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1990 – 1999: Examining how the Interstate Oratorical Contest Closed Out the 1900s

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The 1990s signaled not only the end of a century but the end of a millennium. Decades of Cold War finally culminated with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the approach of a new millennium carried hopes of innovation and progress rarely before seen. Beginning the decade under the conservative leadership of Republican George H. W. Bush and ending it under the more liberal guidance of Democrat Bill Clinton, the United States experienced strong economic growth and even a budget surplus. Socially, there was a rise in environmentalism and third-wave feminism; however, the U.S. also unfortunately bore witness to what *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich called the "homophobic epidemic of 1998" (Rich, 1999) as the nation continued to struggle with the AIDS crisis. Furthermore, in a decade that began with the Gulf War, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and 1995 Oklahoma City bombing emphasized the growing threat of terrorism both foreign and domestic.

The 1990s gave birth to massive scientific and technological innovations that would irrevocably alter the foundations of education, industry, and communication well before the year 2000 arrived. Certainly, one of the most significant moments came on August 6, 1991, when the World Wide Web went live; and by 1997, 35% of all individuals in the US reported owning a personal computer (U.S. Department of Labor, 1999). The 1990s was a decade in which our world expanded beyond our wildest imaginations, offering technological advancements that would impact every aspect of our lives.

Amidst this background of discovery and controversy, the communication discipline continued its constant evolution. Many organizations changed their names to reflect a shifting focus—most notably, the Speech Communication Association became the National Communication Association in 1997 (Goulden, 2002). The advent of the Internet engendered the study of online communication and allowed scholars much expanded access to research and resources (Gunn & Dance, 2014).

Beyond name changes and the introduction of a powerful online toolbox, the study and practice of public speaking did not experience any truly paradigm-altering shifts in this decade. As Goulden (2002) notes in her study of the discipline's evolution across the 1990s, "we will not get up some morning next year and discover that public speaking as we have known it has disappeared forever. Hopefully, though, the discussion will continue" (p. 33). Changes in the study and practice of public address are gradual. The 1990s did not revolutionize the practice taught in the 1980s and render it unrecognizable in the new millennium. Rather, the major theoretical and pedagogical discussion of the 1990s continues today— the tension between rigid and time-tested approaches to public speaking and innovative approaches emphasizing more flexible standards and the increased integration of technology (Goulden, 2002).

This paper examines the top six speeches presented each year during the 1990s at the Interstate Oratorical Contest. Our purpose is to explore how these speeches reflected the political, social, economic and cultural climate of the time as well as the changes our discipline was experiencing in the final decade of the millennium.

Methods

The genesis for this article was a presentation at the 2017 NCA Convention. The method used there was highly qualitative and unstructured, based on a comprehensive reading of all of the Interstate Oratorical speeches from the decade which could be accessed. No formal content analysis was conducted, though the first author chose to organize the presentation using the five canons of rhetoric. The research was observational in nature and included additional personal commentary.

For this article, two additional authors supplemented the original presentation, using a quantitative approach employing structured content analysis. However, in contrast to the original presentation, this analysis examined only the top six speeches presented each year. The findings produced by both of these methods were then combined. By triangulating initial qualitative observations with quantitative content analysis, we could layer the observations of an experienced forensics specialist with numerical frequencies calculated by two coders.

The goal of combining these two styles of methodology was to counterbalance the limitations of each type of research and thus create a more well-rounded investigation. To do this, both approaches applied three of the five canons of rhetoric in distinct ways. Ultimately, some parts of the two approaches intersected while others focused on unique aspects revealed through the separate methodologies. For example, the qualitative reading tended to focus more particularly on topic selection, source types, and literary devices, while the quantitative approach focused on those sections of the speeches which addressed solutions and levels of implementation.

In order to examine trends in the winning speeches of the 1990s, our quantitative analysis coded speeches that placed among the top six Finalists each year, using three categories derived from Cicero's canons of rhetoric. Because the 1994 speeches and the third-place speech from 1992 were not available, a total of 53 speeches were coded. There was an 84% level of intercoder reliability, meaning both coders had similar definitions for coding. Thus, analysis focused on three canonical categories:

I. Invention
    A. Topic Choice, coding for the presence of seven major topic areas. If more than one topic area was present within the speech, the speech was coded based on the area that was most in focus.
        1. Health
        2. Personal finance
        3. Government (local to national level)
        4. International
        5. Legal
        6. Personal safety
        7. Other
    B. Level of Solution Implementation, coding the speech's solution section for the presence of seven types of implementation:
        1. Solely individual action or behavior
        2. Solely organizational action or behavior
        3. Solely governmental action or behavior

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4. Governmental and individual action or behavior
5. Organizational and individual action or behavior
6. Organizational and governmental action or behavior
7. Other

II. Organization
   A. Organizational pattern, coding for the presence of five patterns:
      1. Problem-cause-solution
      2. Cause-effect-solution
      3. Categorical
      4. Chronological
      5. other
   B. Number of Main Points

III. Style, coding each speech's attention-getting device (AGD) for the employment of four possible strategies:
   A. Hypothetical situation
   B. Narrative
   C. Rhetorical question
   D. Statistic

Results

Invention

Topic choice.

