The Pitfalls, Perils, and Promise to Increasing Forensic Research

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Research in Forensics: An Overview

Research is the core of higher education and provides the foundation for what we teach. Research, in fact, provides the foundation for all we do in forensics. According to McBath (1975), "because research and scholarship are the foundation from which all specific areas within a field evolve, and because they establish the basis for interrelationships among the areas, a field of study is both as strong and weak as its research and scholarship" (pg. 34).

Forensic professionals must heed a warning issued by Ryan in 1988: "Scholarly writing has always been a requisite for respect in academia. Folks in forensics cannot expect their non-forensic colleagues to take them seriously if they do not take themselves seriously enough to publish" (pg. 77). Harris, Kropp, and Rosenthal (1986) provide a second reason forensic scholars need to engage in research. "Scholarship enhances the image of forensics both within the field of speech communication and in the larger academic context. Many colleagues feel that we are merely, in the words of Plato, teaching a "knack" which is not worthy of academic treatment. This negative image may be changed if the forensic tournament is viewed as a place to study the relationship between communication/rhetorical theory and practice (Harris, Kropp, & Rosenthal, 1986).

Based on the above statement by Harris, Kropp, and Rosenthal (1986), I feel compelled to qualify my opening sentence to this article. I opened by stating "Research, in fact, provides the foundation for all we do in forensics." A more truthful statement is that "research should provide the foundation for all we do in forensics." I am not convinced this is the case. The most notable illustration is in Program Oral Interpretation (POI). Contemporary practice in POI involves splicing/dicing/weaving together multiple texts. Postmodernity provides potential theoretical justification for the practice. However, anecdotal evidence demonstrates the vast majority of competitors (and potentially coaches) could not clearly articulate the postmodern assumptions underpinning this performance approach. The competitors (and potentially the coaches) are merely copying the form they have seen successful competitors employ. I was around when the splice/dice/weave approach was first introduced into the event. In this opening foray, significant theoretical discussions were held among coaches and competitors as everyone attempted to grasp the fundamental concepts underlying such a dramatically new approach to interpreting literature. Over time, I believe the theoretical discussions have gone away and only the mimicry of the practice remains. Forensics may have, at least in this example, devolved from a scholarly art to a Platonic knack. The de-evolution of pedagogy in such an instance is described by myself and Al Golden in our 1997 article "The 'Unwritten Rules' in Oral Interpretation: An Assessment of Current Practices." We describe the evolution of an unwritten rule in a list titled The Evolution of an Unwritten Rule: A Twelve-Step Program:

> Unwritten rules do not just spring forth fully formed from pen of a forensic judge. Rules have a genesis inherent within the forensic practices in which we engage. The twelve steps articulated below describe the basis for the generation, perpetuation, and discontinuation of unwritten rules in oral interpretation.
> 1. A talented student tries something new/different;
> 2. talented student is rewarded by judge for a strong performance (judge may not even have liked the new approach, yet votes for student because overall performance was strong);
> 3. student continues to win at a variety of tournaments;
> 4. other students observe the winning student and attribute success to the new/different approach;
> 5. other students adapt the new approach into their performances;
> 6. judges see "everyone" doing the new approach and assume this is how it is supposed to be done;
> 7. judges start expecting everyone to include the new approach;
> 8. judges start penalizing students who fail to include the new approach;
> 9. students believe they *must* include the new approach to be competitive;
> 10. seniors graduate;
> 11. forensic alumni return (as either graduate coaches or hired judges) the next season and employ the "unwritten rules" they learned as competitors in order to render decisions;
> 12. the unwritten rule is perpetuated by the community until we return to Step One

when a talented student tries something new/different." (Cronn-Mills & Golden, 1997, n.p.)

Finally, Aden (1990) listed three reasons forensic professionals should engage in research. (1) forensic research is the cornerstone for appreciating the events offered in intercollegiate competitive forensics. (2) forensic research is how professors and students expand on their understanding of forensics. Ballot comments are only a beginning to understanding forensics; research should provide the full explanation of forensic expectations. (3) forensic research is the necessary link between theory and practice. Research is necessary for effective praxis.

Research has, however, never been the strong suit of the forensic community. The 1974 Sedalia Conference was the first national assembly to focus on forensics. One conference agenda was forensic research. Parson in 1990 argues "the conference clearly created a call to research in forensics" (pg. 69). The Sedalia request, now more than 30 years old, may have been largely unheard by many forensic professionals. Editors of forensic-related journals have for a significant time cajoled and lambasted the forensic (and specifically the individual-events) community to increase forensic research. Geisler (1998) during her time as editor of the National Forensic Journal stated that "the associate editors have found a dearth of suitable material for publication in this journal" (pg. 59). Ryan, during his tenure as editor of NFJ (1998) faced the same problem—lack of submissions: "A basic fact of a journal's life is that the editor cannot publish essays that are not submitted" (pg. 77), and Croucher (2006) highlights a lack of theoretical density and rigor in forensic research. Croucher contends "forensics research, at least from a communication theory point of view, really is not all we claim" (pg. XX).

