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REVIEW ARTICLE

Rhetorical citizenship and the environment

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss rhetorical studies' contribution to the study of environmental communication. With the concept of rhetorical environmental citizenship, I emphasize rhetorical scholarship's concern with citizens' participation in democracy – both as recipients of and actors in environmental debates. Specifically, this approach invites analyses and evaluations of the public rhetoric of elite actors, considering how it facilitates critical engagement and reflection in matters affecting the environment. Additionally, it encourages examinations of citizens' democratic participation, attending to how citizens perform, challenge and negotiate their membership in the community also through non-deliberative rhetorical practices.

KEYWORDS

climate change communication, environmental communication, environmental rhetoric, public deliberation, rhetorical agency, rhetorical citizenship

1 | INTRODUCTION

Responding to the widespread assumption that current communication practices are failing to adequately address the urgency of the environmental problems we face; countless efforts are made to improve them. The International Panel on Climate Change publishes handbooks guiding scientists in communicating effectively to increase public awareness and engagement (Corner et al., 2018). Newspapers and broadcasters are developing journalistic guidelines for communicating the urgency of climate change in ways that can engage and motivate their audience to act (e.g. Carrington, 2019; NRK, 2020). Non-profit organizations offer tips, training and workshops on constructive climate conversations that can "replace hopelessness, cultures of silence and climate denial with involvement, drive and the climate movement of the future" (Klimatprata, 2022). Much Environmental Communication scholarship

is also oriented towards improving communication practices. For example the sub-field of Climate Change Communication, emerging in the 1990s and rapidly growing in the early 2000s, is explicitly focused on improving climate change communication to facilitate social action (Chadwick, 2017; Moser, 2010).

From the beginning, rhetorical perspectives have been central to Environmental Communication scholarship (Cox & Depoe, 2015; Peeples, 2015). Among other things, early contributions to the field explored the rhetorical strategies of preservationists and rhetorical contestations over preservation and conservation (Oravec, 1981, 1984; Peterson, 1986), the replacement of social reasoning with technical reasoning in public responses to environmental accidents (Farrell & Goodnight, 1981) and the deployment of "the locus of irreparable" in environmental argumentation (Cox, 1982). Since then, the field has grown, encompassing a range of disciplines with distinct theoretical and

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analytical approaches, among them media and journalism studies, science and technology studies, social psychology, linguistics and cultural studies (Hansen & Cox, 2015).

In this paper, I discuss rhetorical studies' contribution to Environmental Communication scholarship by situating it as the study of rhetorical environmental citizenship. Thus, the paper draws on the theoretical, analytical and normative concept of rhetorical citizenship, developed by the Danish rhetoric scholars Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen (2012, 2014, 2017) and highly influential in Scandinavian rhetoric scholarship. In so doing, I suggest that the rhetorical approach is characterized by its concern with how people use and receive rhetoric in situations where collective decision-making is needed and the role of democratic citizens as participants in and recipients of public debates about environmental issues.

The article has two objectives. The first is to discuss rhetorical scholarship's contribution to the study of environmental communication. The second is to serve as an introduction to environmental rhetoric for students and scholars unfamiliar with this field, including those with no prior background in rhetorical studies. Therefore, the article begins by defining rhetoric as praxis and academic study, followed by an overview of key discussions and approaches in existing environmental rhetoric scholarship.

Then, I introduce the concept of rhetorical citizenship and demonstrate its application in relation to environmental debates. First, I discuss the recipient dimension of rhetorical citizenship, which concerns how citizens practise citizenship as recipients of others' opinions and arguments. A central assumption is that citizens should be able to use the public debate as input to their inner deliberations about matters of shared concern. Therefore, embracing rhetorical citizenship from a concern with how people may be involved in the democratic debate as recipients entails evaluating how contributions to this debate facilitate critical engagement.

Second, I discuss the participant dimension of rhetorical citizenship, which concerns citizens' possibilities to participate in the democratic debate and influence collective decisions. As possibilities to speak and be influential are unevenly distributed, a concern with citizens' democratic participation requires embracing a variety of rhetorical actions as democratic practices, whereby citizens may perform, challenge and negotiate the community's organization, norms and their roles as members of the community. To illustrate this, I look closer at young climate activists' accusations of older generations, arguing that they expand the political community and redefine the membership of children and youth in it.

2 | WHAT IS RHETORIC, AND HOW DO WE STUDY IT?

