Communication and Rhetorical Studies

College of Visual and Performing Arts

12-2010

Citizen Participation, Metadiscourse and Accountability: A Public Hearing on a Zoning Change for Wal-Mart

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in Journal of Communication

By

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Abstract

During a contentious public hearing on a zoning change for Wal-Mart, participants at times moved to a metadiscursive level with utterances such as, "expect to be listened to," "I have a question," or reading quotes of Town Board members from the newspaper. Such metadiscursive references allow participants to attempt to structure, or depart, from the public hearing format. Metadiscursive references also work to criticize their opponents' speech or the process. Metadiscourse has the consequence of contextualizing the participation framework of the hearing as to topic, length of presentation, and mode of interaction. From a normative perspective, metadiscourse is used to reflect on the folk assumptions about communication as expressed by participants during the public hearing.

Citizen Participation, Metadiscourse and Accountability:

A Public Hearing on a Zoning Change for Wal-Mart

When we as concerned taxpayers stand here in these public hearings…we sure

expect to be listened to and not put into a folder for others to be reviewed at

somebody's leisure ((from a resident's presentation at a public hearing))

Public hearings offer an intriguing site to hear the different voices from the local

community. Hearings can be especially interesting when there are contentious issues at

stake which mobilize residents to turn out, as in the present case of the controversy over

the construction of a Wal-Mart. But the public hearing format involves certain

assumptions about communication which may seem naïve or unrealistic in practice—

"seeing language as innocent" (Coupland & Jaworski, 2004). For instance, a resident

expresses doubts about whether board members are listening (see epigram). In

problematizing listening, the speaker implicitly moves to hold board members

accountable. Talking about listening involves the reflexive capacity to evaluate aspects of

the communication process. This practice of talk about communication moves to a meta-

level, so-called "metadiscourse" (Craig, 2005, 2008). In the present study of a public

hearing, participants speak about any number of matters--zoning change, Wal-Mart, their

experiences, but at times, they talk about some feature of the discourse itself. This

practice of moving to a metadiscursive level works to evaluate action and potentially

implicate social accountability (Buttny, 1993). In this study we examine participants'

uses of metadiscourse during a public hearing and how participants notice and evaluate

aspects of their own or others' communication.

Citizen Participation at Public Hearings

While research on public participation is relatively new (Dietz & Stern, 2008), there is a literature on the difficulties ordinary citizens face in participating in public forums. For instance, citizens are said to have lost trust in governmental institutions and decision-making bodies such that they are often alienated from the process (Checkoway & Til, 1978; Douglas, 1992; Webler & Renn, 1995; Belsten, 1996; Chess & Purcell, 1999; Petts, 1999; Boholm, 2008). Public hearings are commonly held late in the decision-making process so public impact will likely be minimal. Legitimacy of the process becomes questioned when the governmental agency defines the scope of the problem in ways significantly different from how citizens define the scope of the problem (Dietz & Stern, 2008, p.231). There is a sense that the decision has already been made by the municipal body and that the public hearing is a mere formality, a way to satisfy minimum legal requirements or let the opposition let off steam—public participation as therapeutic (Checkoway, 1981; Webler & Renn, 1995; Tracy & Dimock, 2004). So citizens approach such gatherings with apathy or frustration (McComas, 2001; 2003) and the process becomes adversarial rather than deliberative (Gastil, 2008).

Public hearings are considered to be a "safe" method for keeping control of the process and diffusing public opposition (Checkoway & Til, 1978). There is said to be a "democratic dilemma" in structuring public participation between genuine open discussion and efficiency of keeping the meeting under control (Llewellyn, 2005; Bora & Hausendarf, 2006; Tracy, 2007). Public hearings are seen as titled toward those with economic stakes in the outcome; those who can mobilize resources to promote their interests (Renn, 1992). Experts may be drawn on as consultants but often speak in highly technical ways or ignore the vernacular discourse of the local residents (Roth, et. al.,

2004). These different ways of speaking can create a divide between experts and the lay

citizenry such that expert discourse is given precedence over the folk logic of the public

(Beck, 2000; Fisher, 2000). The scope of discussion is often set up to exclude social

issues or concerns of the local residents (Buttny, 2009).

Public forums often become polarized as conflicting sides express their opposing

viewpoints, report contrary evidence, criticize others, and engage in ongoing debates

(Boholm, 2008). Even to refer to 'the public' may be a misnomer; a better descriptive

term would be the "factions" or "special interest groups" (Tracy & Dimock, 2004).

Citizens may use hearings to express outrage through emotional outbursts and attempt to

embarrass their opponents (Webler & Renn, 1995). Llewylln (2005) found that heckling

at public meetings allowed audience members to circumvent institutional rules and

immediately address points of disagreement, but without a "descent into chaos" (p. 703).

Despite this expression of frustration and anger, most participants engage in "reasonable

hostility" (Tracy, 2007). Expressions of disagreement and criticism energized the

discussion rather than tearing apart the fabric of the public gathering (Olson &

Goodnight, 2004).

In terms of a normative model for public participation, Webler (1995) suggests

the goals of fairness and competence (also see Petts, 1999). "Fairness" involves giving

participants the opportunity to actually influence decision makers—to be part of the

process—what Petts (1999) calls the "decision-enhancing function of participation" (p.

171). "Competence" involves providing participants with the necessary knowledge and

technical information to make an informed decision. Guttman (2007) adds to the

normative model that the process be deliberative rather than mere argumentation and there be sufficient time allocated.

There has been little research on the evaluation of public participation at public meetings and hearings (Petts, 1999). Kim and Kim (2008) call for the empirical study of political talk especially with regard to the quality of opinions. Much has been written on "the ideology of participation" but little describing the actual practices of participation (Checkoway & Til, 1978, p. 35). And even less empirical research on the discursive practices when citizens speak out in public and engage in, what has been called, "local" or "ordinary democracy" (Llewellyn, 2005; Tracy, 2007).