The number of sessions at NCA available for forensic research is staggering (especially when compared to other interest areas). According to the 2008 Convention Planners' Packet (Bach, 2008), forensic organizations had more than 50 sessions available for scheduling. (A listing from 2005-2008 is provided in the table below.) Few other interest areas come even close to this number of sessions. 50+ sessions is a considerable amount of time devoted to forensic scholarship. Such an impressive array of conference sessions should be producing an equally impressive array of quality journal publications. The significant number of conference presentations, however, does not logically correspond to the limited number of journal submissions and journal articles.

Table One: Sessions/Slots for Programming at NCA

Organization	2005	2006	2007	2008
Argumentation and Forensics Division	18	15	16	16
American Forensic Association	25	25	18	18
International Forensics Association	2	2	2	2
NFHSSDTA*	4	4	3	3
National Forensic Association	8	7	7	7
Phi Rho Pi	2	2	2	2
Pi Kappa Delta	5	5	5	5
Total	64	60	53	53

*National Federation of High School Speech, Debate & Theatre Association

McKerrow (1990) notes a specific question to ask of conference papers: "are papers presented at regional and national conventions moved through the process toward publication? While this is not a prerequisite for every paper presented, the record should reflect a general movement toward publication, whereby convention presentations represent an initial step" (pg. 74). The considerable disparity between the number of presentations at NCA (and other conferences) and the dismal number of manuscript submissions to journals would require us to answer McKerrow's question with a resounding "no, papers are not moving from conference presentation to peer-reviewed journal publication."

A caveat: Understandably, different institutions place varying emphasis on the research expectations of their faculty. Such varying emphases, however, do not account for overall limited production of forensic-related research.

The *Online Index of Forensic Research*
http://fmp.mnsu.edu/forensicindex/online_index.htm

One of the major hurdles forensic researchers faced was writing an effective literature review. A sound literature review is central to almost all research endeavors. A literature review demonstrates the relationship between the current research effort

and previous works. Sound research does not materialize from thin air but is built on a sound framework provided by other scholars. As Feeley (2008) argues, "for knowledge to advance, one must access and build upon published research in a given area of scholarship" (pg. 505).

The dilemma confronting forensic scholars was identifying the articles relevant to their research interests. NCA sponsored for years the Index to Journals in Communication Studies, commonly known as Matlon's Index after the original editor Ronald J. Matlon. (CommSearch History, n.d.). NCA has converted Matlon's into CommSearch, a searchable online index of communication scholarship. Few forensic-related journals were listed in Matlon's/CommSearch. Argumentation and Advocacy, the journal of the American Forensic Association, was one of the very few listed in Matlon's. Inquiries by other organizations to list their journals were turned down by the Publications Board of NCA for a variety of reasons. Forensic scholars were left without a central repository for discovering articles related to their research aspirations. Such a significant roadblock can quickly cripple a promising research inquiry.

In the Fall of 2000 steps were taken to assist forensic scholars in their research endeavors outside Matlon's/CommSearch. I contacted the editors of all the forensic-related journals and requested a meeting at the annual NCA conference being held that year in Seattle, WA. The editors met, discussed the issues of forensic research, and determined an online searchable index of forensic-related articles was a critical necessity. A few basic assumptions were agreed upon by the editors:

1. The system should be housed within a university server to minimize any costs.
2. The system design should be supported by IT professionals. The editors agreed a system designed by students was problematic. Once the student graduates and leaves the institution, all key components of the system would leave with the system. A significant issue could result in a "crash 'n' burn" of the entire project.
3. IT professionals must be available at the host institution to provide technical support.
4. The system would have both an automatic back-up mechanism and a means for exporting the citation data into other digital formats.
5. Once the system was up and functioning, the editor of each journal would be responsible for initial data entry of all article citations from their respective journal.
6. The editor of the database would be responsible for data entry of article citations after pt. 4 (above) was completed. The editor would, therefore, be responsible for keeping the database current. This approach was developed due to the short lifespan of academic journal editors. Most editor terms are for a 2-3 year period. The relatively consistent turnover of journal editors means the requirement to populate the database could be easily lost as editors transition over time. Data entry by the database editor would hopefully provide a mechanism to alleviate this constraint.
7. All editors would request of their organizing body that the editor of the database be added to the permanent mailing list of their journal (thus making #6 possible).

