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Town Meeting as a Communication Event: Democracy's Act Sequence

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Town meeting deliberation and decision making form a communicative event, the act sequence of which ensures that participants enact a democratic process. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from 1999 to 2000, documents, interviews, and videotapes and transcripts of meetings, I analyze the Amherst, Massachusetts town meeting. Performances of rhetorical interactions, over time, develop norms for discourse that participants use to make sense of and evaluate conduct. I outline norms for deliberative democracy in a particular instantiation of democracy and show how local democracy draws from, and contributes to, the larger rhetorical-political culture in the United States. This essay contributes to studies of language and social interaction in political settings and addresses (a) the lack of communication scholarship concerning a fundamental part of New England local democracy and (b) deliberative democratic theorists' idealist notions of local democracy. Given the variety in forms of local political systems, opportunities abound for similar studies of other local democracies' ways of speaking.

In approximately 300 of 351 municipalities in Massachusetts, in 243 of 252 municipalities in Vermont, and in many other towns throughout New England, local governance organizes around the performance of an annual legislative, and communicative, event. In many of these places, between 50 and 1,000+ registered voters act as the local legislature. Every year, townspeople meet to discuss, debate, deliberate, and vote a budget for the next fiscal year. They can also adopt resolutions or change bylaws (what cities call "ordinances"), but no money can be spent, and nothing changed, until the town meeting begins and then ends.

Using ethnography of communication, I address the question, How do the procedures of a town meeting talk organize it as a democratic speech event (Hymes, 1972)? To answer this question, I describe the act sequence of a town meeting. I argue that deliberation in a New England town meeting takes place through an observable act sequence that is to a large degree enabled and constrained by the nature of the legislative process as a speech event. It is partly regulated by written

rules and partly enabled and constrained by the norms of the particular group. It thus differs from other forms of continuously sitting legislatures such as town councils. This study of town meetings thus shows that democracy is a performance and a locally situated, culturally embedded, interactional accomplishment. Participants in a town meeting talk in ways that either create opportunities for further discussion or put a stop to it. To gain town meeting approval for particular issues, participants must interact in ways that I describe in this essay as *rhetorical*. They are designed, strategic, and "chosen" (Tracy, 2002, p. 40). The rules created for rhetorical interaction in a town meeting are based in cultural premises for communicating. Among those premises are (a) every position seeking to be heard must be heard, and (b) procedural orderliness must be followed to ensure that every position is heard.

Being able to have one's say in matters of local (and frequently in national and international) governance is vitally important to democratic functioning in Amherst, Massachusetts. Speech and democracy are linked in important ways in a town meeting, an event designed for the expression of town will. That will is found in the organized selection of "linguistic resources in verbal performance" and is "underlain by kinds of symbolic competence that transcend linguistic competence in its ... technical sense" (Hymes, 1968, p. 667).

Although deliberative democracy theorists may have idealized prescriptions for democratic action, it is important to describe and interpret the practical deliberation of citizens in a democracy. Contexts for study of ordinary people in government have included juries (e.g., Gastil, Deess, & Weiser, 2002) and school boards (e.g., Tracy & Standerfer, 2003). Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amengual, and Gastil (2006), when they described their choice to start with a ground-up, inductive orientation in the study of a public issues discussion group, observed that past theorizing had "deductively derived its ideal conception of deliberation from ... abstract principles" (p. 1) Mansbridge et al. found fault with theory that remains untouched by practical experience. This study is part of the process to enrich theorizing; the context for local governmental political and communicative activity is the local legislative body.

LOCAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Political systems vary by symbolic action and symbolic forms. One way to comprehend a particular system's rhetoric is by way of ethnographic study of "the nature, forms, functions, and situational contexts of use of political language" (Bauman & Sherzer, 1996, p. xii). Study of national leaders' political rhetoric is common; language and social interaction studies of political discourse can complement those studies with a ground-up sense of what actually happens in political discourse. Gastil (1992) argued that scholars must "examine the political language of citizens, relatively minor or local public officials. ... Focusing solely upon elites gives the mistaken impression that the everyday speech of citizens is inconsequential" (p. 494). These studies of nonelite discourse can shed light on how the participants accomplish practical rhetorical goals and thus be seen as cultural accomplishments (Carbaugh & Wolf, 1999; Philipsen, 1986; Townsend, 2006).To be sure, the forms of public address at town meetings vary; local knowledge of what constitutes appropriate, valued, and/or permissible address differs from one culture to another and across time (e.g., Cmiel, 1990; Rosaldo, 1973; St. George, 1984). The discourse and norms of a town meeting form it as an event and show how *democracy* is accomplished in an American deliberative public legislature.

Communication scholarship has examined how *democracy* is accomplished through talk in other deliberative public forums. Unlike counterparts in some other forms of public meetings in the United States (McComas, 2003a, 2003b; McComas & Scherer. 1998: Tracy & Muller. 2001: Tracy & Standerfer, 2003), participants in town meetings actually do make decisions. Unlike school board communication, and somewhat similar to jury deliberation. one of the features of town meeting deliberation is that it must end in a decision (Gastil et al.. 2002). Town meetings must conclude with a vote to dissolve the town meeting itself Like a jury. the town meeting is comprised of people who act as citizens who come to a decision about some public matter. The step I take in this article is to describe and understand the process by which those decisions get made.

Town meetings have been used as the legislative bodies for communities in New England since their founding in the 1600s and 1700s. Tocqueville (1835–1840/1994) provided the now-classic praise for civic association found in New England towns. Yet communication journals have published just two articles about them. however (see Potter, 1957, for a study of colonial town meetings, and Kerr, 1964. for a portrait of "Big Business 'Round the Cracker Barrel"). Along with Schudson's (1998) historical treatment of town meetings. political science provides the most insight into participants' comfort with speaking (Mansbridge, 1980) and quality of decisions (Zimmerman. 1999). Bryan (2004) presented the results of nearly 30 years of data collection, assisted by his students. about the participation and character of the town meeting. Bryan (2004) claimed that "the fundamental purpose of town meeting is to make decisions for the commonweal based on principles of due process and equal protection—but on a human scale" (p. 287). What type of interaction creates "due process"? How does communication create "equal protection"? In the tradition of language and social interaction research, I argue that foundational principles are interactional accomplishments. The process that starts with calling the meeting to order and finishes with the dissolution of the meeting may seem "long and tedious," as some town meeting members have complained to me in the parking lot after a late evening session, but the town has to live with its decisions. In what follows, I demonstrate the importance that the event sequence plays in the creation of local democracy and the efficacy that average citizens have in their own town. By participating in the act sequences of a town meeting, a broad array of citizens has power. Although citizens may call a referendum to overturn a decision made at a town meeting. it rarely happens. The town has responsibility for itself; if the town does not like the results, the fault lies with the town. In towns with town meetings as the legislative event, there is no mayor, no town or city council to serve as scapegoat; in fact, mayors and town councils do not exist in towns with town meetings. Without town meetings, the town would not have to look itself in the mirror. A town meeting requires that reflection annually, or more frequently, as the citizens wish to call them.

