Public meeting discourse

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Abstract:

Public meetings are sites for democratic participation and deliberation on issues facing a municipality. In the North American context, the New England Town Hall meeting epitomizes this democratic ideal. Such meetings are a place where ordinary folks can get up on their feet, have their say, and possibly influence the town’s decision. Not surprisingly, what transpires at public meetings often falls short of these ideals or mythos of democracy. The gap between the ideal and the realities of public meetings has led to calls for empirical studies of citizen participation and deliberation. A language and social interaction (LSI) approach seems especially well-suited for studies of public meetings given the focus on talk as social action and interaction. This discursive turn to actual communicative practices as embodied in participants’ discourse has been called “ordinary democracy.”

Public Meetings as Communication Events

A public meeting may be defined as a communication event involving a minimum of three people who come together to work on the business or functioning of their community, for example, to brainstorm on an issue, to make a decision, to develop a policy, and the like. A public meeting differs from an organizational meeting in that access or participation at the meeting is open to members of the community (Tracy & Dimock, 2004). Public meetings as communication events frame the activities that occur as doing the business of democracy and the community.

There are various types of public meetings that organize participation in different ways. A public meeting of a city council, town board, or planning board involves governmental officials convened to cover, discuss or vote on various issues in front of the municipality. Questions may be allowed from the audience, but the main participants in this format are governmental officials. Another type of meeting is a public hearing which is called to solicit community input and opinion on an issue. Here community members or stakeholders—those who have a stake or interest in the issue—express their viewpoints before elected officials. Technical or scientific experts may be invited or voluntarily speak out to explain the complex matters of their specialty and help decision-makers in their deliberation. Thirdly, a citizen jury or commission of inquiry may be formed to investigate or deliberate on an issue. In this format, community members, stakeholders, or experts are convened as a committee to gather information or explore options and report back to governmental bodies on their findings. Fourth, town hall
meetings invite members of the community, to not only voice opinion, but also vote on issues under consideration. Fifth, question-and-answer sessions allow members of the public to raise concerns and solicit answers from officials or technical experts.

At public meetings who gets to speak, when, and for how long is usually regulated in some fashion such as by parliamentary procedure or Roberts’ Rules of Order. Speakers may be given a time limit or instructed to just speak to the issue, e.g., on the proposed zoning change and not about whether or not you like Wal-Mart (Buttny & Cohen, 2007). Public meeting discourse is a form of institutional talk but is not as structured or as formal as say courtroom discourse. In general, meetings are structured along a continuum from a free and open discussion for public participation, to being bureaucratic and efficient with limited public involvement. In the efficient mode, the meeting is run by an official following an agenda who selects the speaker. An open and free public discussion gives participants more latitude as to topic and access to the floor, but also requires more time for people to be heard. The structure of public meetings needs to weigh the sometime competing demands of time versus efficiency in completing the task, what has been called “the democratic dilemma” (Bora & Hausendorf, 2006, p. 35).

The principle characters or social roles at public meetings are government officials and lay citizens. The officials, who are elected or appointed, typically run the meeting. Lay citizens, those motivated enough to attend meetings, may include activists or special-interest groups who coalesce around an issue. Citizens may speak as an individual or as a representative of a group at meetings. Or citizens may just be part of an on-looking audience. Stakeholders include groups such as the chamber of commerce, schools, churches, and the like. Stakeholders may come from within or without the community. For instance, an outside corporation may want a development in a town and send their representative (e.g., an attorney) to meetings. Experts may be called upon to explain complex technical issues. The press may be present to report on events or interview participants afterwards. A meeting may also be televised, thereby reaching a larger audience. Each of these social roles or membership categories gets realized or enacted through discursive action and interaction at a meeting and surrounding events.

Most every study of public meetings finds some problematic aspects of the communication in these settings. Critics point to how undemocratic public meetings are resulting in a “thin model of citizen participation” (Eliasoph, 1998). Public meeting discourse is often characterized as not deliberative, as making unreasoned decisions based on unfounded assertions. When ordinary citizens are invited to participate at public hearings, there is the illusion of public input and influence. Public meetings are often the brunt of ridicule or derision as undemocratic, endless, or ineffective, but at the same time, meetings are where the business of the community happens.

