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1. Deliberation on the Verge of Dissensus

- 1 In November 2002, the superintendent of the St. Vrain Valley School District, in the mountainous American state of Colorado, made a startling announcement: The school board was short \$9 to \$13 million. District officials had simultaneously underestimated the cost of annual salary increases and failed to account for 150 employees in their calculations. Shortly thereafter, the assistant superintendent of business services and his second in command began an unpaid leave of absence, and a wave of pay cuts and spending freezes subsequently swept through the district.
- 2 By January 2003, public opinion had turned against the school board. Among its most outspoken citizen critics was Susan Bergstrom, a former schoolteacher who made no qualms about her desire for the board's resignation. Consider the linguistic and paralinguistic contours of her opening remarks, well represented below using conversation analytic transcription techniques:

My main question tonight and before you respond to it I had another u:m (.) another item but um first of all considering the gross incompetence demonstrated by this board will you individually or as a board resign and before you respond to that: (.) um I would also like to have a couple good reasons if- if your decision would be n:o I would like you to provide (.) us with a coupleah good reasons (.) for that. Um I'd also like to um include a little analogy here .hh I'm an English teacher as uh some of y'know .hh used to work for the district. Um (.) if I worked for the district currently and displayed a two year record of dramatically dropping standardized (.) test scores for my students (.) would you be comfortable maintaining my employment? An'might I say my students' test scores went up (.) in reading comprehension. Um and that I would like you to respond to now if possible.¹
- 3 First to respond to Bergstrom was the president of the school board: "I guess you'd like to have a response on (.) us uh stepping down? W:e had this discussion () at the previous board (.) meeting and uh I'll let () any board members that wanta make some

comments...” At which point Bergstrom interjects: “Well first I would like to respond to tih my analogy. If that were my track record (.) would you (.) be comfortable maintaining my employment?” And with that, her little analogy gives way to a heated civic debate:

[B = Bergstrom, P = Board President, VP = Board Vice President (Rick), ?? = Unidentifiable speakers, probably other board members]

- 1 P: I'd want to know what your rest of your performance was. It wouldn't just be based on (.)
 2 your t- your student's test scores I would also want to know what kind of teacher you are
 3 in the classroom. An' what kind of reviews you've had. I mean you don't just (.) say
 4 because of a tea- the student's scores that that's just because of you. I'd also like to know
 5 what you've done in the classroom.
 6 B: So, student (1.2) student performance is (0.6) is pretty much at the bottom of your
 7 priority list as board?
 8 P: No it's not. [No I said you said you wanted to know how=
 9 ??: [No (that's one criteria)]
 10 P: =I would handle your (.) being in the classroom as a teacher. I would want to know what
 11 kind of teacher you are (.) not just (.) based on (.) your students' scores.
 12 B: Okay well its let's[(=
 13 VP: [I have another question.
 14 B: =because based on what we are here=
 15 VP: Tom can I have a question here?
 16 B: =you had lousy reviews
 17 VP: Do we have a complaint filed? ((talk from audience)) Is there a complaint on file?
 18 ??: Yes there is
 19 B: I think you're getting into a personnel issue (.) and we can't discuss [those ()
 20 VP: [if if there is () I
 21 don't know if Dan is here (.8) Is Dan still here?
 22 ??: "no"
 23 VP: I'd be concerned about comments that uh any board members would make (.) uh about
 24 questions that she has rais[ed=
 25 B: [why are you discussing
 26 VP: =that somehow could be used (.) in that O-C-R complaint.
 27 B: Rick (.) why are you discussing my personnel issues I was told by Miz Hall when I
 28 brought it up here my personnel issues (.) that we can't discuss that.
 29 VP: Becuz I belie- in my own opinion (.) as a layperson (.)
 30 B: mm hm
 31 VP: you're asking questions of the board (.) that some how could be used by you in a
 32 complaint that you've already filed against the district .hh I'm simply uncomfortable uh
 33 allowing you to manipulate (.) uh what appear to be very general comments (.) for your
 34 own purposes (.) that's my concern.
 35 B: Hmmm.
 36 VP: So, I wouldn't address that personally.
 37 B: We- we judge others (.) as we behave ourselves I guess huh?

