iSocrates: Student-led Public Debate as Cultural Technology

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On July 17, 2010, California Highway Patrol officers made a routine traffic stop on Interstate 580 near the city of Oakland. Byron Williams, driver of the Toyota Tundra that was pulled over, had good reason to be driving erratically. Armed with a 9-mm pistol and a .308 rifle with armor-piercing bullets, he was on a political assassination mission. Rather than be taken into police custody, Williams opened fire on the arresting officers during a 12-minute firefight. Later, as the official police record reflects, "Williams was interviewed at the hospital at which time he stated that his intention was to start a revolution by traveling to San Francisco and killing people of importance at the Tides Foundation and the ACLU" (Weisenberg, 2010).

Williams' lucid jailhouse letter, sent to journalist John Hamilton several weeks later, shed further light on the events that led up to the highway firefight. Fully convinced by television and radio commentator Glenn Beck's conspiracy theory regarding the Obama administration's deliberate sabotage of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig to jam climate change legislation through Congress, and frustrated by the lack of mainstream media coverage of the issue, Williams decided to take matters into his own hands (Williams, 2010).

Left-leaning explanations of this tragic event tended to portray Williams as Beck's robotic foot soldier in the culture wars, incited to violence by the commentator's barrage of talk-show bombast (Hamilton, 2010). In contrast, right-wing pundits dismissed Williams as a lone crackpot who had fallen off the deep end (Meed, 2010). Both vectors of commentary steered attention to the issue of Beck's complicity in the shootout, much as Jared Loughner's later assassination attempt on Representative Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) prompted speculation about Sarah Palin's responsibility for inciting violence with incendiary speech. With controversy surrounding such incitement theories dominating public discussion in the aftermath of both shooting episodes, other aspects of the tragedies went relatively unexamined, such as the role that Williams' own use of new media technology may have played in cultivating his extremist outlook.

Williams' Google search methodology, explored in depth later in this article, offers a poignant "representative anecdote" (Burke, 1959, p. 59) that speaks to the role played by communication technology in shaping the deliberative terrain of 21st-century American society. In the early days of television, utopian futurists speculated about how the spread of communication technology would create a "global village" (McLuhan, 1962) of electronically connected viewers (see Barbrook, 2007). Yet technophiles who saw the advent of the global village marking the cusp of a new age of harmonious concord glossed over McLuhan's later comment that "the tribal-global village is far more divisive—full of fighting—than any nationalism ever was. Village is fission, not fusion, in depth" (qtd. in Stearn, 1968, p. 280). Decades later, development and dissemination of Internet filtering and sorting technology appear to be hastening this social fission process, making McLuhan's pessimistic musings seem especially prescient.

The refinement and spread of "narrowcasting" media technology bring us closer to the age of *The Daily Me,* an online newspaper of the future that gives readers total editorial control (Negroponte, 1995, p. 153). University of Chicago law professor and Obama administration official Cass Sunstein (2000, 2001) sees this trend progressing rapidly in the near future, with possibly grave consequences for deliberative democracy.[1] He warns that proliferation of *Daily Me*-type individualized filtering has the potential to create isolated "deliberative enclaves," where like-minded people hunker down together in cyberspace to hear echoes of opinions consonant with their own. Sunstein draws from research in social psychology to show how enclave deliberation is prone to "opinion cascading" and "group polarization," both of which threaten the ideal of a democratic polity where, ideally, collective decisions are products of compromises stitched together by interlocutors holding heterogeneous opinions. A middle section of this essay revisits some of these landmark psychology studies, paying particular attention to how their findings complicate our traditional understanding of the social dynamics of argumentation.

If journalist Michiko Kakutani (2008) is right that "cognitive dissonance has become a national epidemic," the vector of disease may well be what Thorsten Veblen (1914) called a "trained incapacity" on the part of many citizens to cultivate *philekoia,* the term Isocrates uses to describe a "fondness for listening" to contrary viewpoints (*To Demonicus,* 18; see also Haskins, 2007, p. 72). Lacking *philekoia,* it becomes difficult to practice well-counseled, internal deliberation (*euboulеusis*), the type of reflective, private dialogue Isocrates says is vital for citizens to use in generating prudent and wise judgments regarding civic affairs.

Of course, deep trans-historical differences make uncritical appropriation of classical Greek terminology for contemporary use a fool's errand. But to gauge from Robert Hariman's (2004) reflections on the enduring salience of Isocratic thought, "timely, suitable, and eloquent appropriations" can help

us post-moderns "forge a new political language" (228) useful for addressing the complex raft of intertwined problems facing contemporary society.[2] Following Hariman's cue, this essay draws from the ancient Greek tradition to lend perspective on the vexing challenges involved in promoting deliberative exchange in an age when advanced communication technology tends to segment and isolate citizens who hold contrary viewpoints. This angle of approach tracks generally with the recent surge of communication scholarship on Isocrates (Haskins, 2007; T. Poulakos, 1997; T. Poulakos & Depew, 2004), and specifically with Kathleen Welch's (1999) move to ground her contemporary theory of "electric rhetoric" to select elements of the Isocratic tradition.

