reddit users to think along and further develop narratives already established on *r/influencergossipDK* and to tie those existing stories to the new plagiarism accusations.

4.1 An inviting and ambiguous accusation on Reddit

LittleMissUnperfect’s post is a short text of just 68 words in addition to the elements it imports from elsewhere: Diez’s original Instagram post and the piece of text she allegedly plagiarized from. The first sentence presents something posited as a well-known, commonly accepted fact: “Diez is in the habit of being lavish with her intellectual thoughts”, which is immediately contrasted by LittleMissUnperfect’s discovery: “but here is a part of Diez’ text that she has translated from English using Google and edited a bit”. With the rhetorical question “Cutting and pasting other people’s texts and not referencing sources? Ouchie.” the post invites readers to draw conclusions about what is at stake. In addition, a narrative about Diez’s general practice is consolidated in the post’s closing lines: “She struts in borrowed plumes on Instagram (filter) and IRL (surgeries) and her literary wit (translation of the quote above), who said “the Emperor’s New Clothes?””

“She struts in borrowed plumes” alludes to Aesop’s fable of the crow that borrowed other birds’ feathers to show off, only to be humiliated. In literary history, *to strut in borrowed plumes* has been used specifically as an idiom to describe plagiarism of others’ literary work. Should readers be in doubt about the

answer to the rhetorical question, they are thus nudged. However, in the post this phrase points to more than plagiarism alone, as LittleMissUnperfect specifies that Diez does not only adorn herself illegitimately in her “literary wit” but also “on Instagram (filter) and IRL (surgeries)”. Thus, the post not only forges a causal connection between the concrete example of plagiarism and Diez’s general writing practice, but also between plagiarism and Diez as a (mediated) body by implicitly referencing the many prior discussions of Diez on *r/influencergossipDK*.

Even more ambiguous and inviting is the final sentence, which—with a rhetorical question, “who said “The Emperor’s New Clothes?”—at once likens Diez to H. C. Andersen’s naked, ridiculed emperor and underscores who saw through her, namely LittleMissUnperfect, a Reddit user who is hailed as a detective who did formidable work in many subsequent comments.

The post generates more than 580 comments, several of which contribute concrete examples of plagiarism that serve as evidence and strengthen the narrative that Diez, fully knowingly, plagiarized systematically:

I scrolled through Diez’ insta randomly and thought that this sounds grandiloquent. 4 appropriate search words (Tjajkovskij noblewoman Mech 1200) in English and hey presto....I present to you..... [screenshot of Diez’ post in Danish and screenshot of an original text in English by another author]. (*r/influencergossip*, Top-Art2163)

It is her modus operandi. Here she has copied and (marginally) rewritten a paragraph from Mikkel Thorup’s review of Christian Hjortkjær’s ‘Utilstrækkelig’ [screenshot of Diez’ text and screenshot of Mikkel Thorup’s review]. (*r/influencergossip*, Ok-Blackberry9861)

There are also comments that take up the invitation to develop narratives that go beyond concrete plagiarism. Diez is called both “fake”, “narcissistic weasel” and a “fraud” in comments addressing her role in public debate as a provocateur who—unjustifiably, one is to understand from the accusations—was given a voice in public debate:

To think that Diez has once been able to decide the agenda at Berlingske and start a debate about being well-read while dating - and then she undresses herself completely and now emerges with false lips, false cheeks, false eyes, false tits and now also false opinions. Ouch that has got to hurt. (*r/influencergossip*, insert-username-boi)

It is Diez’ simultaneously self-fashioned and conferred persona as a media provocateur that, with the new evidence, falls apart in such a way that Reddit user *insert-username-boi* declares her “completely undressed”. The invitation to contribute to the narrative of Diez’s borrowed feathers also prompts speculation about her name, education, number of cosmetic surgeries, and whether her romantic relationships have been solely strategic. These are narratives that go beyond the

accusation's bounds as the rhetorical act that assigns guilt (Iversen & Nørremark 2021, 56; Ringgaard 2024, 50), sliding instead into shaming Diez as a person.