- 4 In order to make sense of this fiery civic debate, we must first understand the transcription techniques at work in its textual representation. As their argument escalates, Bergstrom and the board's vice president, Rick, begin stressing various words and syllables, all of which are indicated by underlines (lines 27-28, 32-34). Not surprisingly, their speech also overlaps at several points along the way, resulting in simultaneous utterances (indicated by brackets) and contiguous utterances (indicated by equal signs). Consider, for instance, lines 12-16. No sooner has Bergstrom finished pronouncing “let's” than Rick interjects: “I have another question.” However, as the equals signs indicate, Bergstrom does not stop talking when he begins to speak, choosing instead to finish her comment atop his utterance. (Lines 23-26 display another attempted interruption, albeit with the roles reversed.)
- 5 It is also worth noting here that, while most of this debate is easily transcribed, portions of it are unclear and difficult to render on the page. Where segments of talk are simply obscure, words and phrases are shown in parentheses (e.g., line 9); where they are completely indecipherable, only empty parentheses appear (e.g., lines 19-20); and where these unclear segments of talk are so jumbled or vocally nuanced that it is difficult to distinguish them from non-speech activities and other sound qualities, an additional set of parentheses is used (e.g., the audience talk in line 17). More nuanced still are the moments of silence in this local public debate. Consider, for instance, the abrupt cutoffs in lines 4, 29, and 37. All are marked by hyphens attached to words in various stages of enunciation, and all function as hesitations, allowing speakers to repair or otherwise refine potentially offensive remarks. Also featured in this exchange are pauses of various lengths. Periods in parentheses indicate micropauses, each of

which is roughly two-tenths of a second long. Numbers in parentheses specify the duration of longer, more measurable periods of silence (e.g., line 6, where Bergstrom is formulating a rejoinder to the board's president, and line 21, where Rick is presumably glancing around the room in search of Dan).

- 6 Stressed words, foiled interruptions, obscure and indecipherable segments of talk, grumbles from the audience, abrupt cutoffs, hesitations, repairs, and awkward pauses—all are signs of public deliberation on the verge of radical dissensus. Stressed words and syllables indicate raised voices, all of which are louder than the physical distance and amplification technologies warrant and thus invasive of auditory space.² Competing utterances and consecutive interruptions show overlapping emotional investments, all of which participate in disruptive “action-reaction circuits” (Massumi, 88). Abundant cutoffs, hesitations, repairs, and awkward pauses further suggest moments of face-threatening behavior laced with various impoliteness strategies. And grumbles from the crowd suggest an equally riled—perhaps even mildly entertained—public audience.³
- 7 What is it about Bergstrom's “little analogy” that enabled this tense public exchange with the school board, particularly the board's vice president, Rick? And what, exactly, does her tense exchange with Rick teach us about the rhetorical and political functions of gossip, especially in local American civic debates? Answering these questions are the primary tasks of this essay.

2. Pure Provocation

- 8 Clearly, Rick is unwilling to allow Bergstrom's interrogation of the board to continue: “I'd be concerned about comments that uh any board members would make (.) uh about questions that she has raised” (lines 23-24). But it is not her argument for board's resignation that concerns him. Rather, it is the possibility that this argument conceals within it another, more subversive line of attack:

I belie- in my own opinion (.) as a layperson (.) ... you're asking questions of the board (.) that some how could be used by you in a complaint that you've already filed against the district .hh I'm simply uncomfortable uh allowing you to manipulate (.) uh what appear to be very general comments (.) for your own purposes (.) that's my concern (lines 29-34).
- 9 In this sense, the problem with Bergstrom's “little analogy” is not that it might persuade the board to resign, but that it feigns pursuit of this objective. As Rick sees it, the case of the incompetent school teacher is not a hypothetical example in Bergstrom's “little analogy,” but a thinly veiled allusion to her actual employment record, the purpose of which is to lure board members into an inappropriate discussion of personnel issues, thereby manipulating them for her own purposes. Why else would she mention that she's “an English teacher” who “used to work for the district,” even going so far as to remind the school board that her “students' test scores went up (.) in reading comprehension”?
- 10 More than persuading the board to resign, Bergstrom seems intent on provoking its members—and not in order to arrive at something she can use against them in an “O-C-R complaint.” To be sure, the example of the incompetent schoolteacher allows her to level a pointed claim against the school board: Like the schoolteacher, you have “lousy reviews.” But her claim quickly devolves into a “personnel issue,” effectively foreclosing or, at the very least, deferring her argument for the board's resignation.