Metadiscourse

In light of the above review that participation during public forums is frequently fraught with problems or dilemmas, one move public speakers sometimes make is to refer to the language or the communication process itself. That is, to talk about the talk that comprises the meeting in order to draw attention to something problematic about it. Most of the time participants speak about content issues using an object language, e.g., zoning, risk, Wal-Mart and the like. But at times participants use language to address the discourse itself in order to comment on it. This self-reflexive practice has been variously labeled "metadiscourse" (Craig, 2005, 2008), "metacommunication" (Bateson, 1972), "meta-talk" (Schriffin, 1980), "metalanguage" (Lucy, 1993), "metapragmatics" (Verschueren, 1999), or simply "going meta" (Simons, 1994).

Different observers have noticed different aspects of this self-reflective capacity of discourse to refer to itself. For instance, Bateson (1972) distinguishes the "meta-linguistic," where the subject of discourse is language (e.g., "That's an odd way of

putting it") from "metacommunication," where the subject of discourse is the relationship

between interlocutors, (e.g., "This is play"). Schiffrin (1980) points out "meta-linguistic

verbs" that reference the actions performed through speaking, e.g., "say," "ask," "joke."

Blum-Kulka (1997) examines "meta-pragmatic discourse" and how it functions for the

management of discourse in turn taking, e.g., "Are you listening?" or violations of

conversational norms, such as speaking too long. Craig (2005) suggests that

communication scholars may be able to make contributions to practical problems by

addressing and critiquing the metadiscourse of different speech communities.

    All these distinctions may be classified under the rubric of "metadiscourse."

"Metadiscourse" may be characterized as "the pragmatic use of language to comment

reflexively on discourse itself" (Craig, 2008). Metadiscourse is a pervasive feature of

talk and social interaction (Lucy, 1993) in that speakers have the language awareness to

comment on features of their own or others' discourse.

    For our purposes in this study of the public hearing, we will focus on participants'

use of metadiscourse to invoke some potentially problematic feature of communication.

Quite simply, speakers talk about discourse when there is some actual or potential trouble

at hand. Participants pragmatically move to call those actions to account. So we will

examine the connection between metadiscourse, evaluation, and social accountability.

Background and Data

    The data for this study comes from a public hearing before the Town Board of

Cortlandville, New York held on February 7, 2007. This hearing was called to solicit

public input on a proposed zoning change—a Planned Unit Development (PUD) for Wal-

Mart. There is already a Wal-Mart in Cortlandville but Wal-Mart wants to expand by

building a Super Center on the outskirts of town along the strip development and main traffic corridor. Wal-Mart, of course, has been at the center of numerous controversies in recent years (Porter & Mirsky, 2003; Head, 2004; Fishman, 2006; Halebsky, 2007); what is unique to this controversy is that the Wal-Mart would be built on an open field above the Town's aquifer. Much on the opposition to Wal-Mart has centered on the environmental risk to the aquifer from contamination from ground-water runoff (Buttny & Cohen, 2007; Buttny, 2009). Other criticisms made of the proposal involve the threat to jobs and local businesses, sprawl, increased traffic, and changing the small-town character of the community. Proponents of the Wal-Mart cite lower prices, convenience, and the creation of new jobs.

As a member of the local environmental group, Citizens for Aquifer Protection and the Economy (CAPE), I attended and participated in many of the Town Board's meetings and hearings on this controversy. However I could not be present for this hearing because of a prior commitment. The following day I heard accounts from fellow CAPE members that this hearing was very volatile and confrontational. This conflict has been on-going for over four years and the community is deeply divided over it as witnessed at prior public hearings and in letters to the local newspaper. The controversy is coming to a head in that this hearing was one of the last steps before the Town Board makes their decision on the zoning change.

The Town Board supervisor ran the hearing. After giving the audience instructions as to the focus of the hearing, he calls upon the Wal-Mart representatives (attorney and civil engineer) to explain their site-plan proposal for the PUD and how they address the Town Board's nine concerns raised at a prior meeting. Once the Wal-Mart

presentation is completed, the supervisor calls the citizens' names in the order they have

signed up and each speaker comes to the podium in the front of the room to make their

presentation. Upon completition of the citizen presentation there is typically some

applause from the audience and the speaker returns to their seat while the supervisor calls

out the name of the next speaker. Twenty five residents spoke before the assembled

group at the hearing. The median length of presentation was three minutes and six

seconds; the lengthiest speech was nine minutes and fifty-four seconds, and the briefest,

thirteen seconds. The public hearing lasted two hours and twenty-six minutes.

The Town Board routinely records their meetings and hearings and often airs the

tapes on public-access television. This videotape recording was used to make transcripts

of the public hearing using a modified Jefferson format (see Appendix).

Analytic Perspective

Our perspective in studying public hearings is discursive constructionism (Buttny

2004). We are interested in the speaking practices employed by the participants and the

discursive realities that are claimed, contested, or jointly-constructed about Wal-Mart and

related matters. As an ideal, public hearings offer ordinary citizens a forum to have their

voices heard before a municipal body in a deliberative process of decision making. In

practice, as seen from the literature review, public hearings often do not operate in this

way. Here we look at public hearings, not as an idealized democratic form, but as a

communication event realized through participants' discursive practices.

In this study we are interested in the speaker's practices of moving to a

metadiscursive level to reference some aspect of communication. Participants use

metadiscourse to discuss process and to identify, or anticipate, something problematic

about it. Talking about some aspect of communication is a way to hold others

accountable, e.g., the Town Board not listening (epigram). Using metadiscourse allows

one to position others and position oneself in discursively constructing events. We are

interested, not only in the content of the problem, but also in how problems get

interactionally constructed. As data we select the most explicit references to discourse.

We examine how participants use metadiscourse to organize and evaluate their own or

others' communicative actions during the hearing.

Using Metadiscourse during Public Hearing to Invoke Accountability

At the beginning of the public hearing the Town Board supervisor asks the town

clerk to read the public notice. Then the supervisor sketches out the official focus of the

hearing; he lays out what topics should and should not be discussed.

