ORIGINAL RESEARCH

It's not (only) about Getting the Last Word: Rhetorical Norms of Public Argumentation and the Responsibility to Keep the Conversation Going

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Abstract

The core function of argumentation in a democratic setting must be to constitute a modality for citizens to engage differences of opinion constructively – for the present but also in future exchanges. To enable this function requires acceptance of the basic conditions of public debate: that consensus is often an illusory goal which should be replaced by better mastery of living with dissent and compromise. Furthermore, it calls for an understanding of the complexity of real-life public debate which is an intermixture of claims of fact, definition, value, and policy, each of which calls for an awareness of the greater 'debate environment' of which particular deliberative exchanges are part. We introduce a rhetorical meta-norm as an evaluation criterion for public debate. In continuation of previous scholarship concerned with how to create room for differences of opinion and how to foster a sustainable debate culture, we work from a civically oriented conception of rhetoric. This conception is less instrumental and more concerned with the role of communication in public life and the maintenance of the democratic state. A rhetorical meta-norm of public argumentation is useful when evaluating public argumentation – not as the only norm, but integrated with specific norms from rhetoric, pragma-dialectics, and formal logic. We contextualise our claims through an example of authentic contemporary public argumentation: a debate over a biogas generator in rural Denmark.

Keywords Rhetoric · Debate Norms · Public Argumentation · Public Policy · Debate Culture

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1 Introduction

It may sound strange when we suggest that public argumentation is not about getting the last word. After all, citizens typically enter public debate with the aim of promoting their own views or suggestions in the hope that they will win the day – in other words: that they will be getting the last word. This approach to public argumentation is what is sometimes referred to as "strategic" and identified as "the rhetorical dimension" of argumentation (see e.g., van Eemeren and Houtlosser 1999, 481 and 2000, 295). We agree that rhetoric is about trying to make other people see things in a particular way, but we don't think that it is the whole story—and certainly not when it comes to norms of public argumentation. Although the narrow, purely instrumental, understanding of rhetoric has a long history, it is a misrepresentation of contemporary rhetoric as an academic field and at odds with much thinking throughout the rhetorical tradition. Take, for example, the concepts of *aptum* and *decorum* as discussed by Cicero (2011, 210) and Quintilian (1921/1922, book XI, Chap. 1, 8–11), which underline that a rhetor must give attention to both effectiveness and ethical value when arguing. We might call this a pragmatic approach to public argumentation and note that it requires good argumentation to fulfil "the requirements of the entire communicative situation," i.e., not just the intention of the speaker (Jørgensen and Onsberg 1999, 93 quoted in Jørgensen 2000, 37). Many contemporary rhetorical theorists have also been concerned with how argumentation and communicative acts can be evaluated with ethical or ideological considerations in mind, see for example Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca on "universal audience" (1958) and Edwin Black on "second persona" (1970). More recently, Thomas Goodnight coined the term of "responsible rhetoric", explaining how a "new rhetoric" can be a counterpart to a "new dialectic" (1993). Along the same lines Christian Kock discussed some of the expectations that reasonably can be placed on public debaters by way of the concept of "dialectical obligations" (2007) and later also the idea of an "argumentation democracy" (Kock 2013, 11–38). There is thus a long tradition in the field of rhetoric to handle the 'effect'/'ethics' dilemma, and especially in rhetorical argumentation studies, we find a strong base of research insisting on ethical norms to guide evaluation of argumentation. While rhetoric as a contemporary field of study typically begins with an interest in how to convince a specific audience in a specific situation it is equally concerned with the ethical quality of the argumentation, not only in the specific situation but also in the long run, and not just from the point of view of the immediate participants but also from that of the polity and public debate in general.

In essence, we suggest that evaluation of public argumentation must be geared both to the complexity and messiness that characterises most public debates when they intermix claims of fact, definition, value, and policy (Brockriede and Ehninger 1960, 52–53; Jasinski 2001, 24–29) and to its role in democratic life. With the goal of 'keeping the conversation going' we want to draw attention to the potential damage that some debate behaviour might cause in the long run, and we suggest paying attention to the co-presence and intermingling of all four kinds of claims in this process. As we will show in the discussion of the example below, common debate behaviour operates on a limited time horizon, namely to 'win the day', i.e., to counter the opponent in a way that either persuades them or, short of that, 'shuts' them

'down' or makes them look foolish. Our suggestion is that regardless of how gratifying getting the last word may seem for the individual, and regardless of the quality of argument on either side, a "winner takes it all" mentality rarely solves community problems. The need to share information and reach acceptable common solutions requires a debate culture characterized by a level of civility that is accepting of not just differences of opinion, but also of values, suggestions for action, and not least understandings of realities. By analysing how disagreement plays out in relation to the different kinds of claims, we contribute with a more nuanced awareness of the nature of disagreement and how the ideal of 'keeping the conversation going' can be practiced in relation to the different kinds of claims.

Our aim here is thus to suggest some of the ways we think a rhetorical perspective can be useful for argumentation theory. Put to a point, this means adopting a processual view on argumentation and taking situational complexities into account. At the level of specific argumentative exchanges, we believe that a rhetorical perspective on argumentative practices can be helpful by virtue of its recognition of the variety of argument claims (e.g., policy, value, definition, and fact), the associated argument types (e.g., argument from cause, sign, generalisation, parallel case, analogy, classification, authority, and motivation) and their complex interplay (Brockriede and Ehninger 1960, 53) and the evaluation of specific arguments in specific situations (rhetorical fallacies, straw-person etc.), but what we are interested in here is how a rhetorical approach can be used in formulating a meta-norm.