Language and Social Interaction Studies of Public Meeting Discourse

Given the gap between the ideals of democracy and what actually happens at meetings, between democratic theory and practice, there have been calls for empirical studies of public
meetings. Empirical accounts of meetings can reveal problem areas needed to be described in order to improve practice. Instead of the abstractions of theory and philosophy, we need to examine participants’ actual discursive practices at meetings. The language and social interaction (LSI) perspective is well suited for empirically describing public meetings. Language and social interaction is an umbrella term covering perspectives such as ethnography of communication, discursive analysis, conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and related approaches. While there are differences among these approaches, a common thread through an LSI perspective is the focus on the formative function of talk. That is, an attention to how discourse or embodied language use performs actions that co-create socio-political realities at public meetings. Instead of conceiving of communication as a transmission of information, communication is viewed as action and interaction. LSI research usually involves in-depth case studies of communication events, with a thick description of contextual details, and interactional processes to describe problematic aspects of public meetings. LSI work is typically inductive, grounding claims on first-hand observations, or based on recordings and transcripts. For instance, in a special issue of the *International Journal of Public Participation*, an online streaming video of a public meeting is provided along with transcripts and a collection of LSI studies of that meeting (Black & Leighter, 2009).

Most LSI research has not focused on public meetings as such, but rather on various speech acts, discursive practices, or interactional sequences that occur within the meeting, e.g., citizen uses of argument, metadiscourse, personal narrative and the like. Meetings are seen as a “tool” for some end, for deliberating or making a decision. Yet Schwartzman (1989) calls for taking “meetings as a topic” for study because meetings organize or constitute the community – “meetings are the community writ small” (p. 39). Meetings are the form that generates and maintains the organization of the community. Instead of a “blank-slate image” of meetings, we need to consider how participants do meetings, how meetings are interactionally accomplished.

Some principal questions from an LSI perspective are: How do participants at meetings engage in “ordinary democracy” (Tracy, 2010)? How is citizenship communicated or performed (Bora & Hausendorf, 2006)? How do participants socially position one another? In light of the various difficulties in participating, what strategies do citizens take to deal with such problems? Several studies show how lay citizens subvert or work around the formal rules of public meetings.

Among LSI studies of public meetings, important early work is Nina Eliasoph’s (1998) ethnographic study of citizen groups, and an examination of their frustration when participating in public meetings. Their frustration comes from governmental officials limiting citizen input. Speakers are instructed “to just speak for yourself” and to not raise broader political issues. This participation etiquette, “speaking for oneself,” means speaking from personal experience or from self-interest rather than from a political position or principle. For instance, a “mom discourse” fits this participation mode well: a mom discourse involves being for or against a proposal in order to protect the children. As an alternative, some citizens study the technical aspects of issues and try to sound like “experts” at public forums.
However, when they attempt to speak as experts, they are largely ignored by officials. Only credentialed experts can adopt the voice of the seemingly neutral sounding, rational discourse of science or technology.

Eliasoph (1998) uses this ethnographic description to conclude that limiting talk at meetings to a discourse of self-interest or an impersonal language of facts feeds into a “cycle of political evaporation of the public sphere.” She found that “backstage” at informal gatherings some citizens engaged in public-minded discourse, but much less so “frontstage” at public meetings. When citizens attempted a larger political discussion at meetings, they were largely ignored by officials. These restrictions on the kind of participation allowed at meetings are especially problematic. She calls for citizens and officials to attempt to “reason aloud together” about issues through argumentative discourse. Such discourse and interaction will make for a more vibrant public sphere since “political ideas and political knowledge are not static, but grow when people talk about them” (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 207). When citizens who have differing views converse together there is the possibility for something transformative to happen. Even if disagreements persist, the process at least enlarges citizens’ perspectives.

Public meetings are places that bring together a community’s different people groups, conflicting interests and opinions, and differential resources and power. Differing views or controversial issues are the stuff that can make public meetings contentious. Controversies may take some time before a decision can be implemented, months if not years. Such long-term controversies often lead to increasing polarization within a community, between competing sides as the debate continues. Instead of deliberation or dialogue, public meetings may turn into a “theatre of dissent” (Boholm, 2008). Controversies are constituted by increased tensions between claims of factual evidence and emotion, between risks and benefits, between scientific knowledge and local knowledge, or between economic and environmental values. Stakeholders may be pitted against decision-makers, experts against lay citizens, neighbor against neighbor and divide the community. Boholm’s (2008) ethnographic account describes audience members as raising questions, making statements, reporting contrary evidence, suggesting alternative solutions, and displaying frustration or anger. Governmental officials, in turn, adopt a seemingly deferential position, but continue to repeat the project’s rationale by citing factual statements and a broad political mandate to act.