If these are supposed to be her thoughts, but are just copy-pasted, then we have two problems: 1. plagiarism, 2: her narrative falls completely apart and we see the real Diez: the man-seeking bimbo-like woman who forces others to approve her agenda under cover of "intellectual" writings that are actually authored by others. Ouch. The plaster saint begins to crack. (*r/influencergossipDK*, LittleMissUnperfect).

The potential for shaming Diez is thus present in the inviting post and is pursued by LittleMissUnperfect and others on *r/influencergossipDK*. Nevertheless, it is the concrete plagiarism accusation and the growing body of evidence that dominate the thread, where over 70% of the primary comments either contribute more examples of plagiarism, express enthusiasm that Diez's practice is being exposed, or praise LittleMissUnperfect and others who unearthed evidence. That is more than ten times the number of comments that exclusively address existing narratives about cosmetic surgery, lack of education, or Instagram filters. By comparison, only two comments in the entire thread are skeptical of LittleMissUnperfect's post. What began as quite ambiguous and open to interpretation thus develops—already within the Reddit thread—into a more delimited accusation in which the relation between action and responsibility is presented as incontrovertible, and where the focus on stories about *who* Diez is, rather than *what* she has done, becomes less prominent.

4.2 The article from *Kulturmonitor* as a filter

On Monday 15 January, four days after LittleMissUnperfect's inviting post, *Kulturmonitor* published the first story about the accusations against Diez in a more traditional journalistic outlet, citing *r/influencergossipDK*. The article reproduces several concrete examples of plagiarism highlighted in the Reddit thread but does not describe Diez as a cheater or narcissist, instead referring to her as "Former Berlingske literary critic" and "the prominent culture influencer and personality". These labels already frame the narrative about Diez differently than on Reddit. At the same time, they forge a very close connection between Diez and *Berlingske's* credibility and invite the accusations to be taken seriously. In this article, there is no focus on Instagram filters or cosmetic surgery; rather, the content from Reddit is filtered so the article addresses only *how* Diez plagiarized and which collaborations she had with various media and cultural distributors. Thus, the plumes Diez is said to have adorned herself with are specified: concretely, "literary wit"

The former literary critic at *Berlingske* and now influencer, Katherine Diez, struts in borrowed literary wit on her Instagram profile. These are the accusations from several anonymous Reddit

profiles. Examples of texts from Diez' own hand pile up which are seemingly identical with other articles or content from the internet's backwaters - without any references to the original source. (Lehman, *Kulturmonitor*, 15.01.24)

The article illustrates how examples “pile up” from “the internet’s backwaters” linguistic images that underscore the extent of Diez’s wrongdoing and that she must have made an effort to find the large amounts of content she plagiarized from these out-of-the-way places.

Kulturmonitor's article functions both as a bridge from a particular subreddit with a limited audience to the broader public and as a framing filter. *Kulturmonitor* draws its material directly from Reddit and brings it into a more traditional media landscape with a much larger audience. At the same time, attention is directed to a particular place—towards the content that Diez, a serious “literary critic” produced under the auspices of other media’s credibility with special focus on *Berlingske*. Although several former collaborators are named, Diez is described specifically as “the former literary critic at Berlingske”.

This forces *Berlingske* to address the case as the traditional outlet that, in particular, has helped foster—and benefited from—the Diez as a media provocateur affiliated with the paper. *Berlingske*'s current culture editor initially attempts to separate herself and the paper from the concrete accusations that could potentially rub off on *Berlingske* when she responds to the questions from *Kulturmonitor*:

For Berlingske, which earlier has brought columns featuring Katherine Diez' reviews and commentaries, the many examples of plagiarism do not initially give reasons for “plans to begin an examination of her work”. The culture editor Birgitte Borup writes this in a written answer to *Kulturmonitor* where she also clarifies that Katherine Diez “is no longer affiliated with the newspaper in any way” and has not been since 2022. (Lehman, *Kulturmonitor*, 15.01.24)

Even so, Borup at the same time opens a door to a closer connection between Diez’s plagiarism practice and *Berlingske*—and to a different stance:

She emphasizes also, though, that a more focused plagiarism investigation of the archive at the newspaper can become relevant “if we get information about substantial accusations of plagiarism in texts published in Berlingske”. (Lehman, *Kulturmonitor*, 15.01.24)

Whether this statement in *Kulturmonitor* energizes Reddit users to search *Berlingske*'s archives, I cannot say with certainty, but user *Dry_Ad_3356* quickly indicates in the original Reddit thread:

I will scrutinize the publicized literary reviews from Berlingske. It will be interesting with a commentary from the chief editor if they turn out to have paid for plagiarized texts 😊. (r/influencergossipDK, *Dry_Ad_3356*)

4.3 An unambiguous accusation in *Berlingske*

Two days later, *Berlingske* publishes the article titled “Berlingske initiates investigation after accusations of plagiarism,” with a subheading clarifying that it is not only Diez’s credibility at stake but now also *Berlingske*’s:

After accusations of plagiarism against former literary critic Katherine Diez, Berlingske initiates an investigation of her work. Our credibility is paramount, culture editor says.” (Kühn, *Berlingske* 17.01.24)

The article continues to emphasize the separation between Diez and the current culture editor, Birgitte Borup, noting that Borup “began as culture editor in the summer of 2023” and thus was not “at the culture desk at the same time as Katherine Diez.”

At the same time, *Berlingske* sharpens and specifies the accusation against Diez, using it to create a clear contrast between her actions and the paper’s values:

Plagiarism of entire passages without references is completely incompatible with Berlingske’s values and journalistic standards,” Birgitte Borup says and adds: “It is completely unacceptable to plagiarize without clear references and now that this accusation is made about texts published in Berlingske, we have chosen to initiate an investigation.” (Kühn, *Berlingske*, 17.01.24)

The newspaper signals decisiveness, speed, and gravity when Niels Lykke Møller—an “experienced investigative journalist” (Kühn, *Berlingske*, 24.01.24)—is subsequently hired to investigate Diez’s work for the paper. His credibility and the severity of the accusations are underscored when *Berlingske* lists his merits: he has previously “led several investigative stories about tax evasion and tax frauds and Mærsk’s scrapping of ships,” has “taught methods of investigative journalism,” and even “won one of the most prestigious investigative journalism prizes domestically” (Kühn, *Berlingske*, 24.01.24). Where the narrative about—and accusation against—Diez was woven together with fables and fairy tales in LittleMissUnperfect’s post, *Berlingske* now places the plagiarism accusations on par with extensive tax fraud and corporate wrongdoing. Borup further emphasizes the accusation’s weight by simultaneously bolstering the paper’s credibility and undercutting Diez’s in her answer to whether the accusations prompt broader concern that other reviewers might also have plagiarized:

The baseline is that reviews are subjective interpretations that presuppose that the critic has read the book and is able to understand and analyze it. It is my firm impression that all our critics are able to do this,” Birgitte Borup says. This is why the accusations against Diez do not give cause for general worry about the critics that Berlingske cooperates with, according to the statement. (Kühn, *Berlingske* 17.01.24)

In other words, Diez has not only committed plagiarism; she also begins to appear as the opposite of *Berlingske*'s current corps of reviewers, who actually “have read the book ... and are able to understand and analyze it.” The blame attached to Diez is hers alone; *Berlingske* does not assume any part of the responsibility—on the contrary.

5. The accusation against Diez as a tool to constitute identities, values and norms

LittleMissUnperfect's inviting post is illustrative of how the accusation is wholly dependent on narrative, and how narratives are both ambiguous and explicitly invite engagement. Likewise, the overall crystallization process—beginning on Reddit, filtered through *Kulturmonitor*, and sharpened at *Berlingske*—illustrates how “[t]he possibility of interpreting the story in different ways” creates room for individuals and groups to “forge coalitions across difference” (Polletta 2006, 172). Even though the three accusing parties—*r/influencergossipDK*, *Kulturmonitor*, and *Berlingske*—do not explicitly form a common front against Diez, they actively reference one another and appear as accusing parties in the same case, but with distinct purposes.

