“Are you listening?!”: Indecorous voice as rhetorical strategy in environmental public participation

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This essay calls for a revival of indecorous voice in environmental public participation. Robert Cox has explicated the means by which low-income and minority members of the public are discursively excluded from U.S. public forums. We argue, however, that publics whose participation may already be limited can still enact micro-performances of resistance by seizing kairos with indecorous voice, that is, challenging decorum through timely intervention. Publics in Love Canal, New York, and Salt Lake City, Utah indecorously disrupted institutional constructions of decorum. By shouting, clapping and cheering, and sitting in silence, participants seized kairos by indecorously drawing attention to marginalizing effects of public participation processes. These micro-performances of resistance express public frustration with exclusionary practices, demonstrating inventional possibilities for public participation in institutional settings.

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At the 1999 Conference on Communication and the Environment (COCE) held in Flagstaff, Arizona, USA, Robert Cox introduced the concept of “indecorous voice” in relation to public participation and environmental decision-making. Referring to the means by which low-income and minority members of the public are discursively excluded from U.S. public forums, “indecorous voice” operates as a strategy to limit public participation (Cox, 1999). Against this, Cox positions environmental justice advocacy tactics as a way to refigure the limits of public participation. Beyond a brief mention of “indecorous voice” in Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere, this concept has received little attention by environmental communication critics. This essay calls for a revival of “indecorous voice” in light of its “inventional possibilities” (Stoneman, 2011, p. 130) for institutional public participation.

Following Cox (1999), public participation remains central to environmental communication. For instance, Communication and Public Participation in Environmental Decision Making (Depoe, Delicath, & Elsenbeer, 2004) spawned numerous analyses of public-agency discourse. The ways that institutional forms of public participation, such as public hearings and comment periods, fail to provide “meaningful citizen involvement in environmental decisions” (Depoe, Delicath, & Elsenbeer, 2004, p. 2) is a dominant theme in environmental literature, perhaps contributing to later analyses of more radical forms of public participation (DeLuca, 1999; Pezzullo, 2007). These are valuable contributions to theories of resistance in the context of environmental discourses, which has expanded our field in indelible ways. However, we should not ignore the dynamics of resistance that occur in institutional, typically agency operated, settings. These traditional avenues for public participation represent an important opportunity for public engagement with decision-makers. What may be considered mundane public discourse can narrow our analytical scope from attuning to the radical dimensions of institutional public participation.
We call for a revival of “indecorous voice” as a heuristic for understanding the performance of timely intervention into what is often viewed as a skewed system of deliberation. Thus, we see indecorum not as a means of excluding the public from institutional forums, but as a *kairotic* opportunity for rhetorical invention that renegotiates rhetorical possibilities of public participation. With this in mind, we present an expansion of Cox’s original thesis on “indecorous voice,” drawing on the democratic commitments of classical rhetoric to imagine the emancipatory possibilities of indecorum (Stoneman, 2011). Although our research, like Cox’s, is focused on public participation processes in the United States, it is not unlikely that similar participatory dynamics occur around the world. To demonstrate these radical possibilities, we offer two American examples: The fight for environmental justice in Love Canal, New York, and the struggle for clean air in Salt Lake City, Utah.

**Taking Back Time**

Traditional conceptions of rhetoric are centered on principles of good citizenship. Though not without its own hegemonic entailments (Foss & Griffin, 1992), Aristotelian traditions of rhetoric are grounded in notions of democracy and civic engagement (Garver, 1995). With the critical turn, however, scholars recognize the inequitable ways rhetoric is deployed, often with oppressive and violent ends (McKerrow, 1989; Wander, 1984). Rhetoric constructs barriers, marginalizes voices, and excludes communities from the public sphere as much as it offers possibilities for resistance and justice. The interplay between critical dynamics of rhetoric and environmental public participation is unique to our essay. Cox (1999) explicates how rhetorical construction of decorum dismisses the voices of low-income and minority members of the public affected by environmental decisions. However, Cox’s analysis of Ciceronian decorum inadequately accounts for *kairotic* possibilities of indecorum, eliminating the rhetorical potentialities of indecorous voice. Thus, we seek to unpack ways citizens may seize *kairos* to resist barriers to public participation in institutional forums to perform the “inventional possibilities of indecorum” (Stoneman, 2011, p. 130). To address this ostensible component of rhetoric, it is important to recognize Cicero’s conceptualizations of chronos, kairos, and decorum. Cicero is important because his work pioneered understandings of decorum in rhetorical contexts.