The term "rhetoric" has been defined and applied in multiple ways, both in the rhetorical tradition and contemporary scholarship. Some define rhetoric narrowly, as strategic and situated human communication, others so broadly that, in principle, all symbolic acts capable of exerting some form of influence may be viewed as rhetorical (cf. Schiappa, 2001). As the purpose of this paper is to discuss rhetorical environmental citizenship, I find it expedient to define rhetoric the way that the originators of the term rhetorical citizenship do.[1]

In the application of Kock and Villadsen (2017), rhetoric refers to two things: It refers to the practice of civic communication and the academic study of it. It does not, although these are common misconceptions, refer to discourse that is particularly passionate, figurative or deceptive, in contrast to «rational» discourse. Nor is rhetoric the antithesis of «reality», as implied when someone claims some utterance to be «just rhetoric», in contrast to words that have consequences in the world. Yet, rhetorical scholars acknowledge passionate, figurative expressions as democratic forms of communication and recognize that rhetoric can sometimes be used to deceive, for instance, to make people believe that there is no scientific consensus about human-made climate change.

As praxis, rhetoric should be understood as an art used to influence an audience in situations where decision-making is needed (Kock & Villadsen, 2017, p. 573). This implies a view of rhetoric as purposive and consequential, meaning that speakers have an intention – that speakers are trying to achieve something with their communication. This "something" may be to persuade an audience, but it may also be to mobilize, create identification, strengthen adherence to certain values and so forth.

Moreover, the rhetorical perspective assumes that communication has an effect – that it does something to the audience. But this «something» is not always what the speaker intended – and it is seldom the same for all audiences. Instead, different audiences have different dispositions, leading them to interpret the situation differently and respond differently to the same rhetorical message (cf. Kjeldsen, 2018).

Rhetorical practice is always situated; it addresses particular situations and audiences (Bitzer, 1968). In addition to the audience, the specific context of an utterance encompasses several constraints that influence how the speaker can act rhetorically and with what effect. Among such

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[1] The conceptualization of rhetoric that follows is also a common, yet not uncontested, way of defining and understanding rhetoric within existing environmental rhetoric scholarship (cf. Pezzullo & Cox, 2018, p. 77).

constraints are recent events, dominant discourses and common knowledge that influence how the audience thinks about the issue. Moreover, cultural norms, situational expectations and the communication technology's affordances constrain how it is possible to act rhetorically and how the audience responds to the attempt at influence.

The study of rhetoric is the study of how people argue and use other means of influence to gain the adherence of an audience. Moreover, rhetorical studies aim to understand the effects and consequences of rhetorical messages as they act upon hearers' and readers' minds. However, assuming that context matters, rhetorical studies do typically not offer general, transcultural conclusions about how particular communicative strategies work.

Instead, rhetorical analyses attend to the particularities of one or a small sample of texts (verbal or non-verbal) to explore and evaluate how the text's formal and substantial elements function in the specific context they are conveyed and received. The critic's interpretation of the text's meaning and mode of operation is made in a hermeneutic movement between the text and the context (Leff, 1980). Increasingly, reception and field methods are also employed, allowing the critic's interpretation to be modified, altered or strengthened based on the interpretations and perceptions of the actual rhetors and audiences of those practices (Ceccarelli, 2011; Kjeldsen, 2018; Middleton et al., 2015).

Moreover, dealing with civic communication about collective decisions, rhetorical scholars often apply a normative view of the texts they study, "typically ascribing a potential social function to them and asking whether they are apt to have a positive or negative function in relation to concepts of democracy, societal cohesion, and the like" (Kjeldsen, 2021, p. 5). A normative tilt is also common to environmental rhetoric scholarship, as many scholars intend their research to contribute to improving the quality of public discourse and decision-making affecting the environment (Cox, 2007; Cox & Depoe, 2015; Schwarze, 2007) and contribute to give voice to marginalized humans and non-humans in such decision-making processes (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 81; Pezzullo & de Onís, 2018). However, the role of normativity in environmental rhetoric research has also been the subject of debate.

3 | NORMATIVITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL RHETORIC SCHOLARSHIP

Scholars of environmental rhetoric commonly see themselves as occupied with crises threatening both humans and other earthly life, caused at least partly by failures in human communication (Cox, 2007). Consequently, many view it as an ethical and political obligation to move beyond simply studying environmental communication to actively working to "enhance the ability of society to respond appropriately to environmental signals relevant to the well-being of both human civilization and natural biological systems" (Cox, 2007, p. 15).

Some do so by working from ideological or critical approaches towards destabilizing dominant discourses and systems of power (Peeples, 2015, p. 41). In particular, scholars of critical rhetoric have been occupied with challenging dominant ideologies of anthropocentrism to "address ongoing environmental crises that are rooted in these systems of power" (Endres, 2020, p. 327).

