Discourse Ethics in Environmental Debates

Public Representation and the Problem of Inclusion in Local Wind Power Planning

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Abstract

Localized resistance to renewable energy infrastructure frequently exposes systemic deficits in environmental discourse ethics, particularly concerning the moral inclusion of nonhuman entities and future generations. Grounded in Habermasian discourse ethics (specifically the concept of advocatory discourses), Ott's environmental value structures, and Jonas's imperative of responsibility, this study analyzes the communicative mechanics of the public debate surrounding wind power deployment in Lower Austria in 2023–24. A structurally applied qualitative content analysis of regional media artifacts was conducted to evaluate the legitimation strategies and representational disparities among discourse participants. The empirical findings reveal a pervasive anthropocentric bias: instrumental human interests systematically marginalized intrinsic ecological and future-oriented concerns. Furthermore, the analysis exposes profound institutional power asymmetries that dictate media utilization. Institutional proponents leveraged formal communication channels, whereas grassroots opponents, who lack structural agency, defaulted to emotionally charged, defensive, and informal media formats (e.g., visual satire) to contest perceived disenfranchisement. The study concludes that current renewable energy infrastructure planning paradigms fundamentally fail the Habermasian ideal of domination-free deliberation. To ensure equitable environmental policymaking, the institutionalization of advocatory representation for nonhuman entities and the deployment of symmetric participatory frameworks are imperative to reconcile global climate mandates with localized socio-ecological identities.

Keywords

environmental communication, wind power, discourse ethics, advocatory discourse, moral inclusion, media ethics, Lower Austria, renewable energy

1. Introduction

Public environmental debates frequently suffer from an unequal representation of interests. The transition to renewable energy sources is widely recognized as a global imperative to mitigate the intensifying impacts of climate change. However, the localized implementation of green energy infrastructure often encounters public resistance, revealing a paradoxical tension between the overarching goal of global climate protection and actual local efforts to preserve regional landscapes, biodiversity, and community identity. This tension manifests not merely as a technical or economic challenge, but fundamentally as a profound ethical and communicative conflict.

A highly illustrative case of this dynamic is offered by the recent controversies surrounding the expansion of wind power in Lower Austria. Recognizing its favorable geographical conditions, Lower Austria has positioned itself as a pioneer in the national energy transition, currently generating over half of Austria's wind energy with more than half of the country's wind turbines [1]. In September 2023, the regional government announced a spatial planning amendment to construct 250 additional wind turbines [2]. This initiative sparked immediate and intense opposition, particularly in the rural, heavily forested Waldviertel region. Local citizens' initiatives, backed by certain political factions, mobilized against the deployment, warning of severe damage to local quality of life, real estate values, and native wildlife [3, 4]. The highly emotionalized and mediatized debate then culminated in non-binding referendums across five municipalities on March 10, 2024 [5, 6].

While public disputes over wind energy are common, they highlight a critical deficit in contemporary media discourse, namely, the unequal representation of stakeholders. The debate

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inherently affects not only human residents and economic actors but also affected parties without direct communicative agency, including nonhuman entities such as local flora and fauna and entire ecosystems, as well as future generations. In environmental ethics, such affected parties can be conceptualized as "moral patients" insofar as they can be affected by moral decisions but cannot directly participate in public deliberation [7, p. 9]. Therefore, they need advocates who speak on behalf of their interests in order to create an inclusive discourse.

Addressing this imbalance between *moral agents*, who can indeed speak up for their positions, and *moral patients* requires a robust media-ethical framework. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas's concept of the advocatory discourse [8, p. 104], which deals with the question of how capable actors can vicariously represent the voiceless, and Konrad Ott's structural analysis of the problem of inclusion [7, p. 9], this paper examines the ethical quality of the 2023–24 public debate surrounding the Lower Austrian wind power expansion. The central objective is to investigate how different media actors legitimized their positions and to what extent the interests of marginalized nonhuman entities and future generations were actively represented.
Consequently, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** Which actors represented which specific ethical positions in the public debate on the construction of wind turbines in Lower Austria between September 2023 and March 2024?
- **RQ2:** Through which media channels and forms of communication did these actors operate and how were the interests of affected parties without direct communicative agency (animals, plants, ecosystems, and future generations) vicariously communicated?
- **RQ3:** How was the problem of inclusion negotiated within this public debate and to what extent did the arguing parties utilize instrumental, intrinsic, and eudaemonic value structures to legitimize their stances?

By applying a discourse-ethical lens to a regional environmental conflict, this paper aims to provide actionable insights into fostering more equitable, inclusive, and transparent public communication strategies for future renewable infrastructure projects.

2. State of the Art and Related Work

2.1. Social Acceptance of Wind Energy Deployment

Early research attributed local opposition to wind power to the NIMBY ("Not In My Backyard") phenomenon, suggesting that citizens support renewable energy in principle but reject its local execution due to selfish motives. More recent studies, however, have thoroughly deconstructed this assumption and expanded its context. Already in 2005, Toke [9] demonstrated that planning outcomes for wind farms in the UK were heavily influenced by the degree of transparency and local participation rather than by local stubbornness, with a perceived lack of early involvement provoking community resistance. In 2013, this take was reinforced, for example, by Bell et al. [10], who revisited the "social gap" in wind energy politics, revealing that local resistance is deeply rooted in perceived power imbalances and feelings of marginalization. According to their findings, opposition is often less a rejection of the technology itself and more an expression of resistance against institutional structures that fail to integrate local concerns.