1. (PUD: 2. Note: "Sup" is the Town Board supervisor)

1 Sup: just a- a couple of ah (.) more housekeeping here ah? this is a public hearing: on a

2   zone change: (0.6) from an industrial zo:ne to a PUD (2.0) your comments §need

3   to be on why: that is§ or is not a good idea, (1.1) comments about whether you

4   like- Wal-Mart or you dislike Wal-Mart is >very very nice< but it's not relative (.)

5   or relevant, to this this evening, ↑this public hearing is strictly on whether the

6   zoning should change: from its current status as ↑industrial to a PUD, and we

7   would ask you to please: there's a lot of people who wish to speak so if you would

8   keep your remarks brief and to the point we would appreciate that (1.3) an:d as

9   the evening goes on: if somebody else has already said the same comments you've

10   ↑said, please don't be repetitive it's gonna be a long evening as it is, ºsoº if

11   somebody else has already made the statement it's not necessary for you make it

12   we've heard it the first time (0.6) okay?

In giving instructions to the audience about what is and is not "relevant" to this public hearing, the supervisor contrasts comments on a change in zoning to comments on one's like or dislike of Wal-Mart. This metadiscursive term used here, "comments," is interesting as a descriptive term of the public's participation; it is at once neutral-sounding but also hearably diminishing in scope. The proposed change in zoning is the official issue of the hearing, while the latter—Wal-Mart—has been brought up repeatedly and vociferously by residents at prior hearings (Buttny & Cohen, 2007; Cohen & Buttny, 2008). Given that the zoning change to a PUD (Planned Unit Development) involves Wal-Mart, we will see as the hearing goes on that distinguishing talk about zoning change from talk about Wal-Mart is difficult for many participants to separate in practice.

Another direction from the supervisor here involves the request to make citizen comments "brief" and not repetitive as the supervisor explains there are a number of people signed up to speak, so in the interests of time he requests brevity and non-repetition of speech (lines 7-12). But these instructions also can present difficulties for citizens who want to be effective or influential in their presentation. It may be difficult to give a brief argument or rationale for a position. Public opinion is seen as reflected in a plurality of shared views, so repetition is a way for participants to display strong public opinion at the hearing.

Turning now to the ordinary citizens' speeches, after the eighth speaker finishes, during a transition between speakers, we get the following reaction from an audience member and ensuing exchange:

2. (PUD: 21. "Aud Mem" is an audience member, "Aud" is the audience, and "Sp8" is

the eighth speaker)

((audience applause for prior speaker Sp8))

1 Aud Mem: You have asked two times (   ) to have people just stick to the PUD

2   designation? I'm- I'm sorry I would say this no matter what side you're side on

3   ( ) you're on my side or the other side, >↑this was an exceedingly long speech<

4   is there any way? ↓because we're going to be here until one in the morning,

5   ↑could you- would you be willing to remove people if they don't speak directly

6   to the[PUD issue?

7 Aud: [XXXX[XXXXX

8 Sp8:   [I would just like to mention that I have come to each and every

9   meeting and made my voice heard, tonight is ↑my night so ↓my voice is going

10   to be heard=

11 Aud: = XXXX[XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

12 Sp8:   [I'm the average citizen (   )

13 Sup: And I- I do appreciate ↑it and- but I- I will again s<u>ay</u>:: if you would pl<u>ease</u>

14   keep your comments to whether or not the process should be zoned industrial

15   as it currently is? or whether we should change the zoning to a PUD.

        During the change of speakers an audience member speaks out using a number of

metadiscursive references. She criticizes the prior speech as "exceedingly long" and

referencing the supervisor's own instructions to the audience to limit discussion to the

zoning--which she notes he had requested twice. She further supports her criticism by

reason of the hearing lasting "until one in the morning." Finally she proposes that the

supervisor remove speakers who do not follow the instructions of staying on topic which receives some applause (lines 1-6). She is the first audience member to speak out and criticize another's speech for being off topic and too long. So it is not just the supervisor who openly evaluates the appropriateness of participants' discourse. The audience member attempts to hold the supervisor accountable to his own instructions.

Before the supervisor can respond the prior speaker replies by justifying her presentation. Instead of the audience member's formulation, "exceedingly long speech," the speaker avows "my voice is going to be heard" which receives a burst of applause (lines 10-11). She further justifies her presentation by claiming to have come to every meeting and that she is "the average citizen." This criticism-justification exchange between participants is a momentary departure from the routine public hearing format.

The supervisor intercedes and reiterates his injunction to participants to just address the zoning change. The supervisor begins his assessment by expressing appreciation to the speaker though in a seemingly formulaic manner (line 13). Given that his instructions are hearable as an implicit criticism of the prior speaker, he begins with an appreciation. Compare his statement here (lines 13-15) to an earlier critique he made of the second speaker:

3. (PUD: 16)

Sup: I appreciate comments of that nature but (.) please if you can keep your comments

       to ↑why this zoning should be cha:nged…

The supervisor's formulation, "comments of that nature," is a reference to the speaker's talk about Wal-Mart. In these two assessments, the supervisor's discourse uses the format: [appreciation] "but" [instructions]. Even in his opening instructions about

avoiding discussion of Wal-Mart, he expresses appreciation for citizen views, "comments about whether you like- Wal-Mart or you dislike Wal-Mart is >very very nice< but…" (excerpt 1, lines 3-5). After expressing appreciation, the supervisor moves to the official focus of the hearing.

The supervisor marks his directions as repeated, "I will again s<u>ay</u>::." (line 13). Repeating a direction, of course, is a way to intensify it or display frustration at others' failure to follow it. Notice too that he refrains *en passant* from adopting, or even addressing, the audience member's suggestion to "remove people" if they stray off topic.