Qualitative observations. In the initial qualitative review, which included all of the accessible speeches presented at IOC during the 1990s, the speech topics were divided into very broad topic areas: personal safety, the environment, health care, legal issues, social justice, education, international issues, governmental policies, and laws. As the decade progressed, the list of topics expanded, and many of them appeared to overlap.

Throughout the decade, the preponderance of the speeches dealt with some kind of personal safety issue. Some examples of topics included medicine/healthcare (various diseases, healthcare workers, pharmaceuticals, unsafe hospitals and equipment, 9-1-1 emergency calls, germs, and antibiotics), economic/financial concerns (identity theft, money scams, check laundering, financial planning, tax regulation, credit card debt, and retirement planning), food safety (FDA regulations, additives, food handling, vitamins, and additives), infrastructure/environment (roads, asbestos, transportation, pollution, radon, Styrofoam, and clean water), and technology (cell phones, stun guns, electromagnetic fields, cybercrimes, and personal stereos).

Students were encouraged to approach topics in ways that (as much as possible) made the subjects seem at least "fresh"—or ideally, "entirely original." For example, early in the decade, there were multiple speeches dealing with environmental issues, usually making use of an interesting twist. Students sought to discover new angles on or surprising dimensions to their subjects. There were three different speeches in the early 1990s which revisited the topic of recycling and the new problems surrounding recycling. The number of speeches dealing with environmental issues tapered off as the decade went on.

While the 1990s opened against the backdrop of the Gulf War, there were not many speeches pertaining to the military or foreign policy. Likewise, there were few speeches

that dealt with international human rights issues. There sadly appears to be a pervasive ethnocentrism along with a personal egocentrism on display in the speeches of the 1990s.The personal well-being of the immediate audience seemed to take precedence over the broad well-being of the national or international community. Furthermore, “safe” topics that audiences were likely to find easy to agree with arguably took center stage, while truly controversial topics that might offend some judges were pushed to the background.

Additionally, in comparison to the high number of personal safety speeches, there were far fewer speeches regarding inequality and discrimination against women, minorities, and the LGBT community. This is especially perplexing in the light of some key events of the decade: the Clarence Thomas hearings, riots in Los Angeles, Matthew Shephard’s death, and others.

Many of the speeches specific to the experiences of women were often about health: unnecessary hysterectomies, C-sections, gender bias in drug testing, and effective mammography. As the decade progressed, there were more speeches on domestic violence and, in particular, sexual assault on college campuses. However, few of these speeches made it to out-rounds. While there were numerous speeches on the AIDS epidemic, most were not framed in the context of LGBT issues. Speeches on the subjects of race or gay rights were limited to six within the decade. Compared to speeches after 2000, there were relatively few speeches on the mentally ill, the homeless, and prison reform. There were not many speeches over the decade examining human rights, social injustice, or the criminal justice system.

While there was a smattering of speeches on education topics presented throughout the decade, the middle and the end of the decade concentrated specifically on the experiences of college students. Topics included teaching critical thinking, grade inflation, cheating, and credit card promotion on campus.

Every year of the 1990s, there was at least one speech presented on some aspect of HIV-AIDS. Early in the decade, topics included the potential danger of exposure from healthcare workers, as well as the dangers posed to healthcare workers. The years that followed explored the need for vaccines, considered the problems with AZT, and culminated in 1999 when the IOC champion discussed compassion fatigue and the danger of forgetting about the AIDS crisis.

Additionally, in the mid-1990s, there were a number of speeches exploring very narrow and specific topics (cigar smoke, astro-turf lobbying, security bars on windows) which included clear-cut personalized solutions. In 1995, the first speeches dealing with “the information superhighway” and “cyberspace” were introduced. In these speeches, the first main point usually was spent explaining terms like “email,” “IP address,” “internet provider,” “AOL,” and “Prodigy.”