In Isocrates' telling, the ancient city of Athens was founded by *logos,* the human faculty of using language inventively to cultivate community (*Nicocles,* 5–9). Although the Greek *logos* can be translated as "argument," such rendering underplays the textured layers of meaning that Isocrates wove into this key term, particularly its ability to enable humans to "escape the life of wild beasts" (*Nicocles,* 6) and come together to form cohesive societies. Writing before Plato's effort to drive a wedge between philosophy and rhetoric had reached fruition, Isocrates taught and practiced *logos* as an expansive art that fused reason and eloquence, blending together the communicative activities of inquiry, deliberation, and collective identity formation. By doing so through the then-new communication technology of the written phonetic alphabet, Isocrates bequeathed to future generations a rich constellation of terms describing how public debate—expressed through new communication technologies—can be used to inflect the arc of cultural evolution.

The relevance of the Isocratic vocabulary to contemporary argumentation studies is underscored by the prominence of Protagoras, a key mentor of Isocrates called by some the "father of debate" (Schiappa, 1991, 22). Protagoras taught the value of *dissoi logoi* as a particularly useful form of human meaning-making that generates insight from the friction of argumentative give-and-take (Timmerman & Schiappa, 2010, p. 23; Billig, 1996, pp. 61–80). Protagoras' influence on Isocrates is widely acknowledged, yet the tradition of *dissoi logoi* received different expression in their respective hands. For Protagoras and other "older Sophists," the value of argumentative exchange rested primarily in its function as a pedagogical tool to develop in students what today we might call "critical thinking" acumen (see, e.g., Siegel, 1997). While Isocrates endorsed *dissoi logoi*'s power in this respect, he cautioned against the tendency to sell short argumentation's value by framing it purely as mental gymnastics or "wordy wrangling" (*Helen,* 6; *Against the Sophists,* p. 1). In Isocrates' school, one of the first stone-and-mortar educational

institutions in Western civilization (Jaeger, 1944, p. 55), *dissoi logoi* was given a more robust role as a central feature of *logos politikos,* or public debate in civil society designed to influence wide audiences (T. Poulakos, 1997; Haskins, 2007).

In the United States, this Isocratic tradition of public debate has ebbed and flowed through the nation's history (McGee, 1986, 1998). One high-water mark was the series of Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858, during which U.S. Senate candidates held the attention of thousands of live audience members who gathered to hear argumentation about slavery in events that often stretched beyond three hours (Zarefsky, 1993, p. 233). The vapid presidential debates of the current electronic age stand as arid counterpoints (Farah, 2004). Somewhere in between lies the blossoming of youth-led public debates in the early 20th century, an epoch that witnessed emergence of college students as efficacious deliberative actors on the public stage.

Argumentation and debate scholars frequently interrogate the *telos* driving their enterprise, and this reflexive posture affords them perspective to continually re-ground debating activities in light of shifting historical circumstances. For example, in the early part of the 20th century, the need to equip a large influx of first-generation college students with basic speaking and literacy skills marked rationales for public debate that emphasized education of an informed and competent citizenry (Keith, 2007). Later in the century, rationales for debate as training in technocratic information processing flourished as colleges and universities focused more intently on the sportified objective of fielding debate teams at competitive debate tournaments (Muir, 1993). While similar rationales still hold relevance today (see Atchison & Panetta, 2009), this article explores how our current age of enclave deliberation presents novel exigences, and may yield fresh justifications for student-led public debating in the new millennium.

After taking stock of how rapid development of digitally networked communication shapes the prevailing deliberative terrain, this article revisits Isocratic insight on public deliberation. This clears the way for part three to explore potentially novel roles that public debate can play as a cultural technology in our hyper-sorted, networked society. Along the way, further reflection on key points of departure will provide occasions to revisit themes raised in this introduction. For example, a closer look at Byron Williams' Google search strategy promises to shed light on the Internet's role in structuring contemporary deliberative politics. The counter-intuitive findings of psychological "group polarization" studies will be considered, potentially shaking up some of the shopworn premises found in argumentation theory and free speech scholarship regarding the nature of human communication.

And by inviting readers to think of public debate as a "cultural technology," the following analysis will highlight the liquid quality of debate as a tool that can be used for good or ill, with justifications and rationales that shift depending on the container and context.

Sorted Society's Communication Paradox

One can gain purchase on ways that shifting argumentative contexts alter rationales for public debate by taking account of noted free speech scholar Franklyn Haiman's paradigmatic views on the role of speech in countering noxious social extremism. To counter the corrosive effects of such extremism, Haiman (1981, 1991, 1993) prescribes the "more speech" remedy. The best way to contain prejudicial or ill-founded ideas, Haiman reasons, is to expose them to the disinfecting sunlight of public deliberation. The soundness of Haiman's remedy rests on several commonplace assumptions about the nature of human communication, namely that interactive speech lends participants a sense of perspective and balance, promoting tolerance and serving as a safety valve for civic strife.

