

TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION QUARTERLY, 17(4), 455-458
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ISSN: 1057-2252 print / 1542-7625 online
DOI: 10.1080/10572250802324952



BOOK REVIEW

Participation and Power: Civic Discourse in Environmental Policy Decisions.
W. Michele Simmons. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007.
204 pp.

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The questions are, by now, familiar in our technologically advanced society: How can or should ordinary citizens influence public policy decisions when the problems under consideration call for the interpretation and judgment of expert authorities? Or, in other words, how can citizens participate meaningfully in highly technical policy discourse? W. Michele Simmons's book *Participation and Power* is a worthy contribution to our field's growing body of research and thought on these questions. For me, the book's highlight is the revised notion of civic discourse it presents, a notion that strengthens the connection between technical communication and the public sphere.

Participation and Power centers on the controversy surrounding the disposal of VX nerve agent (a highly lethal chemical weapon) at the Newport Chemical Depot in Newport, Indiana. To comply with a Reagan-era treaty mandating the destruction of all chemical weapons stockpiles, as well as a congressional ban on transporting the nerve agent, the U.S. Army endeavored to destroy the depot's 1,269 tons of VX on-site. Yet, as of 2005 (when the book's account of the controversy ends), the VX had not been disposed of and the dispute over the disposal policy was continuing, a struggle that has involved the Army, various other federal and state agencies, as well as a number of citizens' groups. Drawing on interviews with agency officials and members of citizens' groups, as well as analyses of key government texts, such as environmental impact statements, Simmons provides us with a rich account of this struggle and makes a convincing argument that a critical barrier to meaningful public participation in defining the policy for VX disposal at the depot was the "seemingly mundane institutional practices" of government organizations—practices that seemed designed, in many cases, to give an illusion of public participation while ensuring that the real decision-making authority resided with the organizations and their experts.

Simmons shows us that while the public, in the end, has been able to influence the VX-disposal policy, this influence came not because of but despite the ways in

which the Army and other agencies allowed the public to participate in the process. As Simmons's analysis illustrates, citizens' groups exercised their influence not through the channels and procedures constructed by the Army et al., but rather through "strategic, often subversive moves" (p. 48). Simmons argues that, in typical fashion, the Army took a "decide-announce-defend" approach to the problem, forcing citizens' groups to resort to letter-writing campaigns and other tactics to convince Indiana state legislators to impose more stringent safety requirements on the Army's proposed VX disposal procedure at Newport. As one citizen explained: "The Army wouldn't listen to us, but they had to listen to the governor, so we got the governor to listen to us" (p. 78).

A key strength of the book is its close examination of the ways in which institutions exercise power in determining how or whether citizens can influence decisions such as that of the Newport VX case. Simmons provides a thorough explanation of the overlapping but distinct models of public participation different government entities involved in the VX case took. These entities—the Army, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Environmental Protection Agency, among others—are congressionally mandated to involve the public in policy decisions, but retain the power to determine the form and extent of the public's involvement. Not surprisingly, they tend to exercise this power to retain decision-making authority, as Simmons documents over and over again. Particularly insidious are public-involvement models that create an illusion of public control—"pseudo-participation," as Simmons and other analysts call it.

The pattern of policy controversies devolving into power plays, with regulatory agencies and their experts pitted against citizens' groups and each working to dominate the other, becomes familiar as Simmons describes its features over and over again: It starts when agencies treat citizen involvement as a nuisance, an afterthought, or merely a public relations challenge and then define legally mandated public participation in ways that subvert or circumscribe it. The public, predictably, often responds with end runs around the agencies to legislators who then impose new constraints on the agencies. This, in turn, often requires that initial policy proposals be revised, and the cycle begins again.

Simmons uses this aspect of the VX case—that the process of implementing a disposal policy has dragged on for years and years—to make a case for increased citizen involvement that I believe deserves the emphasis it receives in this book. Yes, on ethical grounds alone, as Simmons notes repeatedly, citizens deserve more of a say in policy decisions such as the VX case, where the impact on local communities can be drastic. But what about the predictable objection from expert regulators and decision makers that involving the public in highly technical policy questions is unrealistic because citizens lack the technical knowledge required to understand and assess such questions? Or what about complaints (also familiar) that opening decisions up to such a wide range of participants is simply too time consuming and costly? In response, Simmons convincingly argues the contrary.

On the first point, Simmons reminds us that citizens are not necessarily non-experts. At the least, they can contribute their expertise as future policy "users": "regardless of technical expertise, all involved public have knowledge about how a policy can, will, or could be used in a particular situation and . . . this knowledge is essential to constructing an appropriate and just policy" (p. 114). And on the second point, Simmons argues that excluding the public leads to more, not less, inefficiency because the dissatisfaction citizens feel at being excluded is what leads to the antagonism between agencies and citizens' groups that often drives citizens to oppose the agencies at every turn.

Merits of the argument for increased efficiency aside, Simmons seems to acknowledge that change will have to come from the grass roots, and provides helpful suggestions and resources for doing so. Reminding readers of rhetoric's roots in civic discourse, she sees environmental policy formulation as an opportunity to connect rhetoric with technical communication in ways I suspect scholars in both fields will appreciate. Once we expand the domain of civic discourse to include policy discourse such as that of the Newport VX case, new opportunities for technical communication researchers and practitioners come into focus. For instance, one consequence of this expanded concept of civic discourse is that citizens will need to equip themselves with new literacies that empower them to influence policy decisions; literacies that include the capacity to understand and critique technical reasoning and "articulate . . . concerns about the technical issues of a policy in ways that are persuasive to experts" (p. 130). Technical communication specialists can aid in building these capacities within citizens' groups. As an illustration, Simmons describes her experience advising students as they worked on creating a community website about storm water pollution prevention. These students applied Simmons's participatory model for policy decision making to website development, involving representatives of various community groups in conceptualizing the design of the site. The result was not just an informative Web resource about storm water pollution prevention, but "a space for citizen involvement" in this particular environmental issue (p. 146).

Building on the book's concern with institutional power structures that exclude citizens from policy decisions, Simmons also urges that institutional critique be incorporated more systematically as an element of this new brand of civic discourse. Acknowledging that "the powerful are rarely willing to become less so" (p. 131), Simmons's ideas for expanding citizen participation are, I believe, wisely pragmatic. Rather than propose a new, one-size-fits-all model for expert-citizen interaction, she provides detailed heuristics for assessing the role of citizens in policy discourse, arguing that these heuristics can help identify "spaces and moments . . . where change is possible" (p. 133).

The problem *Participation and Power* confronts has only grown more urgent in the heightened security environment of our post-9/11 world. Revisiting the Newport VX case in the book's epilogue, Simmons shows us that the climate for im-

proving citizen participation continues to be a difficult one: Acting on an updated congressional mandate that all chemical stockpiles be destroyed by 2004, the Army moved ahead with a new plan to neutralize the Newport VX, allowing even less citizen involvement in formulating the plan than before. Indeed, the Army did little to even inform the public of its decision. Moreover, even though opposing citizens' groups used many of the literacy practices Simmons advocates, they found themselves locked out of the decision-making process. Yet, as discouraging as recent developments in the Newport case may be, this book left me hopeful that our field is poised to contribute in more meaningful ways to this important aspect of discourse in the public sphere.