Argumentation and Reasoned Action

Proceedings of the 1st European Conference on Argumentation, Lisbon 2015

Volume I

Edited by

Dima Mohammed

and

Marcin Lewiński

Audiences as Normative Roles
Commentary on Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati's
Practical Argumentation and Multiple
Audience in Policy Proposals

JEAN GOODWIN
Iowa State University, USA
goodwin@iastate.edu

This paper carries forward the movement in argumentation studies that aims to expand our ability to deal with the complexities of real-world texts. While abstractions like ideal dialogue types can promote careful theorizing and fine distinctions, eventually the theory has to be robust enough to engage with the complex productions of arguers embedded in complex rhetorical situations (Bitzer, 1968). In recent years—and certainly at this conference—there has thus been increasing attention to the presence of multiple goals in argumentation (Mohammed, 2015) or the ways that argumentation functions in non-linguistic media (e.g., the recent and forthcoming special issues on visual and multimodal argumentation). In this essay, Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati focus on yet another complexity: like Lewiński and Aakhus (2014), they are concerned with understanding argumentation in situations involving multiple participants.

Multiple participants are inevitable in many important real-world contexts. There is no such thing as "the" public; public*s* are always multiple, permeable and emerging (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). No arguer who enters the public sphere can limit access to her arguments only to the group she desires to address. Political speech and strategic communication must inevitably deal with this fact. The question Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati raise is what argumentation theory can do to help them.

One obvious approach to distinguishing participants in an argumentative transaction is to identify them by their *standpoints*. This would seem to be a good option when the central issue can be framed in binary terms—e.g., "Ryanair takeover: yes or no?" (Lewiński & Aakhus, 2014). Still, in actual situations there may be two opposed camps who share almost nothing but their position on the central issue; each camp

may contain many competing perspectives on how to justify the stance to that issue. Politics often makes strange bedfellows, as when the Catholic Church joins with a feminist faction to try to regulate pornography in a community. Although in cases like this multiple participants may share the same standpoint, it would be vexing to try to squeeze their views into a single argument diagram. The lines of argument would not only fail to overlap, in some cases they might be based on contradictory premises.

Another possibility then would be to pay attention to those differences in argument, and model multiple participants by the different commitment sets they bring to the interaction. That is after all the strategy adopted in the "folk theory" of argumentation evident when people label participants in a controversy as "left," "libertarian," "neo-liberal" or "progressive"; groups are being segmented out from the general mass of citizens by their purported ideological commitments. This also may be a promising approach, especially when the corpus to be analysed includes enough discourse from multiple participants to allow their commitment sets to be reconstructed. But it will be less helpful when the analysis focuses on a single text, as does Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati's. In such cases, there is little evidence of what any individual audience member is committed too, much less how those commitments cohere or fail to cohere with those of other audience members. Speakers, of course, are always positioned so that they can only guess at their audience's internal segmentation.

Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati propose an ingenious and, I believe, very promising solution to the problem of modelling multiple participants. Instead of modelling audiences by their standpoints (which may over-simplify) or by their commitment sets (which are difficult to determine), they propose modelling audiences by the normatively established roles they *ought* to play within the argumentative transaction. Audiences in this sense are not defined by their standpoints or commitments—they are *stakeholders*, defined by the specific interest it is their responsibility to maintain on the issue under consideration.

The Ryanair takeover case study shows that such stakeholders are readily identifiable, even in a complex situation. Members of the Board of Directors, for example, have fiduciary duties to pursue the best interests of the company. Members of the European Competition Commission ought to protect the competitiveness of the industry as a whole. The Irish Government (a key shareholder) should be seeking the public good for Irish citizens. And so on. It appears that the institutions supporting this complex argumentative interaction have developed these normative roles specifically to make the participants in the transaction more transparent to everyone involved. To me, this is an

important signal that Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati's approach is correct: we find the world already structuring itself in order to make just the participants they predict, *visible.*

It is interesting to note that the normative underpinnings of these roles are quite diverse: members of the Board and the ECC have legal duties; journalists have professional obligations; employees have a prudential interest in retaining their jobs; the Government has a constitutional obligation. In other words, we do not seem to need a unitary theory of "dialectical obligations" in order to generate participants' roles within an argumentative transaction.