Expanding on these friction points and focusing on the Austrian situation, Scherhaufer et al. [11] emphasize that local resistance is driven by deeply rooted personal and political values. They argue that, as such core beliefs are difficult to change, local acceptance can only be achieved by prioritizing fair processes and the distribution of financial benefits. In her 2020 PhD thesis, Nabielek [12] shows that Lower Austria has utilized a top-down approach to govern wind power development by implementing its spatial strategy primarily through state-level sectoral planning initiatives. Once strict boundaries are legally drawn, the public tends to understand them as unchangeable social contracts. This severely limits flexibility and paralyzes the planning system when alternative locations are needed later on. Additionally, Kapeller and Biegelbauer [13] demonstrate through

Austrian case studies that rushed local consultation usually backfires and worsens polarization. They conclude that actively involving the community to redesign and adapt projects serves as a best-practice model for overcoming local blockages.

The underlying economic and democratic logic of these spatial restrictions is further refined by Wehrle et al. [14]. Their findings reveal that protecting residential areas through strict setbacks minimizes external costs and creates massive social welfare gains. However, it also forces turbines into less windy areas, which heavily restricts space and makes the energy transition much more expensive and difficult for developers.

2.2. Health Concerns and Impacts on Nonhumans

Discourses on wind energy are heavily dominated by concerns over health and quality of life, yet these debates are frequently fueled by misinformation about the real-world effects of turbines on nearby residents. A large-scale U.S. longitudinal study by Rott et al. [15] provides crucial empirical clarification regarding local health concerns. Comparing households before and after turbine installations, they found no statistically significant effects on physical or mental health (such as insomnia, depression, or headaches) on a population level. Furthermore, consumer purchases of sleep aids or painkillers remained completely unchanged. However, they note that localized visual and aesthetic disruptions are very real and explain why people oppose nearby wind farms.

Beyond concerns for human health, public and academic discourses frequently highlight that wind energy infrastructures are far more than mere technical operations, as they inherently intersect with complex socio-ecological entities like avian conservation and habitat preservation. Ornithological reports for Lower Austria, for instance, establish exclusion zones and precautionary zones for species such as the red kite and imperial eagle based on high-resolution telemetry data [16]. However, technical solutions are emerging to mitigate such conflicts. Hancock et al. [17] introduce an innovative, nature-inspired solution to resolve the underlying dilemma. Exploiting birds' innate aversion to high-contrast visual patterns, their behavioral experiments demonstrate that biologically inspired, red-yellow-black striped rotor blades drastically reduce avian willingness to approach the structures, allowing them to navigate safely outside the dangerous rotor radius.

2.3. Polarizing Media Frames and Misinformation Narratives

The role of media in framing environmental debates is crucial, given that public perception is strongly affected by mediatized narratives. Focusing on climate change communication in India, Leiserowitz et al. [18] emphasize that while general populations often possess limited factual knowledge about climate change, their perceptions of environmental risks remain high, making them responsive to targeted, emotionally resonant communication. In Austria, socio-political acceptance is generally supported by broad discourse coalitions that frame wind energy as a legitimate technology [19], though this often does not translate to community acceptance at the project level. On a macro-political scale, Schneider and Rinscheid [19] and Bjärstig et al. [20] illustrate how these competing discourse coalitions in traditional mass media drive socio-political (non-)acceptance across entire nations. While Switzerland as a country reluctant to adopt wind energy features prominent negative storylines centered on landscape and alpine protection, media in energy-progressive countries increasingly frame wind power as a necessary systemic solution. However, this public debate is often carried out as an emotionalized, highly polarized "cultural war" [21]. Banita [21] analyzed German print media over a decade from 2011 to 2021, finding that narratives surrounding wind power rely on culturally entrenched, idealized concepts of "untouched nature" and displaying wind turbines as "three-winged demons." She further demonstrates that this traditional mass-media discourse heavily constructs public anxiety and myths, which rarely allow profound ethical or scientific discussions in mainstream reporting.

This polarization observed in traditional media is even amplified in digital spaces. Borch, Munk, and Dahlgaard [22] investigated the role of Facebook in mobilizing anti-wind power protests in Denmark. Their findings illustrate that social-media platforms function as powerful catalysts for

local resistance. Closed or semi-private digital groups seem to foster echo chambers that unite oppositional monopolies and stir up emotional language. They show that these digital channels are not driven by outside agitators, but are highly effective tools used by locally engaged residents to strategically organize resistance and block planning authorities. Munk's [23] broader analysis of online controversies on wind power further confirms that proponents and opponents operate in strictly separated digital networks. Opponents localize their arguments around immediate impacts (e.g., noise, aesthetics, nature conservation), whereas proponents argue from a macro-perspective (e.g., technological feasibility, global climate goals).

This digital divide is also driven by false information and conspiracy theories. Winter et al. [24] calls misinformation on wind farms a mainstream Western phenomenon, displaying traditional factual campaigns as ineffective. Specifically, their study conducted in the US, UK, and Australia demonstrates that while blatantly false myths (e.g., that power cables cause cancer or that disposal releases more CO_2 than operation saves) achieve lower agreement, over 40% of respondents readily believe in corrupt political arrangements regarding wind farm siting, showing a deep-seated public skepticism in these countries. Ultimately, this general susceptibility to wind energy misinformation cannot be attributed to a lack of education or knowledge but is primarily driven by a general conspiracy mentality and a rejection of ecological values.

2.4. Identifying the Research Gap

The state of the art demonstrates that existing research provides important foundations regarding the social acceptance of wind energy, ecological value conflicts, and media framing. However, for Austria—and Lower Austria in particular—the public sphere surrounding wind power controversies has not yet been examined comprehensively across different communicative arenas, including regional journalism, institutional communication, web-based advocacy, and social-media discourse. This article addresses this empirical gap by analyzing the public debate on wind power expansion in Lower Austria as a mediatized environmental controversy. At the same time, it evaluates this debate from a discourse-ethical perspective, focusing on questions of communicative inclusion, advocatory representation, and the moral visibility of human, nonhuman, and future stakeholders. In doing so, the article does not primarily aim to reconstruct the controversy as a sociotechnical network, but rather to assess the ethical quality of public representation within a contested environmental decision-making process.