On the Reddit thread, the narrative about Diez's plagiarism practices is used not only to assign concrete blame but also as a point of departure for a story about Reddit detectives' diligent and legitimate work—that is about more than just digging up dirt on different famous people, but also protecting important democratic values:

Public untruths, misinformation, or in Diez's case disinformation that want to be exempt from criticism, questions, wonder or anything but applause, do not only go against intellectual thought, but actually also against democratic freedom of speech that, among other things, does exist to enlighten us and refute claims that do not make sense and therefore should not be in our information flow. (*r/influencergossip*, Away-Distribution729)

Although one might expect it to be difficult to speak of a unified voice in a subreddit with many anonymous participants, the thread that follows LittleMissUnperfect's post appears surprisingly consistent. An “us” and “we” is constituted across many individual comments, confirming one another in the narrative of Diez's actions—but also in what characterizes the group itself:

[...] Goodbye shame about distrust and antipathy! Goodbye accusations of **us** just being jealous of her looks and success! And hurrah for reason and a well-developed intuition! (*r/influencergossip*, Moberlebu, my emphasis)

The narrative that develops around the accusation against Diez thus reflects on r/influencergossip's users who, as a community and with many markers of consensus, constitute themselves as the contrast to Diez. It is a “we” capable of both seeing through and rising above Diez—as truly knowledgeable:

She has not even learned how to write an academic dissertation. And it shows. And **you are right**, to plagiarize is not just immoral and unsympathetic towards the author, it is completely unacademic, and yet again exposes Diez as an ignorant wannabe. (r/influencergossip, Away-Distribution729, my emphasis)

This invites numerous comments expressing great relief, joy, and even gratitude at finally being seen (and able to see themselves) in a new light:

Agreed. I have found peace and calm through the fact that I have been an honest worker all along and have been right being skeptical about her from the beginning [...]. (r/influencergossip, KarmusDK)

The collective “us” and “we” of anonymous users has thus, as “honest workers” been on the case for a long time but has until now allegedly felt accused themselves of envy. Now it is instead the “we” that steps forward as reasonable and cultivated. They are the child in the fairy tale of *The Emperor's New Clothes* who, in contrast to Diez and all those previously skeptical of their claims, sees reality as it is.

Kulturmonitor – a small niche media with a focus on Danish art and culture – borrows some of the ‘child’s credibility’ when, as the first journalistic outlet, it frames the accusations by filtering out the potential shaming, directly linking Diez’s credibility to *Berlingske*’s, and elevating the accusations to a broader public. *Berlingske* cannot overlook this, especially when several examples of plagiarism in the texts published in *Berlingske* have been revealed.

Like the members of r/influencergossip, *Berlingske* actively uses the accusations against Diez to establish a narrative about what *Berlingske* is—an identity constituted in contrast to the narrative of Diez’s plagiarism practices, thereby clarifying what norms and values the newspaper wants to be associated with. These are “completely normal journalistic standards” (Kühn, *Berlingske*, 17.01.24) that Diez has not represented. The difference between Diez and *Berlingske* is particularly clear in Borup’s remark comparing Diez to the paper’s current reviewers, who have both read what they review “and are able to understand and analyze it” (Kühn, *Berlingske*, 17.01.24). The accusation against Diez and the contrasts between her actions and *Berlingske*’s identity is further intensified when the choice of investigative journalist is justified by comparing Diez’s plagiarism practice to large-scale corporate tax fraud. The values of thoroughness, professionalism, and credibility that *Berlingske* seeks to claim are rhetorically consolidated through a marked break with Diez, which is positioned as the

antithesis of these qualities. Although Diez does respond to the accusation the day after *Berlingske*'s first article, neither the Reddit users nor *Berlingske* devote much attention to her response. *Berlingske* does reproduce parts of her apologetic Instagram post in “Katherine Diez acknowledges: ‘I have been an idiot’” (Schulz, *Berlingske*, 19.01.24) but refrains from evaluating her response, merely noting that the paper has “initiated an investigation [...]”. In other words, Diez’s reply does not seem to be of primary interest to any of the accusing parties. Instead, the different parties use narrative “ambiguity” strategically to establish their own identities and values in contrast to Diez’s actions. The accusations against Diez in *Berlingske* may even exemplify what Kenneth Burke describes as the scapegoat mechanism, whereby someone who was previously an accepted and recognized member of a group is sacrificed so the rest of the collective can define itself “in dialectical opposition to the sacrificial offering” (Burke 1969, 406). *Berlingske* thus “sacrifices” Diez so the paper’s own credibility is strengthened. In her time as a media provocateur, Diez was both recognized and clearly valued—even with a publicly announced pay raise as a reaction to the debate she created at the paper. The value of that attention has, with the accusations against Diez, been turned on its head and become anything but beneficial to the paper.

