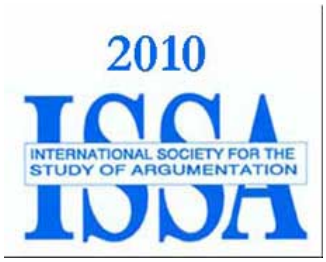
ISSA Proceedings 2010 – The Language Of Democracy And Power, Spoken By Women: Challenging Political Exclusion Through Formal Argumentation



1. Introduction

When Frans van Eemeren surveyed the state of argumentation theory in 1995 he concluded, "argumentative discussion is the main tool for managing democratic processes" and suggested that "argumentation should be valued as the elixir of life of participatory democracy" (p. 145). In the fifteen years since this statement, many studies have emphasized connections between argumentation and participatory democracy (e.g., Bohman 2001, Gutman and Thompson 1996, Keith 2007). For example, Hicks' (2002) research illuminates how argumentation procedures not only govern political deliberation, but also "constitute … the reflexive, self-correcting agents who are able to create and sustain deliberative democracy" (p. 139). Hicks and other contemporary scholars examine and emphasize the value of the practice and study of argumentation in civic organizations (Forester 1996, Keith 2007, Weitzel and Geist 1998, Zompetti 2006), suggesting that one of the most effective ways to promote political skill and reduce inequality among citizens is to promote the use of formal methods of argumentation in municipal assemblies, clubs, and voluntary organizations (Hicks 2002, p. 234).

Yet other scholars such as Robert Roy Reed and Elsa Barkley Brown question the potential of the study and practice of formal methods of argumentation to foster equitable deliberation and democracy, particularly in civic organizations. In fact, several recent studies show that the use of parliamentary procedure, a method designed to aid groups in the efficient and democratic conduct of business, effectively limited participation–particularly the participation of marginalized citizens–in civic organizations and public debate. For example, Brown's (1994) analysis of artifacts of civic organizations in the nineteenth century United States,

reveals that when these organizations adopted *Robert's Rules of Order*, a popular form of parliamentary procedure, "questions of qualifications for participation in the external political arena and internal community institutions" shifted dramatically (p. 135). In particular, these questions challenged the right of female and African Americans members to participate by pointing out "their unfamiliarity with parliamentary procedure or their inelegant ways of speaking" (p. 135). Thus, the introduction of parliamentary procedure precipitated a significant decline in the participation and power of such citizens.

Similarly, Reed's (1990) investigation of the effects of formal rules of debate in late twentieth century Portuguese municipal assemblies shows that the implementation of *Robert's Rules of Order* created a sharp divide between those who had experience with the *Rules* and those who did not. Those familiar with and adept at using parliamentary procedure gained greater control of assemblies and public prestige, while those who found *Robert's Rules* to be a "strange, confusing, and artificial way of organizing debate" disengaged from debate and lost power (p. 137-138).

Historical case studies such as these support the broader claims of Iris Marion Young (1990 and 2001), who theorizes that the valorization of formal rules of debate is a form of "cultural imperialism" that too often has undemocratic effects, particularly for historically marginalized groups. Even those who valorize argumentation's potential to increase civic engagement seem to question the value of parliamentary procedure to that end: As van Eemeren (1995) concludes, true democracy "cannot be achieved by enforcing imitation of formal procedures" (p. 153).

In light of recent case studies and findings, scholars such as Young press us to consider whether the practice of formal methods of argumentation such as parliamentary procedure can cultivate skills and constitute identities in ways that foster equity and the political participation of marginalized people. My current work explores this issue by analyzing the use of parliamentary procedure by civic organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States. Although it is clear that the use of parliamentary procedure can constrain democratic participation, my research shows that in certain contexts such formal methods of argumentation can improve the participation and status of marginalized citizens. Specifically, I find that through methods of argumentation such as *Robert's Rules of Order*, disenfranchised women in the United States not

only cultivated argumentation skills but also constituted themselves as political participants and challenged exclusionary norms. In the context of the turn of the twentieth century United States –where it was illegal for women to vote and a violation of cultural norms for women to engage in public speech and debate – such achievements were remarkable.