This distinction is important because science and technology studies (STS) and actor-network theory (ANT) offer highly productive approaches for examining the multi-perspective constitution of sociotechnical controversies, their material-semiotic entanglements, and their cross-disciplinary dynamics [25, 26]. A full controversy analysis in this sense, however, would exceed the scope of the present case study and would require a different conceptual and methodological foundation. The discourse-ethical approach developed here instead asks how interests are articulated, which actors are able to speak publicly, whose concerns are represented only indirectly, and how moral patients such as nonhuman entities and future generations become visible—or remain marginalized—within the mediatized debate. This also differentiates the present article from the broader InSituEx research agenda, directed by Simon Ganahl at the University of Applied Sciences St. Pölten (USTP), which focuses on the mediation of environmental controversies based on STS concepts and methods [27].

3. Structuring the Ethical Discourse

To systematically analyze the recent Lower Austrian wind power debate beyond its immediate political and economic dimensions, this study employs a triangulation of three complementary ethical concepts: Discourse ethics, environmental ethics, and the imperative of responsibility. By analyzing the empirical material through these three lenses, this study adopts a normative ethical perspective to evaluate the quality of the public debate. Instead of merely describing the conflict, these theoretical concepts serve as evaluative benchmarks to determine the ideal conditions required for a systematically fair and inclusive dialogue. By translating these theoretical insights into practice,

this paper derives concrete, actionable recommendations for future regional planning and public participation processes.

3.1. Advocatory Discourse and Communicative Representation

A foundational premise for evaluating the democratic quality of public deliberation is the theory of communicative action and discourse ethics, prominently shaped by Jürgen Habermas [8, p. 75ff.]. According to this approach, ethical norms and political decisions achieve moral validity if they are the result of an "ideal discourse," a domination-free communication process where all affected parties possess equal rights to articulate their interests, challenge assertions, and reach a consensus based on the force of the better argument. However, traditional discourse ethics is predicated on the communicative competence of the participants. This presents a structural deficit in environmental debates, as a significant portion of the affected entities—such as local wildlife, flora, entire ecosystems, and future human generations—are inherently incapable of articulating their needs. They possess moral standing and can be harmed or benefited, but they cannot act as moral agents in a political arena [7, p. 9, 21].

To bridge this communicative gap, the concept of the *advocatory discourse* is applied [8, p. 104ff.]. This mechanism permits communicative representation, wherein capable human actors introduce the perspectives and interests of moral patients into the discourse. While originally viewed as a substitute for an ideal discourse, advocatory representation is an absolute necessity in environmental communication. Consequently, analyzing wind power debates requires identifying not only the active speakers but critically examining *who* claims to act as an advocate for nonhuman entities and future generations and *how* these surrogate voices are mediatized. While the concept of the advocatory discourse enables the inclusion of the voices of those who cannot articulate their own interests, practical discourses take place under socioeconomic and time constraints, as well as within structural power asymmetries. Consequently, the discourse depends on the participation of civil-society actors, including citizen initiatives that act as advocates and bring such demands into the communicative arena.

To examine communicative inclusion in local wind energy planning, this paper links discourse ethics, advocatory discourse, and media ethics into a consistent theoretical framework. Since modern public debates essentially take place via mass-media channels, media ethics ultimately functions as a touchstone for evaluating how media outlets handle their journalistic practice and social power [28]. Media-ethical concepts thus help to examine whether mass media, including digital channels, provide a fair, undistorted platform for these advocatory voices, or whether they force them to adapt to systemic pressures of profit and efficiency.

3.2. The Problem of Inclusion and Environmental Value Structures

While discourse ethics regulates the procedural mechanics of the debate (the "how" and "who"), environmental ethics determines the substantive values at stake (the "what"). A central analytical challenge is the problem of inclusion (also referred to as the demarcation problem) [7, p. 9]. It asks a fundamental normative question: which entities belong to the moral community and therefore deserve direct moral consideration in relevant public debates?

This problem creates a spectrum of ethical paradigms, ranging from *anthropocentrism* (i.e., nature must be protected because it provides utility to humans) to various forms of *physiocentrism* (i.e., nature has inherent worth). Physiocentric approaches expand the moral circle progressively, including sentient beings (pathocentrism), all living organisms (biocentrism), or entire holistic ecosystems (holism) [7, p. 12–15]. This layered expansion of moral inclusion is systematically visualized in the onion-skin model of environmental ethics (see Figure 1) [7, 29].