Following the Ciceronian-Humanist tradition of rhetoric, kairos enables rhetors to capture the right time for action, complete with significance and meaning. *Kairos* accounts for fundamental human experiences of time in relation to individual perception, managing the confluence of both human and non-human conceptions of time. *Kairos*, therefore,

> immerses speakers in a moral-intellectual crisis when the choice to speak or act (and what and how one speaks or acts) determines an individual’s ‘fate.’ Hence, the Humanists’ habit of weighing alternatives and occasions, of ‘looking both ways’ and speaking (or acting) accordingly—a habit, in short of prudential. (Baumlin, 2002, p. 156)

Because *kairos* manages time, its rhetorical possibilities are relative to *chronos*, which is often characterized as an absolute, or exact quantification of time that affects linear intervals of occasion (Baumlin, 2002). Although *chronos*-time (i.e. clock time) cannot be metaphysically altered, we argue that it can be used as an advantage or disadvantage to rhetorical situations. Particularly, the quantitative aspects of *chronos* affect the qualitative appeals for *kairotic* moments. *Chronos* is an important aspect of decorum because it can be rhetorically stabilized in concrete settings, enhancing or limiting *kairotic* occasions.

The notion of *chronotopos* is useful for understanding the rhetorical possibilities of speech within ordered rhetorical contexts. *Chronotopos* is the combination of absolute *chronos* time and “a conception of concrete and meaningful place,” such as time management (Ramo, 1999, p. 323). Thus, *chronotopos* stabilizes the usage of chronos in concrete settings (*topos*). For our analysis, and consummate with Cox
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(1999), this refers to the ways that organizations manage the context of rhetorical acts for public participants. For instance, organizers of public hearings, open houses, and public forums are able to situate the chronos-time of meetings in settings that may enhance or limit kairotic occasions. For rhetorical appeals to be effective in that context, rhetors must therefore recognize the confines of chronotopos in order to determine the right timing for rhetorical opportunities. This balance determines the prudency of rhetorical deliberation, a feature of rhetoric also known as decorum.

Following Cicero, decorum combines to prepon (the fitting) with to kairos (the timely) to account for the formal and temporal components of rhetoric (Baumlin, 2002, p. 142). Ciceronian “decorum is properly associated with harmony, grace, and comeliness as well as timeliness and appropriateness” (Beale, 1996, p. 169). Decorum may thus be understood as a measurement of ethics for rhetorical appeals because it emphasizes the right timing and appropriateness of human action and speech. That is, decorum represents “the knowledge of opportunity of things to be done or spoken, in appointing and setting them in time or place to them convenient and proper” (Baumlin, 2002, p. 143). More recently, Leff (1990) further indicates that eloquence merges relations of the form/content, thought/knowledge, and aesthetic/practical elements of discourse; such speech produces timely rhetoric with functional purposes. He notes, “The locus of decorum is that moment when the discourse becomes luminous in itself through its illumination of a subject” (Leff, 1990, p. 126). This means that decorum orchestrates a situated context that enables rhetorical timeliness. Consistent with Cicero’s classical interpretation, we consider decorum as the localized appropriateness of speech and embodied behavior in particular contexts.

Indeed, decorum is an essential component of Cicero’s moral goodness for speakers and actors within rhetorical situations. In De Officiis, Cicero states that decorum “is inseparable from moral goodness; for what is proper is morally right [quod decet, honestum est], and what is morally right is proper” (Cicero, 1961, I.93). Although chronos-time is uncontrollable, yet comprehensible, kairos-time remains a human construct that uniquely affects the decorum of speakers, actors, and deliberators. Consequently, decorum is an intricate part of properness within the greater construct of chronos-time.

