

**View from the Summit: Perspectives on Forensics Scholarship and Research from the 2009
Policy Debate Summit and Development Conference**

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Nearly 100 forensics specialists gathered in Winston-Salem, North Carolina from June 5-7, 2009 for the third National Developmental Conference on Debate (NDCD), an event that followed in the wake of similar meetings held previously in Sedalia, Colorado (Bath, 1975) and Evanston, Illinois (Parson, 1984). In keeping with the tradition established by the earlier developmental conferences, the Wake Forest conferees broke out into distinct working groups, with each group focusing on a priority area of concern to the debate community: 1) Tenure and Promotion; 2) Scholarship and Research; 3) Development and Advancement of the Coaching Profession; 4) Innovation; 5) Best Practices; 6) Governance; 7) Alumni Networking; 8) Rationale for Policy Debate; 8) Controversies in Pedagogy; and 9) Alternative Models for Participation.

This paper isolates one issue addressed by several working groups—forensics scholarship and research. Such a focus is especially appropriate for the Alta venue, not only because the initial 1974 "Sedalia" development conference provided impetus for the establishment of the NCA/AFA summer argumentation conference series, but also because the second national developmental conference at Northwestern excluded the topic of forensics scholarship from its agenda, anticipating that the issue would receive ample attention in subsequent Alta programming.

Members of the Wake Forest NDCD Scholarship and Research Working Group included Peter Bsumek, Christian Lundberg, Michael Mangus and Benjamin Voth, with Odile Hobeika and Michael Jensen serving in advisory roles and myself as the chair. The group was tasked by

the conference steering committee to "foster research and scholarship by examining the culture and prevailing norms among debate professionals toward research and scholarship, identify opportunities for innovation in scholarship, examine existing outlets and imagine new possibilities for research and scholarship about debate and/or by debaters." Following preparatory discussions and lengthy on-site deliberations, group members responded to this charge by drafting seven resolutions (see Appendix 1) that were presented at the NCDC closing plenary session and endorsed by the conference body. The second resolution warrants special attention, given that its call for establishment of a new online journal was elicited partly in response to a draft recommendation formulated by the Tenure and Promotion Working Group that circulated during run-up to the conference:

In order to validate the creative research produced by the collaboration of coaches and debaters, the working group recommends that in conjunction with the American Forensic Association, debate organizations create an on-line journal focused on best practices in creative public policy research. In addition to providing an outlet for best practices in debate argumentation, the journal also might publish policy analyses about contemporary policy controversies drawn from debate research. The editorial board of the journal would review samples of creative research submitted on a given topic and then publish on-line those examples of creative research meeting the standards of the journal. The focus of the on-line journal would be on best practices in creative research related to the particular debate topic and thus would not compete with the mission of existing journals, such as Argumentation and Advocacy. However, the existence of the on-line journal could validate the importance of the creative research produced in the

collaboration of coaches and debaters. The on-line journal also might be a way for the debate community to participate in the dialogue about public policy in the public sphere. (Tenure & Promotion, 2009)

The remainder of this paper fleshes out context surrounding the call for a new online journal (part one); elaborates preliminary details on the journal's guiding concept and basic logistics (part two); and finally considers the potential significance of the journal in both historical and prospective terms (part three).

The "Skarburry" Hoax

Academic scholarship helps strengthen the institutional foundations supporting forensics, bolsters the intellectual freedom of forensics participants, and engenders mutually informing conversations between debate scholars and interlocutors beyond the debate community. This basic orientation was emphasized by the Sedalia conference participants, who noted, "programs without any academic affiliation decrease the likelihood that the forensics specialist will be perceived as a scholar whose work is vital to the educational process, and increase the likelihood that competitive activity programs will be regarded as ends in themselves" (McBath, 1975, 14). Underscoring this point, Sedalia conferees David Zarefsky joined with Malcolm Sillars to write an essay on "Future Goals and Roles of Forensics," (Sillars & Zarefsky, 1975, 83) advancing the thesis, "scholars and teachers in forensics should define their interests primarily in terms of their substantive scholarly concerns, rather than their roles as administrators of activity programs" (emphasis added; see also Rieke & Brock, 1975, 129-136).