The supervisor tries to keep the public hearing on track through metadiscursive reference to the zoning topic and by critically assessing speakers who talk about Wal-Mart. Interestingly the audience also enters into this metadiscourse through applause and even explicit verbal evaluations. How the public hearing proceeds is a mutual accomplishment among the supervisor, speakers, board members, and the audience. The metadiscourse serves to hold speakers accountable as to topic and length of presentation. While this public hearing is a specialized form of institutional talk (Drew & Heritage, 1992), it is a soft-shelled variety; it does not impose the constraints, say, of a judicial proceeding. The supervisor does not cut speakers off, but rather reminds them after their speech of the format's official focus.

Citizen Attempts to Engage the Town Board

One of the difficulties with the public hearing format is the lack of dialogue or exchange among residents and Town Board members. A resident may get an opportunity to express an opinion and give reasons but typically there is no response from board members. A way some participants attempt to deal with the difficulties of this

participation framework is to challenge the Town Board to see where they stand. Engaging board members through public discussion can work as a way to hold them accountable. For instance, in the following we see the fourteenth speaker asking the board members a question about taxes.

4. (PUD: 33)

1 Sp14: … I would like to as:k (.) the Town Board members ↑I have a question

2   everybody also had statements I have a question and I'm hoping to get an

3   answer (1.0) can you te- can you please tell me: if our property taxes <will be

4   reduced when considering the large tax grant to Wal-Mart?> (0.8) thank you

5   (1.0) I'l[l sit and wait for your response.

6 Aud: [XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

7   (3.1)

8 Sup: Ya know it's- (0.8) we're not supposed to answer questions but (0.7) the Final

9   Environmental Impact Statement states that they will not (1.6) will NOT

10   (0.9) make any request for any tax abatements at all in Cortlandville

11 Aud: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The speaker here identifies her talk as a "question" in contrast to a "statement" as everyone else has made. Such metadiscursive reference to asking a question and "hoping to get an answer" displays her recognition of departing from the standard public hearing format. At the very beginning of the citizen comment section the supervisor had instructed the audience:

5. (PUD: 13)

Sup: It's not a Q and A session it's a public hear↑ing please make your presentation and

we'll be glad ta (0.7) hear.

So the speaker's metadiscursive identification of her forthcoming talk as "a question"

shows her movement to a potentially delicate issue. The speaker's question can be heard

not only as seeking information, but also as critical or blame-implicative (lines 2-4).

Embedded within the question is the explicit assumption of "the large tax grant to Wal-

Mart." Giving Wal-Mart—the largest corporation in the world--a tax break will preclude

reducing residents' taxes.

After her critical question, the speaker indicates that she will sit down and wait

for an answer to her question as the audience applauds (lines 5-6). The supervisor

responds by citing the proscription against answering questions, but given this disclaimer,

he proceeds to address the question. The supervisor avoids any explicit mention of Wal-

Mart by referring to them with the indexical 'they.' He cites "the Final Environmental

Impact Statement" rather than what Wal-Mart has agreed to. He repeats emphatically

"that they will not (1.6) will NOT" ask for tax breaks (lines 8-10). Further, he gives

emphasis through an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1980), "any request for any

tax abatements at all." This formulation is in marked contrast to the speaker's version,

"large tax grant to Wal-Mart." The supervisor's answer in contradicting the questioner's

assumption also receives applause. So we see a divided audience in that there was

considerable applause for these competing positions over the zoning and Wal-Mart (line

6 and line 11).

It is interesting that this speaker is able to move the supervisor to depart from the

public hearing format and addresses the question. Questions implicate a reply lest the

question remain unanswered. In addition, avowing that she will sit and wait for an

answer, combined with audience applause, intensifies the necessity for a response. The

hot-button issue of a tax break for Wal-Mart further underscores the need for an answer.

A short while later the nineteenth speaker also asks a question and

metadiscursively states that this question has already been asked but has not been

answered. Repeating a question and identifying it as unanswered heightens the demand

for a response.

6. (PUD: 37-9. Note: "BMR" is board member R)

1 Sp.19: ah can you as- (.) as eh board members (.) tell us that (0.6) with the Wal-Mart

2   relocation you'll have a reduced property tax in the future, (1.6) this question

3   was already asked once (.) it wasn't answered (1.5) I'm asking it again.

4 BMR: Are you ask- are you talking about the combination of the county::

5   the Tow[n: the fire:

6 Sp19:   [>Absolutely<

        ((skip three lines))

10 Sp19: ↑I'm asking y<u>ou</u> (1.2) if there's a tax benefit >if you believe that there's a tax

11   benefit< to the relocation of Wal-Mart (0.8) then can you tell me that (0.8) these-

12   any of those three taxes will be reduced in the coming years as a result <u>of</u> the

13   Wal-Mart relocation (0.9) that's the question (1.3) will our taxes be reduced in

14   the- in the future, (.) because of the Wal-Mart relocation? >can you- can you

15   say< yes or ↑no or do you (deci-) (1.5) would you like to not answer that?

16   (2.1)

17 Aud: hh[hh

18 BMR: [I do↑n't know.

((skip 6 lines))

25 Sp19: No that's- you're telling me you don't know (.) so you don't know there's a

26   significant tax (.) benefit to the Wal- the Wal-Mart relocation

27   (3.1)

28   If you don't know then you can't tell me (1.6) there's no tax benefit if- if you don't

29   know if there's a tax benefit if you don't know? (.) right?

30   (5.4)

31 Sup: Are- are you in favor of the PUD or opposed

32 Aud: Hh[hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

33 Sp19:   [I'm opposed- I'm absolutely opposed to it for the following reason…

In response to the speaker's question, town-board member R replies without any disclaimer or marker of departing from the standard format (lines 4-5). R replies by seeking clarification of which taxes, thereby displaying knowledge of the different sorts of taxes. This leads the speaker to re-state a more elaborated version of the question (lines 10-14). He begins with the metadiscursive reference to his speech action, "↑I'm asking you" (line 10), and then after the re-statement he appends "that's the question" (line 13). Not receiving an immediate reply, he asks the question again and metadiscursively refers to candidate answers: yes or no or not answer that (lines 13-15).