Furthermore, it has been suggested that environmental rhetoric scholars should confront environmental injustices and give voice to powerless and voiceless humans and nonhumans (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 84; Pezzullo & de Onís, 2018). Thus, much environmental rhetoric scholarship is oriented to the intersections of environmental injustices with other injustices, for instance committed against colonized, racialized and gendered minorities, and aim to give voice to those who are seldom or never heard in environmental decision-making processes (de Onís, 2012; Reyes and Chirindo, 2020; Pezzullo & de Onís, 2018; Pezzullo, 2007).

Another form of normativity advocated by environmental rhetoric scholars is working to expose unsustainable communication practices and propose sustainable alternatives (Cox, 2007, p. 16–18). This may take the form of publicly engaged and activist scholarship, where scholars do not stop short of researching but also exercise political engagement and actively participate in the rhetorical situations and communities they study (Middleton et al., 2015, p. 48–52). This may, for instance, involve offering communication advice to environmental advocates or educating the public to facilitate social change (Cox, 2007, p. 16–18; Middleton et al., 2015, p. 48–52; Pezzullo, 2016, p. 32–36; Wolrath Söderberg, 2020, p. 30).

An example of scholarship that combines an analytical attitude with an activist agenda is the edited collection *Social Movement for Climate Change* (Endres et al., 2009). The volume examines the social movement Step It Up, which demanded political action to tackle the challenges of climate change. In addition to analysing the movement's organization, strategies and tactics from a variety of theoretical and analytical angles, many of the essays in the collection conclude with «concrete suggestions for people engaged in advocacy and movement building» (Endres et al., 2009, p. 4).

However, there has been debate about the role of normativity in environmental rhetoric scholarship. Steven Schwarze (2007, p. 90) cautioned against engaging in a type

of scholarship that "criticise[s] communication practices in light of their ecological consequences". Debunking anti-environmental rhetoric to contribute to positive change may, Schwarze warned, contribute to reducing rhetoric to merely an instrumental practice and the work of the rhetorical critic to a public relations campaign. Moreover, many environmental issues contain complicated conflicts that do not fall along clear environmental versus anti-environmental lines. Thus, there seldom is one right and one wrong answer to how environmental challenges are best handled. Instead, different reasons belonging to different dimensions may be valid at the same time but still carry different weights to different persons (Kock, 2009, 2018).

However, this does not imply that deceptive claims about the world cannot be criticized, nor that rhetorical practices that undermine (groups of) citizens' possibilities to participate in democracy cannot be challenged (Schwarze, 2007, p. 95–96). Instead, I suggest a normative view of environmental rhetoric that evaluates how particular rhetorical practices create, transform or foreclose meaningful public deliberation about our shared environmental problems and can "keep people talking *with* each other, and not just *about* each other or, worse, discontinue talking" (Kock & Villadsen, 2017, p. 574, emphasis in original). This involves attending both to the adjudication of disputes, exploring whether adversaries are tolerated and addressed or treated as antagonists to be silenced, and to who gets to speak and be influential, and what obstructs others from doing so. Before expanding on this, I outline some central research interests and approaches in environmental rhetoric scholarship.[2]

4 | THE CONSTITUTIVE AND INSTRUMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL RHETORIC

Rhetorical approaches to environmental communication are occupied with understanding particular texts, symbolic acts and discursive practices' constitutive and instrumental functions (Peeples, 2015; Peterson et al., 2016; Pezzullo & Cox, 2018). The instrumental functions refer to actors' strategic use of rhetoric to influence attitudes and decisions about the environment. The constitutive functions refer to how the words, names and concepts we use when we speak about environmental issues contribute to creating and shaping the very phenomenon they address, thereby influencing how people experience, relate to and act in

relation to the environment (e.g., DeLuca & Demo, 2000, 2001; Milstein, 2011; Oravec & Clarke, 2004).

Particular attention has been paid to how human–nature relationships are often constituted through a nature/culture binary that situates nature as separate from the human, existing outside and independently of us (Endres, 2020; Peterson et al., 2007; Pezzullo, 2017). Much scholarship is characterized by efforts to deconstruct this binary, focusing on how nature and culture may instead be "imagined as elements that coconstitute each other materially and symbolically as part of the environment" (Pezzullo, 2017, p. 3).

Among these efforts are studies of how various rhetorical practices may create new orientations to the environment. For example Barnett (2021) and Bruns (2021) discussed how human mourning rituals, such as commemorations, funerals and memorials, may be used to mourn the loss of ecological bodies and how such practices may serve purposes of resisting future losses. Increased attention has also been turned to how nature itself is both an agent capable of exercising rhetorical influence and an audience being influenced by rhetorical practice (e.g., Bjørkdahl & Parrish, 2018; Callister, 2013; Seegert, 2014, 2016).