As a way of moving forward, we contextualise our project in previous scholarship that in various ways addresses the challenges of democratic participation and the need to keep fostering civil discussion. In continuation of this, we elaborate on the formulation of the meta-norm of keeping the conversation going. Next, we explain how our discussion concerns argumentation linked to democracy and the upholding of deliberative culture. We stress how public debate is overall about "doings" (Kock 2017), but how other kinds of claims relate to this overall goal of collective actions and policies, and that for all types of claims, keeping the conversation going must be a meta-norm that guides the argumentative practice. Finally, we discuss an example of dysfunctional public argumentation. With this example, we illustrate our theoretical claim by showing how wrong it can go if actors in a political debate are not willing to listen to each other and put forward arguments and counterarguments when a new initiative is discussed, and to some extent continue to defend the decision after it is made.

2 Creating Room for the Exchange of Widely Different Views and Values

Our thoughts on a rhetorical meta-norm grow out of previous scholarship concerned with how to enable exchange of widely different views and wishes for society without damaging the possibility for future deliberation or even engagement. Important work has been done with similar aims. The political scientist Danielle Allen's notion of a "citizenship of political friendship" as key to fostering democratic dialogue between population groups (in her case Black and White Americans) addresses similar ideas

as our project as far as the normative aspirations are concerned (2004). As Allen reminds us, political friendship does not require us to feel any attachment to others as long as we treat them as we would our friends. Basic to 'talking with strangers' is creating a trustful relation, an effort she claims makes up 75% of the work of political conversation and which involves a speaker's commitment "to developing relations among citizens and forms of reciprocity that justify trust" (2006, 143). As an example of the usefulness of a rhetorical approach to public argumentation, Allen adds to the significance of ethos (the speaker's trustworthiness) the importance of understanding the opponent's resistance to the speaker's proposal, especially as it is rooted in feelings of anger (due to unfair deprivation) or fear. Listening to such concerns and addressing them is crucial to building a relation across differences of opinion. Explains Allen, "Public negotiation even of apparent pains is crucial to democratic deliberation because it gives a community an opportunity to address inconsistencies in how different citizens think benefits, burdens, recognition, and agency should be distributed within the polity." Significantly, Allen continues, "only by addressing negative emotions with a view to generating goodwill can a citizen find the seeds of improved citizenly interactions and a more democratic approach to the problem of loss in politics" (2006, 151). Allen thus argues that the real challenge for democracy is dealing with the relationship to those who lost a particular 'battle' since debate and discussion keep going. Interestingly, she goes to rhetoric for advice on how to adapt one's discourse to one's listeners, an invitation we try to respond in part to with this article.

Another landmark contribution to the study of citizen involvement in public argumentation is Karen Tracy's *Challenges of Ordinary Democracy* (2010). In this study, Tracy observed and analysed meetings held by an American school board over three years, a period marked by significant disagreement among local residents about what it would mean for schools to become more democratic and inclusive. Tracy's approach draws on discourse analysis as a method, which allows her to analyse authentic discourse down to the smallest details of pausing, interruptions, applause, etc. to build arguments about a situation's communicative meanings (17). Tracy studies the meetings in their totality, including a chapter on local newspapers' role in shaping the various controversies and citizens' interest in them. We are primarily concerned with local politicians' and city officials' (lack of) engagement with citizens, and in this respect, we find Tracy's outline of the respective communicative challenges faced by elected officials quite useful. For the officials, some of the dilemmas to be handled are: Balancing attention to process with concerns about outcomes, e.g., by avoiding discussions that only generate more discussion and never result in decisions (194) and recognizing the interconnectedness of words and people in policy discussions (191). We have carried these observations into our analytical approach. Of particular interest for our project is Tracy's claim that "theorizing about deliberative democracy […] has had an unintended negative effect on ordinary democracy" (21). Tracy's main criticism here is that theory about deliberative democracy and ideal communicative settings such as deliberative forums and consensus workshops have given many Americans unrealistic expectations. They ignore the complexities of the situation and participants' different and multiple roles and aims, and they invite unrealistic expectations to participants' discursive behaviour. Instead, she writes, deliberating

bodies, such as a school board, "need a communicative ideal that takes account of the multiple aims and competing values that are always present in sites of educational governance" (21). Tracy proposes such a norm, namely "reasonable hostility" which she aligns with Allen's ideas about how to facilitate antagonistic cooperation. Defined as "a kind of criticism that marries argument and emotion" this norm is better suited to sustain citizen discussions about conflicting interests and thus, "ordinary democracy" because it sanctions a legitimate expression of outrage and criticism while honouring the importance of respectful interaction.

Christopher F. Karpowitz and Jane Mansbridge are similarly interested in how public deliberation can be organized to allow for disagreeing citizens to find it satisfactory. With the concept of "dynamic updating", they introduce a procedure for continuously and consciously taking note of participants' values and interests and possible changes in those during the deliberative process (2005, 348). The authors have studied a particular community development project, and they compare two strands of public argumentation used: a consensus-oriented approach to public deliberation with smaller and more conversational encounters, and a series of public hearings that tended to be more adversarial. They find that while the consensus-oriented approach at first (at least to the organisers) seemed to result in just that: consensus, they had unwittingly neglected dissent in their driving hope of reaching agreement by focusing on shared values. Moreover, the very setting of public debates was found to have significance: Where the consensus-oriented meetings had at times taken place in private homes – thereby presumably encouraging a more polite and cooperative approach, the public meetings revealed more disagreement than expected. Karpowitz and Mansbridge's study concerns a local development project, but contrary to the example we discuss which was politically initiated, their case was intended as a community-driven project. This difference aside, the authors' point that continual attentiveness to discussants' interests and values is crucial for how public argumentation is perceived as either pointless or productive is a significant one.