We argue that there is a gap in research regarding critical components of rhetorical timing. Following Cox (1999), the decorum of public settings can inhibit deliberative rhetoric, limiting opportunities for kairotic appeals. Cox notes that government officials restricted the number of public testimonies, arbitrarily imposed time limits for public comments, and refused to allow additional opportunities for verbal comments following DEQ complaints concerning elevated cancer rates of people living near Shinotech Corporation in Louisiana. These restrictions indicate that chronos and decorum can be used as instruments of power to subordinate public participants from opposing decisions that affect environmental health. This compromises rhetorical opportunities for public participants concerned with environmental affairs.

Cox’s essay is important because it demonstrates that decorum can be used to sustain dynamics of power inherent within environmental decision-making processes. However, while Cox (1999) argues that “indecorous voice” is used to marginalize voices in public participation settings, we believe that “indecorous voice” can strategically oppose logics of oppression wielded by privileged institutions. Indecorous voice, therefore, can rhetorically take back time by seizing kairotic moments in institutional settings. Cox, therefore, fails to recognize the rhetorical potential of indecorous voice. Although he argues that marginalized voices are often disregarded as indecorous, or inappropriate, we argue that indecorous voice can be deployed as an intervention to seize kairos in public forums. Particularly, indecorous voice can challenge the very rules of decorum constructed by institutions charged with managing public participation opportunities.

Thus, to account for the potentials of indecorum, our analysis attends to the rhetorical possibilities of disruptive behavior in public participation contexts. When isolated for critical examination, indecorum can
be understood as a performance that disrupts the privileged distribution of the sensible. Consistent with Stoneman (2011), we argue that public participants can performatively seize kairos in public settings by disrupting nominalized constructions of decorum. Importantly, indecorum need not be deployed as a rhetorical strategy for instrumental gain; indeed, we submit that “indecorous voice” serves to call attention to a disparities of power that limit voice in democratic settings. Additionally, indecorum can potentially reshape the nature of agency-public environmental decision-making. To demonstrate this, we present two U.S. examples of environmental public participation. In these instances, we observe publics using indecorous voice to disrupt decorum and utilize kairotic moments in institutional forums. Though the following two examples contrast in their historical settings, they both exemplify participants’ attempts to take back time that publics feel has been taken away from them.

**Love Canal Residents Fight to be Relocated**

Love Canal is one of the seminal case studies of environmental justice in the United States (Jamieson, 2007). Located in upstate New York, Love Canal is a small working class community that was built over a chemical plume in the early 20th century. Residents first discovered evidence of chemical toxicity affecting human health in the late 1970s. Through grassroots organizing, one resident, Lois Gibbs, galvanized community support for U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) investigations and a federal injunction to help relocate affected residents. Although U.S. President Jimmy Carter eventually declared Love Canal a disaster location and approved relocation in 1981, Love Canal residents struggled for two years to get their voices heard.

The EPA carefully managed decorum in ways that marginalized democratic behaviors of resistance. Particularly, the EPA excluded forms of debate that did not follow normative standards of critical-rational debate. Mothers, for instance, were dismissed on the grounds that their claims were anecdotal rather than substantive. Mothers argued for environmental justice based on personal narratives about miscarriages, child health, and everyday life in their toxic environment (Peeples & DeLuca, 2006). Since these claims did not follow the EPA’s ideal principles of critical-rational debate, residential arguments were thus excluded from democratic processes for not conforming to normative standards of critical-rational debate. Indeed, evidence of child mortality from dioxin and other chemicals in the soil and water was refuted as “useless housewife data” and, when pressed, the EPA arranged the residents to be examined by a veterinarian.