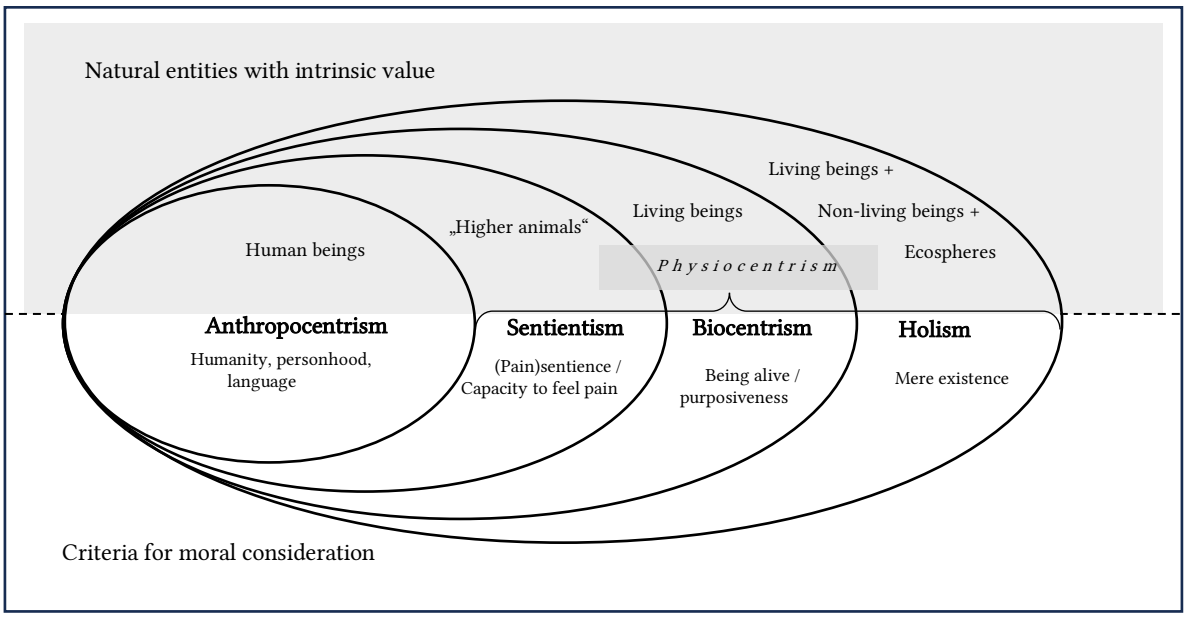

Figure 1: The onion-skin model of environmental ethics, adapted and translated from Ott et al. [7, p. 12] and Gorke [29, p. 23].

To operationalize these paradigms for the empirical content analysis, this study relies on a threefold value structure as conceptualized by Ott et al. [7, p. 8–10], which categorizes how humans attribute worth to natural entities:

1. Instrumental Values: Nature is seen as a resource. In the context of wind power projects, this includes renewable energy, economic profit for municipalities, job creation, or the reduction of reliance on fossil fuels. The environment is protected to secure human prosperity.
2. Intrinsic Values: Nature is recognized as having a moral self-worth, independent of its utility to humans. Arguments rooted in intrinsic value advocate for the protection of an entity (e.g., an endangered bird species) simply because it has a right to exist. This aligns closely with physiocentric ethics.
3. Eudaemonic Values: Deriving from the Greek *eudaimonia* (human flourishing or the "good life"), these values reflect nature's contribution to human happiness, spiritual well-being, and cultural identity. While a forest might have instrumental value (timber) and intrinsic value (biodiversity), its eudaemonic value lies in providing a sense of "homeland," aesthetic beauty, and psychological restoration.

In public environmental controversies, these three value spheres tend to collide. The expansion of renewable energy often pits global instrumental values (climate mitigation) against local eudaemonic values (preservation of the traditional landscape), while intrinsic ecological values (local bird habitats) are caught in the crossfire.

3.3. The Temporal Dimension and the Imperative of Responsibility

The theoretical framework of this study is completed by integrating a macro-ethical paradigm concerning temporal duty, based on Hans Jonas's imperative of responsibility [30]. From this perspective, traditional ethics, focused on immediate, localized human interactions, is insufficient to govern the unprecedented, far-reaching power of modern technology. As large-scale technical infrastructures such as wind farms can permanently damage ecosystems, ethical responsibility must extend far into the future.

This approach implies a fundamental obligation for humanity to safeguard the planet. It requires a shift from reactive ethics to proactive, forward-looking ethics that secure the conditions for future

human and nonhuman life. In the context of the Lower Austrian wind power debate, this principle highlights the ultimate temporal dilemma: a technological intervention required to mitigate global warming (deploying wind turbines) versus the immediate responsibility to preserve local natural habitats. Whether used to justify wind energy expansion for climate protection or to advocate for forest preservation, referencing future generations in the media directly demonstrates this temporal obligation.

4. Methodology and Research Design

To operationalize the theoretical framework and empirically investigate the ethical dimensions of the environmental debate surrounding wind power deployment in Lower Austria in 2023–24, this study employs a structurally applied qualitative content analysis. This method enables a systematic analysis of both explicit statements (e.g., economic benefits, noise complaints) and deeper ethical values (e.g., instrumental vs. intrinsic reasoning) within the media material. The research process is based on the methodological guidelines for qualitative content analysis by Kuckartz and Rädiker [31]. This approach facilitates a transparent and rule-based decoding of the communicative strategies used by the various discourse participants. The methodology relies on purposefully selected and detailed analyses of specific media artifacts rather than a broad, quantitative data corpus. Consequently, the findings presented provide contextual insights into mediatized environmental discourses, but due to the nature of this qualitative approach the results cannot be readily generalized across diverse media landscapes or geographic regions.

4.1. Case Study: The Lower Austrian Wind Power Debate in 2023–24

The empirical focus of this study is the public debate preceding a highly consequential regional referendum on renewable energy infrastructure. In September 2023, the Lower Austrian regional government introduced an amendment to the sectoral spatial planning program, identifying zones for the construction of 250 new wind turbines to accelerate the federal state's climate protection goals and energy independence [2]. This top-down policy announcement immediately triggered organized local resistance, particularly in the Waldviertel, a rural, heavily forested region known for its pristine landscapes and nature tourism [3]. The conflict concentrated on the planned construction of 18 specific wind turbines across five municipalities: Waidhofen an der Thaya, Karlstein, Thaya, Groß-Siegharts, and Waidhofen-Land. Following months of intense public and mediatized debate, non-binding citizen referendums were held on March 10, 2024 [5, 6]. The results reflected a deeply divided populace. Three municipalities voted in favor of the development (allowing 13 turbines to proceed), while two municipalities rejected the plans, effectively halting the remaining 5 turbines [32]. The period between the policy announcement (September 2023) and the referendum (March 2024) serves as the temporal frame of the content analysis.

4.2. Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

To capture the mediatized public sphere of the debate, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. An initial wide-scale scoping search yielded approximately 55 potential source units, including press releases, social media posts, campaign brochures, official statements, and other artifacts. To ensure a representative, high-quality, and non-redundant corpus, a strict set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied to filter the material, namely:

1. Clear Positionality: Artifacts had to demonstrate a clearly discernible stance (pro or contra) regarding the wind power expansion and relate directly to the research questions.
2. Temporal Confinement: Only materials published, circulated, or demonstrably available within the defining conflict phase (September 2023 to March 2024) were included.
3. Accessibility & Format: Sources had to be publicly accessible and documented in written or stable visual formats. Ephemeral events (e.g., unrecorded protest marches) were excluded.