The words, concepts and discourses used to address environmental problems, and their solutions also influence our perceptions of these problems and our dispositions to act. For example the concepts "the climate crisis" and "the nature crisis" turn the present into a moment of great upheaval, in which our actions are decisive for the future. Thus, these crisis concepts may create a sense of urgency. However, they also contribute to reducing the future to two options: an environmental catastrophe or a sustainable future (Bjærke & Kverndokk, 2022, p. 16–17; 171–172).

Concepts may also carry with them different meanings to different actors and audiences. An example is the concept of "sustainable development". Peterson (1997) showed how the complexities and contradictions inherent in this concept may obstruct shared understanding and deliberation on environmental action. Moreover, by promising to unite environmental and economic concerns, discourses about "sustainable development" often reproduce a neoliberal logic of continued economic growth that may obstruct pro-environmental action (e.g. Bricker, 2012; Schneider et al., 2016).

Attending to aspects of text relating to genre is another common way to approach particular texts' purpose and possible effects. Genres come into existence through people's recurring and comparable strategies to adjust to similar situations that recur over time (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978) and constitute social actions that mediate between the rhetor's purpose and the audience's expectations of the situation (Miller, 1984).

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[2] The overview is by no means exhaustive and can be supplemented with overviews found in Cox & Depoe (2015), Endres (2020), Peeples (2015), Pezzullo (2016; 2017), Pezzullo & Cox (2018) and Wolrath Söderberg (2020).

In one of the earliest works in environmental rhetoric, Oravec (1981) examined the famous preservationist John Muir's rhetoric as an instance of the sublime genre, influential in creating widespread national attention and support for nature preservation due to its ability to evoke feelings of spiritual exaltation for pristine nature. Later, Schwarze (2006) discussed melodrama as a rhetorical genre that positions social actors in relation to each other in environmental conflicts and may be used by activists to transform complex and intangible environmental problems into tangible threats with clear emotional and moral dimensions. Moreover, the apocalyptic genre has been discussed as apt to challenge the dominant narrative of human history as a story of progress and human victory over nature (Killingsworth & Palmer, 1996). However, the apocalyptic genre has also been discussed as constraining our agency to act upon the problems by situating the catastrophe as a temporally distant, yet inevitable event (Bjerggaard Nielsen, 2013, 2017).

Environmental rhetoric scholarship is often oriented to political rhetoric and concerned with the democratic potential of the public debate. For instance, several studies have examined how various actors, such as the fossil fuel industry, think tanks with strong industrial ties and political strategists, have acted rhetorically to undermine the public's trust in the climate sciences, thereby undermining possibilities for meaningful public deliberation about environmental issues (Bricker, 2013, 2014; Ceccarelli, 2011; Paliewicz & McHendry, 2017; Schneider et al., 2016).

Recent scholarship reflects how the emergence of new media technologies and platforms creates new possibilities and challenges for public deliberation and public opinion formation on environmental matters, above all on climate change. Studies have explored both how climate deniers have exploited social media's technological affordances to appear credible and create circulation online (Bloomfield & Tillery, 2019), and what rhetorical strategies may counteract climate denialism and facilitate deliberative discussion in online environments (Bloomfield et al., 2020; Cagle & Herndl, 2019).

Ideals of deliberative democracy, particularly the orientation to consensus, have also been criticized as contraproductive in environmental disputes. For example Peterson et al. (2004) observed how expectations to solve community conflicts over land use versus conservation through consensus-oriented discourse led to the exclusion of oppositional interests, poor decisions that did not survive scrutiny and public cynicism by community members. Instead of aiming for consensus, they propose that community-based conservation should be guided by the notion of "bounded conflict". With this, they conceptualize the ideals for the public debate in similar ways as Kock and Villadsen (2017) do within the framework of rhetorical citizenship, namely that participants should be engaged in argumentation and treat each other as adversaries to be tolerated and listened to, but without aiming for consensus (see also, Peterson, 1997; Peterson et al., 2016).

As suggested by several studies of social movements, a variety of non-argumentative and disruptive rhetorical practices may perform important functions of promoting social critique and challenging the status quo. DeLuca has discussed environmental activists' "body rhetoric" (DeLuca, 1999b) and staging of "image events" (DeLuca, 1999a) as powerful forms of political argument and social critique. In a similar vein, Bsumek et al. (2019) argued that one of the leading strategists of the US climate movement, Bill McKibben's, "strategic gestures" serve as interruptions of dominant discourses and enactments of alternative futures. Bsumek et al. (2019) challenged earlier criticisms of McKibben's rhetoric as "merely" symbolic and, thus, ineffective in addressing the problem and generating public support for the cause (Cox, 2009, 2010; Endres, 2009). Moreover, activists' use of accusations, which I discuss more at length below, is increasingly discussed as means by which community's norms are performed and negotiated in relation to environmental issues (Andersen & Fløttum, 2022; Bjerggaard Nielsen, 2021; Hoff-Clausen, 2018).