After a 2.1 second silence and brief laughter by an audience member, board member R responds with, "I do↑n't know" (lines 16-18) seemingly resisting the speaker's promptings (Beach & Metzger, 1997). The speaker metadiscursively takes R's own words as free indirect speech, "you don't know" (line 25). This locution, "you don't know," gets repeated four more times in a Socratic-like performance in which the speaker

attempts to get R to concede that he knows there is no tax benefit to the Wal-Mart relocation (lines 25-29). Following a 3.1 second gap, hearable as R's lack of response, the speaker re-phrases his assertion with a terminal rising intonation and adds the tag question, "right?" (lines 27-29). This again results in a noticeable gap this time of 5.4 seconds (line 30). Such silences, of course, are inference rich. One hearing is that the board member does not want to agree with the speaker's assertion but lacks a counter to it, therefore he does not reply.

At this point during the second noticeable silence the supervisor intervenes but does not address the speaker's question. Instead he asks the speaker about his opinion on the PUD (lines 30-31) thereby attempting to shift the ground back to a straight public hearing and simultaneously rescuing board member R. This shifting of grounds by the supervisor is immediately supported by the audience with laughter which then turns to applause. What is interesting here as to who gets to ask what question and how such questioning sequences unfold.

The supervisor in this hearing serves as a kind of moderator of the participants. While we have seen him giving directives as to topic and format, he does not enforce these strictly and allows for some divergence. As the ninetieth speaker continues he shifts back to questioning the Town Board. Again he uses a metadiscursive reference of his "question."

7. (PUD: 37-9)

((skip 17 lines))

51 Sp19: now >my question to you< do you have any demographic data does the

52   Board have any demographic data (.) that supports that statement

53   (2.3)

54 BMR: We didn't make that statement.

55 Sp19: I know you didn't ↑but (I'm) in- in[reviewing that statement, you have to =

56 Aud: [h h h hhh h h h h h h h h h h h h h h

57 Sp19: = make a decision based on the arguments that are being presented to you (0.8)

58   do you have any demographic data that supports the allegation that we have a

59   shortage of grocery stores in [Cortland

60 BMR: [No but-

61   (4.2)

62 Sup: This is not a question and answer, we're here to lis[ten to ↑you.

63 Sp19:   [>Okay okay< I'm sorry

64   ah: (.) but that question <u>will be asked</u> (0.5) either now (.) or later (.) the question

65   about the economic analysis terms of taxes §if there is§ an assertion being made

66   there are tax benefits to the relocation of Wal-Mart then that is eventually going

67   to have to be sub↑stantiated (.) so: you can either (.) either do an economic

68   analysis now: or do one later.

Here the speaker poses another question to the Town Board and member R responds by denying they made that statement which leads the speaker to explain the rationale for the question. R begins to reply but cuts himself off, "No but-." This results in a gap of 4.2 seconds before the supervisor again intervenes with a metadiscursive assertion about the public hearing format (lines 60-62).

The speaker concedes displaying a recognition of departure, ">Okay okay< I'm sorry" (line 63), but then moves to justify his question. He attempts to justify his

question by the metadiscursive imperative, "Do it now or do it later." As he puts it: "that question <u>will be asked</u> (0.5) either now (.) or later" (line 64) and again "you can either (.) either do an economic analysis now: or do one later" (line 67-68). These different versions of "Do it now or do it later" have a seemingly proverbial or normative character. Also, in shifting to a metadiscourse level to justify this question allows him to resist the supervisor's attempt to shift grounds on him again to the public hearing format. Further, "Do it now or do it latter," implicates that matters will be left incomplete, important questions will remain to be answered.

In this section we have seen residents attempt to engage the Town Board. Board members responded but are selective in what they choose to respond to. Indeed, board member R, at points, remains silent in the face of repeated questioning until the supervisor intercedes to restore the standard, public hearing format. The supervisor does allow some divergence in the participation framework, but is able to reassert order when needed. Metadiscursive references to "having a question," "waiting for an answer," or "Do it now or do it later" create a relevance for a response, least the issue remain opened but unresolved.

Quoting Town Board Members to Hold Them Accountable

One of the frustrations that citizens face with the public hearing format is the absence of response or uptake from Town Board members. In the previous section we saw two speakers deal with this difficulty by asking board members questions about taxes as a way to engage them. In this section we will see a speaker seeking to engage board members by reading excerpts from newspaper stories in which they are quoted. Reproducing the presumed exact words of board members opens up a space for the

speaker to evaluate and respond to what they have said and thereby engage them in a kind

of dialogue.

8. (PUD: 27-30)

1 Sp11: I want to- I want to make a few remarks on the proc*ess* (.) that brought us

2   here tonight and ↑on a number of things that have been said (0.9) by: the

3   Town Board as reported in the Cortland Standard,

           ((skip 5 lines))

10   ↑Mister R said he's not concerned about CAPE's objections (1.8) I'm now

11   quoting him (.) some of the questions depending on what they are (.) I'm sure

12   the Planning Board's going to be quite heavily involved in the process if it gets

13   to that point R said Monday, ↑we're going to get sue:d (0.8) I'm still quoting

14   we're going to get sued one way or the other, (.)↑so we're kind of just anticipating

15   that, CAPE has every right to object (.) and Wal-Mart has every right to object (.)

16   I'll have plenty to say: when it's time to vote on this issue, ↑and until then I will be

17   open minded and obj*ec*tive (1.0) now let me make a few comments on that

18   statement, (1.4) ↑we're going to get sue:d (1.5) now Mister R knows and the

19   Board knows and Mister F knows that the Board is completely? within its legal

20   rights to say no: to Wal-Mart's PUD application without giving a reason (.) and

21   that they §need not fear§ a suit

           ((skip 4 lines))

26   thirdly (.) Mister R says I: will be open minded and objective (1.5) I hope that

27   I'm wrong about Mister R's (0.8) open mindedness and objectivity, (.)↑but on the

28   basis of what he said so far and I'll have: some other quotes I guess I'm not naïve

29   enough to think that he has not already made up his mind

Reading quotes of Town Board members from the newspaper allows the speaker to critically evaluate their claims and position them in unfavorable light. This practice of quoting, or reported speech, allows the reporting speaker to position himself as merely conveying what was said—in Goffman's (1981) terms the reporting speaker is just the "animator" of the board member's words. The source of the quotes being the newspaper suggests that of the words quoted are accurate. Drawing on such a source to reproduce another's words is similar to Antaki and Leudar's (2001) study of members of Parliament quoting the exact words of an opponent from the Hansard for their own political ends.