4. Primary Source Preference: Direct communications from the actors (e.g., campaign websites, press releases) were prioritized. Secondary editorial journalism was only included if it introduced novel arguments or exclusive statements not available elsewhere.
5. Platform Limitation: To manage data volume and avoid redundant echo-chamber effects, social-media analysis was restricted to Facebook, focusing exclusively on original posts rather than comment sections or shared external links.
6. Avoidance of Redundancy: Artifacts repeating identical arguments from the same actor without adding substantive new ethical claims were omitted.
7. Actor Independence: Actors lacking an independent communicative profile (e.g., subordinate consulting firms) or those with ambiguous public stances (e.g., the regional government itself, which acted primarily in the background) were excluded.

Applying these parameters reduced the data corpus to a final sample of $n = 25$ distinct media artifacts. An overview of the entire material (including title, actors, date, media type, and platform/source) is provided in tabular form in the Appendix (see Table 4).

4.3. Category Development and Coding Procedure

This corpus represents the dominant communicative actors defining the public discourse on wind power expansion in Lower Austria in 2023–24. On the proponent side, the discourse is primarily driven by institutionalized actors and civil society groups pushing for the expansion of renewable energy. This includes IG Windkraft, acting as interest group for the Austrian wind energy industry, alongside local grassroots support represented by the citizens' initiative Pro Windkraft (Wind Power). Furthermore, institutional political support is provided by various local mayors, who often emphasize the economic and structural benefits for their municipalities. The broader ecological and intergenerational perspective is introduced by the regional branch of Fridays for Future Lower Austria, while BirdLife Austria provides specific ecological arguments, shifting the focus toward a balanced view of nature conservation and climate action.

In contrast, the opponent side forms a narrative centered around regional preservation, landscape protection, and local resistance. The structural backbone consists of local interest groups and targeted citizens' initiatives, most notably the IG (Interest Group) Waldviertel, Der Gegenwind (Headwinds) and Lebenswertes (Livable) Waldviertel. These groups predominantly articulate concerns regarding quality of life, tourism, and local wildlife disruption. On a partisan level, the regional opposition is heavily amplified and politicized by the right-wing FPÖ party, specifically represented by the regional politician Gottfried Waldhäusl.

The coding frame was developed using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach [31]. In the first phase, the **main categories** were deduced directly from the theoretical framework, specifically Habermas's concept of advocatory discourse [8] and the problem of inclusion [7]. To measure who was speaking for whom, three main categories were structured around the represented entities: *Human Interests*, *Nonhuman Interests*, and *Future Generations*, each separated by the actor's stance (*pro* or *contra*).

In the second phase, the **subcategories** were derived inductively from the material itself. Instead of coding simple keywords, the subcategories were defined by the *argumentative reasoning* and *ethical value structures* (instrumental, intrinsic, eudaemonic) employed by the actors. After coding approximately 50% of the material, the category system underwent a revision loop to ensure comprehensive coverage of the empirical data before the final coding pass was conducted. The resulting codebook, which served as the analytical matrix for the entire dataset, is detailed in Table 1–3.

4.3.1. Coding Frame: Human Interests

This main category captures all arguments prioritizing immediate human well-being, economic stability, and localized quality of life.

Stance	Subcategory	Core Argument
Pro	Economic Hub	Wind power strengthens the regional economic location.
Pro	Energy Independence	Wind power decreases reliance on international fossil fuel imports.
Pro	Job Creation	Construction and maintenance of wind turbines secure local employment.
Pro	Municipal Revenue	Wind power generates direct financial benefits for the communities.
Pro	Energy Affordability	Wind power ensures stable and affordable electricity prices for citizens.
Pro	Citizen Participation	Wind power offers models for locals to invest and profit directly.
Pro	Everyday Compatibility	Wind turbines do not significantly impair the current quality of life.
Pro	Criticism of Opponents	Wind power opponents are spreading misinformation and emotionalizing the debate.
Contra	Health Risks	Wind turbines pose physiological threats, e.g., via infrasound.
Contra	Landscape Aesthetics	Wind turbines destroy the visual beauty of the surroundings.
Contra	Noise Pollution	The operational noise of wind turbines significantly reduces quality of life.
Contra	Shadow Flicker	Shadow casting of wind turbines causes severe nuisance to nearby residents.
Contra	Real Estate Devaluation	Proximity to wind turbines causes a crash in property values.
Contra	Tourism Decline	Loss of aesthetic appeal due to wind turbines damages the local tourism industry.
Contra	Loss of Homeland	Wind turbines destroy the traditional sense of homeland and identity.
Contra	Access Restrictions	Safety hazards of wind turbines lead to bans on entering the surrounding forests.
Contra	Safety Hazards	Wind turbines create risks of ice throw, fires, or structural failures.
Contra	Unreliable Supply	Wind power cannot guarantee baseload energy security.
Contra	Greed for Profit	Wind power projects are driven by corporate or municipal financial greed.
Contra	Criticism of Proponents	Wind power proponents are manipulating and deceiving the public.

Table 1: Subcategories for Human Interests (pro & contra)

4.3.2. Coding Frame: Nonhuman Interests

This main category operationalizes the advocatory discourse, capturing instances where human actors speak vicariously for nature, flora, fauna, and ecosystems.

Stance	Subcategory	Core Argument
Pro	General Nature Conservation	Wind power protects overarching ecosystems by displacing fossil fuels.
Pro	Land Efficiency	Wind turbines require a comparatively small geographical footprint.
Pro	Species Protection	Halting climate change is essential to prevent mass extinction.
Pro	Animal Compatibility	Wind turbine construction strictly adheres to zones deemed safe for local wildlife.
Contra	Endangerment of Animals	Wind turbines drive native wildlife out of their established habitats.
Contra	Threat to Rare Species	Specific risk of death to endangered birds or bats due to wind turbine rotor blades.
Contra	Ecosystem Disruption	Wind turbines cause permanent destruction of the forest as a natural retreat and stable microclimate.