In what follows, I discuss "rhetorical citizenship" as a conceptual framework for approaching the role of citizens as participants in and recipients of public rhetoric and debate.

5 | RHETORICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CITIZENSHIP

Rhetorical citizenship is a "conceptual, analytical and critical approach" to how rhetorical practice creates and shapes citizens' experience of being part of a political community and having meaningful roles to play within it (Kock & Villadsen, 2017, p. 169; see also Kock & Villadsen, 2012, 2014). Rhetoric is viewed as "a medium for being a citizen", through which citizens articulate, perform and challenge norms of democratic membership in a given community (Villadsen, 2017, p. 169). Citizenship is viewed as membership in a polity. This membership is, arguably, constituted rhetorically both in public rhetoric from elite actors that define and establish the formal conditions of citizenship and in the quotidian and vernacular discourse of lay citizens, in which they interpret, perform, challenge and negotiate what it means to be a citizen (Kock & Villadsen, 2017).

As an approach to the rhetorical, processual and participatory aspects of the public sphere, the concept of

rhetorical citizenship is informed by Gerard A. Hauser's (1999) seminal work on vernacular rhetoric, which helped reorient work on political rhetoric in the public sphere to include informal and everyday civic interaction. Kock and Villadsen (2012) shared Hauser's (1999, p. 64) view that "[a] public's essential characteristic is its shared activity of exchanging opinion". Moreover, their interest in the rhetorical enactment of citizenship engages directly with Robert Asen's (2004, p. 191) call to view citizenship as a "mode of public engagement" and explore the multiple rhetorical forms, discursive or symbolic, by which people enact their citizenship.

As an analytical approach, rhetorical citizenship is concerned with citizens' participation in democracy – both as recipients and producers of public rhetoric. Although inviting a range of analytical and critical approaches, it is anchored in rhetorical theories of deliberative democracy (e.g. Garsten, 2006; Ivie, 2002; Kock, 2018) and agency (Geisler, 2004; Hoff-Clausen et al., 2005), emphasizing both "citizens' performance of civic discourse or other symbolic action and their reception of it" (Kock & Villadsen, 2017, p. 574). Following this, the framework of rhetorical citizenship invites studies of how particular contributions to the public debate enhance or obstruct citizens' possibilities to critically engage with and use the public debate as input to form opinions on matters of shared concern (Kock & Villadsen, 2012). Moreover, it invites studies of (groups of) citizens' abilities and possibilities to participate in and influence collective decision-making processes (Villadsen, 2008).

Foregrounding the rhetorical, participatory aspects of citizenship, the concept of rhetorical citizenship carries normative and prescriptive expectations that we, as members of the political community, have access to participate in its discourses and decisions. Thus, rhetorical citizenship is inextricably linked to rhetorical agency, that is to citizens' abilities and possibilities to act rhetorically and be influential in doing so (Hoff-Clausen et al., 2005).

Consequently, lacking political and/or rhetorical agency is to be excluded from practising citizenship. To illustrate how this exclusion may happen both formally, through lack of legal rights to participate, and informally, through dominant discourses about one's place and role in democracy, I turn to a group of citizens, which I revisit later when I discuss the participant dimension of rhetorical citizenship, namely children and youth. While having status as citizens of their nation, this group lacks the most basic political right usually conferred by citizenship, namely the right to vote (Wall, 2014). Thus, they are excluded through law from participating in the community's decision-making processes.

However, the exclusion of children from the sphere of politics also happens rhetorically through dominant discourses about children and childhood that deny them rhetorical and political power (e.g. Lorgen & Ursin, 2021; Ursin, 2019; Wall, 2014). Children are assumed to be innocent and vulnerable bodies that must be protected from the corruptions of the adult world of politics. They are viewed as immature, ill-informed and irresponsible citizens-in-the-making, lacking the sufficient capabilities and competencies to engage in argumentation and make sound decisions. Consequently, children's participation in political debates and decisions is seen as potentially harmful both to themselves and the community. Similar arguments have previously been used to prevent women, workers, the poor and ethnic minorities from participating in democratic discussions and decisions, thereby excluding them from enacting citizenship (Johansen, 2019).