An initial effort to create the database was attempted at Moorhead State University (now Minnesota State University, Moorhead) by then NFJ editor Timothy Borchers. The Moorhead endeavor, however, did not meet a number of basic assumptions laid out by the editors at the 200 meeting. The Moorhead project was student-designed, did not have full-time IT staff support, and did not have reliable backup capabilities. The Moorhead project was soon abandoned as untenable.

I initiated a second effort to bring the database to life at Mankato State University (now Minnesota State University, Mankato). I developed the data-entry fields and primary layout of the online documents. IT professionals at MSU double-checked my work, offered suggestions and made the final alterations necessary to bring the database online. This time the project was successful and the Online Index of Forensic Research was born. The Index is built using Filemaker Pro and delivered online using a dedicated Filemaker server housed on the campus of MSU, Mankato. The Index has full-time professional IT support , is backed up every 24 hours to an off-site server, and has the ability (by the editor) for exporting all data. The Index has proven to be a very robust, effective, and worthwhile addition to the tools available to forensic researchers. In fact, the Filemaker system has proven so effective, additional online databases have been constructed to provide the forensic community with:

1. *Intercollegiate Forensics Tournament Calendar* - http://fmp.mnsu.edu/cofo/
2. *Minnesota High School Speech Tournament Calendar* - http://fmp.mnsu.edu/ctam/
3. *The Online GTA Index for Communication Studies* - http://fmp.mnsu.edu/gtas/search.lasso

The Online Index of Forensic Research is not without limitations. First, not all editors have taken the initiative to complete #5 (listed above). Such journals are to date not listed in the Index. Second, the editor of the Index is frequently dropped from the mailing list of the journals. When the editor is

dropped, new issues are not received or entered into the system. Finally, organizations and editors are occasionally remiss in responding to requests from the Index editor for copies of the latest issues of their journals. All three of these limitations constrain scholars access to the latest research in forensics.

Steps to Improve the *Index*

Specific steps can be taken to improve the Online Index of Forensic Research. First, editors/organizations/journals who have yet to participate in the Index can begin by conducting the initial data entry of all previous back issues of the journal. Interested editors should contact daniel.cronn-mills@mnsu.edu and request information for accessing the data entry module of the system. Second, journals already in the Index can ensure the data is up to date by confirming I am on the permanent mailing list for the journal. Additional back issues may need to be submitted if the journal is behind on citations. Journals published online can send issue link(s) to daniel.cronn-mills@mnsu.edu. The address for a permanent mailing list is:
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Finally, faculty at master and doctoral-granting institutions can add to the robust environment of the Index by submitting citation information for any theses and/or dissertations with a forensic-related research focus.

Steps to improve Forensic Scholarship

The Index has helped to create a more conducive environment for conducting online research. However, the Index alone is not panacea for all that troubles forensic research. Additional steps can and should be taken to improve the overall climate for the production and acceptance of forensic research.

First, graduate students involved in forensics need to be treated and trained as forensic scholars and not just as assistant coaches. Forensic research is not an agenda only for the "old guard" but also for the "young turks" in the discipline. Madsen (1990) has an entire article in the National Forensic Journal dedicated to incorporating graduate students into forensic research. I will not take the time to review all his reasons here, but do highly encourage all faculty with graduate students to read his article.

I strongly concur with Madsen's position, and I speak from experience. I have taught a course titled "Forensics Pedagogy" at MSU, Mankato. After a brief hiatus the course is now offered again by Dr. Leah White. I also have experience co-authoring and advising graduate-student forensic research (e.g., Cronn-Mills & Cook, 1995; Cronn-Mills & Croucher, 2001; Cronn-Mills & Golden, 1997; Cronn-Mills, Sandmann, Sullivan, & Golden, 1996/97; Kerber & Cronn-Mills, 2005; Rowe & Cronn-Mills, 2005; Sullivan, 1997). The earlier students engage in the forensic research experience, the more likely they may continue and become strong contributors to the development of forensics. Graduate courses in forensics pedagogy and research would be a major step to improving graduate student research. I implore all departments with both forensics and graduate programs to offer such a course. Students will become engaged in research in those subjects which they study. A course in forensics pedagogy and research would provide the necessary imperative for students to write, present and publish forensics research.

Second, scholars need to identify the reasons why the majority of forensic presentations done at conferences are never submitted for publication. I can guess the major the reason. I believe many of the forensic conference presentations are never actually written as formal papers. I believe many of the presentations are done from notes and outlines but not with formal, written papers. The lack of a formal paper written for the conference would mean the paper would need to be written after the conference and then submitted for publication. Such practice is a hurdle to any submission process.