THEORY AND METHOD

Some deliberative democracy theorists (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 1996) have started with an idealized notion of deliberation rather than attempting to describe it from empirical observation of those who practice it. Challengers to this view (Hauser, 1999) have preferred description of existing democratic voices rather than prescription of a universal ideal. Critics have pointed out deliberative democracy theorists' inattention to rhetoric and contingencies of local scenes (e.g., Fontana, Nederman, & Remer, 2004). Ethnography of communication (EC) serves as both a

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theoretical and methodological framework for this study. In particular, the concepts of communication events, norms, and participants (Hymes, 1972) are central to assisting me to write the communication rules (Carbaugh, 1990a) for the town meeting communication event. I describe and interpret the event, comprised of rhetorical interactions that both bring out advocacy and grant it legitimacy (Farrell, 1993). In doing so, I thereby add to knowledge about democratic deliberation in local American rhetorical culture.

The EC literature has indicated that participants define what counts as a communication event (Hymes, 1964) and has described such activities as having a distinct beginning, middle, and ending (Baxter & Goldsmith, 1990; Fitch, 1998; Hymes 1972). Events include "activities, or aspects of activities, that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech. An event may consist of a single speech act, but will often comprise several" (Hymes, 1972, p. 56). In examining their field notes, ethnographers have described the patterns and qualities of those patterns in speech acts and events in local contexts. Through description and interpretation of events, they have shown how distinct such events or acts are from others in which speech community participants engage. Town meetings have discursive norms for rhetorical practice that members create, learn, and use (on norms for rhetorical practice, see Bilmes, 1976; Hall, 1988–1989). The concept of speech event has proven helpful to scholars in understanding how politics can be performed and the functions that it serves (see, e.g., Brenneis, 1978, for a study of Hindi-speaking Fiji Indians "song challenges" and "*parabachan*"). What many regard as political or principles of political processes (e.g., *due process* and *equal protection*) can be seen as comprised, at least partially, of components of communication. I focus on audience–speaker interaction and consider the speech event itself in ways the participants would recognize as valid. The content of a political speech event's talk-in-interaction must be considered in relation to the forms in which it occurs and in relation to the contexts that shape it (and that it, in turn, helps shape). Message forms influence messages: "(t)he means of expression condition and sometimes control content" (Hymes, 1972, p. 59). Similarly, I argue that speech event form can condition and control the content of the event.

Data Collection

The case I examine here is the town meeting for Amherst, Massachusetts. Amherst is home to two colleges, one university, and in close proximity to two more colleges and is a well-educated, liberal community. In 2000, Amherst's population of 34,874 residents included 26,403 college students. Its history was in agriculture, however, and there have been tensions between the need for economic development and conservation. Amherst has what is called a "representative town meeting" as opposed to an "open town meeting." This involves several legal distinctions,[1] but the general rules for nonpartisan participation are similar across both types of meeting. Most Massachusetts town meetings use the rulebook, *Town Meeting Time: A Handbook of*

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[1]In towns with open town meetings, any registered voter may attend town meeting, deliberate, and vote. The history provided in *Town Meeting Time* indicates that

The representative town meeting developed in Massachusetts and Connecticut when towns found the open meeting unwieldy and often times unrepresentative of a cross section of the town population. In the representative (or "limited") town meeting the citizens elect representatives to vote at the town meeting. ... The representative town meeting has been adopted by vote of the town accepting a special legislative act. (Johnson et al., 1962/1984, pp. 5–6)

Parliamentary Law (Johnson, Trustman, & Wadsworth, 1962/1984) rather than Robert's (1876/1951) *Rules of Order.*

Between 1999 and 2000, I collected both observational and interview data and consulted written documents associated with town meetings such as reports about town meetings in meeting minutes, newspaper articles, and letters to the editor. Field notes from my attendance at the 1999 and 2000 Amherst town meeting and my reviewing and transcription of videotapes of the event provide primary records about the speech event sequence and structure. I also conducted 11 semistructured interviews with town meeting participants to gather their perceptions of, and reflections on, what should and should not occur in a town meeting.[2]

Data Analysis

I used the concept of speech event as a guide, a "metaphor, or perspective," for my analysis, which made that experience seem understandable to nonparticipants (Hymes, 1964, p.15). I took extensive field notes during the town meetings I observed and focused interview questions around discussion of event sequences. I learned that the whole town meeting event is comprised of several nested events or nightly sessions. During the analysis phase, I reviewed all field notes and chose three sessions from the 1999 meeting for closer analysis and later checked the 2000 meeting for comparison: These parts of the meeting represented the first, the last, and one in the middle of the larger event. I transcribed these three sessions, describing the acts, participants, setting and scenes, and ends and outcomes. From observing patterns of regular behavior and violations of those regularities, as well as following up with interviews, I formulated norms for interaction and interpretation. *Norms for interaction* include those norms that guide how one is to act; *norms for interpretation* guide how those actions are to be interpreted. Carbaugh (1990b) argued that norms are "patterns for proper communication conduct that are used discursively to instruct, regulate, and evaluate routine practices. ... Normative patterns are granted moral status within identifiable speech situations as 'the right thing to do' ... to the more practical 'thing to do'" (pp. 161–162).

Using both my own and participants' labels for activities that I observed, I catalogued the types of activities that occurred by their common features as well as where they occurred in a sequence. I then checked my findings against a fourth session from the middle of the event. I reviewed tapes and notes from the 2000 meeting to confirm or modify my analyses.

Articulating the relationship among components of speech helps the scholar write rules for speech events (Hymes, 1972, p. 58; Carbaugh, 1990a). Rules for interaction are "*reportable* by participants," "*repeatable,* recurrent patterns," "*intelligible* to participants as sensible guides for spoken action," and "invoked as *repair mechanisms* in response to problematic actions" (Carbaugh, 1990a, p. 122). They demonstrate some degree of agreement about what is proper or good because in part, conduct is moral; it is something within human control. Yet discursive norms can also be changed and violated (Hall, 1988–1989). Norms function to instruct, regulate, or evaluate others. When I observed patterns of communicative behavior, when I heard participants report

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[2]Following the intensive period of fieldwork, I have periodically re-visited Amherst for informal interviews with residents to discuss town meetings. I have also regularly reviewed their Web site, containing minutes and other notices. It is worth noting that since that time, the procedures have only changed minimally. Specifically, when speakers wish to speak, they now hold up one of three cards that the Clerk has provided to town meeting members on check-in to indicate the type of speech act they wish to perform (speaking in favor of a motion or against it requires differently colored cards as does raising a question or making a comment) when the Moderator calls for speakers.

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what should or ought to be done, when I observed breaches of an expected pattern, I described the component features of the interaction using the SPEAKING mnemonic.[3] Breaches mark where something should/ought/must not have been done (or where something else should, etc., have been done). Because this legislative governing body is so obviously bound by normative rules, I weave the analysis of norms throughout the analyses of the other components.