6. Conclusion

As I have illustrated, the crystallization of the accusation against Diez unfolds in two tempi that cannot be fully separated. One part is steered by me as critic, as I maintain “a snapshot of a collaborative process” (Gulbrandsen & Just 2011, 1105) as the object I analyze. My selection and delimitation of the object are not random but motivated by which texts garnered particular attention across journalistic media and platforms. The other part of the crystallization process occurs within these texts: the accusation is made and developed on *r/influencergossipDK*, filtered into traditional journalistic media via the niche media *Kulturmonitor*, and then coalesces into its firmest, purest form in *Berlingske*. Already in the Reddit thread, however, a more delimited accusation begins to take shape around concrete evidence of Diez’s plagiarism practices—an accusation that attracts more attention and engagement than those parts of LittleMissUnperfect’s post that invited shaming of Diez as a person. *Kulturmonitor* does not address personal matters or appearance but completely filters out the elements concerning Diez’s person and instead elevates the concrete evidentiary material from Reddit to a broader audience. At the same time, Diez as “culture influencer and personality” is linked to *Berlingske*, which in turn does much to separate the narrative of Diez’s plagiarism practices from *Berlingske* itself. The paper does so by sharpening the

accusation and specifying the degree of severity and then using Diez's actions as a counterpoint to *Berlingske's* identity as a serious outlet.

My analysis of the accusation against Diez and the crystallization process points to several perspectives not clearly made explicit in existing rhetorical theory on public accusations. First, I point out that, in some cases, the accusation's primary function may be to (re-)constitute the accusing party's identity and norms, rather than to invite a response from the accused. Second, I highlight the condition that the accusation must make use of a narrative and thus becomes open to interpretation and engagement. In the crystallization of the accusation against Diez, this is particularly evident in the Reddit thread, where hundreds of members engage in developing and consolidating the narrative of Diez's plagiarism practices, thereby also creating a constitutive narrative about the engaged participants of *r/influencergossipDK*. In a similar way *Berlingske* use the accusations against Diez as a clear foil to the norms and values the paper wishes to be associated with. Third, my analysis indicates that a filtering of narratives occurs in a way that elements concerning Diez as a person are separated from those focusing on her actions. Elsewhere, I have argued that analytically separating accusation – focusing on actions, responsibility and guilt – from shaming – focusing on person and character – can be fruitful, even if the two are often intertwined in actual rhetorical practices (Ringgaard, 2024). In the analysis of the accusation against Diez, that move helps clarify how the accusation crystallizes in a process that runs across media, platforms, and different accusing parties.

Taken together, the case demonstrates how public accusations function as profoundly *cultural* rhetorical practices—shaped by, and shaping, the communicative environments in which they circulate. The Diez controversy unfolds at the intersection of vernacular digital discourse, journalistic institutions, and broader cultural narratives about authenticity, authority, and intellectual labor. In this sense, the crystallization of the accusation is more than a question of rhetorical form, it reveals how narrative, identification, and normative judgment operate across platforms, and how participants—whether anonymous Reddit users or established media outlets—use rhetorical resources to negotiate their places within shifting cultural ecologies. The case thus aligns with scholarly concerns about rhetoric's role in constituting identities, mediating cultural values, and enabling civic participation in increasingly hybrid media systems. By tracing how a single accusation is transformed, filtered, and strategically deployed across contexts, the analysis illustrates how rhetorical criticism can illuminate contemporary cultures of communication—and how public accusation, in particular, serves as a tool for making sense of, contesting, and enacting social norms.

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