An emerging body of empirical evidence, drawn largely from social psychology, troubles key presumptions supporting Haiman's remedy. When groups of like-minded interlocutors engage in "more speech," the additional rounds of communicative exchange tend to prompt "severity shifts" (Schkade, Sunstein & Kahneman, 2000), with homogenous group members sliding their viewpoints to match with the most extreme position expressed in the group.

Hannah Arendt's (1963) work on German fascism and Irving Janis' (1972) groupthink studies have explored how these communicative dynamics tend to develop in repressive societies or secret cabals. Yet, other research illustrates how similar dynamics unfold in more pedestrian contexts. For example, one study shows that littering is contagious—people are more likely to litter when they see trash lying around, or when they see others littering in the immediate vicinity (Cialdini, Reno & Kallgren, 1990). Related work examining social influences on individual behavior corroborates this phenomenon. Solomon Asch (1955) found that in a group matching game, a significant number of research subjects could be led to mistakenly match together two lines of clearly different length when Asch's confederates, posing as research subjects, endorsed the erroneous answer.

These "cascade" effects result in part from people's tendency to construct behavioral norms by looking to situational cues, and also from their desire to "fit in" as group members. Hence, it is not surprising to see cascade effects

pronounced in homogeneous groups composed of people who have common backgrounds, interests, or opinions. Consider jury deliberations. Juries that begin deliberations with split opinions but eventually reach consensus gravitate toward compromise verdicts. However, when jurors start off agreeing about the basic facts of a case, further deliberation tends to swing the ultimate group judgment toward an extreme view held by one outlier juror (Brown, 1986). This pattern helps explain damage award patterns in civil trials. Juries that begin deliberations split on guilt or innocence tend to impose moderate punitive damages, while juries that start out in agreement on guilt tend to undergo "severity shifts," veering toward the most extreme punitive damage award advocated in the group (Schkade, Sunstein, & Kahneman, 2000).

Sunstein (2000, p. 101) calls this "group polarization": "If certain people are deliberating with many like-minded others, views will not be reinforced but instead will be shifted to more extreme points." When groups engage in "enclave deliberation"—communicating exclusively with like-minded interlocutors—the polarization effect is heightened. This finding has serious implications for public argument, since it challenges the Haiman axiom, expressed in the words of his student Erwin Chemerinsky (1998) as "more speech is always better."

Group polarization theory turns Haiman's famous free speech axiom on its head: "With respect to the Internet and new communications technologies, the implication is that groups of like-minded people, engaged in discussion with one another, will end up thinking the same thing that they did before—but in more extreme form" (Sunstein, 2001, 65). Argumentation plays a key role here, since according to Sunstein (2001, 68), "the central factor behind group polarization is the existence of a limited argument pool." Enclave deliberation, coupled with group polarization, shrinks the argument pool and creates a paradox. As members of society communicate more, they grow further apart and become less capable of coming to terms with unfamiliar viewpoints:

> The phenomenon of group polarization has conspicuous importance to the communications market, where groups with distinctive identities increasingly engage in within-group discussion. Effects of the kind just described should be expected with the Unorganized Militia and racial hate groups as well as with less extreme organizations of all sorts. If the public is balkanized and if different groups are designing their own preferred communications packages, the consequence will be not merely the same but still more balkanization, as group

> members move one another toward more extreme points in line with their initial tendencies. At the same time, different deliberating groups, each consisting of like-minded people, will be driven increasingly far apart simply because most of their discussions are with one another. (Sunstein, 2001, p. 66)

Interlocking demographic and social trends are coalescing in such a way as to produce more of this type of "balkanized" echo chamber communication in American society. One striking marker of accelerated sorting is the rapidly rising percentage of "landslide counties" in the United States, defined as counties that vote for one presidential candidate or the other by more than a 20-percent margin. In 1976, 26.8 percent of the nation's voters lived in a county where either Gerald Ford or Jimmy Carter won by more than 20 percentage points. The number of people living in these "landslide counties" increased to 38 percent in 1992, to 45.3 percent in 2000, to 48.3 percent in 2004, and 48.1 percent in 2008.

These trends document what journalist Bill Bishop and sociologist Robert Cushing call "the Big Sort," a phenomenon where "the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart" (Bishop, 2008). On a communicative level, the Big Sort tends to yield in-group enclave deliberation where homogenous interlocutors interact to concretize settled perspectives and incubate extreme positions. These dynamics reverse the torque of the Haiman remedy's corrective free-speech mechanism, since the echo chamber function of enclave deliberation has been shown to exacerbate intolerance and violence, rather than promote critical thinking and understanding across differences.

Migration patterns partly explain the demographic forces driving the Big Sort. From 2003 to 2007, people leaving counties that voted Democratic in 2004 likely moved to other Democratic counties. The trend tended to increase the number of Democrats in counties that already voted for Democratic presidential candidates. This sorting tendency was even more pronounced among Republicans; when people moved from a bright-red county they were very likely to go to a dark-red county. As Andrea Batista Schlesinger explains, similar trends are occurring in cyberspace.

