

VOLUME IX

THE INTERNATIONAL
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
COMMUNICATION

EDITED BY | WOLFGANG DONSBACH

PRECISION JOURNALISM –
RHETORIC IN WESTERN EUROPE: BRITAIN



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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2008 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2008

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

The international encyclopedia of communication/edited by Wolfgang Donsbach.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-3199-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Communication—Encyclopedias. I. Donsbach, Wolfgang, 1949–

P87.5.158 2008

302.203—dc22

2007047271

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Minion

by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Printed in Singapore

by C.O.S. Printers Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

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Public Meetings

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A public meeting is a gathering in which there are limited, if any, restrictions on who may participate. Public meetings, as an ideal, are a form of democracy (→ Public Sphere), but in fact are often viewed as frustrating and futile. Researchers have studied issues and topics related to public meetings (e.g., leadership, public participation); there is now increased attention on studying public meetings themselves as structured communication events. Labeling an event as a meeting calls attention to the communicative dimensions of this activity. Communication scholars have examined public meetings as situations in which identity, social action, and culture, among other practices, are enacted.

Scholars have specified two or, more commonly, three participants as a minimum for constituting a meeting. While people may gather in a variety of situations, not all gatherings are labeled as meetings; e.g., it would be unusual to call a gathering of friends a meeting. A meeting is explicitly framed as such by participants, but not all meetings are public. For those that are, the public may be involved as observers or participants. Public meetings usually have a *specific structure* and *rules for participation* (e.g., parliamentary procedures or *Robert's Rules of Order*). One characteristic of public meetings that distinguishes them from organizational meetings is that the latter form is more open in terms of participation. Also, the latter will have several audiences, some of which may not even be physically present at the time of a meeting but may know of the discussion through mediated forms of communication, such as print or television broadcast. Several types of meetings fall within the domain of public meetings, including public hearings, public inquiries, town meetings, and some board meetings (this last area intersects the domains of the public and organizational study).

Tracy and Dimock (2004) outline two major *research traditions* that provide an understanding of public meetings: public deliberation and public participation. The former area focuses on a normative ideal for the type of communication that should occur during public meetings: talk is rational and assumes equality among participants. Public participation research examines views of participants regarding public meetings. Tracy and Dimock fault both areas for failing to pay attention to the actual communication practices associated with public meetings.

Language and social interaction scholars have used various *perspectives* to study the actual communication practices associated with public meetings; these perspectives include → ethnography of communication, → discourse analysis, → ethnomethodology, → conversation analysis, speech act theory, and critical/narrative approaches. While meetings have been a part of the background context for many studies, Schwartzman (1989) was among the first to call attention to the need to study meetings in and of themselves as communication events. Applying an ethnography of communication framework, Schwartzman identified the varying structures, purposes, participants, settings, and norms for meetings. Several studies have highlighted the role of culture in meeting discourse (e.g., Brison 1992). Because talk and culture are interconnected,

participants may have varying assumptions regarding the purpose of talk during a meeting (e.g., to convey information, to express emotions, to present arguments, etc.). Discourse analysts have shown how differences in participant background can contribute to different meanings for words that are used during meetings, possibly leading to sustained disagreement (e.g., Gephart 1992). More recently, the action-implicative discourse analytic approach (→ Action-Implicative Discourse Analysis) has been applied specifically to examining school board meetings and how participants, through their language use, construct identity and negotiate their interactional dilemmas (e.g., Tracy & Ashcraft 2001).

One *challenge* in the study of public meetings deals with definition. As described earlier, public meetings have been included in many studies as part of a context, but not necessarily as the main focus per se. One reason for this relates to how the unit of analysis is defined for a given study. For example, the topic of focus may be the group (e.g., a governing board) or the purpose (e.g., decision-making, problem-solving, deliberation). Focusing on the group as the unit of study, however, highlights participants rather than communication. Orientation to purpose brings the focus back to communication, but identifying type of talk ahead of time forecloses consideration of the multiple forms of talk that may occur during a public meeting and what those forms may contribute to the various outcomes of a meeting. The most promising future direction for research on public meetings is the development of a practical theory approach (Craig 1989). Practical theory examines communication as naturally occurring practices and seeks to understand the situated ideals of participants for their communication practices. Within the frame of public meetings, a key issue is how participants manage multiple, and possibly competing, goals such as how to develop a consensus or community while voicing individual preferences.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Action-Implicative Discourse Analysis ▶ Conversation Analysis ▶ Deliberativeness in Political Communication ▶ Discourse Analysis ▶ Ethnography of Communication ▶ Ethnomethodology ▶ Language and Social Interaction ▶ Public Sphere

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Public Opinion

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Bearing the dubious distinction of being one of the oldest, yet least understood, concepts in social science, *public opinion* continues to inspire and perplex scholars from communication and other fields. The term can be adequately defined as a general measure of the directionality and strength of issue-specific views and sentiments held by a relevant group. Public opinion bears a sort of syntactical internal contradiction: While “public” denotes the group and the universal, “opinion” on its own is typically associated with the individual and considered a somewhat internal, subjective formulation. The rise of survey research during the early twentieth century further complicated matters with a trend toward quantifying public opinion as a simple aggregation of individual survey responses (→ Survey; Public Opinion Polling). The rejection of such mathematical reductions – along with the suggestion that public opinion was in fact a group-level social force iteratively constructed through interpersonal interaction and media use (→ Interpersonal Communication; Political Media Use; Media Use by Social Variable) – set the stage for a social science debate that has continued for well over 50 years.

HISTORICAL APPROACHES

The French term “l’opinion publique,” originally attributed to sixteenth-century French Renaissance writer Montaigne, was adopted in European thinking as political power and decision-making shifted away from the monarchy and toward the citizenry during the Enlightenment. With the advent of the printing press (→ Printing, History of), knowledge became more distributed within societies, and this led to a realization that it might be possible to arrive at better decisional outcomes if more affected parties (i.e., the citizenry) were consulted. Until recent times, however, the citizenry considered to have a voice consisted primarily of land-owning, wealthy white males. One of the earliest problems to arise in conceptualizing what constituted public opinion was the difficulty of coming to some type of decisional outcome at the end of a public opinion process in which many different viewpoints were voiced. When parties disagreed, it was difficult to discern (1)