A last contribution worth mentioning in this context is Diana Mutz's *Hearing the other side* (2006), also a political science approach to the question of practices and norms in public argumentation. Based on a variety of social network surveys, she studies the tension between inwardly-oriented participative networks aiming for rousing and mobilisation among like-minded people and more outwardly-oriented deliberative networks aiming for establishing constructive, respectful dialogue among people with different political attitudes and behaviours. Having analysed large quantities of social network data, Mutz concludes that an extremely activist political culture cannot also be a heavily deliberative one (2006, 3). She thus challenges the strong and commonly held deliberative ideal in political theory that exposure to dissimilar views should always be a goal. Mutz agrees with Mansbridge that "[e]veryday talk, if not always deliberative, is nevertheless a crucial part of the full deliberative system" (2018, 101). As a future research agenda, Mutz suggests that scholars and researchers concerned with democratic conversation pay more attention to connecting normative theories and ideals with empirical research that investigates where, how, and with what consequences people interact with people with opposite political orientations and views in everyday settings (2006, 9). Mutz' way of assigning value to and relating different kinds of democratic activities and the different

relations that are built up through these is much in line with a rhetorical way of thinking. In our case study, we try to illustrate this attentiveness to community connections amidst disagreement. The same goes for not neglecting activities that are not strictly deliberative. Furthermore, rhetorical scholars are also in general attentive to different situational and contextual functionalities, and the distinction between "vote gathering" and "vote moving" rhetorical behaviour resembles the distinction that Mutz advocates (Jørgensen, Kock and Rørbech 2011, 315–332). Much of the rhetoric in the Facebook group "Biogas Plant – Vig – NO THANK YOU!" that we use as an example is characterized mostly as "vote gathering" argumentation without the involvement of optional elements as backings, rebuttals and qualifiers and thus apparently serves to mobilise follow supporters. However, the group is public, and interestingly, direct appeals to politicians are made as if the group expects deliberation with others to spring from their activities.

Common to the reviewed research on the difficulties that arise in the practice of democratic participation, deliberation, and to the suggested solutions is a view of public argumentation as *processual* rather than eventful, i.e., it must be treated as an ongoing relation that needs to be maintained – and not as isolated discussions that are over once people go home. Related to this is another similarity, namely that a *rhetorical approach* is prominent in all of them, with all that it involves in terms of taking all aspects on the communication situation into account, its recognition of ethos and pathos appeals as equally important as the appeal of reason and logic, and its orientation toward collective action (in other words, trying to reach decisions that do not pretend to be *True* but to have satisfactory community support).

In continuation of this research, we argue that a meta-norm supporting a debate climate where disagreement is taken as a given and legitimate constraint (and not an obstacle to be overcome or resolved) is most constructive because it takes into account that while a given debate will come to a close and end up in a decision of some sort, other debates will follow, sometimes even on the same issue. The debaters are, in other words, likely to meet again and to have to engage each other again. When we speak of norms of public argumentation, we therefore should not only be concerned with the specifics of each exchange of views, but also be concerned with how it prepares the ground for public debate in the future. In other words: How well it provides participants the opportunity to express their views and engage with other participants' views and arguments in ways that feel constructive enough that participants, regardless of the outcome of the specific debate, will consider engaging in future deliberation meaningful, (and that they do not decide to 'check out' of public debate, either altogether or by only sharing their views in closed fora with like-minded people). In a sense, then, the most basic, but also most relevant, evaluation criterion must therefore address the question of how to argue in a way that can keep the conversation going. This would be an approach that makes room for exchange of even widely differing views, values, and wishes yet does not risk alienating arguers because they feel harassed, patronised, or ignored by their counterparts.[1] We could call this *attention to an overall debate culture* where all participants share

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[1] We realize that Richard Rorty on several occasions used the phrase "keeping the conversation going". Our use of the phrase is not inspired by his but does share a kernel of the same impetus: to "embrace the

a responsibility for keeping the discussion constructive, i.e., serving the purposes of clarifying and exchanging viewpoints and discussing their relative weight in a common solution. As we illustrate below in an example of a public debate that ran off track, the simple requirement of responding to one's opponents' concerns is crucial to contributing to a debate culture that feels meaningful to participate in. On this view, the deliberation process is in itself significant to stabilising democracy. The reason is that when citizens have heard arguments for and against a proposal, they might still favour their initial stand, but through the deliberation process, they have gained a better understanding of the opposite viewpoint. Ideally, even if the decision does not go their way, they will still come away from the exchange knowing that they had their say and that their concerns were listened to and taken seriously. This is of great importance if you as a citizen are to live in a society where the majority prefers to do something other than you do. We believe that such meta-attention to the general debate climate and how we establish, support, and cultivate a public conversation is crucial for people's ability to live together and make decisions that members of a society are willing to accept and live with – even when they disagree on some specific actions taken. In a manner of speaking, such a democratic understanding established through deliberative processes should, in our view, be valued on par with the decision itself.