> How are people congregating in these online town halls? Do people engage in healthy debates and discussions with those who hold opposing perspectives? The evidence suggests otherwise, pointing instead to the same trend Bishop sees in our neighborhoods. People are self-segregating on blogs that speak to their political leanings. (Schlesinger, 2009, pp. 33–34)

A study by Sunstein and former University of Michigan intercollegiate debater Lesley Wexler found that in a random survey of 60 Internet websites focusing on politics, only 15 percent provided links to sites of those with opposing views, while almost 60 percent provided links to like-minded sites (Sunstein, 2001, p. 59). These findings are consistent with Andrew Chin's (1997) earlier survey concluding that "far from fostering deliberative political discourse, most of the surveyed Websites sought to consolidate speech power and served to balkanize the public forum." Schlesinger (2009) expresses a similar view, observing that the Internet "often functions as an intellectual and ideological cul-de-sac, full of places where only residents turn in, while those who accidentally enter may look at the houses but will then circle right back out" (p. 32).

A striking example of this phenomenon is evident in Byron Williams' deployment of the Google search engine to build research leading up to his ACLU/Tides Foundation assassination mission. Williams' research methodology became available for public inspection after *Media Matters for America* published his jailhouse letter to journalist John Hamilton (Williams, 2010). In that letter, Williams complained that because the Federal Bureau of Investigation had confiscated his computer and document collection, he required assistance in preparing for his interview with Hamilton. Specifically, Williams asked Hamilton to reconstruct the Google searches he had used to build the body of research that apparently motivated his assassination mission.

In his jailhouse letter, Williams counseled Hamilton on the method one should use in searching the Internet: "When you Google you must be 'specific' or you get an infinite amount of stuff that your [sic] not looking for, and *that* is what wastes time" (Williams, 2010, p. 3, his emphasis). Further explaining how it is possible to tailor Google searches to retrieve specific information that conforms to previously held beliefs, Williams wrote, "the key to Googling is to be sure to include words like 'corrupt,' 'front,' or 'illicit,' otherwise you get all their 'happy-go-lucky' websites" (Williams, 2010, p. 4). In "Addendum A" of Williams' letter, he showed Hamilton specifically how "I include key words 'corrupt,' 'sabotage,' etc. . . . to *force* Google to focus on people that say this, you will uncover *facts* in these articles" (Williams, 2010, 4, my emphasis). This detailed addendum contains 44 specific Google searches (some of which are listed below), yielding a fascinating look into the way in which information filtering through new communication technology can facilitate echo-chamber group polarization:

- "Soros puppet (Obama) planned U.S. oil collapse as result of oil spill."
- "Obama agenda is actually Soros agenda."

- "Obama has ties to radical Islam, false flag terrorism 'on the table.'"
- "An oil spill of this magnitude has never happened in U.S. history, 'coincidentally' it happens 3 weeks after Obama's healthcare ramthrough."
- "Oil spill invented to create 'public outcry,' to pass cap and trade."

A reconstruction of Williams' Internet research strategy offers a poignant case study in how the erosion of an individual's fondness for listening (*philekoia),* coupled with deployment of powerful online information filtering technology, can yield the kinds of "severity shifts" seen in group polarization studies. Turning to another Isocratic term, *euboulеusis* (wise judgment), the following section explores further the mechanism through which this process unfolds. This conceptual move prepares the ground to compare remedies for group polarization, such as Sunstein and Vermeule's "cognitive infiltration" strategy, and interactive public forums such as student-led public debates.

The Isocratic Method

As John Poulakos points out, "older" Sophists such as Protagoras taught Greek students the value of *dissoi logoi,* pulling apart complex questions by debating two sides of an issue, or, in Poulakos' (2009) colorful formulation, "let's start poking holes in this thing and see if it floats." The few surviving fragments of Protagoras' work suggest that his notion of *dissoi logoi* stood for the principle that "two accounts [*logoi*] are present about every 'thing,' opposed to each other" (Schiappa, 1991, p. 100) and further, that humans could "measure" the relative soundness of knowledge claims by engaging in give-and-take where parties would make the "weaker argument stronger" to activate the generative aspect of rhetorical practice, a key element of the Sophistical tradition (Schiappa, 1991, pp. 117–133).

Following in Protagoras' wake, Isocrates would complement *dissoi logoi*'s centrifugal push with the pull of *synerchesthe,* a centripetal exercise of "coming together deliberatively" to listen, respond, and form common social bonds (Haskins, 2007, p. 88). Isocrates incorporated Protagorean *dissoi logoi* into *synerchesthe,* a broader concept that he used flexibly to express interlocking senses of:

- *Inquiry,* as in groups convening to search for answers to common questions through discussion (*Panathenaicus,* p. 14, p. 76);
- *Deliberation,* with interlocutors gathering in a political setting to deliberate about proposed courses of action (*Nicocles,* p. 19; *On the Peace,* p. 2, p. 9); and

- *Alliance formation,* a form of collective action typical at festivals (*Panathenaicus,* p. 146; *Panegyricus,* p. 81) or in the exchange of pledges that deepen social ties (*Panegyricus,* p. 43; *Against Callimachus,* p. 45; see also T. Poulakos, 1997, p. 19; Haskins, 2007, p. 8; and Welch, 1999).