In what follows, I first present a descriptive analysis of the town meeting act sequence followed by an outline of the norms for Amherst's town meeting. The narrative description includes moments of interaction specific to particular sessions that are also illustrative of the general act sequence. I pay particular attention to the analytic concepts of act and act sequence and norms. First, however, it is helpful to divide the entire sequence of the whole meeting into its parts. In Amherst, the event is typically comprised of six to nine nightly sessions. During each night, there is another sequence that guides the night's work. The issues are addressed in a similar order every year (i.e., budget early in the meeting; petition-driven articles, including foreign affairs, at the end), but sometimes there is reason to put the budget at the end. As of budget finalizing time in 2000, the town was still waiting for the amount of state aid it would receive. By delaying the meeting's deliberation and voting on the budget, the town meeting could anticipate having a clearer picture of their finances in anticipation that the state would provide the figures they need by the end of the event.

SPEECH EVENT DESCRIPTION

Around 7:15 p.m. on a weekday night in late April, Amherst residents, individually, in pairs, or small groups, enter the doors of the Amherst Junior High School auditorium. They mill about, sometimes stopping at the Nicaraguan Sister City Committee table to buy doughnuts and coffee before entering. Smiling and chatting with others or silently without expression, they pause at a desk staffed by seated women wearing name badges, the Board of Registrars. The people say their names, and the Registrars look them up on a roster of 240 elected town meeting representatives (and 10 ex-officio voting members of the town meeting). Representatives, often called *town meeting members,* are registered voters who are elected in 10 town precincts; 24 representatives are elected from each precinct. Visitors must wear a sticker that says "non-voter" and sit in the back rows as do Amherst residents who are not representatives. The Moderator told me that "you are not a visitor at your own town meeting." They may not be voters, but they are citizens of the town and permitted to speak.

Inside the auditorium, numerous curved rows of cushioned chairs with attachable swing desks line the floor. On stage right are a table and a podium for the appointed Town Clerk and elected Moderator, respectively. In the center of the stage is a screen for overhead projections, usually text of the motion under consideration. To the stage left is one of three cameras from Amherst Community Television, which televises town meetings live. The Clerk records amendments and votes, whereas the Moderator calls the meeting to order and generally guides the procedures. Participants concur that the Moderator has tremendous power due to his or her ability to stop someone from speaking or even to briefly jail an unruly participant.

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[3]The cultural components of communication included in Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING heuristic are scene/setting, participants, ends, acts, key, instrumentality, norms for interaction and interpretation, and genre (p. 59).

The stage is at the top of a series of steps from the pit of the auditorium. Just below the stage are two long, microphone-equipped tables separated by an overhead projector and a podium. The five members of the Select Board, the elected executive body of Amherst, sit close to stage right, whereas the other table is usually reserved for the Finance Committee, a Moderator-appointed group that makes recommendations to town meeting and the Select Board. Only the Select Board issues a "warrant," or agenda, but state law allows 200 registered voters to call a special town meeting. The Town meeting will consider and vote on "articles," or single-issue items, such as whether to make a particular change to the zoning bylaws or whether to pay last year's bills. In 1999, there were 52 articles; and in 2000, there were 40. Members of the Moderator-appointed Finance Committee send town meeting members a Report as well as information on, and recommendations about, articles in the warrant.

All participants agree that the town must pass a budget; by law, they must. Within that realm, there are those who use fiscal conservative arguments and those who shy away from what they deem as unnecessary expenditures. They tend to be in the minority in an Amherst town meeting, however. Because it is generally a liberal town, social services are valued very highly. Expenditures for schools are usually welcomed, yet the *anti-authoritarian* (as several informants described it to me) character of participants here comes out during debate on whether, for example, to allow the police to purchase a new cruiser. The goals of the speech event, however, center on approving a budget and deciding the articles. The laws and budget cannot go into effect until after the meeting ends. The time it takes the members to reach those decisions and end the meeting is described as a problem by both participants and nonmember residents. Some members value the sometimes slow pace of deliberations, for that constitutes "careful consideration," whereas others express disdain for what they see as "long, drawn-out talk."

START OF THE SPEECH EVENT WITH A CALL TO ORDER AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

At 7:40 p.m., people are still arriving despite the supposed start time of 7:30 pm. Despite today's junior high school evacuation due to a bomb scare, the mood is lively. In contrast, at the end of the evening's session, participants' scarce energy is directed to leaving; and at the end of the town meeting itself in June, collegial conversation at the start quickly gives way to seriousness and frustration at having endured the long string of sessions. A volunteer from the Board of Registrars signals to the constable—really a police officer, but at town meeting, he is referred to as a "constable." He calls from the back of the auditorium, "Mister Moderator!" and the man at the podium on the stage stops talking with the woman seated to his right. The Moderator announces, "The 240th town meeting of the Town of Amherst is called to order. There are 250 town meeting members, 126 constitute a quorum, and the constable informs me that more than 126 members are present." He bangs the gavel, and the town meeting begins.

Because it is the start of the whole event, and not simply the start of a nightly session of it, other important activities occur. The Moderator introduces the Town Clerk, who quickly and in a monotone reads the "Call" of the meeting, an official document legitimizing the town meeting. Members wander around the auditorium. The Clerk then swears in the Moderator, who swears in newly elected members. The Moderator offers the newly sworn in members a very simple "congratulations" on being elected and sworn in to office. This is a perfunctory set of actions: There does not

seem to be a high degree of expressiveness coming from anyone; only the people chatting privately with one another are animated. The perfunctory nature of the swearing in "ceremony" reminds listeners of the official nature of the proceedings. People begin to take their seats and attend to the opening announcements. The opening announcements, which I describe in detail after an overview of the whole session, orient the participants to the sequence, rules, and expectations of the meeting. It concludes with presenting the first article for discussion. The middle of the session is a series of repeated smaller sequences, but roughly includes recognition of the first speaker, board recommendations, and the floor being open until a vote. When the floor is open, a series of speakers will rise to *speak in favor of,* or, *in opposition to,* the issue before them. Speakers may also *make recommendations, ask questions,* and *make comments.* The end of the night's meeting session is usually marked by a vote on an article considered prior to 10:00 p.m. In the 11 of the 12 session nights of the 1999 meeting, the Chair of the Select Board would make a "motion to adjourn until a time specific." This refers to preset times that the Town Clerk, Moderator, and Select Board Chair have agreed on in advance. The Town Clerk has scheduled and reserved the auditorium for several sessions of town meetings. After the Chair moves to adjourn, someone seconds the motion, and the Moderator bangs the gavel and announces the meeting adjourned. When members have considered all articles in the warrant, the end is similar except that the motion is to dissolve the meeting rather than adjourn *to a time specific.*

Within each night, there are phases of work. Phase 1 is presentation of an article. The Moderator reads the article and indicates what is necessary (i.e., simple majority or some form of a supermajority) for approval. A proponent reads a motion for it. A representative from the Select Board *speaks to the issue* by making a *recommendation.* A representative from the Finance Committee (or other relevant board) does the same. The proponent *speaks to it* (Townsend, 2004).