3 Rhetorical Theory on Argumentation and Democracy: Keeping the Conversation Going with the "Other" Means Entering Rowdy Rhetoric with Potential Disagreement on all Types of Claims

Our overall point concerns public argumentation in a civic setting, that is, exchange of viewpoints and proposals regarding topics of shared societal significance, typically political issues, presented in public contexts that may be local, national, or even international. Common to these settings is that argumentation is *the* democratic modus for negotiating disagreement and divergent visions of an end goal. With a democratic norm set must come acceptance of disagreement as natural, expected, in fact unavoidable – even under the most ideal conditions. Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse argue for the significance of argumentation studies by reference to its central role in democracy and to the appropriate handling of disagreement as central to democratic citizenship:

> democracy is committed to the idea that sincere, well-intentioned, competent, informed, and rational citizens might nevertheless disagree severely about moral and political questions […] it is therefore also the project of collective self-government among equal citizens despite ongoing disagreement about fundamental matters. Given this, we might say that the key to democracy is the view that respectful disagreement is possible among proper citizens (2014, xiv).

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social dimensions of inquiry, thought and action" and to "speak in terms of conversations and vocabularies rather than truths, representation, and foundations of knowledge" (Cooke 2004, 83).

A similar view is held by American rhetorical theorist Robert Ivie who suggests that "the principal challenge of agonistic democracy is to address the "other" as a legitimate adversary rather than as an evil enemy" (2002, 277). But unlike Aikin and Talisse whose view of rhetoric is a narrow effect-oriented one, Ivie points to the rhetorical tradition as a resource uniquely positioned to deal with this communicative challenge: "A rhetorical conception of deliberation […] promotes democratic practice immediately—in the here and now—rather than postponing it indefinitely into a hypothetical future where the condition of diversity would no longer apply and where participatory democracy would be sufficiently disciplined by an illusion of universal reason to yield a reliable and supposedly rational consensus" (278). Ivie's point here is that rhetoric, with its pragmatic and at times "rowdy" approach to disagreement, neither panders to ideals of objectivity and universal reason nor presumes to present a neutral or true position. Instead, it owns up to its own positionality and is keenly aware of its recipients, finding ways to promote enough identification and common understanding to keep them interested: "By maintaining a productive tension between cooperation and competition and not privileging any single perspective to the exclusion of all others, "rowdy" rhetorical deliberation increases the potential of preventing adversaries from being transformed into scapegoats and enemies" (279).

Among rhetorical scholars with a particular interest in argumentation is Christian Kock who in multiple publications argued against defining rhetoric by either its means (stylistic traits) or its goals (persuasive effect), but by its theme or domain (see e.g., Kock 2013, 2017). While we do not agree with Kock's somewhat sweeping claim that rhetoric in its truest essence is *only* about how to discuss "issues in dispute" (Kock 2013, 439), we find much value in his discussion of key differences between a formal, logical approach to argumentation and a rhetorical one. Kock's overriding point is that rhetorical argumentation is intimately connected (historically as well as theoretically) with the realm of democratic politics, and that in that domain, the key issues on which people argue concern the question of *the preferable* or simply: What to do. In this, he follows Aristotle who in the *Rhetoric* (2006) suggests that rhetoric concerns matters for which there are alternative possibilities, in other words, things that are in our power and about which we can do something. Political argumentation has as its overarching goal to reach a decision on what to do, not determine what is true (Kock 2013). We agree with Kock that since policy claims can never be a matter of truth, debaters cannot through deductive reasoning arrive at a 'True' solution to practical challenges that everyone will agree on. Every practical solution has advantages and disadvantages, and therefore debaters should be willing to put forward arguments, consider counterarguments, and do all this for everyone to be able to make up their mind by weighing the arguments against each other (on weighing arguments, see Kock 2013 and 2017, on trialogical communication, see Jørgensen, Kock and Rørbech 2011). Furthermore, the political debate will be more constructive if both sides acknowledge that there are counterarguments that might have some weight, even though these arguments do not weigh more than arguments on their own side.

However, in this endeavour of formulating a meta-norm, we wish to extend Kock's argument about choice not being true and false (2009) by adding that neither are claims of value, definition, or even, at times, fact. Factual matters and values are

often just as intensively debated as the policy decisions itself, and we cannot assume that everything presented as facts and values are pre-established matters from which the deliberation on specific policy suggestions can depart. One person's 'fact' may be another person's misunderstanding or prejudice. One person's appeal to 'environmental protection' may be challenged by another person's justification for destruction of nature.

Through public deliberation and argumentation, a society can deliberate and strive to establish a common understanding of or adherence to (some) facts, definitions, and values, and, at best, use this as a basis for a widely supported decision. At the level of decision-making, argumentation, thus, deals with beliefs, preferences, ideas about what will be beneficial, and how to understand and define reality. Therefore, a meta-norm by which we can evaluate public argumentation should take into account that not only proposals but also values, definitions, and facts in politics are subject to deliberation. Even when decisions are made with a significant majority backing, knowledge, circumstances, or political constellations may change, and the decision may later have to be revisited, perhaps modified, perhaps overturned due to altered circumstances or political constellations. This must have implications for the way argumentation is done and thus the norms and criteria we apply when evaluating public argumentation. As pointed out by Allen (2006), we need to find ways to collectively deal with the relationship to those who 'lost' on a particular issue not only because they deserve to be recognized and respected, but also because we will need to discuss other things with them in the future. One implication is thus to not consider a particular political debate as an isolated event, but as part of a greater debate culture in which the very same issue may arise again, and therefore, being on speaking terms with one's opponents after one debate will ease interaction in the following.

