“Sound bites that bite back”
Dr. Lisa S. Villasden, Department of Rhetoric, Copenhagen University

In this presentation, I will take my starting point in the common ambition of wording a point in a succinct and memorable way because it not only is convenient to quote, but also makes the point more memorable and “sellable”. Here, I will briefly draw on ancient and contemporary rhetorical theory. The presentation will then turn to instances where the high hopes for the beneficial effects of sound bites have been disappointed. For example, former Danish prime minister at one time tried to mimic Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” phrase, and it fell flat in a Danish context. A key theoretical point is that kairos and setting is key to success or failure. Another theoretical point to make has to do with the weight that sound bites are made to carry. Just think of Obama’s “Change” – at once very evocative, in a particular time and place, but also vulnerable to ridicule once it was made to stand on its own.

For the main part of the presentation, however, I would like to focus on phrases and expressions that may not have been uttered with the intention of becoming a sound bite, but were used by the media as such. For example: At a press conference where the consequences of a reform of welfare came up, the Danish minister of internal affairs finally blurted out “But that’s how it is!” (“Sådan er det jo!”). This phrase was immediately turned against her in the media and interpreted as a reflection of coldness and cynicism on her part. It haunted her for some time, so much that she decided to take it up in an ironic manner in her speech to her party at their annual convention a few months later. From the standpoint of rhetorical citizenship, it is interesting that while we normally fault politicians for serving us euphemisms and platitudes, they also get criticized for being frank.

Time permitting, I may also touch on the issue of phantom sound bites: things that are attributed to particular persons who never actually said them but end up having to disavow them repeatedly.