Phase 2 involves deliberation and discussion. The Moderator opens the floor for debate. Any member may raise his or her hand to be recognized and speak. Registered voters of Amherst occasionally line up in the back of the auditorium and also ask to be recognized. Nonregistered voters and visitors to the town may ask for permission from the members to speak. During discussion in the multiple acts of *speaking to the issue,* a member may make several types of motions, all hierarchically arranged in terms of what can be made when. All motions entail further procedures. Motions include *Call the question* (cut off debate and vote immediately), *amend* it, and *divide the question.* To dismiss the article one can move to *table, lay the question on the table, dismiss, postpone indefinitely,* or *take no action.*

Phase 3 involves voting. The Moderator announces that it is time to vote. He asks for all in favor to say "aye," and those in favor of the article respond "aye." He asks for all opposed to say "no." Those in opposition say "no." Based on his sense of the quantity of voices in each vote, he announces whether the motion has been approved or rejected. If members "doubt" the call of the vote, they may shout "doubt," and the Moderator will call for a standing vote. He swears in members as tellers, or vote counters, who count the voters who stand in favor and opposed. Barring any immediate objection or "doubt" of the vote's call on the main motion, however, or once the vote has been officially tallied via a standing vote and announced, the Moderator moves to the next article. The variations of form are limited; one cannot say "be quiet everybody, let's just go home." However, in every discussion, one of the following variations might occur:

1. The voice vote is called, and the motion is approved.
2. The voice vote is called, and the motion is rejected.

3. Either the motion is announced approved or rejected, and a member questions the call by proclaiming "Doubt!," which follows a standing vote in which those in favor are counted, those opposed are counted, tally is announced, and the motion is approved or rejected.

The process itself, however, allows proponents to advance some claim on a particular topic and then symbolically separate from that topic. Discussion is on the public topic, not with the proponent. Only the Moderator recognizes speakers, and only one person may speak at a time. Due to this, speakers formally are expected to "address the Moderator" when they speak to present all arguments as flowing through him. These norms for interaction provide what the Moderator described in an interview with me as "a fiction" that is used to "cushion anger" during debate. He said this is necessary because "government affects lives," and involves "real emotions" that can get participants in trouble should they direct their anger at people involved in the decision-making process rather than have it flow through a conduit. When members are instructed to "address your remarks to the Moderator," a norm for interpretation is that a speaker should follow the fiction that all remarks really do get addressed to him. When not interpreted as a fiction, this can pose interactional problems: The speaker will make arguments and look directly at the Moderator. The Moderator indicated in an interview that sometimes when this happens, he finds himself listening (as he would normally do in conversation with others) and giving nonverbal feedback such as nodding. This, of course, appears as if he is violating standards for noninvolvement. He informed me that he tries to avoid this.

Structured in this way, the town meeting creates a democracy that is elaborate and orderly. Even with interruptions and digressions, with people milling around outside the auditorium (and sometimes inside, in the back), the procedure usually is followed. The beginning of Amherst's annual town meeting sessions can be said to start officially when the Moderator announces that the meeting is called to order. He then makes announcements.

Announcements usually are to inform people which article they are to begin discussing that evening. Other kinds I have seen include directives to pick up any papers and recycle them at the end of the meeting or information that the building is safe from the bomb scare. I have also heard notification that the Nicaraguan Sister City Committee is selling coffee and doughnuts in the lobby and reminders that political signs and buttons are not permitted in the auditorium. They set the tone for the meeting, at least at the start. They are informal, contrasting with the formal call to order and recognition of speakers, but they can occasionally be hortatory as when the Moderator instructed members to arrive promptly so that they may begin at the designated time. People are still filing in during announcements, picking up the literature left on the tables at the middle of the auditorium. The Moderator asks the person who will *move the article* to step forward and proceed. The pattern that starts with his request is essential; only when a speaker *speaks to the issue* at hand can the meeting proceed. The Moderator introduces the boards in front, facing the audience, and orients the participants in the room and at home about who is there and what will happen. The Moderator next reads from the Finance Committee Report, which contains a list of some of the "Rules of Order for Town Meeting." He instructs members on how to make a motion. One example from a recording is as follows:

1. When you make a motion on an article, whether it's a main motion or a motion to amend, to commit, or to postpone, you will have up to five minutes to speak to that. Subsequent speakers on a motion have up to three minutes.

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2. If you're going to present a motion, and you wish to have more than five minutes, and if you need more than five minutes, please ask for it at the beginning of your speech, and I will uh ask the meeting if they will agree to let you have more than five minutes. But we would like to know ahead of time that you need more time.

Speeches are supposed to be prepared in advance, so speakers can have an idea about how much time they will need. As line 2 shows, speakers should show courtesy toward listeners by informing them if they anticipate speaking longer than 5 min. I have never seen anyone denied time to speak. Given the interviewers' agreement that members will even second the motions of others in opposition to their own position leads to my interpretation that participants do not want to be seen as shutting someone down.

After a long pause, the Moderator continues, in the third person, modifying the rule about no speaker being heard more than twice on the same subject

except when the Moderator believes that certain people have information which the town meeting needs at that moment. So this may include presenters who are members of town boards and committees. They may end up speaking more than twice if they have information that I believe we need.

Permitting some to speak more often than others ensures that the town gets "its questions answered" for the benefit of those watching the town meeting on local cable television from home, as the Moderator mentioned in an interview. This practice is not without its critics, however, as the Moderator noted to me. Some claim it grants more time to administrative members of the Town rather than the legislative body of town meeting representatives. This position is somewhat untenable, for in deliberations, town meeting members do not shy away from speaking. There are some who speak more than others.

The Moderator uses a casual, matter-of-fact tone as he instructs members of these rules. They are familiar with them because many have been members for years; and they are also printed in the Finance Committee Report, a document that the Town Clerk mails to their home prior to town meeting. It includes rules such as who is eligible to speak and how votes will be counted. Getting recognized to speak in the manner that the Moderator instructs is not one of the written rules listed in the Finance Committee Report, however:

If you wish to be recognized, raise your hand. I will try to recognize you, but sometimes there are many, many people with their hands up. … I have to do my best to be fair. If you had your hand up for a long time or you see someone who *has,* and I don't seem to be noticing them, or seeing them. it's alright to say, or to shout out, "Mister Moderator" and try to get my attention. That doesn't obligate me to recognize them, even *then,* but I'll do my best

I have seen this happen, and the Moderator will occasionally thank members for the assistance.

Analysis of one announcement in particular will illustrate some of the native attitudes about town meeting itself. Then I turn to discussion of the middle and end portions of a nightly session. In one session of the 1999 town meeting, there was an announcement that was rich with reflection on the meaning of the whole event's length thus far. On May 19, reminiscing about the previous evening's session and apologizing for his mixing of words during votes (when he would say the

"ayes have it" when really the "nos" had had the majority), the Moderator humorously reflected, "I can't say 'no,'" and offered the following explanation to urge the members to finish their work:[4]