Before moving on to our example, we want to dwell on our understanding of facts and how facts cannot always be assumed to be pre-given, but sometimes need to be taken up for discussion. The pragma-dialectical approach also takes this into consideration by involving an 'opening stage' prior to the 'argumentation stage', identifying the disagreement and the shared rules and starting points, before embarking with the argumentation (Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 60–61). What we argue here is that if disagreement on factual matters occurs, the debaters must be willing to enter a discussion about these factual matters as part of the debate. We do not believe that this can be done prior to the argumentation, but must occur along the way, and that there is a chance that the debaters involved do not reach consensus on factual matters. In many cases, factual matters are characterized by complexity and uncertainty, and as we shall see in the example below, this is very much the case in sophisticated technical discussions. Therefore, in connection with our meta-norm of keeping the conversation going, we see a potential in not just showing a willingness to debate about what to do, but also recognizing the need to debate the factual basis on which the decisions are made.

We suggest visualizing the relationship between the different kinds of claims as below, with the claims of policy in the middle as the central goal and the other types of claims as integral parts of the policy debates. In practice, the different kinds of claims will often be debated in a random order according to the situation, and not all types of claims are necessarily explicitly present in each debate. One point of this

model is thus to underscore that the various kinds of claims are not dealt with in a linear fashion (moving from fact over definition to value and policy) but often overlap or be raised by different debaters at different times). A debater will often try to create coherence between the different kinds of claims making the claims of fact, definition and values a collective totality that builds up to the overall policy claim (See Fig. 1).

4 Example: Debate about the Establishment of a Biogas Generator in Vig

To illustrate our overall point about the need for a rhetorical meta-norm of keeping the conversation going and to show how participants' argumentative behaviours can have severe consequences for the general debate culture, we now turn to an example of an authentic public debate. We are particularly interested in looking for debate behaviour that, explicitly or not, promotes particular dialogical norms by which citizens seek to coordinate social action. To this end, we offer an analysis of a public debate that, according to the most vocal participants, was far from well-functioning. The debate concerned the establishment of a biogas generator in a small community in rural Denmark. We consider this to be a paradigmatic case study (Flyvbjerg 2006, 475) through which we can explore, discuss, and nuance insights about rhetorical norms for public debate. As suggested, we also consider the case an *exemplary non-exemplary* public debate in the sense that the deliberation led to polarisation and declining trust among citizens in local politicians, municipal officials, and the political system as such.

Fig. 1 Visualization of the four types of claims in public debate and their relation. In a political debate, a debater will often move back and forth between the different kinds of claims trying to create coherence between the four types of claims and connect the claims of fact, definition, and value to the claim of policy in a convincing manner. This happens in a synchronous movement adapted to the situation
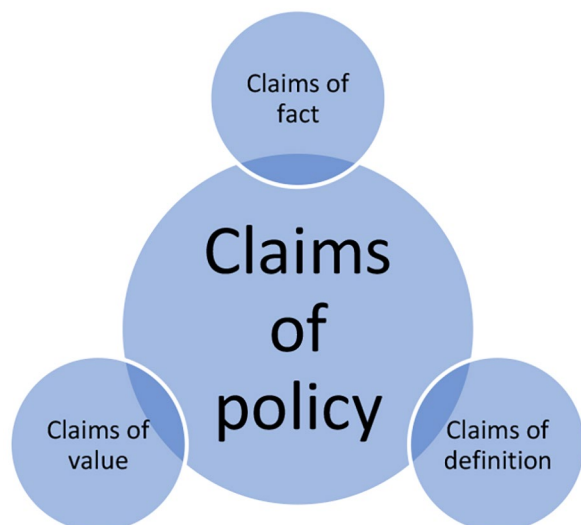
5 Background: Biogas in Vig

In March 2017, the town council in Odsherred Municipality, Denmark, voted for a change to the zoning plan for an area north of the small town of Vig (pop. 1,700) to allow for the establishment of a biogas plant. The plan and the associated environmental report were subsequently the subject of an eight week-long public hearing period. On May 4, 2017, three weeks prior to the deadline for written comments to the plan, a public hearing meeting was held in the local community building. On June 29, 2017, the plan to allow the biogas plant to be built was passed by the city council.

In Denmark biogas plants generally use organic waste from agriculture, wastewater, and dumps to create gas for electricity and district heating. Biogas emits less CO2 than fossil fuels and can therefore contribute to reduction in emission of greenhouse gasses. In Vig, the plan is to let two pig farmers from a neighbouring municipality build and run the biogas plant with liquid manure from their farms. The electricity created will then be circulated by the electricity plant SEAS NVE, an electricity plant located in Svinninge in the neighbouring municipality, app. 25 kms from Vig.

The Vig plan was met with criticism from locals. 14 citizens submitted comments protesting the plan during the hearing period, all of which were rejected by the municipality (https://www.sn.dk/odsherred-kommune/overvejer-fogedforbud-mod-biogasanlaeg/).

In May 2017, an online petition to stop the project was initiated. By June 2022, 411 people had signed it. The petition allowed signers to comment, and many citizens used this possibility to offer a reason for their resistance to the project (https://www.skrivunder.net/signatures/underskriftindsamling_mod_biogasanlag_i_vig/). Common reasons cited were concerns about the smell (as a nuisance to locals and as a threat to tourism in the area), increase in heavy traffic in the area, a ruined view, decrease in property value in the area, and that people in the immediate vicinity will not benefit from the plant as the electricity is to be transported to another municipality. Another petition protesting the plan allegedly got 1,400 signatures (https://www.sn.dk/danmark/debat-biogas-bliver-et-vigtigt-valgemne/). The most active forum for protest, however, was a Facebook group entitled "Biogas Plant – Vig – NO THANK YOU!" [Biogas anlæg – Vig – NEJ TAK!] (https://www.facebook.com/groups/2020822344812065). The group is open, currently has 731 members (November 1, 2023), and is the primary forum for resistance to the plant. The founder of the group remains the most active participant. A common complaint among protestors was that neither city officials nor local politicians responded to their numerous objections, regardless of how they tried to get through to them (letters, phone calls, local paper opinion pieces, Facebook, etc.). As late as spring 2021, local dissatisfaction with the plan was still big enough to make it a key theme in the local elections. In the new city council there was, however, unanimous support for continuing with the plan[2].