In addition to the question of what topics were chosen for examination, a pattern appeared relative to how topics (once they were selected) were approached. One interesting phenomenon with regard to topics began to appear in this decade. Ideas that were once framed as “strong solutions” were now being analyzed as “problems.” For example, previous decades had speeches that called for “recycling” or “organ donation” as their call to action or solutions .Now those same topics were being framed as “problems.”

Content analysis. Once again, initial observations about the entire corpus of speeches held true in the content analysis of the top six speeches each year, with 47% of the 53 speeches having topics related to health. The next most common topic was a tie

between governmental policy and personal finance, with each individually accounting for 13% of the total. Topics on personal safety accounted for 6%, international issues 4%, and solely legal issues 2%. The remaining 15% of the speeches could not easily be coded into any of the existing categories.

Solution implementation.

Qualitative observations. Upon initial review, nearly 90% of the entire corpus of speeches appeared to end with some kind of call for action or change of attitude. The 1990s also reflected a strong trend toward personalized solutions, solution steps that an audience member could easily implement through everyday lifestyle changes or simple actions. These very simple personal topics, suggesting simple solutions like "hand washing" (Sisk, 1998) or the need to get more sleep, remained pervasive throughout the decade. Meanwhile, the subsequently ubiquitous "give away" (a brochure, a card, a water bottle, etc.) was not evident in any of the speeches.

Content analysis. Concerning the level(s) of solution implementation suggested (particularly in each speech's solutions section), 53% of the "top six" annual speeches which were coded called for combined implementation at both the governmental and individual behavior levels. The next most frequent choice (28% of all speeches) was implementation at the combined governmental, individual, and organizational levels. Thus, these two approaches accounted for a total of 81% of the speeches coded. The remaining percentage is accounted for by three speeches showing combined organizational and individual implementation and two speeches solely advocating individual implementation. No obvious difference appeared between speeches presented earlier vs. later in the decade. This data suggests that the initial observations regarding the prevalence of personal solutions were indeed valid, albeit incomplete. Every speech featured a personal solution, but personal action steps were almost always paired with some form of governmental or organizational solution.

Organization

Organizational pattern and number of main points.

Qualitative observations. Initial qualitative observation of Interstate Oratorical finalists across the decade revealed a high level of consistency regarding organizational patterns. One criticism often heard of the forensics community over the past few decades is that students' speeches sound very formulaic. This complaint certainly bears validity in relation to the speeches of the 1990s, a decade in which the "unwritten rules" seemed to greatly influence the shape speeches took. The typical IOC speech during this decade evidenced a reticence to move away from the "problem-cause-solution" organizational pattern. While some speakers attempted to present an innovative approach within the preview by reframing terms—problems were sometimes labelled "harms" or "disadvantages," while solutions were occasionally labelled "policy changes" or "action steps"—these efforts ultimately still reflected the familiar organizational trope.

While few speeches deviated from this organizational template, some speakers experimented with different structure and organization. One school in particular (Berry College, with speakers coached by Dr. Randy Richardson) was willing to shift some of the traditional organizational patterns and employ a "statement of reasons" or modified "comparative advantages structure," or at the very least not fall into using the labels "problem," "cause," and "solution" (Lindrum, 1996; Alban, 1999). In 1999, one speaker

went so far as to explain that, "in forensics we have been conditioned to a certain formula of persuasion. But you're not going to find solutions at the end of this speech. To me, offering 3 [sic] easy solutions trivializes all those who suffer from AIDS" (Wedlock, 1999). Even so, the speech does indeed advocate for a vaccine, and that is itself a form of solution step.

Content analysis. These initial observations were largely confirmed in our content analysis. Seventy percent of the speeches followed a problem-cause-solution format in which speakers first outlined the problem in detail, then explained why the problem existed, and finally discussed their proposed solution(s) to the problem. The next most frequent speech pattern was the cause-effect-solution format, which was used 25% of the time. The cause-effect-solution style starts with an explanation of why the problem exists, then considers the consequences of the problem, and lastly outlines solutions. Together, these organizational patterns accounted for the choices made in 95% of all speeches. Of the remaining speeches, two utilized a categorical pattern while another fell into the "other" category.

The difference in the frequency of using certain organizational patterns in the first half of the decade vs. the latter half was negligible, with only two more cause-effect-solution approaches being used in the first half than the second. Overall, 98% of all the speeches coded for this research used three main points in their bodies. There was no difference in this pattern between the first and second halves of the decade.

Style

Attention-getting device.