Public Hearings

Public hearings have received the most attention in the literature on public meetings since this is where ordinary citizens are invited to speak. Yet at such hearings, citizens face “the speaker’s problem” (Buttny & Cohen, 2007) of how to be credible, how to present something that has not been heard before, or how to engage with officials in discussion. One discursive strategy that citizens employ is to respond to some prior discourse. Given the dialogical character of language and the fact that public hearings occur in a context of prior arguments and positions, a speaker may draw on some of this prior discourse by quoting what another person
said, so-called reported speech. Drawing on the words of others allows the current speaker to use those words for their own purposes, to reinterpret that discourse, to evaluate it as right or wrong, good or bad, and so on. Quoting another’s words then opens up a slot for the current speaker to reply to them. Citizens draw on what another participant said at the hearing, or at some prior time, or imagine what may, could, or would be said in the future. Similarly citizens may formulate a prior position or argument in order to argue against it. These prior or hypothetical discourses serve as discursive resources that can be drawn upon in the citizen’s speech and used in constructing their own argument.

The idea of a public hearing, however well intentioned, in practice seems based on overly simplistic assumptions about communication. A public hearing is conceived as a process in which citizens speak and officials listen to ascertain the will of the people and take these comments under advisement. But while citizens may be speaking, officials often are not really listening. At public hearings, officials control who can speak about what, how one must speak, and for how long. The public may have restricted access to information and documents available to officials, and no access to legislative processes leading up to the hearing. Public hearings have been criticized as nothing more than a series of short speeches, not a genuine discussion or dialogue. A public hearing, called for late in the process, does not make for joint decision making. There is the sense that a decision already has been made by officials behind the scenes. Accordingly, public hearings are merely forums for defending or legitimizing prior decisions, as a legally mandated activity to be endured which allows the public to vent. The public hearing process is seen as more political theater, captured well by the adage: “Decide, announce, defend.” All this plays into the cynicism that fuels a broader decline in public trust in governmental institutions and business corporations. Such loss of trust and cynicism often results in citizen frustration or apathy, the feeling of being patronized by governmental officials.

But generally citizens want to engage with officials, to have discussion or dialogue on important issues. One strategy citizens attempt to engage officials on their views is to pose questions. The speech act of a question as request for information projects a response; questions open up a slot and make an answer relevant. Eliasoph (1998) describes how officials treat questions from lay citizens as merely requests for information. Officials prefer a mode of communication in which they have the answers and convey technical information to citizens. Even questions that posed an argumentative challenge to officials were treated as requests for information to avoid debate. But questions can be formulated to put an issue on the table for further discussion and deliberation. These kinds of questions are intended to resist any quick or obvious answers; they are framed as meriting further consideration such as issues for discussion in a citizen jury. Also rhetorical questions can be used to articulate a problem and designed to avoid a simple answer.

The use of metadiscourse at meetings works to refer to one’s own or another’s discourse and how that discourse is to be framed. Lay speakers may metadiscursively identify their statements as a question to pressure the board members to respond. For instance, during her presentation one citizen uses a question to depart from the standard public hearing format and
attempts to compel an answer from the town board by saying: “I have a question everybody also had statements I have a question and I’m hoping to get an answer” (Buttny 2010, p. 643); or later another speaker uses a similar strategy, “this question was already asked once (.) it wasn’t answered (1.5) I’m asking it again” (Buttny 2010, p. 645). In each case the speaker employs metadiscourse—talk about talk—as a strategy to provoke an answer from a board member. Of course, there is no guarantee that one will receive the desired answer or that it will lead to a deliberative discussion.

The discourse of public meetings is not confined to talk at meeting itself. For instance, at a public hearing a speaker reads quotes from the local newspaper of a town board member interviewed after the last meeting and then critically evaluates those quotes (Buttny, 2010). Unlike the use of questions discussed above, here the citizen’s views occupy the second position in evaluating the board member’s quotes in the first position. This also shows the discursive resources citizens can draw upon to subvert the restrictions of the hearing format. They may unable to engage with the official during the meeting, but by drawing on the official’s words from the newspaper the citizen can at least give their response to those quotes.

In addition, the minutes of the meeting, press coverage, letters to the editor, internet postings all extend the discussion beyond the meeting room. These texts then become the starting points for further comments by citizens or officials at the next meeting (Tracy 2010). Talk or materials may be presented at meetings “for the record” which then may be drawn upon at a later date. These inter-textual relations show the dialogical character of public meetings.