Table 2: Subcategories for Nonhuman Interests (pro & contra)

4.3.3. Coding Frame: Future Generations

This main category theoretically addresses Jonas's imperative of responsibility [30], considering arguments that evaluate actions based on the survival, prosperity, and ecological inheritance of future populations.

Stance	Subcategory	Core Argument / Ethical Value
Pro	Livable Future	Wind power helps to secure a fundamentally sustainable life for coming generations.
Pro	Nature Inheritance	Wind power helps to protect the global climate, ensuring that grandchildren will still have intact environments.
Pro	Climate Protection (Survival)	Urgent technological interventions are necessary to secure human survival against climate change.
Pro	Supply Security	Wind power helps to ensure that future societies are not crippled by energy shortages.
Contra	Permanent Landscape Loss	Soil sealing and infrastructure caused by wind power leave irreversible scars on the land for descendants.
Contra	Loss of Heritage	Wind farms rob children of their traditional regional identity and natural homeland.
Contra	Forest as Climate Regulator	Descendants need intact local forests as oxygen producers and microclimate stabilizers.

Table 3: Subcategories for Future Generations (pro & contra)

The systematic application of this codebook to the 25 media artifacts generated a comprehensive data matrix, allowing for both numerical assessment (frequency of specific ethical appeals) and qualitative interpretation (contextualizing how these values were communicatively framed). The analytical findings derived from this process are detailed in the following section.

5. Findings: Analyzing the Environmental Debate

The qualitative content analysis of the 25 media artifacts offered comprehensive insights into the communicative dynamics and ethical value structures of the Lower Austrian wind power debate in

2023–24. By systematically applying the coding frames, **three central patterns** emerged: an overwhelming anthropocentric dominance, a distinct discrepancy in media use, driven by institutional power asymmetries, and a highly defensive communication strategy rooted in structural mistrust.

5.1. Anthropocentric Dominance and the Deficit of Advocatory Discourse

The most prominent finding of the content analysis was the severe imbalance in the representation of moral patients. Even before a deep reading of the individual arguments, the numerical distribution of the inductively derived subcategories indicated a clear anthropocentric bias within the discourse. As detailed in the methodology (see Table 1–3), human interests generated a highly differentiated spectrum of 20 distinct subcategories. By contrast, nonhuman interests and the interests of future generations each yielded 7 subcategories.

This numerical disparity reflects a fundamental qualitative deficit in Habermas's concept of the advocatory discourse. Throughout the analyzed material, the surrogate representation of flora, fauna, and entire ecosystems remained limited and marginalized. The debate was predominantly framed around Ott's concept of instrumental values, treating both the construction and the rejection of wind turbines primarily as means to secure or protect human prosperity.

The Proponent Framing: Global Instrumentalism

The proponent side predominantly legitimized the wind power expansion through instrumental human benefits: regional value creation, energy independence, and job security. Even when environmental protection was spoken about, it was frequently framed anthropocentrically, saving the climate to save human lives, rather than protecting nature because of its intrinsic worth. This instrumental focus is vividly illustrated in an official press release by the Austrian wind energy interest group IG Windkraft published in March 2024:

> Every wind turbine brings domestic added value and jobs and secures the domestic economic location. For every wind power plant built in Austria, 30 domestic jobs are needed for construction. The domestic added value during the construction of a wind turbine is 4.5 million euros […]. Furthermore, wind power and photovoltaics are the life insurance for the domestic economy and the guarantor of an affordable power supply for the population [33 (our trans.)].

When the proponents did engage in an advocatory discourse for nonhuman entities, they often pointed to the long-term compatibility of wind power with species protection. IG Windkraft stated, for example: "Imperial eagles and white-tailed eagles, both of which were considered extinct in Austria in 2000, have developed very positively over the last 20 years" [33 (our trans.)], suggesting that renewable energy and biodiversity are not mutually exclusive. However, in the analyzed corpus, these intrinsic arguments were rare and usually subordinated to economic imperatives.

The only notable exception to this anthropocentric dominance was the ornithological non-governmental organization (NGO) BirdLife Austria [16]. Functioning as a genuine advocatory voice, BirdLife Austria was the sole actor that systematically differentiated its arguments based purely on the intrinsic value of nonhuman entities (birds). By publicly criticizing both the initial spatial planning and the subsequent amendments on the grounds of avian habitats, the NGO provided a rare example of how a physiocentric, inclusive discourse could operate in a highly polarized environment.

The Opponent Framing: Local Eudaemonism

Conversely, the opponent side heavily relied on eudaemonic values. While they also utilized instrumental arguments (e.g., property devaluation and health risks), their core communicative strategy centered on the loss of the "good life." Media artifacts from local initiatives repeatedly emphasized the destruction of the traditional landscape aesthetic, the loss of regional identity, and

the disruption of a sense of home. The forest was not primarily defended for its intrinsic ecological worth, but as a cultural and psychological retreat for the local human population.

This collision between the proponents' global instrumentalism and the opponents' local eudaemonism demonstrates that the problem of inclusion was largely bypassed in the debate. Both sides essentially voiced human utility, leaving the inherent rights of nature largely unrepresented.

5.2. Media Formats and Institutional Power Asymmetries

The second major result highlights a distinct structural divergence in *how* the arguments were mediatized. A comparative analysis of the utilized communication channels revealed that the formatting of the messages correlated directly with the institutional power of the respective actors. The proponents, comprising established political parties (e.g., Die Grünen), municipal mayors, and national interest groups (e.g., IG Windkraft), predominantly used factual, text-heavy, and formally structured media formats. Their communication relied on official press releases, scientific studies, expert statements, and data-driven brochures. This reflects their access to professional public relations infrastructure, financial resources, and established media networks.