Qualitative observation. Initial observation noted that a clear majority of the speeches began with a real or hypothetical narrative. Used not nearly as often, but still present in many introductions, was the personal "ethos statement." These kinds of statements were sprinkled throughout the speeches of the 1990s, but they became even more prominent at the end of the decade. They included personal references by a Desert Storm Vet, a domestic violence survivor, an adoptee, the mother of a child who was suffering from a specified disease, and a speaker whose brother was discriminated against because of his disability.

Content analysis. As revealed by our content analysis, 70% of the final round speeches used narrative style attention-getting devices. These stories, generally true and related to the topic, led into the speeches' larger discussions. Fifteen percent of the speeches began with a fact or statistic, and 9% began with a related hypothetical situation. Additionally, 6% of the speeches used a rhetorical question as their opening device. Rhetorical questions were more popular in the earlier part of the decade. They were used three times in speeches delivered during the first five years, but not used at all in the latter half of the 1990s.

Source type.

Qualitative observation. Throughout the first five years of the decade, the most consistently used sources appeared to be magazines (*TIME, Newsweek, US News & World Report*), newspapers (*New York Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, Wall Street Journal*), and news broadcasts like *60 Minutes*. What was most striking was that very little original research was personally conducted by the speakers themselves. Few, if any, of the speeches throughout this time period included much in the way of personal interviews.

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As the topics became more specific, the use of journals like *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association, The Lancet, The Chronicle of Higher Education, ABA Journal,* and *The New England Journal of Medicine* became more prominent. As the decade progressed, so did the variety of the source material. In the later years of the decade, *TIME* and *Newsweek* continued to be cited along with the major newspapers. However, we began to see the use of more magazines like *Mother Jones*, *UTNE reader*, and *The Atlantic Monthly* – periodicals that were doing more investigative journalism. In 1995, there was an influx of speeches regarding technology, and we were introduced to *PC Weekly, Computer Weekly,* and *Mac WORLD*. It is not until 1999 that we saw the first website citation.

Use of literary devices.

Qualitative observation. Based exclusively on qualitative observations, we found that the IOC speeches of the 1990s generally lacked traditional stylistic devices like repetition, parallel structure, active voice, analogy, metaphor, and alliteration. It appears rhetorical style elements were reduced largely to the "punny" preview.

Discussion

Combining both the qualitative reading and the quantitative content analysis achieved a more comprehensive examination of the 1990s Interstate speeches. Qualitatively, observational notes framed the decade in comparison to both the preceding and subsequent decades, providing the analysis with a more nuanced lens. The observations also provided a more detailed analysis of specific speeches, including observations regarding topic choices and references used in individual speeches. Overall, this approach enhanced the comprehensive analysis by positioning the decade's speeches as a segment in the larger continuum of all Interstate speeches.

Meanwhile, the quantitative content analysis generally provided objective support for the initial observations. The quantitative approach also allowed us to examine the decade solely in terms of the statistical frequencies appearing during just those ten years. Among other findings, our coding revealed that almost all of the categories coded contained one option that appeared with a frequency of over 50%. This would suggest that speech trends, formulas and tropes (such as recurring organizational patterns, the use of narrative attention getting devices and "trendy" topics) dominated the 1990s Interstate speeches just as unwritten rules do today.

Interestingly, the qualitative observations also drew special notice to a few speeches which resonated strongly with the authors because of their seemingly prophetic nature. These speeches seemed to be ahead of their time, and this paper highlights them in order to provide additional insight into the importance of studying the Interstate competition as a cultural artifact. Some of these speeches focused on airport security and the need to invest in stronger screening and security (Anderson, 1990), same-sex marriage (Walton, 1992), the electoral college (Volesky, 1993), the need for sexual assault policies and reporting on campus (Anton, 1994), and sexual harassment of teenage girls (Erickson, 1997).

Conclusion

The 1990s were a decade which signaled the end of an era while heralding the dawn of a new millennium full of change and innovation. The authors are emblematic of that decade; one is steeped in tradition and moving into the twilight of her career, while the others are just beginning the journey, full of energy, excitement and new ideas. We collectively agreed on the following conclusions.

The precious records that *Winning Orations* provides are invaluable resources for research by the forensics community, providing unique opportunities for study. We cannot think of another collection of artifacts that is so comprehensive and specific to a competitive forensics event. While we now have high-quality video and digital recordings of final rounds from some national tournaments, there is something profound and pure about exploring the printed text in the absence of delivery elements— and only the IOC records give us almost a century and a half of competitive speech manuscripts to explore. As textual records of performed speeches, these artifacts enable us to develop a critical approach somewhere between traditional literary criticism and traditional oral criticism. Traditional literary criticism is concerned with words on the page. Oral criticism traditionally considers all five classical canons, including delivery (and thus powerful and diverse nonverbal elements). In this study of IOC manuscripts, we stand in the middle ground. Like literary critics we are looking at words on paper—but unlike literary critics (and like oral critics), we are examining words composed for listeners rather than readers.