In brief, the practice of formal argumentation in civic clubs created forums in which women had a voice and vote in matters of collective concern. As they participated in meetings and activities, members cultivated skills that were essential to participation in the public realm, such as parliamentary techniques, public speaking, research and argumentation, and deep understanding of democratic process. Instead of public silence, activities such as asking questions, debating issues, advancing arguments, and voting became normal for women in the club forum. As they engaged in these discursive activities, women demonstrated that the language of politics and power that had appeared to be the exclusive domain of men was in fact available to them; moreover, as they practiced parliamentary procedure and worked to enact the majority will, women found ways to make democracy work for them, rendering it something other than a politics of exclusion practiced by men in power.

2. Practicing Deliberative Democracy

In 1895, more than 800,000 U.S. women belonged to women's clubs in the United States (Blair 1980, p. 61). These local civic organizations, which numbered in the thousands, existed in communities throughout the country and often adopted *Robert's Rules of Order* to manage their meetings (Blair 1980, pp. 69, 114, 117; Scott 1992, pp. 81, 101, 120). In fact, the high rate of adoption of *Robert's Rules* by women's clubs prompted the publication of bestselling books that offered guidelines for clubwomen seeking to learn parliamentary procedure (Fox 1902, Prichard 1894, Roberts 1914, Shattuck 1891, Shattuck 1898, Shattuck 1915, Strong-Tracy 1909). Although the excellent historical work of Blair and Scott establishes the widespread adoption of parliamentary procedure among turn of the century women's clubs, it offers little insight into the use and impact of this formal method of argumentation. To better understand the dynamic between clubwomen, parliamentary procedure, and participatory democracy, I examined records – which included more than 700 pages of meeting minutes, roll books, presentation manuscripts, and resolutions – of women's clubs in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. In particular, my archival research and

analysis focused on the Woman's Club of Portland, the Woman's Club of Olympia, the Spokane Sorosis Club, and a Seattle African American woman's club originally known as the Clover Leaf Art Club, because there exist clear records of these organizations' activities and accomplishments. It is important to note that although there are a number of differences among these clubs – such as the ethnic and economic status of their members – together they well represent the club movement. Moreover, these clubs share two common and significant features. First, when these clubs were founded their members lacked experience with parliamentary procedure, and second, their mission statements affirmed traditional – apolitical – roles for women.

The express purposes of such clubs were to "make better wives and mothers" and "to lift homes to higher levels" (Woman's Club of Portland Minute Book [WCPMB] December 1895-March 1900, p. 1). Such objectives were in keeping with norms of the time, which emphasized that women were to preside over family life and model piety in the private sphere, not to participate in public speech, debate, or politics. Yet even as the expressed mission of women's clubs suggested that they did not intend to challenge cultural norms, club activities did exactly that, developing new and broader roles for their members, transforming women from individuals ensconced in the private realm to skilled political participants.

This evolution was swift and significant: between 1895 and 1912, clubs that initially devoted their time to activities such as music and the practice of parliamentary drills reshaped themselves as powerful political organizations and achieved an impressive array of public reforms, including the passage and enforcement of progressive labor laws, establishment of state libraries supported by new tax measures, the implementation of land use laws, the effectuation of pure food regulations and appointment of market inspectors, the election of women to school boards and city offices, and ultimately the remarkable achievement of voting rights for women in Washington and Oregon. To provide a synopsis of four ways in which parliamentary procedure empowered disenfranchised clubwomen to engage in public life and politics, I will focus my analysis on the specific case of the Portland Woman's Club.

The second official meeting of the Portland Woman's Club was called to order in room 321 of the Portland Hotel at 2 o'clock on January 14, 1896. Just a few minutes later, club members voted to adjourn the meeting temporarily and to relocate to the hotel lobby, as their room was "altogether too small to

accommodate the 100 more ladies who were crowding into it" (WCPMB December 1895-March 1900, p. 4). After the group settled into the large lobby, it turned to the business of the day: enrolling new members, debating and voting on a club constitution, appointing a committee to select a name for the club, and voting to meet again. This meeting, like every other official gathering of the Woman's Club, was governed by parliamentary procedure, a deliberative method designed to aid groups in the efficient and democratic conduct of business. In fact, this form of communication was used to decide virtually every matter that came before the club. In the club's early years, these included questions such as whether members should sign their own or their husbands' given names in the record book; the choice of location, time, and subjects for club meetings; the selection of a club flower; the price of membership dues; the allotment of club funds; the formation of committees and departments; the acceptance of invitations to collaborate with other women's organizations; permission to publish papers that were presented by club members at meetings; the creation of memorials to the state legislature; the organization of a state federation of women's clubs; and the generation of protests to the U.S. Congress (WCPMB December 1895-March 1900; WCPMB April 1900-December 1902; WCPMB January 1903-May 1905).