In contrast, the opponents, consisting primarily of local grassroots citizens' initiatives (e.g., IG Waldviertel, Der Gegenwind) and individual politicians (e.g., Gottfried Waldhäusl of the right-wing FPÖ party), mostly resorted to highly visual, informal, and emotionally charged media formats. The content analysis identified the use of digital memes, satirical comics, interactive online platforms, and even a protest rap song. These artifacts were characterized by a bold, provocative, and sometimes humorous style, designed to trigger immediate emotional resonance.

This divergence can be interpreted through the lens of discourse ethics as a symptom of structural inequality. Lacking the institutional backing, financial resources, and formal platform access of the proponents, the local initiatives chose emotionally striking media as a tactical necessity to generate public attention. Furthermore, the immediate geographical proximity of the opponents to the planned construction sites fostered a sense of direct existential threat, translating into alarming and visually dramatized communication forms. For oppositional political actors, such as regional representatives of the FPÖ party, this emotionalized communication also served a strategic purpose, namely, mobilizing rural voters by capitalizing on the sentiment of being overlooked by centralized authorities. Consequently, the Habermasian ideal of a rational, domination-free exchange of arguments was heavily distorted. The power asymmetries fueled an attention-driven discourse where emotional provocation superseded factual deliberation.

5.3. Defensive Communication and Structural Mistrust

This structural power imbalance also manifested in the argumentative tactics of the actors, specifically in the disproportionate use of defensive communication strategies. Defensive arguments aim to mitigate or neutralize the persuasive impact of an opposing position. Although generally considered weaker, these arguments play a strategically vital role in weakening the opponent's counterarguments and limiting their argumentative weight [34]. The coding process revealed a striking numerical discrepancy: defensive arguments constituted approximately 25% of the total argumentative output on the opponent side, compared to a mere 12% on the proponent side. Opponents utilized defensive strategies twice as frequently as proponents.

However, the disparity was not merely numerical; the qualitative nature of the defense differed fundamentally between the two camps. The proponents utilized defensive arguments primarily in a corrective, fact-checking capacity. Their defense aimed to debunk what they perceived as misinformation spread by the citizens' initiatives, for instance, correcting exaggerated visualizations of turbine sizes, addressing scientifically unfounded health claims regarding shadow flicker, or pointing out the contradictory political stances of opposing politicians. Their defense was epistemically driven.

The opponents' defensive strategy, however, was delegitimizing and deeply personal. A prominent, inductively derived subcategory within the opponent corpus was the greed for profit.

Opponents accused the project developers, the regional government, and even the local mayors of sacrificing the community's well-being for financial kickbacks and corporate revenue. Furthermore, proponents were accused of conscious manipulation and deceiving the public regarding the true ecological costs of the turbines.

The high frequency of defensive delegitimization indicates that this resistance is not solely a reaction to the physical infrastructure, but a symptom of deep-seated structural mistrust. Drawing on Nabielek's findings [12], this rhetorical defensiveness may reflect the psychological alienation of rural communities who feel marginalized, disempowered, and excluded by top-down spatial planning. Because the local population was not adequately included in the early phases of the decision-making process, the resulting public discourse devolved into an ad hominem conflict. The opponents' heavy reliance on defensive arguments underscores a feeling of political powerlessness, where attacking the moral integrity of the institutional proponents became the primary mechanism for voicing dissent.

In relation to Jonas's imperative of responsibility [30], this mistrust severely hinders the societal capacity to implement forward-looking climate policies. When local populations suspect that responsibility for the future is merely a rhetorical smokescreen for present-day corporate profit, the ethical legitimacy of the entire energy transition is called into question.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to analyze the discourse-ethical dimensions of a localized environmental conflict, using the planned wind power expansion in the Lower Austrian Waldviertel region in 2023–24 as an exemplary case. By integrating Habermas's theory of communicative action, Ott's environmental ethics, and Jonas's imperative of responsibility, this paper aims to extend the existing literature beyond conventional socio-political acceptance studies, offering a discourse-ethical evaluation of public communication in renewable-energy controversies.

The applied content analysis revealed a significant deficiency: the profound deficit of advocatory discourses in environmental debates. The empirical data clearly shows that affected parties without direct communicative agency—including nonhuman entities such as native wildlife, flora, and ecosystems, as well as future generations—are systematically marginalized in the public sphere. With the rare exception of specialized NGOs like BirdLife Austria, the debate remains strictly anthropocentric. Moreover, the structural disadvantages of grassroots citizens' initiatives prompt these groups to rely on highly emotionalized, defensive, and polarizing media formats, ultimately undermining the Habermasian ideal of a rational, domination-free discourse.

While a perfect resolution of the problem of inclusion remains a theoretical ideal, the practical execution of environmental planning could be significantly optimized to foster a more equitable discourse. To mitigate future conflicts and ensure that marginalized voices are adequately represented, several concrete communicative and institutional interventions are recommended based on our findings:

- **Institutionalizing advocatory representation:** The targeted strengthening and formal integration of advocatory interest groups (e.g., ecological NGOs or designated "future councils") into the early planning stages is crucial to ensure that nonhuman and future interests are systematically voiced.
- **Promoting open and moderated forums:** Shifting the discourse away from closed digital spaces toward publicly accessible, transparent, and professionally moderated discussion forums to prevent rapid polarization and unchecked spread of misinformation.
- **Prioritizing official and transparent channels:** Municipalities and project developers should proactively utilize official, accessible communication channels to share detailed project data, specifically concerning financial structures to counteract defensive accusations of "profit greed."