Isocrates' concepts of *euboulеusis* and *synerchesthe* position debate as something more than just a critical thinking game; it is the core of a political epistemology, since the wise are those who "most skillfully debate their problems in their own minds" (*Nicocles,* p. 8). Regarding the linkage between these "internal rhetorics" (Nienkamp, 2001) and the external world of shared public speech, Isocrates explains, "for the same arguments which we use in persuading others when we speak in public, we employ also when we deliberate in our own thoughts" (*Nicocles,* p. 8). One entailment of this concept is that the smooth monopoly of viewpoints encountered in enclave deliberation robs *euboulеusis* of its dynamic power, foreclosing avenues for engagement in argumentation as a "person-risking enterprise" (Ehninger, 1970).

In hyper-sorted social environments, argumentation becomes a risk-averting enterprise. Intellectual curiosity gives way to a smug aloofness that says: keep your facts out of my information cocoon. The right to know gives way to its inverted variant: the right not to know. Byron Williams was well aware that the Internet was awash with viewpoints contrary to his own (on "happy-go-lucky" websites); he simply banished them from his own internal deliberations (*buleo*) by "forcing" Google not to return them as search results (Williams, 2010). This example highlights a key mechanism driving social extremism. One-dimensional public discourse impoverishes citizens' capacity for *euboulеusis,* which in turn flattens the texture of public deliberation, by limiting the capacity of those same citizens to invent and contribute wise judgments to public life.

In a society where "cognitive dissonance has become a national epidemic" (Kakutani, 2008), public debates may still occur, but when the clash of ideas does take place, it is often distorted by big-money politics and infotainment-driven media. This is evident in contemporary perversions of the debate process such as vapid presidential debates and verbal pyrotechnics found on "Crossfire"-style television shows.[3] Such spectacles project an illusion of argumentative exchange, but the frictionless manner in which they portray contrary viewpoints flying past each other with minimal contact tends to ingrain, rather than unlearn, audience members' trained incapacity for *philekoia.* Conducted against a backdrop of infotainment-driven, frictionless public debates, student-led public debates may have potential to interrupt this cultural drift, a notion that serves as the point of departure for the following section.

Student-led Public Debate

If demographic and technological trends in American society predispose citizens to cluster in deliberative enclaves, which can function as echo-chamber incubators of noxious social extremism, what are the potential counterweights? One corrective measure Sunstein recommends (with co-author Adrian Vermeule) to counter the politically corrosive effects of such filtering is "cognitive infiltration of extremist groups":

> [W]e suggest a distinctive tactic for breaking up the hard core of extremists who supply conspiracy theories: cognitive infiltration of extremist groups, whereby government agents or their allies (acting either virtually or in real space, and either openly or anonymously) will undermine the crippled epistemology of believers by planting doubts about the theories and stylized facts that circulate within such groups, thereby introducing beneficial cognitive diversity. (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 219)

Given the Lasswellian (1927), "hypodermic needle" style of communication presumed by Sunstein and Vermeule's cognitive infiltration strategy, it is not surprising that such a proposed remedy sparked widespread criticism, including calls by right-wing commentators for Sunstein's ouster from his post as head of the Obama administration's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (Beck, 2010). From the left, former intercollegiate debater Glenn Greenwald (2010) called Sunstein's plan for "systematic deceit and government-sponsored manipulation" a "spine-chilling" proposal. Whether or not one agrees with these shrill assessments, it is likely that the mere presence of contrary viewpoints posted on Internet comment boards may not be sufficient to cure a "self-isolating political subculture gone rancid" (Packer, 2008).

Sunstein's (2007, p. 66) "mere exposure" effect theory presumes that deliberating citizens can escape the polarizing drift of enclave deliberation simply through exposure to differing opinions, even if the contrasting views are provided by government agents posing as anonymous weblog commenters. Yet the validity of the mere exposure effect is questionable, especially in light of anecdotal evidence such as the Byron Williams incident and empirical data showing that Americans tend to hold on to factually inaccurate positions even when presented with compelling contrary evidence (Lewandowsky, et al., 2005). To Sunstein's credit, he also suggests that depolarizing argumentative cross-fertilization can take place in interactive public forums, where live exchange holds potential to interrupt the spiral of group polarization on a deeper level: "As a corrective, we might build on the understandings that lie behind the notion that a free society creates a set of public forums, providing speakers access to a diverse people, and ensuring in the process that each of us hears a wide range of speakers, spanning many topics and opinions" (Sunstein, 2001, p. 26). This angle of remedy aligns Sunstein's project with the American forensics tradition, which has for many years experimented with ways to achieve precisely these deliberative objectives.