Public Meetings as Theater

Citizen groups, or other stakeholder groups, may hold pre-meetings in order to strategize for the upcoming meeting. One study examined city officials’ private pre-meetings to work out differences and to make decisions prior to the open, televised public meeting (Beck, Littlefield & Weber, 2013). These public meetings were held in time of crisis brought on by flooding. City leaders wanted to minimize conflict and show that things were under control. The discourse at the private pre-meetings as opposed to the open public meetings comports well with a dramaturgical metaphor of frontstage and backstage. At the public, open meeting officials spoke to one another about issues even though the issue had been previous decided at the private pre-meeting.

Seeing public meetings as theater or drama seems particularly apt and it suggests the importance of image construction. For instance, as Hong Kong was transitioning from British colonial rule to rule under the government of China, governor Chris Patten holds an open public meeting and takes questions from the Hong Kong audience to present a democratic image (Flowerdew, 1996). Symbols of hierarchy and power are removed; Patten speaks informally using first names and humor while stressing the importance of community and consensus. On the surface there is public participation, but this participation is controlled. For every topic
Another discursive practice found at public meetings is telling stories or personal narratives. A story can work as a strategy used in making an argument. For instance, a speaker tells the story of what her dad told her, “Never gamble with what you can’t afford to lose,” and then she applies this maxim to the current Wal-Mart and the aquifer debate – we can't afford to lose our drinking water (Buttny & Cohen, 2007). Personal stories draw on people’s experiences in a powerful way which differs from the more usual issue-oriented discussion. Stories have the potential to invite dialogue between participants (Black, 2008). Dialogue can “occur in moments” because stories make it easier to understand another’s perspective. Stories commonly focus on a problem. Personal stories of loss and trauma have been used in meetings between conflicting ethnic groups in order to deepen the experience of empathy, such as between Palestinians and Israelis or in South Africa’s reconciliation process.

Public meetings occur in some place. Place can hold various meanings or significance for participants. Starting with place in the sense of the spatial configuration of the meeting room, such as where officials sit vis-a-vis the locals, where citizens are allowed to speak during a public meeting, or where different interest group members congregate together in the audience. Also, there is place in the sense of “place-making,” how participants talk about places and their significance. For instance, business developers use visual mapping and PowerPoint slides at a meeting to show the geographical location of a proposed project (Buttny, 2009). Developers in Witteborn and Sprain’s (2009) study identify the neighborhood for the project and claim that this community “needs to be enhanced and developed” (p. 20). Audience members from this community argue that only people who live in this neighborhood have the right to say what development should or should not take place there. This contrast between outsiders and locals, between big corporations represented by their attorneys and the ordinary folks who have lived here all their life are tensions that play out in place-based discourses (Buttny & Cohen, 2007).

Place-making discourse evokes different categories of persons, e.g., “us” versus “them,” locals versus outsiders, ordinary folks versus big corporations. In the Witteborn and Sprain (2009) study, community people identify by the ethnic category, African American. The significance of this identity for these participants implicates who has the right to speak about the community and its development. But these categories are not always so clear cut as when a self-identified African American who is also a member of the chamber of commerce advocates for the community development project (Witteborn & Sprain, 2009, p. 23-24).

**Experts at Public Meetings**

Proposals at public meetings may involve technical or scientific questions which only experts can credibly answer. Experts are an interesting membership category in that they can draw upon scientific-technical rationality to support their assessments. The discourses of science and technology are a source of authority for experts in addressing complex issues. At public
meetings, experts frequently speak using technical terms or ignore the vernacular of local residents. These technocratic ways of speaking create a divide between experts and the lay citizenry. Experts hired by competing interests, or coming from different scientific or technological perspectives, not uncommonly disagree over the risk of a project. Opposing sides may each have their own expert to support their point of view. Knowledge of complex matters is frequently uncertain and contested. This suggests that the assessment of risk is not only a scientific or technical matter, but also political.

One study examines Wal-Mart’s experts’ presentation to a community on their site plan (Buttny, 2009). The experts’ talk occurs in the midst of an ongoing controversy and criticisms from local residents. In their presentation these experts formulate prior citizens’ complaints by a neutral-sounding, legalistic language which works as a gloss. Citizen concerns are fitted into a problem-solution discourse where the solutions involve engineering technology. The Wal-Mart representatives display their expertise through describing these technological answers. Scientific documents or tests are presented which point to counter-intuitive results. They draw on a discourse of ‘facts’ and ‘information,’ but these do not simply speak for themselves, they are used as part of an argument in support of their proposals. In addition to displaying scientific-technological expertise, they avow openness to dialogue and willingness to work with the town. The Wal-Mart representatives present themselves as both technical experts and trustworthy partners.