Upon completion of the quote the speaker moves to, as he puts it, "make a few comments on that statement" (line 17-18). The speaker switches footings from just reporting what was said to assessing what was said. He begins the assessment by quoting again, "↑we're going to get sue:d" (line 18). He proceeds to frame this assertion as disingenuous in that R "knows" and "Mister F," their attorney, "knows" that the Town Board can deny the PUD without giving reasons. The implication here being that this claim about getting sued is not only legally inaccurate, but they both know that it is inaccurate, consequently their statements are disingenuous.

A moment later the speaker again quotes board member R, "I: will be open minded and objective" (line 26), and then moves to raises doubts about R's claim. In effect the speaker challenges R's metadiscursive avowal of openness as a kind of cynical ploy. And he bases this criticism on R's own words as contained in this and other quotes.

In a sense, the speaker attempts to turn R's own words against him and hold him accountable. So in the first assessment the speaker can challenge the getting sued claim by implicit reference to the state code; in this assessment he can challenge R's claim of openness by reference to quotes from R. He comes to completition of this assessment section by raising doubts about R's avowal of being "open minded." The ability to show a contradiction in another's position through use of their words can be a powerful practice in evaluating their actions.

Drawing on board member R's words and then assessing them is done, not solely for R, but in front of the Town Board and audience. The speaker's assessments of this quote are clearly criticisms of R. In ordinary conversation a criticism sequentially implicates a response of some sort from the recipient such as a denial, justification, explanation, and the like. But the canonical public hearing format does not readily allow for such second-part responses. Instead, upon completition of the speaker's assessment we get various kinds of responses from the audience.

9. (PUD: 27-30, continued from excerpt 8)

30 Sp11: I'm not naïve enough to think that he has not already made up his mind,

31   (3.4) ((Sp11 turning pages while at the podium))

32 Aud 1: Is this about Mister R or ( )

33 Aud 2: (Is this about) the PU[D?

34 Aud: [xxx[xx

35 Aud 3:   [Yeah are we just doing ad hominems (.) or we

36   actually going to get to the point

37 Aud ?: (   )

38   (1.5)

39 Sp11: You're not [hearing me talk ad hominem

40 Aud 4:   [(   ) nobody interrupted the oth- other

         side.

41   ((ZZZZZZZZZ audience members briefly overlapping))

42 Aud 4: LET HIM TALK

43 Sp11: ((adjusting microphone)) (Kevin) how's that?

44   (1.9)

45   ((ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ: audience members overlapping for 5.7 seconds))

46 Aud 1: Mister R should sue him

47 Sup: Let him finish his statement please:

48   ((ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ: audience members overlapping for 5.3 seconds))

49 Aud 4: Point of order ((zzzzzz: audience overlapping for 1.6 seconds))

50 Sp11: I think you have to let me finish folks, you may not like what you're hearing

51   (.) and I'm sure the Board doesn't like it but they should hear it.

Upon completition of the third critical comment and as the speaker is turning the

pages of his notes during a three second pause (lines 30-31), audience members speak out

in succession (lines 32-37) challenging the focus of the speaker's remarks. These

heckling statements from different audience members fill the space during the pause

while the speaker is turning pages. These heckling statements are responsive to the

speaker's criticisms of board member R. The responses from the audience members are

not about the particulars of the speaker's criticisms of R, but about the focus of the

speaker's comments—about Mister R and not about zoning. These audience criticisms of the speaker echo the previous instructions from the supervisor.

The hecklers' statements are critical of the speaker such that he defends himself against one of them by denying the use of ad hominem (line 39). Other audience members mount a defense of the speaker's right to the floor (lines 40, 42, 49). Interesting how this challenge-defense sequence among audience members and speaker moves to a metadiscursive level—about appropriate topic, ad hominem, and the right to the floor as speaker. Again we see this turn to metadiscourse as a way to evaluate action or hold others accountable.

Eventually the supervisor intervenes and requests that the audience let the speaker "finish" (line 47). Notice that the supervisor refrains from entering the dispute over topic or ad hominem, but does invoke the speaker's right to the floor. After some audience collective "buzzing" (Llewellyn, 2005) and a call for order, the speaker with microphone addresses the hostile part of the audience by invoking his right to continue (lines 50-51). Notice that he draws on the supervisor's term "finish." He further justifies his statement by the metadiscursive, contrast structure between the audience and the Board "not liking what (you're/they're) hearing" but "they (the Board) should hear it" (lines 50-51).

The speaker continues by reading more quotes of board members from the newspaper and commenting on them. Other board members are quoted but most of the quotes are from board member R. Finally R responds to the criticisms.

10. (PUD: 27-30, continued from excerpt 9 and skip 17 lines)

69 Sp11: I'm quoting now Mister R again, §I do think that it's ridiculous§

70   (.) that this whole thing has taken as long as it does and how expensive as it is,

71   somebody responded in the Cortland Standard to Mister R's comment how long

72   it's going on and told him and I say now if you're not willing to stick with the

73   process beginning to end you should not have any part in the process.

74   (8.3) ((Sp11 turning pages while at the podium))

75 BMR: Well I'm going to be here until one-thirty

76 Aud: h h h [h

77 Sp11:   [Well I'm almost at the end Don

78 BMR: >Ya know< I object to a number of things you said.

79 Sp11: I'm quoting you Don

80 BMR: You cut me off: >I mean< I- I- it's not that I didn't care about CAPE's

81   ob↑jections, (1.3) it's just that all of CAPE's objections had already been

82   answered.