Existing treatments of rhetorical citizenship are mainly oriented to the rhetorical constitution and performance of membership in the nation-state, typically studying situations where what it means to be a member of a nation becomes the subject of debate and contestation (Kock & Villadsen, 2017; Villadsen, 2012, 2017, 2019). As suggested by recent discussions about the intersections between the environment and citizenship within political science, our environmental challenges call for an expansion of the arena of citizenship from the nation-state to a global community, which also includes the environment (e.g. Dobson, 2007)[3]. In addition to examining how citizens negotiate their democratic membership within the nation-state, such an expansion involves attending to how relationships of rights and duties are constituted, performed and negotiated between humans and non-humans, as well as between contemporary citizens and future citizens. Thus, questions of whether and how non-humans and future generations may gain citizenship also emerge. The emphasis on citizenship as rhetorical practice suggests that they, being physically unable to participate in contemporary political discourse and decision-making processes, cannot. However, as Peterson et al. (2007, p. 79) argued, these groups can gain citizenship through spokespersons representing their interests and rights in political decision-making. In my discussion of the participant dimension of rhetorical citizenship, I will suggest that young climate activists have done precisely so, that is, acted as spokespersons for future generations, thereby challenging and attempting to expand the temporal limits of citizenship.

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[3] Environmental citizenship is, in this scholarship, commonly discussed in terms of citizens' environmental duties and responsibilities (Dobson, 2007) or environmental rights (Bell, 2005). However, environmental citizenship is also understood as discursively constituted, for instance, through an orientation to how environmental citizenship is articulated in educational contexts (Marti, 2021).

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In what follows, I elaborate on the concept of rhetorical citizenship, first by discussing the recipient dimension of rhetorical citizenship, and then, the participant dimension of rhetorical citizenship.

6 | CITIZENS AS RECIPIENTS OF PUBLIC ENVIRONMENTAL RHETORIC

The recipient dimension of rhetorical citizenship concerns how citizens practice citizenship when they read or hear others' opinions and arguments and use these as input to form their own opinions in matters of shared concern. A central assumption is that the public debate should enable citizens to reflect upon and choose between conflicting choices for future action in matters affecting the community. Therefore, examining the recipient dimension of rhetorical citizenship requires attending to how various contributions to the public debate facilitate deliberation about issues of shared concern.

Deliberation is here understood as primarily rhetorical, and deliberative argumentation as practical argumentation about what to do (Garsten, 2006; Kock, 2018). Thus, deliberation is centred around a specific domain of issues, namely those issues that concern choices about future action and wherein there is no one true answer (Kock, 2009, p. 62). Consequently, a rhetorical approach to deliberation emphasizes that public deliberations must accommodate uncertainty, conflicting views, interests and values. Usually, both sides will have irrefutable reasons, meaning that consensus cannot be expected (Ivie, 2002; Kock, 2009, 2018).

Here, rhetorical argumentation differs from technical forms of reasoning, primarily concerned with discovering what is true and false and, therefore, inviting the audience "to 'infer' a certain conclusion" (Kock, 2018, p. 479). By contrast, rhetorical argumentation usually involves uncertainty and unsolvable disagreement about what is the best course of future action and, instead, invites the audience "to 'prefer' a certain action" (Kock, 2018, p. 479; see also, Kock, 2009). Although political decisions should indeed be informed by scientific knowledge, we should, thus, be critical when actors claim that acting to mitigate climate change is an unpolitical matter of "facts, not opinions" (e.g., Thunberg, 2020), and that we, therefore, should simply "listen to the science" (e.g., Thunberg, 2019a). Although there is an overwhelming consensus among scientists that climate change is real, human-made and consequential, decisions about how to act upon the scientific conclusions involve many uncertainties and goal conflicts (Hulme, 2009). For instance, efforts to mitigate climate change may often conflict with efforts to prevent biodiversity loss. Both climate measures and nature con-servation may, in turn, conflict with community interests, indigenous rights, as well as people's personal interests and visions of the good life. Thus, mitigating climate change requires making political decisions and, doing so, requires deliberation.

As Farrell and Goodnight (1981) discussed, the public debate is increasingly dominated by technical argumentation, which undermines citizens' possibilities to use it as input to their inner deliberations. Technical reasoning withholds its presuppositions from ready public access as it requires special expertise to evaluate such arguments. Furthermore, technical arguments remove politics and agency from view. Instead of political choices prioritizing some interests over others, decisions appear to be made based on strictly objective considerations of what choice is better. By presenting decisions this way, decision-makers can evade obligations to argumentation and foreclose possibilities for critical engagement and counterargumen-tation. Therefore, the erosion of the public sphere of argument by technical reasoning obstructs citizens' participation in and critical engagement with public arguments (Farrell & Goodnight, 1981; Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992).

For the public debate to serve as input to citizens' processes of opinion formation, it is reasonable to expect contributions to this debate, in particular from elite actors, to present hearers and readers with arguments for acting the way proposed by the speaker. However, the aim of the debate is not to reach agreement but to contribute to shedding light on the different perspectives on the given issue, enabling hearers and readers of the debate to weigh the different reasons and discover what reasons carry more weight to them (Kock, 2018).