1. Moderator [M]: I had just seen Commonwealth Opera's production of "Oklahoma" and I
2. started thinking about a few other songs from that play that seem very appropriate to this
3. town meeting. One of them is called *the farmers and the ranchers should be friends.* [lots of
4. laughter from the audience]. And another one which seems *particularly* appropriate to this
5. town meeting is many a new day [After a 3-s pause (with laughter in it) the following
6. exchange occurred between Bryan Harvey, Select Board Chair, and Moderator Harrison
7. Gregg.]
8. Harvey [H]: Mister Moderator?
9. M: Yes?
10. H: You missed one.
11. M: What?
12. H: *June is Bustin out all over* [lots of laughter that was sustained via the next several lines.]
13. M: Well, that's from *Carousel.*
14. H: We'll get there.
15. M: And when we are finished it'll be *oh what a beautiful morning* [5-s pause] But
16. seriously there is *one* other song from this play that I would like to mention that is-
17. that is very appropriate to all town meetings: *all or nuttin—* [laughter] "with me it's all or
18. nuttin, is it all or nuttin with you?" And it's all or nuttin with town meeting. We have *to stay*
19. *with it* and finish every article on the warrant or we haven't done *nuttin* because nothing
20. takes effect until the meeting *dissolves.* The meeting cannot dissolve until
21. we have dealt with every article either having voted on it up or down, dismissed it, or
22. referred it. So we do have to stay with it. At this point, we have disposed of twenty-two
23. articles in the eight evenings that we've been here. Two from the special town meeting and
24. twenty from the annual town meeting. We have thirty-two articles ahead of us [6-s
25. pause, while rubbing his forehead]. This has been a long and sometimes difficult meeting.
26. We've all had moments of boredom and frustration and exasperation. And some people have
27. been heard to ask, "what am I *doing* here?" I-I'd like to say what I think we're doing here. I
28. think we're conducting the business of the town. I think we're continuing Amherst's twenty-
29. four- *two* hundred forty year tradition of open discussion and collective decision making and
30. I think we're upholding the ancient [rite/right] of the people to petition their government and
31. to know that their petitions will be heard. This is an obligation that we have all undertaken
32. and it is our privilege. I *very much* appreciate after all these nights people turning out in a
33. timely way. And I urge you- I urge you to continue keeping- uh, we have all these things that
34. we have to do but we have to start keeping an eye on the *clock* and an eye on the *calendar*
35. and maybe exercise a little more self-restraint as we go through our debate. And there will
36. be time to rest, we have six nights out- off after tonight, and after next Wednesday we have
37. eleven nights off. Then we come back on June seventh, June nine and God help us, on the
38. following Monday, Wednesday and Thursday! Uh. I think we can finish in about four more
39. nights if we *really* stay at it."

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[4]While transcribing, I was most interested in content of talk and thus limited attention to linguistic and nonverbal features. I modified standard transcription styles. Statements were transcribed verbatim. Noticeable pauses were measured in seconds. Emphasis in intonation is reflected with the use of italics. When laughter or applause was present, I noted so in brackets. When I was uncertain about a word or phrase, I put the word or phrase in brackets. When a speaker abruptly stopped, I used a hyphen to mark the stop. Question marks represent rising intonation; periods mark falling intonation. Commas mark the "falling-rising contour one finds in items in a list" (Psathas, 1995, pp. 70–78)

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The meeting then began as usual. In this announcement, the Moderator refers to the nature of town meeting as a legislature several times (lines 1–7, 15–22, and 33–39). He appeals to what he assumes is the members' desire to complete their duty. Particularly, in lines 18 to 22, the Moderator stresses the importance of finishing. Talk is important, but so is finishing so that the decisions can "take effect." Additionally, there are several inside jokes that drew laughter from the group. Divisions between categories of participants, such as town versus colleges and the university, are acknowledged metaphorically as in the mention of the farmer and rancher song. Also, town meeting has a reputation for taking time, hence the reference to "'many a new day.'" With each passing session, June gets closer and closer. These appeals to the town meeting from the Moderator attempt to address some of the concerns members express during and after town meeting, in conversations, or in editorials or letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Participants share a frame of reference: Through their laughter, they acknowledge that they are taking more time than others (or they themselves) may prefer, yet it also signals recognition that they must soberly face their duty to complete deliberations carefully.

The Moderator reminds participants of their place in a living history and their duty to ensure that the town's needs are addressed (lines 27–31, 31–33). He acknowledges that debate is important (lines 27–31) and then completes his speech with noting that participants ought to be the ones to "exercise a little more self-restraint" during that "debate" (lines 34–35). In this town meeting, participants are the ones who have ultimate control over the quantity of speeches and need to remember their "obligation" (line 31) to the people of the town. It is their "privilege" to bear that burden, and they ought to remember that (line 32). That there is a considerable amount of reflexivity is not an anomaly; indeed, Amherst residents in general and representatives in town meetings in particular have frequently conducted this type of activity. The end of announcements is typically the end of the beginning portion of the communication event. The transfer to the middle starts with the recognition of the first speaker.

THE MIDDLE: MEMBERS SPEAK AND VOTE

The middle portion of the speech event (from April to May or June) includes several nightly sessions that feature minibeginnings and miniendings. What gets accomplished in the middle portion is one unique feature of the town meeting as a local legislature. Because the agenda, the warrant, is set, all business must be completed while the town meeting is in progress. It is not continuously sitting. The public notification process ensures that people know when an item of interest will be discussed and decided. Problems with this occur when a meeting lasts for several evening session, as was the case for 1999. The course tends to change in tone when the meeting continues for several nights, for example, the Moderator has asked if there is anything new that the members wish to say on an issue; his vocal tone seems more frustrated or tired. Initially, participants have considerable energy. The amount of speaking does not diminish much over the course of the middle. Instances of speaking occurred 99 times in an early session, 89 times in a middle session, and 86 times at a later session.

During town meeting, the Moderator calls various speakers (one at a time) to the podium in the front of the auditorium. He indicates that the speaker (whether Board member or Petitioner) may present his or her motion. The speaker moves an article by saying something such as, "Mr. Moderator, I move in terms of the article." The key is subdued and serious, generally without discernable

emotion. This act of motion-making is only part formality; its purpose is to bring the issue before the voting listeners, the town meeting members. An article is not "self-starting," *Town Meeting Time* informs us; rather, "it merely stakes out the limits of the area within which the meeting may act" (Johnson et al., 1962/1984, p. 61). Prior to any vote, participants are "painfully detained" (as the Moderator characterized it in an interview) as they listen to positions even with which they may object.

In case people cannot see the visual aids on the overhead projector or do not have the benefit of having the motion sheet (with the expected articles to be completed that night) before them, the motion is read aloud. Only elected representatives may make motions; those residents who attend may speak but may not make motions. The Moderator asks for a "second" to each motion. After the motion is seconded, the Moderator indicates that the speaker may "speak to your (or the) issue." Allowing a petitioner to speak to his or her issue immediately after moving that it be considered is a tradition in some communities such as Amherst. Then the Moderator calls for a member of a relevant town committee or board to present the board's position on the issue. Following that, the Moderator asks if there is any further discussion on the issue. Members of the town meeting raise their hands to be recognized.

Recognition of First Speaker

When the Moderator recognizes a person by pointing (and sometimes saying his or her name if he knows it), he or she speaks to that issue. If the speakers do not follow the norm, for example, by speaking without recognition from the Moderator, he interrupts the speaker to invoke the rule. The presumption is that the participants will be respectful of the rules. Typically, the first speaker for the town meeting's first session, inaugurating the middle section, is the Select Board Chair. Whenever the speaker has a title relevant to the discussion, the Moderator says it in recognizing the speaker (see line 1 following). The Chair usually moves to hear the Finance Committee's Report. Traditionally, Article 1 is "To see if the Town will hear only those reports of Town officers, the Finance Committee, and any other Town boards or committees which are not available in written form." Speakers usually inform the Moderator just before the meeting starts that they will be introducing an article that evening. Following is a transcribed interaction from April 29, 1999, that follows a pattern I observed numerous other times:

1. [Moderator:] I will now recognize the Chair of the Select Board Mr. Harvey, for two procedural motions, which you will find in your motion sheet. Mr. Harvey.
2. [BH:] Thank you. I move to consider articles ten and eleven after the disposition of article fifty-two.
3. [Moderator:] Is there a second? [Several town meeting members shout "second!"] [Moderator:] You may now speak to your motion, Mr. Harvey.
4. [BH:] Thank you. Uh the Select Board sets the order of the warrant some weeks before we actually get here and then often something comes up that suggests a different order that we ask you to consider. [. . . .]