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[2] See https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/regionale/sjaelland/ny-borgmester-vil-ikke-droppe-omdiskuteret-biogasanlaeg.

6 Disagreement Regarding Claims of Policy: The 'Quiet Treatment' as Disrespectful and Potentially Harmful to the Local Debate Culture

In general, citizens who participated in the debate about the biogas plant in Vig agree that global warming and climate change present a significant problem to society and that the promotion of green technologies is a solution. What they disagree about is what kind of technologies and not least their location. While the citizens who are against placing the biogas plant in Vig argue in public (in local newspapers, commentaries in continuation of an online petition and the public Facebook group), the politicians who voted for the local plan have kept rather quiet since the approval in 2017 and have primarily deliberated at city council meetings and apparently also at meetings with industrial partners from the energy industry and local farmers. Even when the citizens call for reactions from the politicians and stakeholders (sometimes directly by name), they are met with silence. Below are some examples from the Facebook group "Biogas Plant – Vig – NO THANK YOU!" where local citizens express their frustration with the silent decision makers (see Figs. 2 and 3):

Another citizen also takes a humorous approach to the lack of reactions from the politicians by posting a gif showing an armadillo rolling into a ball when there is danger (see Fig. 4).

These excerpts illustrate citizens' frustration with something which arguably is fundamental to public argumentation, namely adherence to common discursive norms such as acknowledging questions and answering them. The posting citizens clearly do not find that the politicians have lived up to this and their frustration feeds into sarcastic comments about if they can even explain their position for the biogas plant.

As we have suggested above, ignoring the opposing side's points is tantamount to not engaging them at all and thus a way of shutting them down. What we see in the biogas plant debate is that politicians and stakeholders who are for the biogas plant in Vig seem to have stopped arguing in support of their decision—at least in the forums favoured by the opponents. Even after a thorough review of the debate, arguments

Fig. 2 Post on May 4, 2022, by local citizen: "Before the last election in 2021, some new politicians have admitted that they are against …. But now all politicians are silent! All criticism is shut down with resounding, disgusting silence!"

Fig. 3 Comments to the above post on May 4, 2022, by other local citizens: Comment #1: "I wonder if there are any politicians out there who have really good explanations?? It makes no sense to me." Comment #2: "Would it be completely impossible to arrange a public meeting with politicians from both municipalities." Comment #3: "We tried it earlier. But it's not realistic because there is no political will …. and look at this thread … not a single politician has commented…"

Fig. 4 Post on March 31, 2022 by local citizen: "The reaction from the latest three city councils, including mayors, municipal councils, law departments and administration when the Vig biogas case comes up"

supporting the specific technology and the specific placement are very hard to find, not only in the Facebook group but also in local and national newspapers. It is also noticeable that opponents of the biogas plant in Vig seem willing to consider alternative proposals for solving the green transition for much longer than the politicians. They suggest, for example, solar cells and wind energy and specific alternative locations for such technology in the local area. These alternatives are, however, again primarily debated by the local citizens and not politicians and stakeholders[3].

Of course, one can ask if the politicians are obliged to continue debating a proposal that has already been voted through. Or, in other words, once an issue has been through the proper hearing and is politically decided, when is the time to move on and use one's attention and energy for other causes? We believe that as long as there is massive popular resistance expressed in various fora, politicians would be well advised to stand by their decision and explain and defend it. For example, in the debate about the biogas plant in Vig, the arguments for choosing the specific technology and its placement are not publicly available and the responsible politicians neither seek opportunities nor respond to the apparent need to rehearse them. This may well be a key cause of the dissatisfaction, and a cause of declining trust in the political system. Local decision makers are clearly up against the 'not in my backyard' (NIMBY) phenomenon, a colloquialism signifying one's opposition to the locating of something considered undesirable in one's neighbourhood (Kinder 2022). But even if the only way to appease proponents of the NIMBY position would be to cancel the plans and place the plant elsewhere, the politicians make matters worse by not engaging their critics to at least justify their choice of location. We believe that the politicians would be well-advised to regularly rehearse their reasons for their decision when it is challenged by local protestors, not to win the sceptics over, but at least to give them some arguments and thereby qualify the decision. As time goes by the expectation that politicians stand up for the decision and repeat their reasons for it of course decreases unless new information or new arguments for or against emerge. Still, we would argue that citizens have a reasonable expectation to get a response when they try to engage politicians in debate. 'The quiet treatment' is likely to be taken as a sign of disrespect or disregard and may also lead locals to speculate that information is being kept from them. Even if discussion of a particular matter at some point must come to a stop because the matter is too far along to cancel or change, a healthy debate culture requires that its participants leave it without feeling disrespected.

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[3] However, we have found one video post in the Facebook group "Biogas Plant – Vig – NO THANK YOU!" on March 15, 2022, by a local city council member for The Social Democrats, suggesting placing the biogas plant in Audebo, an area with only few houses and "a dam that already smells".