From the beginning, parliamentary procedure was not only a form of discourse that clubwomen used to manage activities; it was also a subject that they actively studied, practiced and discussed. Club records note that women frequently devoted afternoons to parliamentary drills, that they organized discussions on the topic, "The Science of Government as Applied to Parliamentary Law," and that they established a permanent department for the study of "Expression and Parliamentary Law" (WCPMB December 1895-March 1900, pp. 42, 82). Such engagement with parliamentary law and procedure was characteristic of most women's clubs in the Pacific Northwest. The founders of the Olympia Woman's Club in Washington, for example, perceived the practice to be so important that before initiating any club meetings, they copied fifteen pages on parliamentary procedure from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – by hand – to use for guidance (Haarsager 1997, pp. 134-35). Similarly, African American clubwomen in the Pacific Northwest spent large amounts of time studying and practicing the rules of parliamentary procedure. Women's clubs throughout the region had parliamentary drills as a regular feature of their meetings, and they often appointed a member to serve as a parliamentary critic and keep the rules straight

(Dickenson 1987, p. 67; Haarsager 1997, pp. 134-135).

The Woman's Club of Portland employed *Robert's Rules of Order*, which was touted as "The Standard Parliamentary Authority" at the turn of the century ("Advertisements and Reviews" 1899, p. 1). Members believed that *Robert's Rules* well suited the goals of the club, as it instructed leaders "on how to run the meeting, but also gave the least experienced member on the floor the skills necessary to participate fully in that meeting" (Doyle 1980, p. 18). The *Rules* provided procedures for conducting meetings in a way that enabled all members to be heard yet retained the right of the majority to decide questions (Robert 1915, pp. 178-202). In addition to providing clubwomen – most of whom were inexperienced in public forums – with guidelines for participation, the study and practice of parliamentary procedure contributed to the development of women's political participation in four specific ways: it enabled them to develop speaking abilities while retaining a sense of propriety, it cultivated their faith and ability to participate in the democratic process, it fostered their public authority, and it challenged negative cultural assumptions about women.

In regard to the first achievement, it is important to recognize that it was profoundly difficult for women to speak out in public gatherings in the turn of the twentieth century United States, even gatherings that consisted entirely of women. Sandra Haarsager (1997) proposes, "one reason for the club movement's success" at this time "was that clubs offered safe settings, not only a haven for women to study and deliberate issues of importance, but also a safe 'platform' from which to speak to an understanding and supportive audience" (p. 58). Building on Haarsager's scholarship, I suggest that clubs were important sites to foster women's development as public speakers, not simply because they offered an opportunity to speak to audiences that were generally all-female and supportive, but because they provided members with clear and realizable guidelines for discursive participation in a group. By teaching and practicing parliamentary procedure, clubs offered women an opportunity to learn to speak "properly" in a public forum, thereby providing a structure in which women could voice arguments without necessarily violating norms of decorum. In short, by establishing clear guidelines for propriety within the context of debate, parliamentary procedure liberated women to speak.

In fact, as clubwomen practiced parliamentary procedure, speech rather than silence became the norm for women's behavior in the quasi-public forum of the

club. In order to carry out *Robert's Rules*, members of the Woman's Club had to speak at each meeting, even if it was simply to voice a yea or nay vote. Beyond the practice of voting vocally, *Robert's Rules* provided instructions that made it feasible for club members to participate in forms of discourse that ranged from reading aloud to extemporaneous debate. Members could and did engage in a variety of speech acts as parliamentarians: voting, sharing club minutes, presenting information, making motions, and contributing to debate about an issue before the group. In an organization governed by parliamentary procedure, women could progress through various kinds of speech acts at their own pace or comfort level, while maintaining an equal vote in club business. Moreover, they had the opportunity to observe other women engaged in forms of public discourse; through this combination of activities, club practice of parliamentary procedure established alternative norms for feminine propriety and agency, norms that affirmed women's public speech.