Although Rick initiates this shift in their discussion (“Tom can I have a question here? ... Do we have a complaint on file? Is there a complaint on file?”), it is Bergstrom who completes it: “I think you’re getting into a personnel issue (.) and we can’t discuss those...why are you discussing...Rick (.) why are you discussing my personnel issues I was told by Miz Hall when I brought it up here my personnel issues (.) that we can't discuss that.”

- 11 Why, if Bergstrom is intent on persuading the school board to resign, does she facilitate this breakdown of her little analogy? And why, if she is intent on using this breakdown to lure the school board into an inappropriate discussion of her “O-C-R complaint,” does she go out of her way to prevent this discussion from occurring? In other words: What, exactly, is the point of her address to the school board?
- 12 Strictly speaking, there is no point—at least not in the usual sense. On display in this civic debate is not a botched attempt to secure personal advantage, as Rick would lead us to think, but instead *a successful act of pure provocation*—an act of provocation stripped of rhetorical purpose, or, as twentieth-century literary critic Kenneth Burke once described maneuvers of this sort, an act of provocation invested with *pure purpose*, “a kind of purpose which, as judged by the rhetoric of advantage, is no purpose at all, or which might often look like sheer frustration of purpose” (270).
- 13 If Bergstrom facilitates the breakdown of her “little analogy,” then forecloses any and all discussion of her “personnel issues,” it is because, more than convincing the board to resign or using its comments to advance her “O-C-R complaint,” she is intent on provoking its leading members—and for no other reason than to provoke them. As a political antagonist, she “revels in the sheer syllables of vituperation” (Burke 269).
- 14 This becomes increasingly apparent as her interaction with the school board proceeds. Within breaths of her parting shot at Rick—“We- we judge others (.) as we behave ourselves I guess huh?” (line 37)—Bergstrom returns to her opening line of inquiry, sharpening her interrogation to a fine point and, in turn, amplifying her dispute with Rick:

43 B: Can you answer the question (.) are you gonna resign? ...
 44 BM: I'd be happy [to
 45 B: [are you not gonna resign?
 46 BM: I'll be happy to answer it. um I'm not gonna resign. Um, I think that one of the best things
 47 that I can do at this point in time (.) is to work for a solution? to this problem (.) and to
 48 help work with not only intern- internally within the district but also with the community
 49 and try and get us out of this as quickly as possible.
 50 B: And I don't think I'd be alone in uh ()
 51 VP: [Do you want a comment from us or are you gonna
 52 comment on everything we say?
 53 B: I- I'm responding to what she said.
 54 VP: Ask us a question. Do you want to know if- of what we're gonna do?
 55 ??: () Are we allowed to do it
 56 B: Rick (.) please calm down.
 57 VP: [are we gonna be allowed to
 58 B: [please calm down.
 59 VP: I am calmed down you ought [to see me when I get upset.
 60 B: [tha-
 61 B: Whe:w!
 62 ((chuckles))
 63 VP: I'm calm [Let me tell you I'm- no
 64 B: [we ()
 65 BM: This is not appropriate.
 66 VP: I'm not gonna resign.
 67 B: Exactly
 68 P: We're gonna be done
 69 B: Exactly it's [n:ot
 70 VP: [I'm not gonna [resign
 71 P: [If you like to- if you want to hear our responses we'd be glad
 72 to [give 'em
 73 B: [the woman in the red jacket who had all kinds of kudos for you (.) she wasn't thrown
 74 off the podium.
 75 P: We'd be glad to respond to your question about the r- the resignations if you'd want to- if
 76 you'd like tuh [wait
 77 B: [kay I uh simply wanta say I don't think I'm (.) I would be alone in
 78 sayin that you're not the group of people (.) to come up with a solution. thank you.