So we can see that deliberation at meetings is not only about factual information or expert technical knowledge, but also about relational issues such as trust, being able to work together and establishing a relationship. Several studies point to the relational aspects of public meeting discourse. Participants commonly use indirect speech which allows individuals to negotiate and work through differences and delicate issues in order to maintain their social relations (Schwartzman, 1989).

The Audience at Meetings

Often the public comprises the audience at meetings. But an audience is not a passive recipient of events; rather an audience can play an active part in this participation framework of meetings. Audience members may respond to what officials, experts, or citizens are saying on a moment-by-moment basis. The audience can respond to what is being said by applause, booing, or laughing and each of these non-verbal or embodied actions reflect varying shades of situated meaning. An audience may “laugh with” or “laugh at” a speaker; such laughter may come from the entire audience or just an isolated member(s). In addition, audience members may verbally respond by heckling a speaker. Heckling and audience members’ audible murmuring, called “buzzing,” can be seen as ways to display opposition or to keep a point live for discussion. Buzzing begins quietly and builds up to a peak. Heckling has an orderly character typically timed at turn-relevant places or during gaps (Llewellyn, 2005). Different audience members may co-construct a line of argument by adding to another’s heckle. Heckling or buzzing creates
a problem for speaker who has the floor for if audience’s responses are ignored, it undermines what is being said, but if it is responded to, it may disrupt the speaker’s presentation. These audience responses may not be sanctioned, but they do occur and are not uniformly criticized by officials running the meeting.

**Questions of Civility**

Disruptions and unruly behavior at meetings and other forums has led to calls for civility throughout the wider society. Partisans become too angry or hostile in dealing with disagreement or opposing sides. Strong emotions are said to overtake reasonable discussion and the character of democratic meetings suffers. This concern with civility can be seen as a subtext in much of what we have already covered: public meetings become “a theater of dissent” where lay citizens’ comments or questions seem designed to embarrass officials, where speakers at public hearings avow anger or frustration and blame officials or opposing sides. The volatile, angry public may be the consequence of elected officials’ attempts to limit the amount of public input or discussion at meetings. Officials seem reluctant to engage on broader issues and instead prefer to limit discussion to factual, technical information imparted from experts. Officials may hold private pre-meetings to work through their differences so that the public meetings can be run smoothly without conflict. The public may be given its say during public hearings, though officials are required to just “listen.”

An underlying assumption in calls for civility is the tension between reason and emotion in dealing with disagreement. Emotive or affective states such as anger or frustration sometimes overcome reason and lead to uncivil or disrespectful conduct such as shouting, ad hominem attacks or attempts to embarrass opponents. Karen Tracy (2010) notes that “expressed negative emotion” is to be expected when officials and citizens disagree on important issues. Decisions before governing bodies matter to citizens so their participation at meetings often is heightened by expressions of outrage, displays of affect, or “feeling limned discourse.” Tracy (2010, pp. 202-208) identifies what she calls “reasonable hostility” as a way to see people being passionate in the expression of an opposing position. “Reasonable hostility…is an expression of anger that most people would judge reasonable. It is emotionally marked, critical commentary about another’s action that matches the perceived wrong to which it responds” (Tracy, 2010, p. 203). Instead of privileging reason over emotion, we need to see these impassioned claims and heightened statements as how people actually talk at contentious meetings.

Given the sometime ambiguous borderline between reasonable and unreasonable hostility some citizens may be reluctant to speak out for fear of threatening another’s face or ongoing social relations. As seen above, the relational aspects of communication matter; how people are being treated can become more salient than what is at issue. A speaker may not be intending to attack the face of an opponent but it may be taken as such. This can create a dilemma for participants: citizens want to express their position or opposition, but also they want to maintain relationships with fellow community members.
In conclusion, most all LSI studies focus on citizen problems with meaningful participation at public meetings. Citizens motivated enough to get off the couch and come to a meeting want to engage or express strongly held views, but feel they are not being heard by officials or given a forum for discussion. Some studies look at the creative ways citizens subvert or get around the rules in order to speak out at meetings, posing questions to the board, reading quotes from the newspaper and critiquing them, or heckling or buzzing. Officials, on the other hand, seem to want to control meetings to prevent escalating controversies, unruly emotions, and polarization. These tensions reflect the “democratic dilemma” between openness and efficiency of doing public meetings. Seeing meetings as constituted by different members’ speech actions and interaction allows us to better understand how the community makes decisions and does its civic business.

References