No doubt this strong claim is one reason why G. Thomas Goodnight called for the rapprochement of argumentation scholarship and debate practice at the second Alta

argumentation conference (Goodnight, 1981). While some have taken Goodnight's cue and written about the interpenetration of argument theory and practice in contest rounds (see e.g. Kauffman, 1991; Mitchell, 1998; Munksgaard & Pfister, 2005; Panetta, 1990; Rowland & Fritch, 1989), the tradition of debate scholars actively producing scholarly manuscripts has receded, with the energy of forensics specialists increasingly channeled toward pursuit of the tournament trophy. This is not entirely a new trend; even during the Sedalia era, forensics leaders were keenly aware of the acute professional tradeoffs forced by intense labor commitment involved in fielding a competitive team on the debate tournament circuit. Yet in recent years, longer tournaments, a research assistance "arms race," and a permanent, 24-hour research cycle resulting from ubiquitous online connectivity have combined to sharpen the coach vs. scholar tradeoff facing forensics scholars who wish to pursue academic knowledge production. In short, heightened sportification of the debate activity, general decline of interest in scholarly knowledge production on the part of forensics specialists, and erosion of tenure-stream faculty lines for directors of debate are but a few symptoms of this nascent problem Sedalia diagnosed but did not treat.

On this point, a recent publishing controversy in the high school ranks serves as a representative anecdote for the predicament facing forensics specialists generally. In April 2009, the prominent space policy weblog [Space Review](#) published an article entitled "Space-based Solar Power: Right Here, Right Now?" under the byline "John Marburry" (Marburry, 2009). The article contained detailed and opinionated analyses of several fine points in the policy debate surrounding solar-powered space satellites, a common topic discussed during interscholastic debates held under the rubric of the 2008-2009 high school policy debate resolution on alternative energy. When several high school debaters and coaches attempted to contact the

author with queries regarding Marburry's background and the provenance of his article, they received curious email replies from a Hotmail account that appeared to be Marburry's own.

In the fullness of time, it came to light that "John Marburry" was a fictitious pseudonym created by former Arizona State University college debater and Damien High School coach Justin Skarb. Skarb not only tricked Space Review editor Jeffrey Foust during initial submission of his article; he persisted in the ruse after the piece was published, using a fake name to answer email queries directed to "Marburry" about the piece. The controversy flared for weeks, as suspicious debaters, coaches, editors, and policy analysts dug through specifics of the case to find out what happened. After publishing a mea culpa on several online debate discussion boards, Skarb contacted Foust to clear the air, prompting the following note to be appended to the original article:

Editor's Note: This article was originally published under the byline of "John Marburry." This was the name the author used in his original submission in February and subsequent correspondence. The day the article was published the author contacted this publication and asked for a credit for Justin Skarb, as he has provided "research assistance" for the article; an acknowledgment was added to the article that same day. Only later did this publication learn, through comments and email messages, that "John Marburry" was actually a pen name for Justin Skarb, a fact that Mr. Skarb confirmed to us on May 15. As a result the byline of the article has been changed accordingly. We sincerely regret unintentionally misleading readers as to the true identity of the author. While we have decided not to remove the article, as there is no evidence of any misconduct beyond the use of

the phony name, we have decided not to publish any articles in the future from Mr. Skarb. (Foust, 2009)

While this episode lacks the drama and gravity of the famous "Sokal hoax" (see Editors of Lingua Franca, 2000; Sokal & Bricmont, 1997), it does highlight aspects of prevailing debate culture relevant to our analysis here: 1) Forensics specialists are capable of writing crisp, organized, informed and policy-relevant summaries of their contest round research for wider publication; and 2) scarce mentoring and institutional support for such endeavors encourage ad hoc, even half-cocked efforts in this regard.

To more fully unpack this final point, it may be useful to revisit David Zarefsky's (1972, 1979) theory of academic debate as hypothesis testing. During the heyday of policy debate's "paradigm wars," hypothesis testing had its share of adherents, some in the judging ranks who applied the paradigm as a tool for adjudication of individual contest rounds, and others in the debating ranks, who used the paradigm to justify certain argumentative strategies (e.g. multiple, conditional and contradictory negative counterplans).