Consistent with Cox (1999), this event demonstrates that public participation agencies may strategically use indecorum to dismiss important arguments concerning environmental justice. However, this case reveals that indecorum can also be used to seize kairos by challenging institutional constructions of timeliness. As a rhetorical strategy, indecorous voice can therefore open the possibilities of effective participation by emphasizing the loss of voice during normal participatory procedures. With the production of the documentary *The Poisoned Dream: The Love Canal Nightmare*, real-time footage of many public hearings held in front of the U.S. EPA has been preserved. This film reveals the ways that area residents performed indecorous voice as radical resistance to oppressive constructions of decorum.

By early 1980, Love Canal residents were promised the U.S. government would seize infected homes and pay for the residents’ relocation. When this action was stalled, residents responded with indecorum. Challenging the formal nature of the public participation process, locals vigorously contested EPA chronos, which was used to delay investigative procedures and dismiss residential arguments concerning environmental health. The timeliness for democratic behavior was dramatically restricted. What was believed to be an open context for democratic deliberation turned out to be a process of a different kind: One that limited participation to the normative decorum of silence. In one hearing addressing these concerns, documentary footage shows a middle-aged man standing up with arms outstretched in...
exasperation, shouting: “All I want, all I want... I don’t want to be relocated, all I want is my 28-5 [referring to the government payment for his home] and give it to me tonight and I’ll move down that road and I’ll never look back at the Love Canal again!” (Matthews, 1999). On the verge of tears, his face was flush and his voice trembled. Immediately following his statement, the crowd sitting around him erupted in boisterous cheers. Community supporters clapped while chanting, “WE WANT OUT! WE WANT OUT!” Meanwhile, others pumped their fists above their heads or jumped from their seats.

Former resident, Luella Kenny, reflected upon another public hearing event held in 1980: “The people became petrified. I mean, I saw them throwing knives and forks at the government officials...one government official, I mean someone grabbed him, put a tie around his neck, just practically strung him up [she simulates this motion on camera for the documentary]... it was frightening” (Matthews, 1999).

These two examples demonstrate the rhetorical performance of indecorous voice. In response to what was considered an unfair construction of participatory democracy, Love Canal residents used indecorum to seize a kairos that was denied to them by institutional authorities. While the EPA attempted to silence publics by constructing a contextual setting that intrinsically silenced public voice, locals took back the time that was promised to them by violating normative standards for appropriate behavior. Appealing to their state and national government for rescue from toxic chemical exposure, locals resisted EPA standards of decorum because to EPA’s watch, the timing would never be right for environmental justice. Concomitant with Cox’s (1999) findings, public health officials constructed standards of “proper” public participation by using expert knowledge of health science to reject residents’ claims of toxicity. Love Canal residents were dismissed with insults of sexist language and veterinarian examinations, demonstrating Cox’s point that decorum is often established according to gender and socio-economic status (Cox, 1999, p. 22). After a round of false promises of relocation, residents expressed their anger and frustration as they “[felt] abandoned by their government” (Matthews, 1999).

This reading departs from Cox’s understanding indecorous voice because Love Canal residents used indecorum to their rhetorical advantage, rather than succumbed to its instrumental forces of marginalization. Indecorum was used to capture kairos. Infuriated residents demanded a right to be heard because the time for justice was now rather than later. By dismantling EPA’s seemingly unjust constructions of decorum, Love Canal residents seized kairotic opportunities to shout their comments, chant and clap together for one another, and even threaten the livelihood of hearing officials. These indecorous acts resisted EPA’s utilization of chronos and proper behavior, and attempted to transform the debate rather than bureaucratically resolve it.