The tone is matter of fact, suggesting that everyone understands that the order must be flexible. The procedural motions, like that in line 2 preceding, tailor Amherst town meetings to the nonresidents who participants in informal interviews have referred to as "outsiders." In this case, the

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outsiders are specific individuals who will be important to a certain debate, such as architects, at-
torneys, or experts, may not be able to meet on a night that town meeting will actually consider an
article. and so they have someone request a change in order for their convenience. They do not rep-
resent themselves nor do they represent voters; they are acting in their roles as professionals or ex-
perts in a topic.

Board Recommendations

In Amherst, when the first speaker concludes, the Moderator calls for the Select Board's and/or
the Finance Committee's recommendation on the article presented. If there are other boards or
committees whose work is immediately relevant to the article, the Moderator will ask for their rec-
ommendation as well. Although this takes time and could perhaps be handled in a pretown meet-
ing forum, it does permit town meeting members to know what the citizen boards and committees
think of a motion on an article. Generally, committees have spent more time with an article, and
even though the Finance Committee recommendations are printed, this speaking reinforces them
(or introduces them to those who did not read, or overlooked, the printed recommendation.). For
example, on an article relating to signage for a building, which is within the Planning Board's pur-
view, the Moderator asked a representative from that board to speak.

Speakers from the Select Board can start their speeches by indicating the level of support their
positions have: "The Select Board unanimously recommends. ..." This authoritative stance en-
courages the town meeting to support their positions. The Moderator noted that even though de-
bate is at times sharp and vociferously opposed to the Select Board position, town meetings tends
to vote with Select Board recommendations.

Following the Select Board recommendation on an article, the Moderator asks for the Finance
Committee recommendation, even if they have none, before turning to the town meeting members
for their positions. The Finance Committee Chair typically makes a brief, one-to-two-sentence
statement, giving the number of Finance Committee members in favor, opposed, or absent at the
time of the preliminary vote. General recommendations, in the form of the Finance Committee's
budget report, and procedural motions rearranging the order of the articles from their initial place-
ment in the warrant are made at the beginning of the event. The town meeting must vote to hear a
report, and the Finance Committee Report is usually given the most prominence of all documents
during the meeting itself, with members referring to it throughout the meeting. People listen to the
report carefully; this is one time when milling around typically ceases. They can vote on articles
and make light-hearted remarks about the town: "If we could print our own money," Chair Alice
Carlozzi remarked, "the way we manage our foreign policy," then the town would not be con-
cerned about finances. In that comment, Carlozzi referred to the ease with which members and
nonmember citizens bring forward resolutions on international events.

Floor is Open Until a Vote

When all relevant committees have spoken, the floor is open for general discussion. Debate ends
when no one else comes forward to speak or when a member moves to stop debate, and the meet-
ing approves that motion. The Moderator indicates that they will come to an immediate vote on the
article before them whether it is amended or in original form. The members vote on the motion as
described earlier, the Moderator announces the vote, and the article is finished. One major norm is

that *once a vote has been taken, no more discussion can occur on that article*. This act sequence is repeated on each successive night, with a few exceptions such as swearing in new members or reiterating rules when a violation has occurred. Proper procedure, although it must be followed, is flexible enough for certain kinds of contingencies.

After a person raises his or her hand, the Moderator makes eye contact and says "yes [sir or ma'am]" or "Mr. O'Connor" (or the name of whomever it is who has indicated that he or she wishes to speak if he knows the name) to recognize the person. The Moderator instructs the person to state his or her name and precinct (even if he has called on the person by name). This lets the Clerk, colleagues, constituents, reporters, and the television audiences know who is speaking. If the person asks useful questions or makes a good speech, others know whom to praise or blame in subsequent remarks. In case someone, such as a police chief, needs to get information back to the person speaking, he or she knows who to go to. In this speech event, town meeting representatives are responsible for their own words, even if they are representing others.

Speakers, once recognized, may either stand from the audience or go to the podium; and on rare occasions, speakers remain seated. Nonmember residents or others may speak from a microphone at the back of the audience. I have seen speakers who formally read from a prepared manuscript speak extemporaneously or hold forth in an impromptu fashion. Occasionally, speakers hold a manila folder or the Finance Committee Report or other papers in their hands, referring to it verbally or nonverbally as proof of one point or another. Some speakers mumble, whereas others speak plainly or eloquently, sometimes quoting from Shakespeare or Aristotle. Discussions of foreign policy, for example, get debated toward the end of the meeting sessions, in May. They are not discussed every night; yet when participants do discuss them, they debate them similarly as they do other articles, with board recommendations, those in favor of the article and those opposed, questions, and comments. The Moderator permits speakers to ask questions but discourages conversation between questioners and answerers by saying, "Direct your comments to the Moderator, please." The Moderator then states "Further discussion." Or he may ask "Anyone else?" or "Further discussion?" These utterances are sometimes made in either an annoyed or curious tone, depending on the course of discussion, and time. When the meeting has lasted past 10:00 p.m., he will typically use a more annoyed tone. Speakers are not permitted to speak more than twice on a topic, but people sometimes try anyway. I have never seen this succeed nor heard anyone say that this was successful.

End of Discussion

Town meeting members must vote on articles after the end of the discussion. Voting is, as described earlier, usually performed through a voice vote of *aye* or *no*. The Moderator judges which side of the issue has more votes. When a vote is required on something other than an article (to lay motions on the table, a vote for the previous question, to limit or extend debate, or a suspension of rules), the Moderator prefaces it by indicating, "This is a two-thirds vote." This process is structured toward an *aye* vote because any article on the warrant has a petitioner who has proposed it. If only one person votes for an article, and no one makes a *no* vote, the motion is approved. He announces the vote by saying the article name, the call, and what was necessary to approve it, for example, "Article 1 is approved by unanimous vote." The Moderator acknowledges that not everyone who is there votes, and they cannot be required to vote. It is common that most who are there do vote, but even attendance is not required.

For unanimous votes, the tone varies depending on the content of the article and the time of the vote—end of session or meeting votes tend to be quick, and members sound tired. Moderators use humor occasionally but generally are directive without being stiff, patient without letting anyone else take control, and fairly formal but capable of informality. Not every Moderator is the same, but both the research (Bryan, 2004) and guide manuals (Johnson et al., 1962/1984) have noted humor's occurrence during town meetings.