7 Disagreement Regarding Claims of Value: Explicating, Prioritising, and Relating Values as Conversational Care

The debate about the biogas plant also illustrates how the arguments rest on different values, and that these only to a minimal extent are addressed and explicitly commented on by debaters on either side. This is to be expected as values often function as implicit warrants in the arguments, but, nonetheless, further explication could be a way of making the different values at stake clearer. This would call on debaters to consider their personal values and the prioritisation of these values and relate these to those of their counterparts in a respectful way, e.g., acknowledging that – although different from one's own, the opponent's values and the prioritisation of these does not have to be completely off. The value of a green transition seems to be something both sides agree on. However, other values are also at stake: While the citizens in Vig argue on the basis of values that have to do with avoiding nuisance (smell, noise, increased heavy traffic, threat to everyday life and cultural life), the politicians and stakeholders make arguments that build on values of environmental solidarity (maybe it's bad for Vig, but it's good for the world) and integrity (keeping a promise to local farmers and the industry). In a public statement the former mayor, who after poor results in the local election in November 2021 had to resign from office[4], states that the solution with a biogas plant in Vig "may not popular… but it is necessary" (see Fig. 5).

In the same post, the former mayor arguably makes a strawman when saying that "Odsherred must take responsibility for the green transition" ["Odsherred skal tage ansvar for den grønne omstilling"], thereby implying that the citizens opposing the biogas plant do not or will not take responsibility for the transformation to a more green and sustainable heath production. Doing so, he ignores the fact that local citizens had proposed alternative ways of contributing to the green transition. What we see here is that the discussion based on values is characterised by a lack of willingness to relate to values thematized by the opposing part, both in specific argumentation for a specific value and used as warrants in policy claims. As Rawls reminds us, values are incommensurable and cannot be reduced to a common measure (Rawls 1971). Even so, the values used in a debate can be more explicitly addressed, and arguers can make an effort relating to and recognizing other peoples' values without abandoning their own viewpoint. In other words, if arguers acknowledge and address their opponents' guiding values, they stand a better chance of helping third party onlookers get something out of the debate to help them form their own opinion. Moreover, and significantly for our point here, is that it improves chances of keeping the conversation going because this gesture of acknowledgement and discussion signals respect for the critics and a good faith willingness to find the best solution.

Above, we have primarily criticised the politicians for their 'quiet treatment' of the local protesters because of the potential damage that this might cause in the long run for the debate culture in the municipality. The same willingness to establish a respectful relationship is, of course, incumbent upon the citizens. In this case, the citizens

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[4] An election result which by several observers was regarded as a consequence of the decision about the biogas plant.

Fig. 5 On November 3, 2021, during the local elections, the local former mayor participated in a Danish National Radio program. On his Facebook, he wrote: "Wednesday morning at 8.30, I will participate in P1 Morgen. P1 tells the story that it costs local votes in the local election to stick to green transition projects. My answer is: It is the municipality's credibility with companies and investors that is at stake if you cancel the local plan. The municipality of Odsherred must also take responsibility for the green transition and more difficult choices about wind turbines and solar cells will come in the following years. It may not be popular…. but it is necessary"

might have contributed to a better relation to those in power if they had acknowledged the shared value of green transition more and used this as a starting point for a more constructive and engaging debate. This would have been an indication to the politicians that they as citizens were not just focused on their individual local needs but were willing to take responsibility for and be committed to their local community contributing to the green transition. Reaching out and making an effort to point to the common values, if any, is also a symbolic gesture likely to make the other party more willing to participate in a respectful conversation.

8 Disagreement Regarding Claims of Facts and Definition: Keeping the Conversation by Acknowledging Disagreement about Realities

Obvious from most current political debates is that disagreement does not only occur in relation to what to do, but also in discussion of what 'the facts' and definitions are or should be. Hence, the meta-norm of keeping the conversation going should not only concern claims of policy and value but all four types of claims.

In the debate about the biogas plant, one of the factual claims discussed is whether biogas plants are a climate gain or not—if biogas can accurately be characterised as "green energy" which is a question of definition. When the local debate about the biogas plant in Vig was at its height, the Danish Energy Agency published a report documenting that the biogas plants emit far more harmful methane gas than first assumed. This news was shared in the Facebook group and the local critics of the biogas plant refer to the agency's questioning of the climate gain and that the technology is not economically sustainable without substantial support by the government. However, as far as we know, this information did not become part of the more general debate but circulated only among the sceptical citizens (see Fig. 6).

Another claim of fact that the local citizens try to establish or gain adherence to in the Facebook feed is that biogas plants are smelly and noisy. This claim is primar-

Fig. 6 Post on November 26, 2021, by a local citizen who links to a journalistic article entitled: "The state pumps billions of kroner into biogas plants with dubious climate gains" from the industry organisation "The engineer" ["Ingeniøren"] on a new report from The Danish Energy Agency

ily supported by citizens' own amateur video recordings and evidential, experience-based descriptions from already existing plants. As with every argument, you can discuss the quality of it (are the recordings truly representative?, are expert arguments better than citizen observations?, etc.), but nonetheless, this is a central factual claim that is highly relevant, but seems to be ignored as part of the debate. A last category of factual claims are predictions about the future. For example, that a biogas plant will ruin tourism in the area, and that real estate prices will drop dramatically. Both arguments are hard to substantiate because they are complex claims that include hypothetical prospects about complicated, future, causal relationships. Even so, these may be relevant aspects to consider when wanting to promote green transition in a particular area.