Approaching rhetorical citizenship from a concern with how people may be involved with the public debate as recipients, thus, entails evaluating how contributions to this debate are apt to enable citizens to reflect upon and choose between conflicting views on the community's organization. Therefore, utterances in the public debate can be criticized, for instance, when they are deceptive or irrelevant to the issue in question, foreclose possibilities for critical engagement and counterargumentation or in other ways fail to present the hearers or readers with reasons. This may, for instance, involve critically investigating false accusations of climate scientists of being unscientific, elitist and conspiring (Bricker, 2013; Ceccarelli, 2011), the rhetorical use of and responses to shame appeals (Andersen, 2022) or powerful actors' strategic use of the concept of "crisis" to legitimize debatable actions and circumvent critical discussion of controversial decisions (Whyte, 2021).

However, approaching rhetorical citizenship from a concern with citizens as participants with access and

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possibilities to influence civic life requires also attending to how a variety of rhetorical practices – also non-argumentative practices – are democratic means by which citizens may perform, challenge and negotiate the community's norms and organization.

7 | CITIZENS AS PARTICIPANTS IN DEMOCRACY

Rhetorical citizenship's orientation to citizens' possibilities to participate in and influence civic life, essentially, concerns citizens' rhetorical agency. Rhetorical agency refers to citizens' abilities and possibilities to speak and be heard (Hoff-Clausen et al., 2005). On the one hand, this has to do with rhetoric's instrumental aspects, that is the citizens' rhetorical competency and confidence to act rhetorically in a given situation to influence others. On the other hand, it has to do with rhetoric's situational aspects, that is the physical, social, institutional, political and cultural factors that enable and constrain speakers' possibilities to speak up and be heard (Geisler, 2004, p. 12–14). Having rhetorical agency, then, is both to be recognized as a speaker by the rhetorical community and given a speaker position from which one can seek influence – and being able to utilize this speaker position to do so.

Rhetorical agency is considered a fundamental human right because it is linked to being included in the community as a rhetorical citizen (Hauser, 2004, p. 186). However, many groups, often those most affected by environmental hazards, have limited rhetorical agency and, thus, limited possibilities to influence decisions about how the community should respond to these problems. As discussed, young people are excluded from the sphere of politics both by lacking formal legal rights to vote and due to long-standing assumptions about their place and role in society. Although children and youth have been highly visible in the climate change debate, especially through Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for future movement, which attracted massive media attention with their school strikes, they have often not been recognized as fully worthy citizens in the rhetorical community (Andersen, 2023; Jacobsson, 2021; Ursin, 2019). Instead, they have been dismissed by the mass media and politicians as politically inexperienced, immature and not knowledgeable enough to have and voice an opinion on the issue (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Feldman, 2020). Furthermore, they were deprived of a political project, and their identity as democratic citizens was negated when media reporting about the strikes transformed the protesters into apolitical beings, typically portraying them as individuals rather than a collective with a political agenda (Jacobsson, 2021).

In the remaining part of the paper, I discuss a recognizable feature of the school strikers' rhetoric, namely the accusation of older generations of betraying younger and future generations by failing to act on the challenges of climate change. I argue that this generational accusation functions to redefine the role of children and youth in the political community and can be seen as a means by which the youth craft rhetorical agency for their group. By doing so, I wish to draw attention to how the evaluation of rhetorical practices must always attend to their particular context and emphasize that the rhetorical strategies of marginalized actors may often be judged differently than the actions of those in power (Peeples, 2015, p. 43).

Accusations often challenge the ideals of deliberative debate as conceived within the conceptual frame of rhetorical citizenship, according to which the adjudication of disputes requires adversaries to be tolerated and addressed rather than antagonists to be demonized (Kock & Villadsen, 2017). The Fridays for future movement has also received criticism of this kind. In particular, Greta Thunberg has been criticized for cultivating contempt for politicians and distrust in democratic institutions by depicting politicians as villains (Alstadheim, 2021; Caldwell, 2019).

However, accusations may also serve important social and political functions as reinforcements, examinations and negotiations of collective norms and values (Iversen & Nørremark, 2021; Bjerggaard Nielsen, 2021). Moreover, by accusing a third party, speakers may challenge established hierarchies of power and craft rhetorical agency for themselves and their audience (Andersen & Fløttum, 2022; Hoff-Clausen, 2018).