Second, for clubwomen, *Robert's Rules* provided training in deliberative democracy and cultivated faith in the democratic process. Conducted according to the norms of parliamentary procedure, club meetings reflected what English (1961) defines as "the five steps of democratic action" (p. 17). Minute books show that club members fulfilled these five steps as they 1) voted to assemble, determining the time, location, selected and a subject matter for each meeting, 2) had an idea or argument presented to the group by members, 3) engaged in consideration and debate of the argument, 4) proposed, voted on, and accepted a majority decision in regard to a response to the argument, and 5) carried out the majority decision. Simply put, working according to this pattern offered training in democratic action as it encouraged women to speak, debate, vote, and enact the will of the majority.

The minutes of a March 1896 club meeting offer insight into the democratic practices of the organization. The meeting began with the reading of meeting minutes and the admission of new members, and then turned to performances by club members. This portion of the program featured a presentation entitled "Dante – Sketch of His Life and Review of Some of His Best Works" by Mrs. M. E. Young, an instrumental solo by Mrs. W. E. Thomas, a reading of the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem "Divinia Commedia" by Miss Mary A. Rockey, and a vocal performance of a song entitled "Dawn" by Mrs. J. Cader Powell. These cultural activities were followed by a formal presentation on the practical

question of the day entitled “Some Defects in Our Educational System,” by Mrs. R. H. Miller. After Miller’s lecture, the club engaged in a discussion of “the inferiority of public schools to the training and fitting of youth for the battle of life.” At the conclusion of the lengthy discussion, a member moved that the club send a letter to the *Oregonian,* requesting that the newspaper publish the text of Miller’s presentation on the issue. The motion carried, and a committee was appointed to send a letter on behalf of the club to the popular local newspaper, the *Oregonian* (WCPMB December 1895-March 1900, p. 13-14).

As they addressed issues that ranged from the educational system to food safety, clubwomen performed as democratic citizens, researching problems, making public presentations, debating the merits of issues, voting on courses of action, and electing representatives to lead initiatives and act on behalf of the group. In the club forum, women voted, and their votes were the force that authorized collective action. In the club setting, women discovered that democracy could work for them – that it could be something other than the model that dominated U.S. politics, the model that promised a government of, by, and for the people yet denied the franchise to more than half of the adult population.

Third, the use of *Robert’s Rules* fostered a sense of agency and authority among clubwomen, who described parliamentary procedure as “the language of democracy and power, spoken by men” (Haarsager 1997, p. 138). As members of the Portland Woman’s Club “pursued parliamentary usage with a view of having a more accurate knowledge of one’s rights upon the floor and one’s duty in an assembly,” (*Club Life* 1902, p. 3) they demonstrated that the mode of deliberative exchange that governed political arenas such as the U.S. Congress was one that could be learned, applied, and mastered by women. Knowledge of and skill in parliamentary tactics supplied women with a sense of accomplishment, and a realization that they were qualified not only to participate in political deliberation but also to provide public leadership.

In her 1897 address as club president, for example, Mrs. J. C. Card theorized, “the reference to parliamentary law leads to the suggestion that there is always danger in a deliberative body of making parliamentary rules into some sort of fetish. Lawyers are not the only people who lose sight of the merits of a cause in the technicalities of its management. Witness the way in which ‘the rules’ have tied half the business of our Congress hand and foot” (p. 1). This passage made a remarkable assertion: as it warned of dangers that existed for practitioners of

parliamentary procedure, it compared its audience of disenfranchised clubwomen to congressmen, suggesting that women had the skill to avoid the deliberative dangers that snared powerful men and U.S. government. In short club records suggest that women's mastery of parliamentary techniques led them to believe that they could behave as democratic citizens as well as – if not better than – men.

Moreover, clubwomen's expertise in parliamentary procedure created opportunities for them to assume positions of leadership in the wider public realm; for example, the Portland Woman's Club taught and demonstrated *Robert's Rules* before large audiences at fairs and other gatherings (Portland Woman's Club Records, Willamette Valley Chautauqua Records, Eva Emery Dye Papers). As clubwomen led men and women in parliamentary exercises, mock debates, and real debates from these public stages, they performed as public authorities. In this sense, expertise in parliamentary procedure occasionally served as a surrogate for political power, connoting women's authority and providing a means to assert women's qualifications for increased participation in the public realm.