Indeed, Gibbs herself reports that such indecorous actions were a deliberate strategy: “...we thought about how people behaved and how could we use that to heat up the struggle and put pressure on those target people. And it worked extremely well” (Matthews, 1999). For example, Gibbs explains, “We used to use Patty...who was one of our best criers, who would stand up and shout at them and cry.” With this comment, the documentary cuts to footage from a separate public meeting in which a woman, with toddler on her hip, stands and shouts at agency officials (Matthews, 1999). Thus, for Gibbs and the other Love Canal residents, the loud, emotional and even dangerous capacities of the human body were used as kairotic appeals to drive environmental reform in their community. Indecorous voice, therefore, a term denoting inappropriate behavior and previously understood as a construction by government officials to marginalize residents’ voices, was re-claimed as residents performatively re-invented the timeliness of decorous situations (Baumlin, 2002). Potentially, when employed as a rhetorical strategy against oppressive agencies of public participation, indecorum may reframe environmental debates by cathartically performing that which cannot be said, offering participants new strategies for resistance amid normalized behaviors of silence.
Utah Residents Fight for Clean Air

More recently, the Salt Lake Valley in Northern Utah has been entrenched in a fight for better air quality. Kennecott Utah Copper (KUC), a major mining operation, has maintained status as the primary polluter of Utah’s air. On February 22, 2011 the Utah Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) held a public hearing to evaluate statements concerning Kennecott Utah Copper’s plan to expand the Bingham Canyon Mine. The nearly 150 hearing participants included air quality activists, unaffiliated members of the public, as well as KUC employees and elected representatives from area municipalities. The purpose of this hearing was to assess Kennecott’s request to amend Utah’s State Implementation Plan (SIP) and update air permits. This document outlines Utah’s agenda for monitoring local air pollution. Since the Clean Air Act requires a public hearing for SIP amendment proposals, the DEQ and Division of Air Quality (DAQ) are responsible for monitoring and reviewing public comments before rendering a final decision.

The event was carefully regulated by DEQ’s utilization of chronos and mandatory kairotic behavior. This organization, charged with facilitating public dialogue about the proposal, managed the temporal settings of this hearing. The hearing took place on a Tuesday at 3:30 p.m. at the Utah Department of Environmental Quality Headquarters in Salt Lake City. Arguably, this was an inconvenient time for those who work regular weekday shifts. Although the hearing began with a seven-minute speech limit, authorities soon decreased time to five minutes. Importantly, this change occurred immediately before a local clean air activist delivered his case; alternatively, those who enjoyed seven minutes of delivery were political and institutional leaders who spoke earlier in the meeting on behalf of Kennecott expansion.

Despite DEQ-sanctioned chronos, participants seized kairotic moments by clapping and cheering. Following nearly every statement opposing Kennecott expansion, the room filled with loud and sometimes boisterous accolades, applause, and approbations. This rhetorical event was both visually striking and audibly disruptive. One female participant who discussed citizens’ rights in a participatory democracy received loud applause, energetic cheers, and shouts of “woo-hoo!” from supporters in the room. Similarly, a male participant who gave his comment wearing a white medical lab coat told an emotional story about a patient of his that is terribly sick. The speaker ended his story with a question posed directly to the DEQ representatives: “are you listening?!” With this, he received great applause and many cheers. Additionally, several attendants softly jeered statements delivered in support of KUC. There were also a few times when Kennecott supporters clapped for industrial devotees, but such instances were irregular and pale in comparison to those supporting clean air. These indecorous acts put the spotlight on the public’s loss of voice in this environmental debate. As an attempt to transform the disparaging nature of this institutional process, publics rallied behind a new notion of timeliness that had been denied to them by the public participation authorities. Through indecorum, public participants were able to utilize a kairos unique to their demands, rather than the decorous ones implied by the DEQ.

Silence was also used as a rhetorical strategy to create kairos. For instance, the public often sat in silence after supporters of KUC delivered their statements. Although some supporters clapped for pro-business comments, they were far outnumbered by people sitting in silent opposition. Decisions not to applaud demonstrated that such comments were unworthy of public acknowledgement; thus, time became a rhetorical space that belonged to the public. One participant actually filled his speech time with silence. The gentleman physically moved his chair to face the audience and asked, “What is it that you love most in the world?” Following several minutes of silence the participant disclosed his love and the room immediately erupted with applause and standing ovations. Arguably, this statement demonstrates the marginalization of voices in Salt Lake City. While big companies such as Kennecott and the DEQ work together to forge agendas prioritizing economic gain, the public is left with the unhealthy ramifications of poor air quality. His statement represents an attempt to perform the silence experienced in the public sphere. Thus, this participant’s micro-performance took back time. It used the hollowed space of silence
to critique the very process of the public hearing, which was responsible for silencing public voices in Salt Lake City. As a rhetorical trope, this strategy attempted to reframe the contextual form of the public participation process by featuring that which was missing: Voice.