- **Media representation of diverse perspectives:** Fostering a media landscape that consciously highlights a variety of ethical viewpoints, including physiocentric arguments, rather than simply reproducing the binary conflict between economic utility and local aesthetic disruption.
- **Structural support for civil society:** Providing non-institutionalized grassroots initiatives with formal communicative platforms, ensuring their concerns are integrated substantively rather than pushing them to populist, attention-driven media tactics.

By implementing these strategies, future environmental debates could transition from reactive, defensive battles toward constructive, value-based deliberations, ultimately creating a more just and sustainable foundation for environmental policy decisions.

To further expand the field of discourse ethics in environmental conflicts, future research should adopt comparative frameworks analyzing diverse demographic and geographic contexts, as this study's targeted sample size and context-specific nature limit the immediate generalizability of its results. Investigating the discrepancies in wind power acceptance between rural and urban populations and conducting more cross-national comparisons of discourse trajectories could yield valuable insights into cultural variations in environmental communication. Moreover, simulation-based research exploring the practical implementation of ideal-discourse models in municipal energy planning would be highly beneficial for developing actionable guidelines for policymakers. Finally, supplementing qualitative discourse analyses with broad, representative surveys on the societal perception of renewable energies in Austria would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying ethical values driving public opinion.

Authors' Contributions

This article is based on a bachelor's thesis written by Lena Wagner and supervised by Simon Ganahl in the Media Management program at the University of Applied Sciences St. Pölten (USTP). The study was presented at the IConCMT 2025 conference and subsequently elaborated into this peer-reviewed, open-access paper published as part of the *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Creative|Media/Technologies* (IConCMT 2025), held on November 26–27, 2025, at the University of Applied Sciences St. Pölten, Austria. Lena Wagner is the lead author and Simon Ganahl the coauthor; both serve as corresponding authors.

Declaration of Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AI Declaration Statement

Generative AI technologies were used selectively for language editing and translations as well as for drafting support during the preparation of this article. All conceptual arguments, interpretations, and revisions were developed and critically assessed by the authors.

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Appendix A

Title	Actors	Date	Media Type	Platform / Source
Gegenwind	Roland Neuwirth (IG Waldviertel)	2023-09	Song / Video	Website IG Waldviertel
Die größten Windräder der Welt mit 285 m Höhe...	IG Waldviertel	2023-09	Brochure	Website IG Waldviertel
Sie wollen nur unser Bestes	Der Gegenwind	2023-09-02	Video Montage	Website Der Gegenwind
Warum keine neuen Windkraftanlagen im Waldviertel?	Jimmy Moser (IG Waldviertel)	2023-09-07	Press Interview	Website NÖN
Wind statt Gas	Fridays for Future NÖ	2023-09-09	Posting	Facebook
"Windradwahnsinn": Waldhäusl will nun "Schutzpatron des Waldes" sein	Gottfried Waldhäusl (FPÖ NÖ)	2023-09-26	Press Interview	Website Kurier
Klare Worte zu Windkraft im Wald	Gottfried Waldhäusl (FPÖ NÖ)	2023-09-27	Video Statement	Facebook
Geplante Windkraftwerke im Raum Waidhofen/Th	Lebenswertes Waldviertel	2023-09-28	Web Article	Website Lebenswertes Waldviertel
Haben uns die Situation in der Nähe von St. Pölten angesehen …	Sabine Nagl (Pro Windkraft)	2023-10-23	Posting	Facebook
Richtigstellung! Immer wieder wird mit Bildern, welche einen irreführenden Eindruck …	Sabine Nagl (Pro Windkraft)	2023-10-28	Written Statement / Posting	Facebook
Positionspapier: Vorschläge und Alternativen	Der Gegenwind	2023-11-05	Position Paper	Website Der Gegenwind
Klares Bekenntnis zur Windkraft im Waldviertel	Fridays for Future NÖ	2023-11-22	Open Letter / Press Release	Website Fridays for Future
Der Energiemix der Zukunft & der Beitrag des Waldviertels	Fridays for Future NÖ	2023-11-22	Factcheck Booklet	Website Fridays for Future
Aktivisten wollen Windkraft im Waldviertel faktenbasiert diskutieren	Fridays for Future NÖ	2023-11-22	Press Interview	Website NÖN
Auch das Jahr 2023 zeigt, Österreich hat eine Winterstromlücke und …	Martin Litschauer (Pro Windkraft)	2024-01-08	Posting	Facebook
Ich finde es sehr gut, dass es eine Volksbefragung geben soll …	Thomas Müllner (Pro Windkraft)	2024-01-11	Posting	Facebook
Ornithologische Untersuchung zum	BirdLife Austria	2024-01-15	Environmental Report	Website Raumordnung NÖ

Sektoralen Raumordnungsprogramm				
Vor allem junge Menschen wollen die Windkraft …	Christian Oberlechner (Pro Windkraft)	2024-02-07	Posting	Facebook
Wer Sonnen- und Windstrom verhindert, fördert Atomstrom	Die Grünen NÖ	2024-02-19	Press Release	Website Die Grünen NÖ
Windkraft: Gute Argumente	Der Gegenwind	2024-02-20	Q&A Sujet	Website Der Gegenwind
Im Zweifel Humor	Der Gegenwind	2024-02-23	Memes / Comics	Website Der Gegenwind
Über 10.000 Waidhofener entscheiden über ihre Windkraft-Zukunft	Mayors of Municipalities	2024-03-05	Regional Press Interview	Website NÖN
14.000 ha Wald wären notwendig, um dieselbe Menge Strom jährlich in einem Biomassekraftwerk herzustellen …	Martin Litschauer (Pro Windkraft)	2024-03-06	Posting	Facebook
Windkraft bringt Gesundheit und Standortsicherheit für NÖ	IG Windkraft	2024-03-07	Press Release	Website IG Windkraft
Was bedeutet der 10. März 2024 für unsere Zukunft?	IG Waldviertel	2024-03-10	Brochure	Website IG Waldviertel

Table 4: Overview of Analyzed Discursive Material