Adjourning

Once the clock hits 10 in the evening, the meeting must finish handling the article they were debating and come to a vote on it. They then usually break for the evening. At the close of each session night, it is tradition for the Chair of the Select Board to move to dismiss until a date specific, a particular date and time that has usually been preset. Sometimes members vote even as they walk out the doors. Occasionally a few people shout *no* to the move to dismiss; typically, they are not serious, but sometimes there is an attempt to continue the meeting. The Moderator, often issuing reminders for people to pick up their trash on their way out, then pounds the gavel, and the meeting adjourns for the evening.

THE DISSOLUTION OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

The major differences between the end of a session and the end of the annual meeting are in act and key. The Chair of the Select Board moves to "dissolve" rather than "dismiss" the meeting. "I've just received word that the last dog has been hung," the Moderator informed the meeting once (to which Brian Harvey, Select Board Chair, responded "woof, woof, woof" and then made his motion to dissolve). People sigh, smile mildly, and laugh and joke on the way to their cars. At the end of town meeting, some debates continue in newspaper letters to the editor or in social conversation at offices discussing a particular vote or set of speeches. Some versions of the controversial articles reappear in successive years, for example, the parking garage project. Members who opposed a parking garage fought it for years by cutting funding or proposing some change to the previously approved design. Some people complain that that is a problem with Amherst town meeting: Some issues linger. Even though no items on the warrant may be carried to the next town meeting, petitioners can collect signatures to put the issue on a new town meeting warrant. People find new ways to speak about issues presumably resolved by votes in earlier meetings. When building a parking garage was proposed and approved, for example, discussion about architectural design arose at subsequent meetings: capability for a triple deck or simply underground and street-level only. The very end of the speech event starts out with announcements of appreciation for the cable access channel volunteers and for others involved in organizing and conducting the meeting. The overall tone the meeting takes varies, depending on the issues. Complaints about the town meeting taking a long time, as described earlier, happen throughout: There are jokes at the beginning, mumbling in the middle, and complaining at the end, although even then humor is always attempted. Following the end of the communication event, the Attorney General's Office Municipal Law Unit reviews town meeting decisions. At the office in Springfield, the Municipal Law Unit checks each approved motion to see if it complies with existing Massachusetts General Laws. This review ensures local compliance with Commonwealth law. Any article that the town

meeting approves but is not compliant with Commonwealth law is nullified. Residents learn of the results only if the law was nullified, and newspapers would report such an unusual action.

NORMS FOR AMHERST'S TOWN MEETING

A town meeting as a cultural and political practice makes evident certain premises about procedure, speech, and listening in Amherst, Massachusetts:

1. Every position seeking to be heard must be heard. Prior to any vote, participants listen to positions. The Moderator does little to discourage speaking; it is rare for him to cut people off or refuse to continue discussion.
2. Procedural order must be followed, and this order ensures that every position is available to be heard. The town meeting sets out rules for participating so that every position can be heard.
   Members know and generally follow these rules. The procedural order recognizes that people have different positions and that those positions matter and is organized to allow for those differences to be examined fully. The rule that "no speaker may be heard more than twice on the same subject" encourages different voices to be heard.
3. The town meeting will rearrange its agenda to accommodate temporary participants who may have necessary information but be unavailable for a particular session. If a nonmember has asked the Moderator to *speak to the issue,* or if a member has informed the Moderator and the Chair of the Select Board that this is the case, and there is a particular problem with scheduling, then the leaders will often move to a different article on the warrant. In addition, if the Chair of another relevant Board is not present for a particular issue that concerns that Board, the participants will rearrange the agenda to accommodate others' schedules.

These premises for acting closely resemble rule Number 2 in Carbaugh's (1990a) discussion of *Donahue* discourse: "Interlocutors must grant speakers the moral 'right' to present 'self' through opinions" (p. 127). An important difference is that the speaker may or may not be representing him or her "self" but could instead by speaking "for" others.

CONCLUSION

Town meetings as practiced in New England communities have different traditions and community expectations. What they share is their status as communication events. Unlike legislatures that are in continuous existence, each town meeting must have a beginning, middle, and end. To use participants' terms, town meetings must be "called to order" at the beginning and must "dissolve" at the end. That conclusion is essential to the efficacy of the actions taken in the deliberation and votes. In this way, a town meeting is both ephemeral and enduring. It is a legislative event that has begun and ended for hundreds of years. In Amherst, which celebrates its 250th anniversary in 2009, the town meeting has been called to order and dissolved for just as many years. The act sequences proceed in much the same way each year. The middle of the event, featuring deliberation and voting, occupies the bulk of the interaction. The end, the dissolution of the meeting, is what

allows the decisions to take effect. Its status as a communication event is evident from analysis and interpretation of its component parts.

The beginning contains the highest degree of formality, owing partly to the history and tradition of the event. The middle involves the greatest variation in emotional pitch and tone. The ending of town meeting can bring relief, exhaustion, or both. The way that participants conduct their deliberation is consequential for the adequate functioning of local democracy. Minority stances must be protected and allowed voice to stay true to the spirit of town meetings. The means for that protection lay in the interactional order that structures deliberation. The town meeting speaks from, and adds to, the language of *democracy* in the United States. Participation in democratic political processes happens through discursive action, having the needs of all the members of a polity spoken for even if they do not speak themselves in that forum. Boundaries for permissible speaking seem to get blurred, as Amherst's town meeting takes on issues that affect them in less direct ways than do issues like "sewerage."

The notion of "scene" (Burke 1945/1969), as a component of ways of speaking (Hymes, 1962, 1972), helps draw out the importance of deliberative democracy and town meeting. Burke argued

> Democracy is felt to reside in us, intrinsically, because we are "a democratic people." Democratic acts are, in this mode of thought, derived from democratic agents, agents who would remain democratic in character though conditions required the temporary abrogation of basic democratic rights. ... By the scene-act ratio, if the "situation" itself is no longer a "democratic" one, even an "essentially democratic" people will abandon democratic ways. (p. 17)

In the United States, in an Amherst town meeting, participants make sense of their actions as democratic because they discursively construct the communication event as one of *democracy*. The acts must be democratic acts because democratic agents in a democratic legislative event enact them. With this event sequence, *democracy* is practiced through the performances of each rhetor, each person "speaking to the issue."[5] They value talk for its own sake and for what it can accomplish in town governance. Everyone agrees to a set of procedures, the purpose of which is to assure fairness in who gets to speak. These procedures also help to assure that everyone will get a chance to listen to differing positions on an issue. The unspoken premise, then, is that when people hear different positions, they make more informed decisions than they otherwise would.

In this community, with this act sequence in place, speaking does matter; speaking can influence votes, which shapes both policy and action in the community. This view contrasts with Bloch's (1975) near-universalized finding about formal political action involving coercion: "All political systems and all leaders use a variety of types of coercions" (p. 12). The town meeting as a legislative form has procedures in place to limit coercive talk. Further, Bloch (1975) claimed that norms affect content: "the very rules of politeness, of appropriateness, of formalisation, reduce and almost eliminate this potential of language [i.e., to say what one wishes]" (p. 18). The event and its regulation encourage and support expression of a wide variety of viewpoints. Even many critics of town meetings would agree that in Amherst, people are generally civil. The Moderator's

[5]Despite the length of the meeting, the participants continue to talk; this suggests that they value and enjoy talking. Unlike the La Have Islanders, participants in Bauman's (1972) study, these participants like to talk and like talking itself. Only in the general store do La Have Islanders enjoy speaking for its own sake.

power to control the flow of the meeting enforces what have become the normative rules for the communication event. Members exert social control over each other in disavowing personal attack and revering instead argument based on impersonal matters. In my study, I found one area of conclusion aligned with Bloch's: In such formal communication events, speech predicts response. Even when it appears that the meeting is unanimous in its agreement on an issue, the Moderator will usually ask if anyone wishes to speak against it. When participants speak on budget items, when they speak on land use issues, when they speak on foreign policy, they all must, and usually do, follow the same set of procedures for speaking.