- 15 Again, the paralinguistic features of this public discourse are telling. More stressed words, more foiled interruptions, more overlapping speech, more obscure and indecipherable segments of talk, more hesitations, cutoffs, repairs, and awkward pauses. All signal a crucial turning point in Bergstrom's argument with the school board, effectively shifting this local civic exchange from the deliberative realm of reasoned debate and rational persuasion to the epideictic realm of accusation, reproach, and antagonism. Not even the resolve of other board members ("This is not appropriate" [line 65], "We're gonna be done" [line 68]) can offset the linguistic and paralinguistic intensity of Bergstrom's dispute with Rick.⁴
- 16 Add to this the modal shift in her discourse from argumentative questions about the future of the school board ("Are you gonna to resign? ... Are you not going to resign?") as well as the antagonizing statements about its current disarray ("Please calm down. Please calm down."), and the specific function of her discourse as pure provocation becomes equally discernable. Much as Bergstrom contributed to the breakdown of her "little analogy," interrupting her opening argument in order to quarrel with Rick about "personnel issues" (issues which she then goes out of her way to prevent the group from discussing), she now obstructs the return of her original argument, interrupting it *again* and thus, *once again*, prolonging her dispute with Rick.
- 17 Just as Bergstrom had no intention of discussing her "personnel issues" during her first dispute with Rick, she also has no intention of pacifying him with her repeated request that he "calm down." As a rhetorical maneuver, "calm down" neither advances her little analogy nor lessens the antagonism into which this analogy has devolved. Instead, it only serves to aggravate Rick further, and for no other reason than to aggravate him further. In this sense, "calm down" is an empty gesture, a request designed to be rejected. Its purpose is nothing other than the frustration of its apparent rhetorical purpose. As an act of pure provocation, the success of "calm down" depends upon its repeated failure to pacify Rick. Only in light of these repeated failures, when Rick has

begun to lose his composure (“I am calmed down you ought to see me when I get upset” [line 59]), does Bergstrom return to her initial argument for the board’s resignation. That Rick cannot remain calm is symptomatic of “the gross incompetence demonstrated by this board.” His nettled speech is a testament to the fact that “you’re not the group of people (.) to come up with a solution” to the district’s financial plight (line 78).

- 18 Which brings us back to Bergstrom’s “little analogy.” Maybe there is more at stake in her self-interruptions than an opportunity to reorder her initial questions. Recall, for instance, Burke’s symptomatic reading of pure persuasion: “the indication of pure persuasion in any activity is in an element of ‘standoffishness,’ or perhaps better, *self-interference*” (269). That Bergstrom is standoffish almost goes without saying. She is nothing if not hostile to the board and unsympathetic to its current plight. But it is her tendency to interfere with her own argument against the board’s authority that distinguishes her conduct from other forms of political contention. From the disruption of her opening remarks to the dislocation of her argument by comparison to the delay in her return to this argument, Bergstrom seems committed to self-interference and, in each instance, to prolonging her dispute with the school board.

3. Nothing Said

- 19 When the referent of the incompetent school teacher begins to slip, so also does the substance of Bergstrom’s first quarrel with Rick. Recall, once more, her pointed replies to his initial question:
- I think you’re getting into a personnel issue (.) and we can’t discuss those...why are you discussing...Rick (.) why are you discussing my personnel issues I was told by Miz Hall when I brought it up here my personnel issues (.) that we can’t discuss that (lines 19, 25, 27-28).
- 20 To what, exactly, do these utterances refer? “Personnel issues,” of course. And to what, exactly, do these “personnel issues” refer? On this point, Bergstrom is outspoken: The topic of her discourse is the topic of Rick’s discourse, which is a topic that neither of them is allowed to discuss.
- 21 The paradox of this rhetorical maneuver is readily apparent. Only by repeatedly mentioning her “personnel issues,” thereby establishing them as a point of discussion, can Bergstrom prevent this discussion from occurring, effectively purging her dispute with the school board of her personnel issues. The Greeks had a word for this way of speaking: *apophasis*. As a persuasive technique, it allows speakers to mention something by refusing to mention it. More generally, *apophasis* consists in describing what something is by considering all of the things it is not, as in negative theology, which presumes the inability of positive linguistic description to capture the essence of God. Only rhetorics of negation, so the argument goes, can render divine essence intelligible.
- 22 But Bergstrom is not talking about God. And her discourse, as we have seen, is not operating as a simple, straightforward means of persuasion. More than *apophasis*, her response to Rick has the form and the function of *everyday talk*—a quintessentially modern way of speaking that Kierkegaard first conceptualized as “chatter” (*snak*) and that Heidegger later described as “idle talk,” or, depending on how you translate *Gerede*, “gossip.”⁵ With the addition of this final conceptual layer, we discover the

intellectual resources needed to conclude our analysis of Bergstrom's dispute with the school board.