83 Sp11: I'm just quoting you Don=

The speaker reads another excerpt from the newspaper that quotes Town Board

members and he critically comments on it (not shown here) and then moves to another

quote (lines 69-70). As a way to evaluate this quote the speaker uses indirect speech to

summarize a letter to the newspaper which reflects his own view about sticking with the

process (71-73).

During an eight second pause while the speaker is turning the pages, board

member R speaks out with a sarcastic remark about how long this presentation is taking

which echoes the earlier audience member's criticism of being here until one in the

morning (excerpt 2). R moves to defend himself by "object(ing)" to much of what has

been said. Of course "much of what has been said" are R's own words—which the

speaker reminds him of (line 79). But one's "own words" can be heard in different ways. As R explains his statement that was quoted, in effect, parsing his meaning of "car(ing)" about CAPE's (a local environmental group) objections (lines 80-82). He moves to a metadiscourse level to clarify his meaning in that quote. What is implicitly at issue here is R's positioning as a proper Town Board member—as receptive to inputs from different parts of the community.

In response to R's objection and explanation, the speaker replies, "I'm (just) quoting you Don" (line 79 and 83). In effect saying, these are your own words for which you must be held accountable.

Discussion

This public hearing was probably the most contentious or controversial of the several that have been held over the past four-years dealing with the zoning change for Wal-Mart. Participants disagreed over substantive matters (Wal-Mart, zoning, the economy and the like), but they also disagreed through metadiscourse—particularly over how their opponents communicate. Such moves to metadiscourse can be consequential in that they can forestall or open up what can be talked about and how it can be talked about. As the hearing becomes more polarized on the issues, participants seem to more frequently turn to the metadiscursive level to criticize the process or their opponent's speech. Much of the metadiscursive references involve some problematic or potentially problematic action, for instance: not listening, talking about Wal-Mart, an exceedingly long speech, asking or not answering a question, disingenuous statements, the right to the floor and to finish, and not being quoted properly. With few exceptions, these metadiscursive references are about *others'* problematic actions.

A public hearing is a specialized kind of communication context. How public hearings operate in practice is our concern—particularly with how metadiscourse works to order and evaluate the proceedings. Participants use metadiscourse as a practice to instruct, to challenge, or to depart from a standard public hearing format. The supervisor uses metadiscourse to explain to the audience proper protocol and topics for discussion, e.g., not about Wal-Mart, about the PUD. Given these explicit prescriptions and proscriptions for proper speech, we see that these rules have some elasticity. The supervisor generally allows speakers to have their say even when they depart from the above-mentioned rules; only after the speaker is finished does the supervisor reiterate that the focus should be on the zoning change and not on Wal-Mart. Only when there are contentious exchanges between speaker and board member (excerpts 6-7) or among audience members and the speaker (excerpt 9), does the supervisor intervene. The supervisor faces a tension or dilemma between a well-ordered hearing and an open, free-flowing discussion (Llewellyn, 2005). The supervisor uses metadiscourse to intervene and instruct participants on appropriate procedures. This elasticity in practice to the public hearing "rules" contextualize this setting as less strictly bound to protocol than, say, a courtroom proceeding or the school-board meetings in which participants are allocated three minutes to speak (Tracy, 2007).

Speakers draw on metadiscourse to challenge or extend the public hearing context, e.g., the board not listening, a speaker having a question, or the board not answering. Even audience members' heckling uses metadiscourse to criticize speakers for not adhering to the public hearing guidelines, e.g., speaking too long or about Wal-Mart or using ad hominems. So while participants have a taken-for-granted knowledge

of a public hearing, this context can be upheld, recreated, extended, or departed from through participants' discourse, especially through their metadiscourse. Metadiscourse can contextualize the proceedings in different directions—as to topic and length, as questions for the board to respond to, or as thinly-veiled criticisms. A public hearing is a loosely codified context for citizen input, but participants' metadiscursive practices can attempt to *recontextualize* the hearing in more dialogic ways (Bakhtin, 1986).

The focus of this study has been on participants' actual metadiscursive practices. But given that participants' use of metadiscourse can be heard as an attempt to improve the process through invoking procedural rules or attempting to engage board members, what can we say about the quality of the proceedings? That is, how can this public hearing be evaluated in terms of the normative model of public participation that was mentioned above in the literature review (Webler, 1995; Petts, 1999; Guttman, 2007; Dietz & Stern, 2008)? Starting with the criterion of "fairness"—Can participants actually influence decision makers? We saw one participant explicitly state his suspicion that a decision has already been made by Town Board members (excerpts8-9, also see epigram). The charge that a decision has been made is not only contrary to the fairness criterion, but also feeds the cynicism among the public. It violates the assumption of "transparency and good-faith communication" with the Town Board (Dietz & Stern, 2008, pp.232-233). The suspicion that board members have already made their decision undermines the very point of public hearings. It renders public hearings as mere theatrical events, what Boholm (2008) calls a "theatre of dissent." Public participation becomes reduced to satisfying a legal requirement for the Board. For those on the apparent losing end, the hearing turns into a forum to let off steam and vent (Palmlund,

1992). Some speakers appear to attempt to embarrass their opponents (Webler & Renn, 1995) as we have seen with the question of tax grants for Wal-Mart or newspaper quotes of board members and the charge of being disingenuous. Other speakers display frustration or anger with the process. While these affect displays may be seen as instances of "reasonable hostility" (Tracy, 2007), we need to see such negative affect as evaluation, as a form of criticism and an implicit call for accountability.