Lost in this process of reduction was Zarefsky's vision of academic debate as a vehicle to transport the theory and practice of argumentation to wider society (see e.g. Sillars & Zarefsky, 1975; Zarefsky, 1980). Hypothesis testing, in this larger frame, was a construct for establishing the gravitas and authority of forensics specialists in conversations about the nature of argumentation beyond the contest round setting. Here, the analogy linking debate to scientific hypothesis testing was not designed to show how debate itself was a scientific process, but rather to alert external audiences to the fact that academic debate, while deviating significantly from established patterns of scientific inquiry, features its own set of rigorous procedures for the testing of argumentative hypothesis. The NCD Scholaship and Research Working Group

concluded that it would be worthwhile to establish a peer-reviewed journal for the purpose of animating Zarefsky's vision of hypothesis testing as a vehicle for carrying insight forged during the fire of contest round competition to audiences beyond the tournament setting. The next section spells out preliminary details in this regard and shows how the new proposed publication is designed to complement, not supplant existing journals such as Argumentation and Advocacy, Contemporary Argumentation and Debate, and Controversia.

Timely Interventions

Sometimes undergraduate students convert their debate research into term papers, and occasionally more advanced scholars develop dissertations or scholarly articles from topic area reading they pursued while coaching. Yet for the most part (the "Skarburry" case excepted), the voluminous work products flowing from policy debate competition never reach wider audiences beyond the debate community, and sometimes are never even read in contest rounds. This mothball effect is a shame, not only because the rest of the world might benefit from debate-driven insight, but also because young debaters and coaches stand to bolster their scholarly credentials by converting the fruits of their research into peer-reviewed publications. Timely Interventions: A Translational Journal of Public Policy Debate is designed to facilitate such conversion by carrying the following types of essays:

- 1) Policy advocacy essays, where authors pull together their research on a particular policy position (e.g. affirmative case), and write up the case for a general, educated reading audience.
- 2) Controversy review essays, where authors isolate a particular point of salient disagreement featured in contest round competition, clarify for a general,

educated reading audience why the controversy warrants extended study, and explain how the arguments from contest round debating deepens understanding of the controversy under review.

3) Source review essays, where authors isolate a particular expert whose published work is receiving significant attention in intercollegiate policy debate competition, detail ways that the source is informing the policy argument, and reflect on how the debate experience yields resources for better understanding the expert's role in the policy debate for general, educated audiences.

4) Forum exchanges, where top experts in the field utilize a debating format to elucidate salient aspects of pressing public policy issues.

As with scholarly, peer-reviewed publications, prospective authors would submit draft manuscripts falling into one of the above categories to an editor-in-chief, who would then solicit peer review from members of the editorial board. Peer reviewers would be asked to apply evaluative criteria associated with quality debate argument (e.g. claims stated clearly and convincingly, arguments backed up by support, evidence thoroughly cited), as well as criteria associated with the challenge of translating “debate speak” into accessible prose understandable for a general, educated readership. This latter set of criteria is especially important, given the vision that Timely Interventions cultivate a wide readership amongst policy-makers, journalists, citizens, and others interested in learning about that year's given topic area through a debate prism. As an online publication, Timely Interventions would publish individual manuscripts serially, upon successful completion of peer review and copyediting.

For forensics specialists seeking the job security and intellectual freedom afforded by professional promotion in the field of communication, the windfall from successful placement of

peer reviewed scholarly work in Timely Interventions is clear. But tenure-stream professors of communication will not be the only scholars to benefit from this new publishing opportunity. Thanks to the debate methodology's wide applicability, the journal possesses disciplinary fungibility, enabling debate students who publish in the journal to bolster their academic credentials for placement in policy think-tanks and government agencies, or admission to the most selective graduate schools in law, international relations, political science, and other cognate fields. Additionally, the recent surge of resources flowing to undergraduate research in American higher education creates openings for non-tenure stream forensics specialists to tap fresh funding streams for their debate programs. Such requests for supplementary funding can be tailored to underwrite efforts by program directors and students to co-author translational research converting their contest round work into manuscripts suitable for publication by Timely Interventions. In a virtuous circle of tournament competition reinforcing academic scholarship, the resulting finished articles will serve as powerful exhibits testifying to the intellectual rigor, pedagogical value and policy relevance of the debate activity in subsequent budget requests.