- 23 "What is it to *chatter*?" Kierkegaard asked in the mid-1840s, just as ordinary democratic culture was beginning to thrive in Denmark. "It is the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking" (Kierkegaard 97). To illustrate this talkative annulment, he recalls the dysfunctional grandfather clock of a family he once visited:

The trouble did not show up in a sudden slackness of the spring or the breaking of a chain or a failure to strike; on the contrary, it went on striking, but in a curious, abstractly normal, but nevertheless confusing way. It did not strike twelve strokes at twelve o'clock and then once at one o'clock, but only once at regular intervals. It went on striking this way all day and never once gave the hour. (Kierkegaard 80)

- 24 Note the parallels between Bergstrom's first quarrel with Rick and the grandfather clock described by Kierkegaard. Just as Bergstrom avoids discussing her "personnel issues" by repeatedly introducing them into the discussion, so also does this clock avoid telling the time by continually striking "once at regular intervals." And just as her outspoken refusal to discuss these issues allows her to prolong her dispute with the school board, so also does the hourly dysfunction of this clock allow it to continue keeping time, even though it can only do so "in a curious, abstractly normal, but nevertheless confusing way." In this sense, the communicative function of this grandfather clock, like that of Bergstrom's outspoken refusal to discuss her "personnel issues," is nothing other than the repeated expression of this very function. Its hourly strokes, like her repeated outbursts, are testaments to its enduring status as a medium of communication.
- 25 Chatter functions similarly, suspending the purposive, deliberative, and referential functions of public speech in service to its own continuation. "One who chatters presumably does chatter about something, since the aim is to find something to chatter about," Kierkegaard quips (99). With no aim or anchor other than itself, this way of speaking becomes "a frivolous philandering among great diversities," in which one "chatters about anything and everything and continues incessantly" (Kierkegaard 99-100). Not even private life eludes this glib, perpetual talkativeness. Like Bergstrom's open refusal to speak about her "personnel issues," chatter revels in any disjunction between private and public discourse. "By this chattering the distinction between what is private and what is public is nullified in a private-public garrulousness," Kierkegaard concludes (100). "Something that no one would dare present at a meeting, something that no one would be able to *speak about* "—even things that "we can't discuss," Bergstrom adds—all are open to public debate when chatter prevails (Kierkegaard 100).
- 26 Like Kierkegaard's notion of "chatter," Heidegger's treatment of "idle talk" focuses on suspensions of purpose and judgment, both of which, in turn, he attributes to a breakdown of reference. Because idle talk "has lost its primary relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about," it can only communicate by "*gossiping and passing the word along*," he argues. "What is said-in-the-talk as such, spreads in wider circles and takes on an authoritative character. Things are so because one says so." On the one hand, this means that "its initial lack of grounds to stand on becomes aggravated to complete groundlessness." On the other hand, it means that, because "an understanding of what is talked about is supposedly reached," idle talk "discourages any new inquiry and any disputation, and in a peculiar way suppresses them and holds them back" (Heidegger 212-13). The result is a groundless form of public authority that

sustains itself on self-assured interpretations of the world and self-certain interruptions of others. Hence, the daringness of Bergstrom's remarks. Her refusal to discuss "personnel issues" not only confirms Rick's suspicion, effectively uprooting her argument by comparison; it also paves the way for an obscure yet sneering response to his mock politeness, allowing Bergstrom to suggest that it is her, not Rick, who understands the significance of their vacuous dispute: "We- we judge others (.) as we behave ourselves, I guess huh" (line 37). If Bergstrom seems to be manipulating the school board, it is not because Rick has revealed her deceit, but because she has revealed his.