Craig (2005) has called for scholars to examine a speech community's metadiscourse to offer critique or practical recommendations on their assumptions about communication. As a case in point, the implicit communication model of the public expressing viewpoints and the Town Board just listening appears problematic. After such a lengthy process, it seems naïve or disingenuous to assume that board members are simply listening, gathering information or consulting with the community. Another point for communication criticism is the Supervisor's request for speakers to be brief and not to repeat what others have said due to the number of people signed up to speak. But one of the few resources that opponents have is the assertion that public opinion is against the proposal (Renn, 1992). Public opinion is a discursive process; it emerges through discussion and debate, rather than simply from the sum of isolated individual views (Kim & Kim, 2008, p. 61). Hearing an opposing viewpoint just once is easier to dismiss than repeated cumulative statements from the public. In addition, the injunction, "Be brief; don't repeat," hearably diminishes the importance of citizens' speech. Time, of course, is a constraint; no one wants to be there, as one speaker put it, until "one o' clock in the morning." This tension between open discussion and time constraints raises the larger

point that probably any procedure implemented to foster better deliberative practices will result in a conflict or a dilemma between desired ends (Guttman, 2007; Tracy, 2007).

Turning to the criterion of "competence"—Can participants be provided with the necessary technical knowledge to make an informed decision? The board relies on the opening presentation by Wal-Mart's representatives to explain technical matters to the public. In an earlier study a Wal-Mart's presentation to the community was examined (Buttny, 2009). The public was given approximately three months to read the three-volume, Draft Environmental Impact Statement written by Wal-Mart. The community then heard Wal-Mart representatives' oral presentation on technical matters at the beginning of a public hearing. Given the focus of the present study, we cannot address the competence criterion here other than to note the self-interest of the technical experts who give the presentation to the community.

From a normative perspective, public hearings do not seem to be a very good format for public deliberation. Given that this hearing is part of an on-going process of over four years, participants have become increasingly polarized as reflected in their argumentation and affect displays (Boholm, 2008). The public hearing format of citizens arguing diverging viewpoints does little towards consensus building or compromise. In their defense, hearings do allow for the performative aspects of citizenship, what Svensson (2008) calls "expressive rationality." Speaking out in public can reinforce participants' political identity and forge bonds among like-minded citizens. Further, hearings allow "the public to brush up against itself…Even if citizens persist in disagreeing with one another, deliberating together can enlarge citizen perspectives" (Gastil, 2008, p.200). The function of citizens becoming more aware of differing views

is positive, but to characterize these hearings as "deliberating" seems doubtful. At this late stage of the process deliberation may be too much to hope for. But at least a few of the board members offer reasons and justifications implicitly in support of the proposal. While board members have not explicitly stated their decision, their responses to questions and challenges seem to indicate where they stand. Board members can, of course, be held accountable to the citizenry during the next election cycle. From an environmental perspective this battle may be lost but at least residents and board members became educated on the aquifer and related environmental issues.

Given this study's focus on metadiscourse, future research should differentiate the various kinds of metadiscourse and their uses. Future research might examine how political decision-makers use metadiscourse to justify their final decision. A limitation of this study is that the data do not inform us on the broader issue of environmental decision making. We saw some participants make ascriptions of the board members' stance or likely decision. Future research should investigate the connections between the quality of public participation and decision making. In addition, Craig's (2005) project of examining the folk assumptions invoked through metadiscourse would be worth pursuing in future research. As we have seen, a public hearing format seems based on faulty assumptions about communication, e.g., just listening; be brief; don't repeat what another has said; this is not about Wal-Mart. Any process used in the messy world of local politics and a global giant such as Wal-Mart can be fraught with conflicts and dilemmas between desired goals.

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Appendix

The transcription system used here is adapted from the Gail Jefferson system.

[Marks overlapping utterances. For example:

A: Why don't you come up and see me some[times

B: [I would like to

=   Marks when there is no interval between adjacent utterances. For example:

A: You don't have one this week =

B: = No

(3.5)   Indicates pauses or gaps within or between utterances. Timed to tenths of a

second. For example:

S: Makes a big difference in what?

   (1.6)

W: Well first things first

(.)   A short untimed pause or gap within or between utterances. For example:

M: I just know (.) I (.) I know I just have a feeling

:   Colons mark the extension of a sound or syllable it follows. The more colons, the

longer the sound stretch. For example:

T: You know you are involved in a:: in a: very particular ritual

?   Marks a rising intonation. For example:

F: I know you're pissed but? (0.9) I have to do it

-          Marks an halting abrupt cutoff. For example:

B: Just pres- (1.5) uh

↑   Marks a rising shift in intonation. For example:

F: In the sp↑ring I'm gonna have my car up here

↓   Marks a falling shift in intonation. For example:

F: I understand we'll- ↓we'll go another ti:me

<u>word</u>   Underlining marks a word or passage said with emphasis. For example:

F: Oh <u>come on don't</u> be pissed

WORD   Capital letters indicate that the passage is spoken louder than the surrounding

talk. For example:

F: you know (.) SHE NEVER WROTE ME LAST YEAR so you know

°word° Degree signs mark a passage that is said more quietly than surrounding talk. For

example:

W: It's too: ear:ly to talk about (.)°this kind of thing°

>word<   Chevrons marks a passage delivered at a quicker pace than surrounding talk.

For example:

W: Uhm again back to th- >you know what I said originally I think ya know< just

this inability

hhh   Audible outbreaths including laughter. For example:

H: I think the balance between us is (0.5) ah: about right hhhhh

.hhh   Audible inhalations. For example:

S: Like you're going to go looking for someone else?

(1.4)

W: .hh

§word§   Word or passage uttered with a staccato voice. For example:

S: your comments §<u>nee</u>d to b<u>e</u> on why: that is§ or is not a good idea

XXX   Indicates applause. For example:

     S14: I'l[l sit and wait for your response.

     Aud: [XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

ZZZ   Marks a buzzing sound from the audience. For example:

     Sup: Let him finish his statement pl<u>ease</u>:

          ((ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ: audience members overlapping for 5.3 seconds))

     Aud 4: Point of order ((zzzzzz: audience overlapping for 1.6 seconds))

(   )   Unsure of what is transcribed. For example:

     M: (as if I'm sick) (   ) I'm depressed

((word)) Scenic details or description of the context. For example:

     S: How's your pract- ((clears throat)) how's your practice progressing