In the early part of the 20th century, debate teams traveled on barnstorming tours to other campuses in order to debate in their hosts' public forums, airing contrasting views in the process. Student debating was developed jointly as a learning exercise as well as a general entertainment medium (Parrish, 1931, 1926; Gilman, 1931). Creative organizers even blended public debates with musical performances to offer audiences inexpensive diversions from the grind of everyday life. The rise of tournament debating after World War II triggered a dispute in the 1950s that pitted inward versus outward models of debating practice. Debate coach Nicholas Cripe (1957) defended an inward turn, emphasizing the value of tournament competition as a pedagogical site for students to engage in freewheeling argumentation. Cripe's interlocutor Richard Murphy (1957) replied by urging that the outward focus of the day's public debate programs be preserved, lest the debate community lose its direct link to the democratic deliberations of the times. Ronald Greene and Darrin Hicks (2005) focus on this era in their analysis of "switch-side" (or insular tournament-style) debating as a "cultural technology." Mobilizing technological nomenclature enables Greene and Hicks to unmask what they see as switch-side debate's ideological function. After analyzing the political controversy over the 1954 national intercollegiate debate resolution, they conclude that switch-side debating, in the Cold War context, worked to solidify for participants a sense of political agency rooted in liberal subjectivity and American exceptionalism. Despite the fact that Greene and Hicks' thesis occasionally drifts into technological determinism,[4] their work greatly enriches understanding of the political implications and entailments of student-led public debate. Let us next consider how this form of debate works as a cultural technology (in Greene and Hicks' sense).

Today, one emergent role for public debate relates to the unique nature of the contemporary milieu, which as detailed in the previous sections, is characterized increasingly by enclave deliberation and group polarization. In theorizing ways to overcome "trained incapacity," Kenneth Burke (1984, p. 7) isolates perspective by incongruity as a particularly powerful form of "verbal atom cracking," with potential to shake up ossified orientations.

Burke's concept is that provocative juxtaposition of the novel with the expected wakes up the mind to consider previously dormant possibilities. Conducted against a backdrop of infotainment-driven, frictionless public debates, student-led public debates have potential to produce perspective by incongruity, on several levels.

Most basically, students participating in public debate model the process of argument as a "person-risking enterprise" (Ehninger, 1970). This modeling effect flows from the students' status as learners, as they are, by definition still forming opinions and revising positions in the course of their studies. In this way, student performances set the tone for public debates, flipping on debate's pedagogical switch. Audience members witness this process through perspective by incongruity, as the novelty of what they're seeing departs dramatically from the verbal pyrotechnics and vapid exchanges commonly packaged as debates in televised political theater. A similar transaction transpires between student debaters and invited speakers who share the stage. Non-students participating in student-led public debates are steered, by the power of example, to observe a pedagogical decorum that naturally highlights the debate process as a method of creative inquiry. This process resembles Michael Calvin McGee's (1998) reconstruction of Isocrates' political interventions as attempts to "affirmatively interpellate" audience members into a deliberative space.

McGee's appropriation of interpellation builds on Louis Althusser's sense of the concept, yet adapts the term in innovative fashion. As McGee observes, Althusserian interpellation carries the heavy pejorative baggage associated with the state's tendency to "asphyxiate" subjectivity, as when police officers hail suspects with the call "Hey, you!" In Isocrates' calls for citizens to "come together deliberatively" through *synerchesthe,* McGee sees a similar process of interpellation at work, albeit one operating through different communicative pathways, and producing different effects.

While Althusser categorizes "hailing" as purely a state power, Isocrates describes how similar acts can be performed by citizens operating independently of the government apparatus, as when teachers "call" students to adopt a more deliberative posture in political affairs. While both thinkers were concerned with the theory and praxis of power, their respective treatments of power diverge in significant ways. As McGee (1998) explains, "Althusser viewed interpellation as a power of the State, and therefore something always negative in his revolutionary world-view." In contrast, "Isocrates' gaze at the powerful was not upon their corruption, but on their immaturity, their incompleteness. Until I become practiced in its use, my possession of power is a weakness, a psychic weakness that derives from knowing that I am accountable, that I must do the right thing, and that I must constantly act to justify both my possession of power and my attempts to maintain and enlarge it."

By exercising this affirmative sense of interpellation, students create perspective by incongruity for audiences, whose prevailing notions of "debate" tend to have been debased by mass media perversions of the art. In today's hyper-sorted, bombastic political environment, it is frankly surprising for audience members to witness patient and cooperative deliberative exchange by speakers espousing viewpoints at odds with one another. This element of surprise endows student-led public debates with uncommon interpellative power in the contemporary milieu.