- 27 Chatter, gossip, idle talk: All refer to the same linguistic event, namely, *public speech in which nothing is communicated*. And herein lies its significance. Unlike the classical canon of delivery, which is premised on the ability of speech to convey something, chatter, gossip, and idle talk deliver nothing. Like Bergstrom's outspoken refusal to discuss her "personnel issues," these ways of speaking are distinguished by their inconsistency, their undecidability, their insubstantiality, and their apparent emptiness. And yet they are neither wordless nor insignificant. Just as the topic of Bergstrom's discourse is the topic of Rick's discourse, which is a topic that neither of them is allowed to discuss, chatter, gossip, and idle talk openly—and with no shortage of words—call attention to a linguistic void in speech itself.
- 28 How are we to understand this communicative act? According to Peter Fenves, "a void of communication is communicated whenever communication is avoided," and for this reason, "the communication of a void does not avoid communication." In other words, it is impossible to avoid communication, even (and especially) when the object of communication is a void, a negation, of communication. Hence the basic truism of many theories of human communication, a truism which is itself anchored in the logic of negation: "communication cannot *not* take place" (Fenves 145).
- 29 To say that "chatter delivers nothing" is not to suggest that it withdraws from language (resulting in meaninglessness). Nor is it to suggest that this way of speaking fails to communicate (resulting in unintelligibility). Rather, it is to highlight the capacity of chatter to communicate a *specifically linguistic nothingness*. "The vehicle of communication, language as structure and act, remains in operation, but it no longer works, for whatever it carries is somehow 'nothing,'" Fenves explains. "Utterances are neither garbled nor indecipherable nor meaningless; rather they have become, for all their clarity, idle vehicles, vehicles without content, vehicles in which 'nothing' is said" (Fenves 1-2).

4. Affective Intensity

- 30 At their furthest reaches, chatter, gossip, and idle talk would be strictly vocalic, yielding little more than grunts and groans, hoots and hollers. Like teeth rattling against teeth, they would highlight the animality of spoken discourse implicit in Aristotle's *zōon echōn logon*. Like the hesitations, cutoffs, repairs, and awkward pauses that riddle Bergstrom's dispute with the school board—all of which, as we have seen, are symptomatic of an underlying affective excess—they would index "the bare life of embodied speech, something Real, beyond signification, something that speakers share" (Gunn and Rice 218). As voice and nothing more, chatter, gossip, and idle talk would be sites at which affect disrupts language, overwhelming sonic form and

semantic content in a discontinuous event of unqualified intensity and unassimilable effect.

- 31 At lesser extremes, chatter, gossip, and idle talk would be at once verbal and vocalic, and irreducible to either mode of expression. Like “um,” “uh,” “oh,” and other discourse particles, these ways of speaking would yield words without direct semantic meaning and utterances subtracted from traditional grammatical word classes.⁶ Here, chatter, gossip, and idle talk would be figures of a balanced yet differential relation between linguistic expression (form/content) and affective event (intensity/effect). Affect would resonate and interfere with language, language would amplify and dampen affect, and together—in a series of transductions not unlike those which riddle Bergstrom’s discourse—they would stretch verbal, vocalic, and affective tensors through spoken discourse, driving it toward the outer limits of semantic form.
- 32 But they would not reach it. Only chatter, gossip, and idle talk in their most mundane, stereotypical forms reach this semantic extreme. Here, these communicative practices yield neither grunts nor groans, hoots nor hollers. Affective intensity, instead of interfering with linguistic expression, submits to its qualifying, dampening influence. Yoking voice to verbiage, sound to semantics, spoken discourse of this sort puts the “para” in paralanguage. And yet, even as the affective force and acoustic form of spoken discourse submit to its linguistic content, this content—much like the substance of Bergstrom’s “personnel issues”—continues to leak out, gradually draining spoken discourse of significance until its only remaining substance (if indeed we can call it that) is *a pronounced lack of linguistic content*. Here is the outer semantic limit of Bergstrom’s dispute with the school board. Here is the grandfather clock. Here is chatter, gossip, and idle talk in their most pedestrian, yet also its most paradoxical, forms.
- 33 And here, not surprisingly, is the point at which these everyday ways of speaking verge on something other than themselves, something in excess of linguistic expression, something which emerges from language’s affective and acoustic unconscious, causing momentary breakdowns of locutionary meaning and illocutionary force—breakdowns in which examples become inoperative, analogies become aporetic, judgments become obstructed, advantages become deferred, purposes become pure, and gestures become empty. With these breakdowns come a variety of intense perlocutionary effects as well. Some of these effects, as we have seen, are abrasive and powerfully divisive; others are conciliatory and facilitate identification; others still fall somewhere in between. But all demonstrate that chatter, gossip, and idle talk—even if they are “devoid of passion,” as Kierkegaard suggests—can and often do generate affective investments (Kierkegaard 77).
- 34 It is here, at the threshold between the linguistic expression and affective investment, that chatter, gossip, and idle talk lend themselves to critical inquiry, especially among students and scholars of American public discourse. If pure provocation operates *meta-rhetorically*, sacrificing ulterior motive, attainable advantage, and even rhetorical purpose in order to prolong and intensify moments of antagonism, chatter, gossip, and idle talk operate *meta-communicatively*, evacuating public speech of its linguistic content—and always in the service of additional, ever more talkative evacuations—until its only remaining content is the act of public speech itself. To be sure, all spoken discourse is rhetorically eventful. But it is chatter, gossip, and idle talk that reveal spoken discourse as a rhetorical event.