The young activists' accusations can be termed "generational accusations" as they, in contrast to the typical public accusation, do not target a particular person or group but a loose group designation that blurs several demographic and political features of the accused. Moreover, the accusation does not concern one specific action but a complex of actions over time – an action pattern in the entire generational group (Bjerggaard Nielsen, 2021, p. 25–26). Therefore, the activists have been criticized for creating stereotypes that overlook similarities between and differences within generations (e.g. class, race and gender) and reduce the political issue of climate change to a question of one generation's immoral lifestyle (Morris, 2022).

However, studies of the rhetorical use and function of generational accusations in the rhetoric of Greta Thunberg (Bjerggaard Nielsen, 2021), and her allies (Andersen & Fløttum, 2022), also find that the accusations serve as a critique of the place and role of young people in democracy and challenge dominant perceptions of who has what rights and duties across from whom in the community. The young activists accuse adults of being irresponsible

when not listening to and acting upon children's concerns for the future. The norm the older generations are accused of violating is, essentially, the generational contract, entailing both that adults should take the concerns of the young seriously and that they are responsible for acting to ensure their children a safe and sound future. By accusing adults of being irresponsible, the young step out of the role usually assigned to them in the community as trusting children depending on their parents to secure them a safe and sound future. Instead, they step forward as agents in a position to reprimand the adult generation for having failed them. Thereby, they reverse the usual child–adult relationship, claiming that the adults are immature and irresponsible, whereas children are actively acting and taking responsibility (Bjærke & Kverndokk, 2022, p. 141).

Moreover, although adults are blamed for the problems and accused of failing to act, the invitation to act is primarily addressed to other young people, who are encouraged to mobilize against the adult world's inaction and force the grown-ups to listen to their concerns and act upon the problem (Andersen & Fløttum, 2022). Thus, these accusations serve as a way for the youth to challenge dominant perceptions of their membership in democracy and establish new roles for young people in the community as agents capable of acting and being influential.

Furthermore, the older generations are accused of neglecting their responsibilities not only to the young but also to future generations. Thereby, the youth expand the political community to include both children and those not yet born as fellow citizens with rights that must be considered in contemporary political decisions, evident in their demand for climate justice not only within but also between generations (Friberg, 2022, p. 55).

The young activists advance their accusations "on behalf of future generations" (Thunberg, 2019b, p. 57), through prophetic glimpses into the future from where they look back at the present as an imagined past (Bjærke & Kverndokk, 2022, p. 142–143). Moreover, they claim that the catastrophe is already taking place in the here and now, rather than being a future apocalyptic event (Friberg, 2022, p. 57). Thereby, they draw the future into the present. This temporal shift has political implications: If the future is now, then future generations are not merely abstract entities that must be taken into consideration in contemporary decision-making; they are truly fellow citizens on an equal footing as contemporary ones. Thereby, the young activists' accusations may be understood as a performance of rhetorical environmental citizenship. Through rhetorical practice, they challenge and attempt to expand the limits of citizenship to include themselves in the present and to reach into a temporally distant future.

8 | CONCLUSION

As Environmental Communication scholarship grows increasingly diversified and multidisciplinary, I propose rhetorical environmental citizenship as a way of conceptualizing and clarifying the contribution of the rhetorical perspective to the field. The normative foundation of the concept of rhetorical citizenship emphasizes citizens' opportunities to participate in democracy both as recipients of and participants in the democratic debate (Kock & Villadsen, 2012; Villadsen, 2008). On the one hand, the approach invites analysis and critical evaluation of the deliberative quality of elite actors' public rhetoric, asking whether their contributions to the public debate are apt to serve as input to citizens' inner deliberations about collective decisions.

However, because the opportunities to speak and be heard are unevenly distributed (Johansen, 2019), citizens' participation in democracy cannot always be polite, receptive and argumentative (Villadsen, 2017). With disruptive rhetorical acts, such as accusations, rhetorically underprivileged and marginalized citizens can demand recognition, attract attention to marginalized societal issues and challenge established beliefs and power structures (e.g. Bsumek et al., 2019; Schwarze, 2006).

I started this paper with the observation that the question of how to communicate about our environmental challenges to create increased awareness and motivate action attracts much attention both in research and the public sphere. As an analytical and critical approach to environmental communication, rhetorical citizenship does not offer any recipes on how to communicate environmental issues effectively, nor does it see it as feasible to do so. Instead, it starts from the assumption that the effects of any utterance will vary depending on who communicates what, to whom, and in what situation. Still, it assumes that the rhetorical choices we and others make when addressing and attempting to influence decisions about how to act matter. The rhetoric we practise and receive shapes our understanding of the issue, our possibilities to act, the relationships between us as citizens of the local, national and global community and our relation to the non-human world. Studying rhetorical environmental citizenship is to explore how such influence and identification happen rhetorically and evaluate the societal implications of various messages as they circulate and exercise influence in society.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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