Four Eras of Debate Scholarship

The institutional tie between forensics programs and academic departments is an arrangement that has historically provided stable homes for debate teams. But such arrangements have also enriched the academy, as debate scholars have played prominent roles in steering the nascent field of speech communication. For example, Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede used analysis of forensics to connect particular practices in the debate community with more general treatments of debate as a mode of democratic decision-making, thereby highlighting the importance of argumentation theory in the broader study of communication (see e.g. Brockriede,

1972; Ehninger, 1970; Ehninger and Brockriede, 1972). Brockriede's doctoral dissertation advisor, Marie Hochmuth Nichols, broke into the study of communication as president of the Women's Debating Association at the University of Pittsburgh in 1932, and then went on to publish landmark essays in rhetorical criticism and serve as president of the Speech Communication Association (Patton, 2001, 123-141). And academic luminaries such as Thomas Hollihan, Allan Lichtman, and David Zarefsky all cut their research chops during the so-called paradigm wars of the 1980s and 1990s, when the Journal of the American Forensic Association carried waves of scholarly articles on arcane facets of debate contest round theory and practice. It is possible to organize the foregoing examples of scholarly excellence as falling into roughly three historical eras (see Figure 1). While the intellectual lineage connecting each of these eras to present-day forensic specialists grows increasingly tenuous, recent trends are opening up new opportunities for innovative forms of academic scholarship in the digital era.

In the prevailing milieu, debate teams have begun digitally scanning evidence and transporting their files on laptop computers, which are now ubiquitous at tournaments. In-round note-taking has gone digital too, with many debaters and judges keeping a "flowsheet" of contest round arguments on laptop spreadsheets. Pencils are gone; pens are becoming rare. And perhaps most importantly, widespread wireless connectivity links debaters together in ways that facilitate evidence sharing, argument scouting, results reporting, and interactive commentary about argument trends and practices on Internet discussion boards.

Recast in the digital age, Zarefsky's concept of debate as hypothesis-testing points to possibilities for fresh avenues of knowledge production with the potential to redeem his Sedalia/Alta vision of forensics as scholarship. The Internet, and the rapid diffusion and absorption of advanced communication technology by the intercollegiate policy debate

community, makes possible modes of hypothesis-testing difficult to fathom in the 1970s and 1980s. Consider the notion of internetworked hypothesis-testing, where the debate community acts in concert as a collective research unit, pooling its resources to generate truly unique insights regarding the national policy debate resolution. Debate's digital turn opens up opportunities for forensics specialists and debaters to pursue this form of collaborative scholarship. The aim of Timely Interventions is to "showcase debate's collaborative research model" by providing such opportunities for mixed groups of researchers (undergraduate students, graduate students and faculty, even from different institutions) to translate the fruits of contest round research into medium-length manuscripts suitable for rapid uptake by wider public audiences interested in the public policy issues being researched under the rubric of that years' intercollegiate policy debate resolution.

In charting a course for the future of forensics, the Sedalia conferees envisioned the debate community rounding into a scholarly enterprise that would grow from its audience-centric roots to tackle research questions on such topics as political campaign debates, conflict resolution, public opinion formation, and processes of persuasion (see McBath, 1975, 35-36). While this vision has not yet materialized, Timely Interventions offers forensics specialists a research pathway to recuperate the audience dimension of argumentative practice, one that complements, not supplants, the wondrous enterprise of fast-talking, evidence-intensive, dynamically reflexive tournament debating.