Fourth, as it cultivated public speaking skills, democratic experience, authority and agency, the use of parliamentary procedure by the Woman's Club of Portland challenged negative cultural assumptions about women. Clubwomen consciously worked to "supplant a popular image of chatty, illogical matrons with that of businesslike reformers," and their argumentation method contributed to this end. According to local newspaper reports, women's skilled use of parliamentary procedure demonstrated that they "were capable of being independent citizens rather than subject to undue direction by priests, husbands, or other authorities," and that women could engage in rational public deliberation **(***Club Life* 1902, p. 3**)**. By 1916, women were so well known for their excellent use of parliamentary procedure that Henry M. Robert, the author of *Robert's Rules*, declared, "In this country, a knowledge of parliamentary law [is] an essential part of the education of every manly man, and now this is equally true of every woman who wishes to live up to her responsibilities" (Robert 1916, pp. 1-2).

Ultimately, participation in the Portland Woman's Club and experience with formal argumentation equipped women to transform the cultural and political landscape of the U.S. West. In addition to altering women's own civic identities and skills, clubwomen's discursive activities altered existing law and political practice. Newly confident in their ability to utilize "the language of democracy

and power," clubwomen in the Pacific Northwest led increasingly significant campaigns that redefined government priorities and participation. For example, after organizing and winning an electoral campaign to establish a tax-funded state library system in Oregon in 1901, members of the Woman's Club quickly pursued and achieved an impressive array of initiatives that made space for women in government and made certain forms of social welfare – such as labor regulation and public education – functions of government (Haarsager, p. 227). By 1909, their achievements included the construction of playgrounds; the establishment of a school for girls; the appointment of a prison matron and the separation of women prisoners from male inmates; speaking positions for women and African Americans at the largest chautauqua in Oregon; the preservation of local forests; the passage of pure food laws; the election of one of their own members as Portland's market inspector; the election of Mrs. S. M. Blumauer, who was not a club member, to the city school board; the passage of labor laws designed to protect women and children; and effective enforcement of those laws (Portland Woman's Club Records; Willamette Valley Chautauqua Records; Eva Emery Dye Papers; *History of the Woman's Club of Portland*).

This movement of women into the political realm did not occur without resistance, but the achievement of their initiatives and legislative bills demonstrated to clubwomen and to the general public that women were capable of influencing public debate and policy. In 1910, in light of such evidence – and with the confidence and skills developed through club activities – the Woman's Club of Portland decided to officially endorse and campaign for woman suffrage. Northwest clubwomen's participation in controversial campaigns for equal suffrage in Oregon and Washington capitalized on the very things cultivated by their discursive practices since 1895: forums for women's voices, public authority, experience in campaign organization, an extensive network of women, and civic ties to men in power including legislators, newspapermen, and businessmen.

In addition, the record of achievement by women's clubs in the Pacific Northwest well served the campaigns for equal suffrage. Most fundamentally, that record of achievement challenged the traditional assumption that women were not prepared for, interested in, or capable of political participation. By 1910 women had made impressive contributions to Northwest culture and politics through club work. They had behaved as capable citizens – carrying out orderly meetings, engaging in rational debate, speaking publicly, lobbying representatives,

organizing public programs, shaping legislative agendas, and serving in public office – even while operating in a sphere that did not recognize them as qualified participants or voters.

In light of the achievements of clubwomen, it was possible for proponents of equal suffrage to argue that the enfranchisement of women in the Northwest was not a radical experiment or revolution but rather a simple recognition of a pre-existent fact: that women were capable, consequential participants in deliberative democracy. During the 1910 campaign, clubwomen themselves drew on their discursive training and abilities to advance such arguments in the public sphere, arguing in newspapers and from platforms that:
We are all in politics! Willy-nilly. Politics is the regulation and government of a nation or state, for the preservation of its safety, peace, and prosperity. All our water, our food, our clothing, even the trees we plant in our garden, the house we build, the materials we put into it, the street cars we ride in, the schools our children attend, the detention house we build and the woman in charge, the juvenile court and the judge thereof, the police matron, the humane officer, the pure food inspector, the safeguards that we would place around our children and the home – these are all in politics, and that is why women want to vote (Biggs).