As demonstrated, the hearing’s chronos was carefully managed by the DEQ. Although we do not intend to speak on behalf of DEQ motives, we can safely note that the agency’s chronos affected participants’ form of kairotic behavior. For discourse to be timely within this situated context, participants were required to meet certain demands carefully monitored by DEQ authorities. For instance, DEQ officials disciplined those exceeding the five-minute time limit. Interestingly, the DEQ limited speech time from seven minutes to five minutes immediately before leading environmental advocates made their case for clean air. Potentially, this demonstrates the rhetorical power of regulating time to disparage oppositional voices. Consistent with Cox (1999), this point indicates that chronos, or clock time, can be rhetorically managed to disadvantage particular publics. It remains clear that the proper timing for deliberative arguments was restricted to DEQ standards. To the public, these restraints were used to unfairly privilege industrial voice. In response, the public decided to take back lost time by indecorously seizing the kairos that had been promised to them.

Recognizing the seemingly unfair limitations of institutional decorum, participants dissented from DEQ conditions of decorous speech and created their kairos by rhetorically using “indecorous voice.” Acts such as clapping, shooting woo-hoo’s and cheers, and sitting in silence broke from normative behaviors of DEQ time. Challenging DEQ definitions of appropriateness, participants performatively negotiated how things should be done. While the majority of the participants supported this endeavor, institutional rules still dictated basic features of speech such as the time and location of deliveries. Actions like clapping and cheering are not radical, yet this indecorous behavior performatively negotiated the dominant logic of undergirding this particular public forum. Drawing attention to the unfair constructions of decorum, participants attempted to transform the seemingly skewed debate, which they believed was marginalizing their voices in the public sphere.

In sum, this hearing demonstrates that indecorous voice can be used as a rhetorical strategy, especially under institutional conditions that limit, and potentially marginalize, public concerns. In this case, publics disrupted DEQ decorum by intervening with outcry, embodied gestures, and silence. Against a chronos inconvenient to many, the public created their own kairos, demanding that the time belong to them and not the American plutocrats controlling the processes of deliberative democracy.

Like the residents of Love Canal, participants in the DEQ hearing demonstrate the invention possibilities of indecorous voice, especially when deployed under conditions of institutional marginalization. Participants performatively reclaimed the processes of deliberative democracy by renegotiating the prudency of timely actions.

**Conclusion**

At the fifth biennial Conference on Communication and the Environment, Robbie Cox argued that U.S. institutional settings have used decorum to marginalize public participation advocates from authentic democratic engagement. Although processes of public participation often remain unfair, Cox’s analysis fails to account for rhetorical potentials of indecorous voice. We argue that participants in public forums can use indecorous voice to seize kairotic moments, disrupting rhetorical settings designed to subordinate public participation. In this way, indecorous voice rhetorically creates spaces of resistance autonomous from the restraining rules of decorum. This essay has provided two examples that support this thesis. Publics in Love Canal, New York, and Salt Lake City, Utah, indecorously disrupted institutional constructions of decorum. By shouting, clapping and cheering, and sitting in silence, participants effectively seized kairos. These micro-performances of resistance express public frustration with
exclusionary institutional practices, demonstrating the rhetorical possibilities of indecorous voice. This research contributes to environmental communication by reinvigorating the concept of indecorous voice, highlighting the radical dimensions of traditional participation, and exploring the critical potentials of classical rhetoric. In conclusion, indecorous voice may potentially transform public debates by exposing features of public participation that silence public voices.

References