How well does that procedure enable all participants to speak and have their concerns be heard? The event structure does little to prohibit a plurality of voices. Others may not like what people have to say, and short of the speakers failing to follow norms of speaking to the issue, people can pretty much say what they want. When I presented some research on the town meeting's foreign policy positions to a class at the University of Massachusetts, a woman from China in my audience objected that a Chinese perspective was not offered on a resolution on Tibet. After learning that she was a resident of Amherst, I told her, that as a resident, she is free to attend and speak. Before I encouraged her to attend the event, however, she had not known of it. Although the event sequence is quite open to nonmembers speaking and thus the possibility of influencing a vote, there has been a tradition of reluctance to reach out to University and college students living in Amherst. Yet Amherst is a town that worries deeply about fairness and democratic access. In my fieldwork, I did not witness any major breach of those commitments as they are expressed in the town meeting event. Within the event itself, the way Meetings are conducted and ordered, is an earnest attempt to engender fair access to democratic voice. With the Meetings televised, taped, and stored in the town library and public cable access station, for those who cannot attend or watch them, and with the Meeting's consent to detailed question-and-answer sessions, the town attempts to foster an open environment.

Town meeting members, with volunteer boards and committees who investigate policy and budget options, have considerable control over how their town will be run; and if any 10 registered voters agree that a certain issue must be deliberated publicly, they may petition the town meeting to vote on it. In 1999, Amherst had a $50 million budget. The town meeting controlled 78% of expenditures for the operating budgets and 6% of expenditures for the capital budget. Citizens have the power to direct where this significant amount of money goes, to shape zoning regulations, and to care for their environment through creation of new regulations or budgetary decisions. In this communication event, participants engage in a specific act of deliberative democracy for conducting the town's affairs. The town meeting appropriates money and creates and amends bylaws. No person or group in town can do that independently.

Through chatting with others informally over coffee and donuts just outside the auditorium, through privately whispering to one's neighbor during a speech, and through formal podium public address, deliberation occurs in the town meeting event. Members and nonmember residents try both to resolve local problems and in some cases to address global issues through discursive practice. The event involves participants who offer different viewpoints. They get a chance to shape town politics and town governance through their speeches and votes.

Politics in the town meeting is fluid: Allies on one issue may be adversaries on the next, "anti-authoritarians" mingle with "conservatives"; both resist buying a new police cruiser because "surely a used one will do just fine." Proponents frame each issue in speeches. Members who read the warrant to learn the agenda for the meeting may come to the speech event as opponents and

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either remain silent or speak against the issue. If they are not already in existence prior to the call to order for the speech event, opponents occasionally are created through hearing the proponent's remarks and finding themselves in disagreement. Politics becomes a temporary affiliation of floating "we's" identifying for the cause of one issue at a time and one issue only (Mouffe, 2000). Members become temporary "'adversaries'" or 'friendly enemies', that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 13).

My analysis supports the critiques of deliberative democracy theorists (Best, 2005; Fontana et al., 2004) by showing how the town meeting event is created through a set of rhetorical interactions that promote a variety of opinions toward a public decision on a particular public good. The question one poses to a Police Chief is asked through a Moderator; comments about a budget are made to the meeting through the Moderator. Participants engage in a discussion through a third party and with multiple audiences. These interactions are rhetorical in that they exist to clarify a position, make a statement, or critique some actions. They are made in public for purposes unique to the contingency of the issue. The interactions are rhetorical because through the questions and answers, directed to each other via a third party (a Moderator), the primary audience is, at times, persuaded. Members have acknowledged as such in interviews. "Democracy" is "essentially cultural, continuously defined, contested and redefined not merely through reasonable discussion, but also through struggles over values and meanings associated with its overall cultural resonance and component parts" (Best, 2005, p. 219). In Amherst, the town meeting is an important part of community life. It is not the only aspect, however. Historian Zuckerman (1968), in his study of "The Social Context of Democracy in Massachusetts," reminds one that

> A concept such as democracy must always be recognized for just that: a concept of our own devising.
> .. It is an abstraction—a rather elevated abstraction—which represents a covering judgment of the general tenor or tendency of social relations and institutions. As such it can carry its own assurance of validity only if it proceeds out of, rather than precedes, analysis of the society to which it is applied. To rip it out of its social context is to risk exactly ... a disembodied discussion of democracy. (p. 524)

In Amherst, people talk about their government; they talk about local and global issues. Learning about how New England towns foster civic and democratic life is important to understanding the range of ways of being *democratic* in America.

We cannot establish all-purpose, purely rational, or completely just norms to govern deliberation because "those very rules are discovered over the course of deliberations" (von Heyking, 2004, p. 186). Participants have a stake in creating and enforcing their explicit rules and their traditions of practice, their norms for interaction. Although I make no claim about the health of this local democracy, its features and norms do seem conducive to handling dissent without fear. Ethnographers of communication interpret how rhetorical norms emerge from communal context. Paying attention to a culturally situated process of public address may help elucidate both the *public* and the *address* that interacting rhetors cocreate in a communication event.

The town meeting members, the Moderator, the boards and committees, all help assure that the act sequence of their democratic legislature progresses as usual. Public address must occur within this act sequence for it to have legitimacy. When the act sequence progresses, the meeting, the public, makes decisions. The act sequence of the event is democracy in action; people speak about things they care about, and the town decides its future.

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Most Commonly Used Transcription Symbols

.	(period) Falling intonation.
?	(question mark) Rising intonation.
,	(comma) Continuing intonation.
-	(hyphen) Marks an abrupt cut-off.
::	(colon(s)) Prolonging of sound.
never	(underlining) Stressed syllable or word.
WORD	(all caps) Loud speech.
°word°	(degree symbols) Quiet speech.
>word<	(more than & less than) Quicker speech.
<word>	(less than & more than) Slowed speech.
hh	(series of h's) Aspiration or laughter.
.hh	(h's preceded by dot) Inhalation.
[ ]	(brackets) Simultaneous or overlapping speech.
=	(equals sign) Contiguous utterances.
(2.4)	(number in parentheses) Length of a silence.
(.)	(period in parentheses) Micro-pause, 2/10 second or less.
( )	(empty parentheses) Non-transcribable segment of talk.
(word)	(word or phrase in parentheses) Transcriptionist doubt.
((gazing toward the ceiling))	(double parentheses) Description of non-speech activity.
#	(pound symbol) Creaky voice
S or £	(American or British money symbol) Smile voice
↑ ↓	The up and down arrows indicate a rise or fall in pitch.