However, unlike oral critics, the words we are examining are void of the delivery dimension. This provides an intriguing research opportunity, given that some today believe that forensics competition places too much emphasis on delivery. Having access only to the written texts puts our research focus on the comprehensive evaluation of specific phrases, word choice, literary devices and other structural components in a way that shifting live performances of texts—in their passing and variable nature—render challenging if not virtually impossible. This approach, of course, is limited in what it can reveal about how an audience reacts. As scholars of communication, we also understand that a written speech is not a "complete" product until it is spoken. We cannot see through the text to determine how delivery factors (or audience reception) may have enhanced, supported, contradicted, or contextualized the words on paper. Yet, a focus on the written text composed specifically for oral delivery in the absence of those delivery elements can let us look at issues that our traditional concern for delivery distracts us from, concentrating attention on written elements which were composed with anticipated live audiences in mind.

We have seen the value of studying the history of our activity for forensics coaches and students. As author Michael Crichton notes, "If you don't know history, then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree" (Le Baron, 2012). It seems that too few of us take the time to understand the roots of collegiate forensics – its origins, its artifacts, and its evolution. Understanding the historical relevance and scope of the forensics tradition will be a crucial tool in the fight for its future. In fact, as Reynolds (2016) explains, programs that can boast a deep knowledge and a link to a longer, stable history may be less likely to face budget cuts. As the forensics community struggles to justify funding from administrators, recruit new students, and sustain program growth, a

greater reverence for the activity's rich history among coaches and competitors may be more valuable than ever before.

In order to ensure that we are using the best methodologies and avoiding the mistakes of those who came before us, it is vital for us as teachers and students to look back and reflect, to assess what we are doing now, and to use all of what we discover to move forward. This research provides the authors and the forensics community with new insight into our teaching and coaching pedagogy, leading us to take more time with the entire process of coaching oratory, particularly in relation to the first step of invention. Our work also tells us that we should promote more primary research and encourage students to take more risks, experimenting with different topics and organizational styles.

Since the 1990s, the number of available resources and the amount of information easily accessible to students has grown exponentially. Students need not pour through microfiche or transcribe entire episodes of *60 Minutes* taped on their VCRs. At the same time, while the enormous amount of information at our fingertips is amazing, sorting through it presents huge obstacles that students in the past did not face, and the search for "truth" becomes more elusive.

One of the speeches from this decade ("Traditional Oratory: The Thoroughbred of Persuasive Speaking," Willich, 1992) provided a unique perspective on oratory. Here the speaker advocated for the "revivification of traditional oratory," and explained that oratory or persuasive speaking had been reduced to simply a first affirmative debate argument. The speech is critical of the status of persuasive speaking in forensics competition and serves as a critique of our practices both then and now. Speeches like this are especially important to study, as past critical reflections on the activity serve to ignite exploration and experimentation among current coaches and speakers outside of the current oratory template.

Finally, at its best, our research reinforced a lot of hope. It is difficult to label one decade more "golden" than another. From decade to decade, speeches may look different and sound different as trends come and go. But what is most important and remains constant is the fundamental purpose of teaching students to advocate, to argue, to celebrate the beauty of language, and to present their messages with passion. This is invaluable. As we struggle for ethical standards and search for the truth (or at least "truths"), we need to hold tight to this goal today more than ever.

The study of speechmaking reaches back to a time even before the classic canons that outlined our study. In the same sense that speechmaking never had a formal beginning, it will never have an end so long as there are those that raise their voices in response to the world's perceived injustices. Even while topics, strategies, and research tools continue to evolve, what remains timeless is the need to responsibly and ethically bring problems to the forefront, advocate positions, and bring about positive change through the art of persuasion.

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Appendix

Year	Tournament Site	Host School	Number of Contestants	Number of States Represented
1990	Menomonie, Wisconsin	University of Wisconsin, Stout	39	22
1991	St. Petersburg, Florida	St. Petersburg Community College	44	26
1992	Austin, Texas	University of Texas at Austin	48	26
1993	Boston, Massachusetts		43	25
1994	Anchorage, Alaska	University of Alaska	61	28
1995	Tempe, Arizona	University of Arizona	55	29
1996	Lincoln, Nebraska	University of Nebraska	49	27
1997	Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia		53	27
1998	Springfield, Illinois	Lincoln Land Community College	53	28
1999	Lexington, Kentucky	Georgetown College	50	26

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