Student-led public debates create perspective by incongruity through another pathway, by exhibiting the antimetabolic argument structure borrowed from competitive intercollegiate policy debate's pattern of alternating pro and con speech turns. Here, audience members are invited to read positions in a controversy back and forth against each other. This process generates a unique kind of friction, a useful friction that stands in contrast to the cosmetic clash of infotainment spectacle. As Christopher Tindale (2004, p. 82) observes, the "antimetabole is a change in strategy; it breaks the rhythm of the amplifying statements as the discourse turns back upon itself." Public debate's antimetabolic power to enact perspective by incongruity can be compared to Isocrates' mash-up strategy in the *Antidosis,* William S. Burroughs' "cut-up" technique, and the creative sampling approaches commonly deployed in hip-hop artistry. Each of these strategies taps the creative energy sparked by friction from perspective by incongruity. Just as Isocrates likely piqued audience attention with the "remix" artistry of his *Antidosis* (largely a mash-up of the greatest hits from his earlier rhetorical compositions), so do artists of the digital-age practice remixture, to sometimes spellbinding effect (Navas, 2007). Likewise, student practitioners are capable of demonstrating, through the cultural technology of public debate, how *dissoi logoi,* coupled with *philekoia,* can cultivate *eubouleusis.*

The multiple facets and functions of deliberative exchange in Isocrates' treatment of *synerchesthe* highlight the flexibility of public debate as a cultural tool. Some critiques of the debate process (e.g., Tannen, 1999) are premised on the notion that argumentation is a monolithic and binary ritual of adversarial combat. Yet such formulations gloss over debate's quality as an especially liquid cultural technology. Students are particularly well positioned to fashion novel forms of debate, including tailored formats, innovative participant roles, and topics designed to structure the deliberative milieu in *kairotic* ways (see Broda-Bahm, Kempf & Driscoll, 2004).

The reflective space opened by public debate's more generous preparation time and leisurely pace heightens pedagogical opportunities to pursue Isocratic teaching strategies that enable participants to learn by *mimesis,* "looking at" exemplary performances, while also "seeing through" them via reflexive theorizing, to apprehend embedded aspects of their construction and dynamics (Isocrates, *Panathenaicus,* p. 14, p. 76). Much as Isocrates' innovations with the new technology of writing freed oratory from the water clock, public debate frees debaters from the temporal tyranny of the contest round stopwatch, enabling them to assert "argumentative agency" (Mitchell, 1998)—the ability to use argumentation skills to impact wider spheres of public deliberation (see also Suzuki & Morooka, 2000, p. 313).[5]

Conclusion

William Rehg's lucid keynote address at the 2001 International Debate Association conference in Prague set forth a challenging research agenda for argumentation theorists. Rehg's address, published in 2002 as the lead article in the inaugural issue of *Controversia,* and subsequently anthologized in David Cratis Williams and Marilyn Young's (2009) edited volume, focuses on the concept of argumentative "transfer." By transfer, Rehg means the process by which argumentation scholars bring their technical expertise to bear on actually existing deliberative democracy. One key way argumentation scholars achieve transfer, according to Rehg, is through what he calls "vicarious participation" in public debates:

> As educators, for example, argumentation theorists become vicarious participants in public deliberation by virtue of the indirect effect they have on the quality of deliberation through the students who transfer their education in argument evaluation to the public sphere.... This connection modifies the status of the argumentation theorist's philosophical expertise, which now counts as expertise only insofar as lay participants can make it relevant and usable in contexts of public discussion and argument. (pp. 35–36)

The transfer challenge is central to the American forensics community, which has long functioned as a cultural switching station that links student debaters with wider society. The nature of that connection has shifted through the years, along with trends in societal transformation, as well as evolution of the cultural technology of debate itself. Each transformation and evolution present fresh opportunities for forensics practitioners to reframe their activity as a new form of Rehg-like "vicarious participation" in public argument.

Shortly after the turn of the century, public debating was grounded as a tool of democratization at a time when opportunities for U.S. citizenship training were in short supply. During the Cold War, American tournament debating took root as an exercise focused on training aspiring members of the technocratic elite. This article has explored how our current moment presents novel opportunities for elucidating the purpose and significance of public debate in a networked society characterized by a high degree of enclave deliberation. The cultural technology of public debate, in this account, enables practitioners to perform a "fondness for listening" (*philekoia*) as a means to cultivate wise judgment (*euboulеusis*) informed by the give-and-take of argumentative exchange (*dissoi logoi*). The fact that such performance unfolds by "coming together deliberatively" (*synerchesthe*) introduces centripetal momentum to a culture rent by the fraying effects of what Bishop and Cushing call "the Big Sort."

Isocratic terminology is especially appropriate to describe this role for public debate in sorted society, in part because Isocrates himself practiced and taught an engaged form of argumentation *(logos politikos)* oriented toward overcoming cultural fragmentation to steer discussion toward practical solutions to shared problems. In using new communication technology (for him, the written phonetic alphabet) for this project, Isocrates also stirred reflection and debate on the possibilities and pitfalls associated with deployment of cultural tools to inflect the arc of societal evolution. Just as Isocrates' spirited argument with Plato over the technology of writing continues to echo in today's era of "secondary orality" (Ong, 1982, p. 136) controversy regarding use and abuse of public debate as a cultural technology continues to simmer. This is all to the good, since in Montaigne's sage words, there is no conversation more boring than the one where everybody agrees.