Such arguments suggest, in distilled form, the degree to which club activities empowered women to engage in deliberative democracy, to claim a place for themselves in the public realm, and to make a better way of life in the New Northwest. To women who established clubs in the interest of becoming better mothers – not to get mixed up in politics – this transformation was nearly miraculous. As club president Viola Coe observed:

Such a thing as a discussion of public issues by the general membership of the club was absolutely unheard of, and indeed no one could have expected that without the interposition of a miracle, the frightened and unready women of that time, who, clinging to a chair for support, and with eyes chained to the manuscript, uttered in husky tones their halting thoughts, could ever be transformed into the really skilled debators [*sic*] and campaigners that they have become. In fact the transformation has been brought about by a miracle, the miracle of … persistent practice and methods (p. 1).

3. Conclusion: Democracy, Equality and Formal Argumentation
As they reflected upon their achievements, members of civic organizations such

as the Portland Woman's Club credited the practice of formal methods of argumentation with the development of new skills and identities, developments that altered members' expectations for and ability to participate in democratic politics. Through practices such as parliamentary procedure, women realized that the "language of politics and power" that once appeared to be the exclusive domain of men was available to them as well, and women used that language in innovative and effective ways to expand their role in public life.

Ultimately, rather than functioning to impede their participation or entrench inequality, parliamentary procedure was a formal method of argumentation that facilitated the political development and empowerment of clubwomen in the turn of the century United States. Through this method of argumentation, women in that context discovered that silence was not necessarily a virtue. Rather than being made to feel "unfeminine" or improper for engaging in debate, women who used *Robert's Rules* found it productive speak out, to cultivate public identities and assert their authority in the public realm, and to challenge norms that limited the promise of participatory democracy in the United States. In fact, this study reveals that formal argumentation procedures such as *Robert's Rules* can be used to challenge exclusionary cultural norms even when those excluded operate within the parameters of such norms.

In light of this study and others, it is clear that the relationship between the practice of parliamentary procedure in civic organizations and the cultivation of equity and deliberative democracy bears further exploration. Although it is apparent that the practice of parliamentary procedure can facilitate the participation of traditionally marginalized citizens, it is not yet perfectly clear what conditions separate the successes of organizations such as the Portland Woman's Club from the difficulties encountered by groups such as those examined by Brown and Reed. As a starting place for further research, it may be useful to note four key differences between the women's clubs examined in this study, and the cases studied by Brown and Reed.

First, whereas members of the organizations examined in this study were of relatively similar political status, the political status of members of the organizations examined by Reed and Brown was far more diverse. Members of the organizations considered in this study were all disenfranchised female citizens, prohibited by law and custom from participation in deliberative democracy; in contrast, the organizations examined by Reed and Brown included among their

members women and men, and traditionally marginalized citizens as well as experienced politicos.

Second, whereas members of the organizations examined in this study uniformly lacked experience with parliamentary procedure at the time their clubs adopted Robert's Rules, members of the organizations examined by Reed and Brown had variable amounts of experience with parliamentary procedure – some possessed no prior experience, while others were very familiar and adept with *Robert's Rules*.

Third, whereas parliamentary procedure was adopted at the inception of the organizations examined in this study, the organizations studied by Reed and Brown implemented parliamentary procedure well after their formation, and in the context of sharp disagreements about their memberships and missions.

Fourth, whereas the organizations examined in this study were quasi-publics, whose meetings were rarely observed by non-members and thus offered a relatively protected forum for learning and development, the assemblies analyzed by Reed and Brown were publics, whose operations were open to general observation, critique, and intervention.

Ultimately these four differences, together with the central findings of this study, suggest that formal argumentation practices such as parliamentary procedure are themselves politically neutral forms of discourse. Although the valorization of formal rules of debate can function as a form of "cultural imperialism" that has undemocratic effects (Young 1990), history reveals that the practice of formal argumentation also has the power to foster equity and participation in deliberative democracy. Indeed, the use of parliamentary procedure by women's organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Unite States improved the political skill, status, and power of marginalized citizens. In light of historical cases that demonstrate formal argumentation procedures are not inherently inclusionary or exclusionary – that such procedures can be used to facilitate or impede deliberative democracy – scholars and practitioners would do well to further explore methods and conditions that "render argumentative discussion [the] main tool for managing democratic practices," (van Eemeren 1995, p. 145) in a way that is accessible to all.

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