As with the other claims in the debate, the politicians and stakeholders do not comment on these claims of fact and definition which we see as a potentially damaging silence. We are not saying that politicians are obliged to reconsider decisions already made every time some new information appears. However, maintaining a healthy debate culture requires acknowledgement of one's opponents' arguments, and this is no less important when new information becomes available. If politicians more willingly acknowledged relevant new information and explained why they did not find it substantial enough to reconsider the decision, or why they simply still disagreed, this would probably benefit their credibility and citizen trust. Again, as with the disagreement about policy and value claims, we believe that 'the quiet treatment' can potentially damage the relationship between actors in a political debate and therefore must be a main concern.

8.1   A Concern for the Relationship and the Debate Culture Itself, not just Getting One's way

Considered from a distance, the local debate about the biogas generator might strike one as a comedy of errors—heated and chaotic, yet even though especially one side of the debate is extremely frustrated, it never turns hostile or threatening. As suggested in some of the text examples above, there is room for humour and light-hearted banter. The post above with the armadillo might be a good example of Tracy's notion of "reasonable hostility" in its clear expression of dissatisfaction with the politicians' reactions. In virtue of its joking manner, it makes the criticism bearable to all parties in the controversy. Still, absence of open hostility is an unacceptably low threshold for evaluating public discussion. Our analysis shows that protesters' frustration grows with time and their distrust in the politicians seems to increase correspondingly. We believe the key to this problem might lie in the local politicians' tendency to not respond to the criticism of the project as it unfolds in the Facebook group and in the local paper. This is very much in line with Mutz' concept of "hostile silence" (2006, 62): an unfortunate consequence of a deliberative situation where the parties hold very different views and understandings of the world. For their part, the politicians might say that they have publicly debated the issue in the town council, at the public hearing held in connection with the initial hearing process leading up to the decisive city council meeting when the plan was passed, and later (after the decision was made) at election campaign meetings. They might thus consider the case closed.

However, we here argue that paying attention not only to the specific case and its decision, but also to the general debate environment or culture should be encouraged. The reason is simple: The future will hold issues to be debated and call for new decisions to be made. An open-minded and respectful relationship among the participants in a political debate is a fundamental requirement for a well-functioning democracy. As we read the case, the local politicians won the battle, but possibly lost the war in the sense that they lost credibility among some voters and were (partially) responsible for poisoning the well of the local debate climate. This to such an extent that a public meeting was held in January 2020 with the express purpose of fostering "better dialogue between citizens and politicians" and helping both groups become "better at listening" to each other. The organiser of this event specified the need for politicians to become better at involving citizens in decision making processes and for citizens to become better at listening to politicians' arguments for promoting comprehensive solutions[5]. The event, thus, clearly was intended to facilitate 'keeping the local conversation going', e.g., by committing to more mutually acceptable approaches to their disagreement. While we recognize this as a commendable initiative, we believe that a commitment to a shared meta-norm as the one we recommend could have spurred timelier attention to, and intervention in, the dysfunctional debate. Moreover, paying attention to the different kinds of claims and how disagreement can occur not only about policy claims but about all three kinds of claims, is a way to scaffold an inclusive practice that not only embraces disagreement about policy and values but also facts. To become a robust argumentative practice, debaters should not only focus on winning over a majority to a given policy claim in a political representative decision-making body. Especially not if this is accompanied by ignoring and neglecting citizens' values and worldviews. Doing so constitutes a major risk of poisoning the debate climate in the long run with consequences much worse than the disagreement in the particular case. When Karen Tracy suggests that we "need a communicative ideal that takes account of […] multiple aims and competing values" (Tracy 2010, 21), we agree with her and add that different ways of viewing realities must also be something that a sustainable debate culture strives to overcome, accept, and handle in a way preventing larger groups of people in a society from feeling disregarded. Lack of consensus about both policies, values and facts is something that occurs all the time, and to cultivate a productive debate culture, we must find ways of accepting and handling disagreement as part of a political debate and find ways to detect, reflect on and live with discrepancies without dismantling the relationship.

The point we wish to take from this is that to some members of the local population, obviously mainly the neighbours to the new plant, the conversation was *not* over the moment the plan was voted through in the city council, and that treating it as such was a mistake by the politicians. Had the politicians to a higher degree engaged the protesting citizens, demonstrably listening to their concerns and answering them along the way, this probably would not have persuaded the neighbours to the plant that it was a good idea to place it in Vig, but they might have felt less frustrated and ignored if politicians had explicated why their concerns regarding e.g. unsus-

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[5] See https://www.sn.dk/odsherred-kommune/som-i-hakkebakkeskoven-bedre-dialog-mellem-politikere-og-borgere/.

tainable transportation of manure and the nuisance and potential consequences for local tourism of a smelly environment did not weigh heavier in the decision making process. The case suggests the relevance of a meta-norm of public argumentation to the effect of taking responsibility for the debate culture in which a particular issue is debated. Given that political questions cannot be 'resolved' in the sense of reaching consensus, and that compromise and majority decisions are the way of democracy, it is important that debaters show concern for the debate itself (and not just getting their way) in order not to foreclose future deliberation. We therefore suggest that an additional perspective should be added to the way we evaluate public argumentation: its ability to not undermine continued debate. From a rhetorical perspective, norms that guide political debate should spring from the overall goal of securing collective measures to cultivating public debate as a forum for engaged discussion and competition of views and understandings of realities that citizens, politicians, and others do not withdraw from, but consider relevant, safe, and helpful are crucial to the health of democratic societies.

Declarations

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