It is also interesting to note that Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati's approach allows us to identify some individuals as *outside* the transaction. Me, for example, although I may have strong views of how the proposed takeover would be a dreadful case of corporate greed harming ordinary consumers, or a wonderful example of capitalism at its best, my views are irrelevant. I have no *stake* in the matter; I am an un-ratified "over-reader"; it is *none of my business.*

In their analysis, Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati demonstrate how Ryanair's arguments are structured to respond to the sub-issues that each legitimate stakeholder group is normatively required to consider. Elegantly, they show how at points the same stretch of discourse can be reconstructed as presenting different arguments addressed to the different interests of different stakeholders. This is a nice example in argumentation of what rhetoricians would call *polysemy* (Ceccarelli, 1998). The success of their textual analysis provides additional support for their conception of audiences as stakeholders, since it makes evident that the text constructors were tracking just the distinctions that Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati have predicted. The one further step I would recommend would be to extend the study to consider the responses of various individuals and groups to the Ryanair proposal— an analysis of the text's *reception* (Ceccarelli, 1998). If these, too, are oriented to the stakeholder interests Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati have identified, that fact would provide further confirmation for their approach.

In this response, I have focused only on one aspect of this strong paper—the conception of audiences as stakeholders—thus passing over other important contributions, especially the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT). Let me close by putting Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati's innovation in a larger context, as a partial explanation of this focus. Within argumentation theory, rhetoric has commonly been assigned the task of elucidating the effectiveness of argumentative discourse in persuading audiences. Actual scholars of rhetoric, by contrast, have uniformly insisted that rhetoric is deeply normative enterprise (e.g.,

Kock, 2009; Leff, 2000). Rhetorical scholars have been tenacious in examining (among other things) the *officia*—the normatively-grounded roles or local responsibilities—of those who undertake to address publics on public business, the *res publica*. The best contributions of rhetorical scholars to the interdisciplinary field of argumentation studies have been detailed reconstructions of how speakers undertake *officia* and the ways those *officia* structure argumentative transactions and the arguments that are exchanged within them (e.g., Innocenti, 2011; Kauffeld, 1998; and, immodestly, Goodwin, 2011). The work of Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati extends this approach essentially by giving us a conceptualization of the *officia*—the local, normatively grounded responsibilities-of audiences as well. This is something I will be thinking about for a long time.

REFERENCES

Asen, R., & Brouwer, D. C. (2001). Reconfigurations of the public sphere. In *R. Asen* & *D. C. Brouwer (Eds.), Counterpublics and the state* (pp. 1-32). Albany: State University of New York Press.
Bitzer, L. F. (1968). The rhetorical situation. *Philosophy & Rhetoric, 1*(1), 1-14.
Ceccarelli, L. (1998). Polysemy: Multiple meanings in rhetorical criticism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 84*(4), 395–415.
Goodwin, J. (2011). Accounting for the appeal to the authority of experts. *Argumentation, 25*(3), 285–296.
Innocenti, B. (2011). Countering questionable tactics by crying foul. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 47*, 178–188.
Kauffeld, F. (1998). Presumptions and the distribution of argumentative burdens in acts of proposing and accusing. *Argumentation, 12*(2), 245–266.
Kock, C. (2009). Choice is not true or false: The domain of rhetorical argumentation. *Argumentation, 23*(1), 61–80.
Leff, M. (2000). Rhetoric and dialectic in the twenty-first century. *Argumentation, 14*(3), 241–254.
Lewiński, M., & Aakhus, M. (2014). Argumentative polylogues in a dialectical framework: A methodological inquiry. *Argumentation, 28*(2), 161–185.
Mohammed, D. (2015). Goals in argumentation: A proposal for the analysis and evaluation of public political arguments. *Argumentation*. Online first (doi: 10.1007/s10503-015-9370-6).