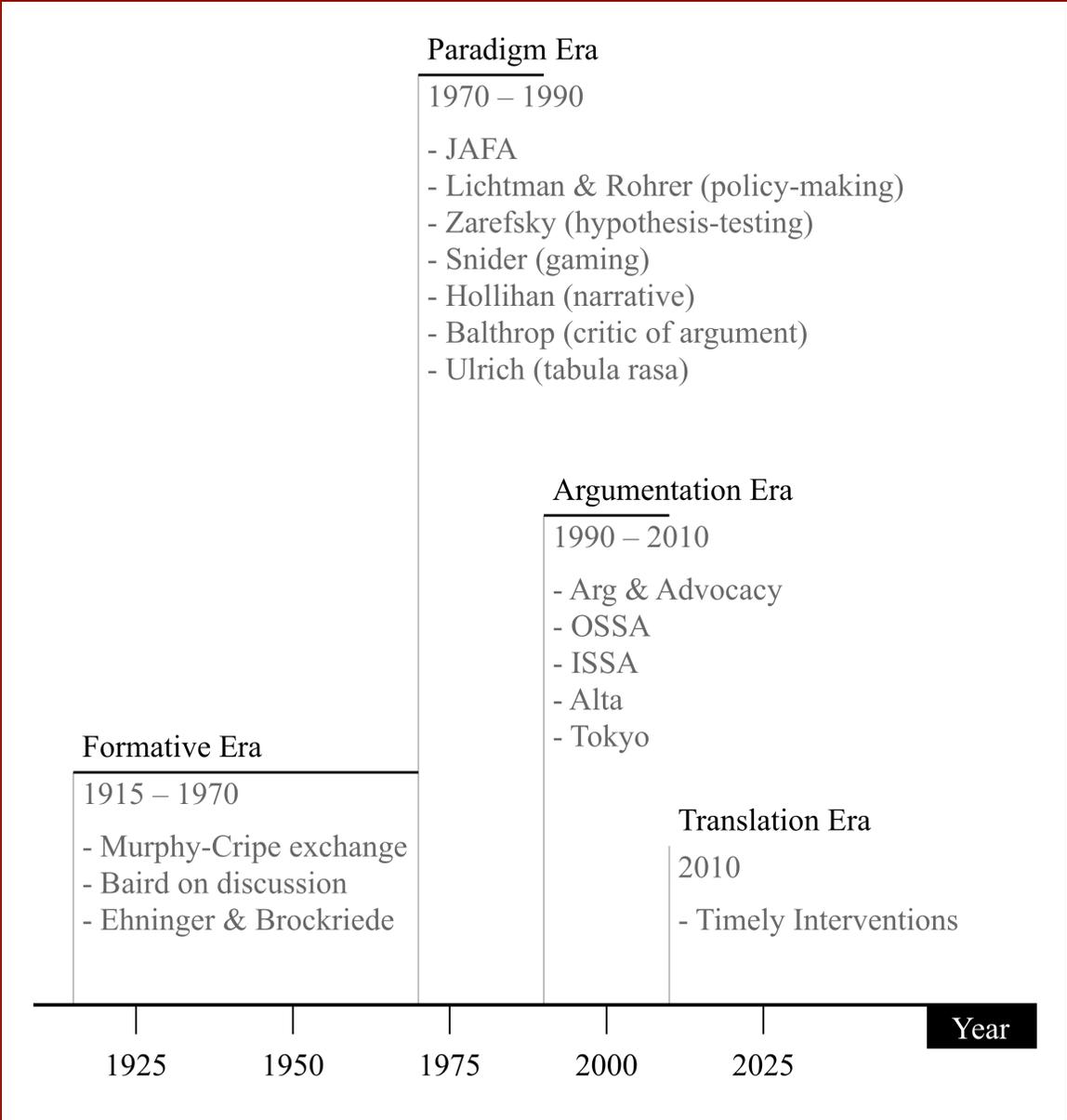


Figure 1. Four eras of American debate scholarship.

Appendix 1

Resolutions on Forensics Research and Scholarship

Adopted at the Third National Developmental Conference on Debate

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC

June 5-7, 2009

RESOLUTION 1. The National Developmental Conference on Debate (NDCD) recommends that forensics organizations improve online digital systems for archiving and distributing debate knowledge production. Toward that end we suggest pursuit of a participatory design process that maximizes benefits of digital archives for the contest round participants, production of peer reviewed scholarship, and public engagement.

RESOLUTION 2. The NDCD recommends establishment of a publishing outlet that translates knowledge produced in contest debating into double peer reviewed academic journal articles. Ideally, the journal will showcase debate's collaborative research model and its ability to impact live public argument with timely interventions.

RESOLUTION 3. The NDCD recommends that the American Forensics Association Research Committee exercise professional leadership by including in its annual reports updated lists that identify opportunities for innovation in forensics scholarship intersecting with issues of public concern.

RESOLUTION 4. The NDCD encourages research and scholarship on topics relating to contest debate round practice such as argument trends, frameworks, tournament governance, coaching pedagogy, and other related topics. We also encourage debate scholars to extend these

research findings to matters of wider public concern. We encourage Contemporary Argumentation and Debate to review and publish such scholarship on a quarterly basis.

RESOLUTION 5. The NDCD encourages the formation of a mentoring group as a resource for emerging scholars. This group will be composed primarily of former debate coaches comfortable with providing advice and possible review of scholarship. The purpose of this group is to encourage young scholars to produce quality debate research and to provide positive relationships for continuation of the debate scholarship tradition.

RESOLUTION 6. The NDCD should recommend that American Forensics Association adopt guidelines for collaborative coauthored scholarship.

RESOLUTION 7. The NDCD endorses the establishment of a U.S. Congressional Speech and Debate caucus and encourages that caucus to foster debate research and scholarship, including the publication of a topic area packet, and support of a participatory design process oriented toward refinement and development of an open source digital debate archive.

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