5. Mediality, Pure and Endless

- 35 That Bergstrom and Rick are unable to discuss her “personnel issues” is in keeping with the meta-communicative function of chatter, gossip, and idle talk. As we have seen, the topic of Bergstrom’s refusal is the topic of Rick’s suspicion that the topic of her “little analogy” is the topic of an “O-C-R complaint” whose very existence, as he points out, is itself a topic in need of further inquiry: “Do we have a complaint filed? Is there a complaint on file?” (line 17). At the root of Bergstrom’s outspoken refusal to discuss her “personnel issues,” in other words, is not a prohibition against the public discussion of these issues but, instead, an affectively charged question about their very existence—a question whose destabilizing effects ripple through her first dispute with Rick, emptying the referential character of “personnel issues” to such an extent that the utterance can no longer refer to anything like a specific, preexisting “O-C-R complaint” but only participate in a sequence of progressively emptier remarks, until the only “thing” to which this utterance refers is its own suspended referential function.
- 36 If Bergstrom and Rick are unable to discuss her “personnel issues,” it is because these “issues” do not refer to anything beyond—and thus to anything other than—the affectively charged discussion at hand. And it is precisely here, with the irreducible reflexivity of their quarrel in full view, that the rhetorical and political functions of chatter, gossip, and idle talk become most apparent. If chatterers, gossipmongers, and idle talkers have nothing to say, it is not because they are unable to communicate, but because what they communicate *cannot be said*. It is the medium of public speech itself, in its “pure and endless mediality,” that finds expression in their discourse (Agamben 59). On this point, Fenves is adamant: “When chatter takes place, language itself, and not an ‘existing’ subject, speaks” (236).
- 37 As objects of critical inquiry, then, chatter, gossip, and idle talk allow us to isolate and unravel the linguistic structure (medium) as well as the communicative act (event) of spoken discourse, providing us with unique and largely unprecedented access to what Heidegger famously described as the positive phenomenal field in which, out of which, and against which “all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed” (213). Whether and to what extent students and scholars of American public discourse can capitalize on this opportunity remains to be seen.

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NOTES

1. I am grateful to Karen Tracy for her willingness to share this transcript with me. For a broader, contextual analysis of the budget crisis that occasioned Bergstrom's address to the school board, see Tracy. And for a more thorough account of Bergstrom's discourse than the one provided here, see the longer essay from which this one derives: McCormick, "Arguments from Analogy and Beyond".
2. See Culpeper et al, and Navarro and Nebot.
3. On the relationship between impoliteness and "voyeuristic pleasure," see Culpeper.
4. On strategies of refusal, in which officials respond to emotional appeals with calm resolve, see Culpeper et al, 1574-75. A broader discussion of the relationship between impoliteness and emotional intensity, specifically "destructive emotional arguments," is provided in Kienpointner, 2008.
5. On the intellectual and cultural history of these discursive forms, see McCormick, *The Chattering Mind*.
6. See McCormick and Stuckey, 15-16.

ABSTRACTS

Many Americans are as enthusiastic about the idea of deliberative democracy as they are appalled by its actual practice, especially when it comes to local forums of civic life. In school board meetings, city council gatherings, and various public hearings across the United States, ordinary citizens have a tendency to botch, and sometimes abandon all together, the democratic ideals of reasoned debate and rational decision-making, resorting to more ordinary ways of speaking like chatter, gossip, and idle talk instead. This article explores one such example, paying special attention to the use of chatter, gossip, and idle talk for purposes of provocation, antagonism, and radical dissensus in local American civic life. Starting with a detailed qualitative case study, this essay works inductively from the specific rhetorical contours of a local public debate toward a broader philosophical perspective on the communicative practice of everyday talk, suggesting that there is always something extraordinary about ordinary civic discussion and debate.

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Keywords: provocation, dissensus, everyday talk, American civic life, debate

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