Notes

1. While critics generally laud Sunstein's (2001) book *Republic.com* (see, e.g., Labaton, 2001; Rubin, 2001), some commentators contest his stark empirical claims regarding the Internet and democracy. For example, Federal Communications Commission attorney Mark Nadel (2002) argues that Sunstein underestimates the amount of political cross-fertilization that takes place on the Internet. Sometimes, people even use customized information filtering to access the "unplanned, unanticipated encounters" that Sunstein values so much. Further complicating Sunstein's argument is the fact that several of the Internet companies he cited as driving the process of custom filtering went out of business before *Republic.com* hit bookstores (see Fallows, 2002). Another notable

qualification to Sunstein's thesis is his stipulation that in certain circumstances, enclave deliberation performs an important social function: "A special advantage of 'enclave deliberation' is that it promotes the development of positions that would otherwise be invisible, silenced, or squelched in general debate. In numerous contexts, this is a great advantage; many social movements have been made possible through this route (as possible examples, consider feminism, the civil rights movement, religious conservatism, environmentalism, and the movement for gay and lesbian rights)" (Sunstein, 2000, p. 111; see also Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Mitchell, 2004). Here, enclave deliberation provides those speakers who may feel excluded or intimidated in mass public spheres with opportunities to develop their public voices and to share their views with like-minded interlocutors. Yet, there is an important catch—while such activity has potential to enrich a society's overall argument pool, "enclave deliberation is unlikely to produce change unless the members of a different enclave are eventually brought into contact with others. In democratic societies, the best response is to ensure that any such enclaves are not walled off from competing views, and that at certain points, there is an exchange of views between enclave members and those who disagree with them" (Sunstein, 2000, p. 113).

2. In an unpublished manuscript, Michael Calvin McGee (1998) makes this point even more explicitly: "The possibility of understanding the political and cultural fragmentation of America in Isocratean terms may productively refocus the theory and praxis of political rhetoric" (see also Lanham, 1993).
3. On vapid presidential debates, compare George Farah's (2004) *No debate* with former intercollegiate debaters Newton N. Minow and Craig L. Lamay's (2008) more measured, yet still critical *Inside the presidential debates* (pp. 101–122). Deborah Tannen's *The argument culture* (1999) catalogs an array of combative, headstrong episodes of argumentation that are sometimes characterized as legitimate "debates" in popular culture and politics.
4. The term "technology" appears 11 times in the main body of Greene and Hicks' (2005) essay. Early on, they couch the term in qualifiers and suggest that debate is a technology "capable of generating a commitment to free speech" (p. 102). Here, the adjective "capable" leaves causal wiggle room—as a technology, debate need not necessarily do this; it could do other things. Then they move to the claim that debate is a "technology of citizen formation" that is "invested with an ethical substance" (p. 110)—note the more restrictive and deterministic rendering created by "invested." Finally, the adjective "intrinsic" appears later to ratchet up the level of determinism: "Debating both sides, then, is necessitated by the ethical obligations intrinsic to the technology of democratic debate" (p. 111). This latter formulation invites critique of Greene and Hicks on the grounds that their analysis enacts a form of technological determinism, i.e., the notion that technologically speaking, there are intrinsic ethical commitments invested in the activity of switch-side debate (namely, belief in American exceptionalism). As a counter-example, one might point out that in the 1954 "debate over debate," this strong principle of technological determinism was not found in the psychology or practices of debaters, who viewed a commitment to switch-side debate less as a foundation for American exceptionalism and more as a bulwark against McCarthyism. Another anomaly for this deterministic framing would be Malcolm X, who embraced switch-side debate as a tool to counter American exceptionalism (see Branham, 1995).
5. Empirical evidence shows that participation in tournament competition increases debaters' critical thinking acumen (Allen, et al., 1999; Colbert & Biggers, 1985). This research suggests that competitive debating may work as an antidote to the politically corrosive effects of customized information filtering and enclave deliberation isolated by Sunstein. However, the political efficacy of competitive debating as a remedy for group polarization is circumscribed by the fact that such debating is itself an exercise in enclave deliberation—debaters mostly talk to themselves and to expert judges trained to understand them. In part, this isolation is the natural result of the specialized jargon and speedy speech featured in policy debate contest rounds. Given that "to the uninitiated onlooker, this style of debate reveals itself as an unintelligible charade, something like a movie-length Federal Express commercial or an auctioneering competition gone bad" (Mitchell, 2000, p. xvi), it is not surprising that most contest rounds unfold in obscure venues and go unnoticed by public audiences. However, one should not be too quick to dismiss the value of tournament debating purely on the grounds that it unfolds in obscure enclaves. Such activity benefits greatly the modest number of debaters who are able to learn the game's arcane rules and invest the substantial resources required for tournament travel (Muir, 1993; Panetta, 1990). Recall Sunstein's stipulation elaborated in note 1: enclave deliberation is not intrinsically bad—it all depends on whether the walls insulating particular discourse communities are temporary or permanent. While it is true that insular deliberative groups can generate truly novel viewpoints on important issues facing society, such views can only deepen society's overall "argument pool" if eventually such groups turn outward to communicate with those beyond their tight circle of members (Cox & Jensen, 1989; Weiss, 1997).

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