Finally is the issue of incentives. I read during the summer Freakonomics by Levitt and Dubner (2006). One concept addressed in the book struck me as highly relevant to forensics research—incentives. According to Levitt and Dubner, "an incentive is a bullet, a lever, a key: an often tiny object with astonishing power to change a situation…. we all learn to respond to incentives, negative and positive, from the outset of life…. An incentive is simply a means of urging people to do more of a good thing and less of a bad thing" (pg. 16-17).

Forensics is laced with incentives. Student-competitors receive incentives to perform well at tournaments (trophies and the recognition of their peers during the award ceremony). Directors, assistant directors, and graduate-student coaches receive incentives to have their teams perform well at tournaments (trophies and the recognition of their peers). Departments have incentives to have their programs perform well at tournaments (trophies and recognition from other departments, administrators, and the community). Almost all forensic organizations also have incentives (awards) to provide service to the forensic community. A similar vein of support is not as strong for forensic research.

Let's take a look at the AFA-NIET as an example. Competitive trophies for speakers and teams are handed out the award ceremony attended by almost all (numbering in the hundreds) competitors and

coaches/judges. The AFA-NIET Distinguished Service Award is presented to the recipients at the opening assembly to the national tournament attended by almost all (numbering in the hundreds) competitors and coaches/judges.i The AFA-NIET Outstanding New Forensics Coach Award is presented to the recipients at the opening assembly to the national tournament attended by almost all (numbering in the hundreds) competitors and coaches/judges.ii And most recently, the AFA-NIET has recognized individuals who have attended the NIET for 25 years. These individuals are honored at the award ceremony attended by almost all (numbering in the hundreds) competitors and coaches/judges. (Notice a pattern?) The national champions in each individual event, the national champion in individual sweeps, the national champion in team sweeps, the Distinguished Service recipients, the New Coach recipients, and the 25-year recipients are further "immortalized" by a historical listing in the tournament booklet. (Notice the pattern from the previous paragraph being reinforced?) In summary, we have across the board for competition, service, coaching, and longevity a significant public and print presence for these deserving recipients.

And what public and print presence do we have at the national tournament that honors forensic research? First, to its credit, the AFA-NIET does distribute every year the Dr. Bruce Manchester NIET Scholar Series (a research grant program).iii The recipient is announced at the AFA-NIET Committee meeting during the NCA convention, and then again during the AFA-NIET opening assembly. A public research presentation is also expected of each recipient during the AFA-NIET. The scheduling of the public presentation varies and attendance is often sparse (especially when compared to the hundreds at the opening assembly and the awards ceremony). We should be sure to note only the announcement of the recipient is made during the opening assembly; the actual presentation is not at the opening assembly nor at the award ceremony (which, if case we've forgotten, are attended by almost all—numbering in the hundreds—competitors and coaches/judges). Second, however, the AFA-NIET does not have any awards for outstanding research or for outstanding thesis/dissertation.iv The AFA-NIET does not list in the tournament booklet or anywhere during the tournament any form of forensic scholarship (including no listing of the recipients of the Dr. Bruce Manchester NIET Scholar Series).

A glaring disparity obviously exists between the incentives speakers, graduate students, and faculty have directed toward competition and service, and the incentives focused on research. Research during the national tournament is the bastard step-child of the activity.

Want to prove to yourself this disparity exists? Ask any 3rd or 4th year competitor (or graduate student, or director, or assistant director, or coach, or judge) to name as many coaches from top 20 programs as possible. Then ask them to identify as many published forensic researchers from the last year (or last 5 years, or last 10 years). Want to bet which list is longer?

I propose all national organizations take a close look at the incentives provided to their members to produce forensic research. Levitt and Dubner (2006) state incentives come in three flavors—economic, social, and moral. I believe economic and social are the most applicable and compelling incentives for forensic scholars.

1. Economic Incentive—Research Grant Programs. Money is always a good incentive. Money can also be problematic. Organizations have only so much money available. Too small a grant and few will be interested in applying. Too large a grant will wipe out the coffers of the organization. Levitt and Dubner (2006) provide numerous examples, in fact, where economic incentives actually proved counter-productive to the intended outcome. For example, a forensic scholar who does not win a research grant may now feel less inclined to carry out the research agenda detailed in their grant application.

2. Social Incentive—Award Recognition. People in forensics love awards. For a reminder how much we love awards just review the paragraphs above detailing the competitor, service, and longitudinal incentives. Forensic organizations spend thousands (maybe even hundreds of thousands) on awards. Awards are cheaper (much cheaper) than grants. Forensic organizations could easily create numerous awards to honor individuals who have written and published strong forensic research. Award recognition as a social incentive is not restricted to just national organizations/tournaments. The same task could be carried out at invitational tournaments (e.g., best forensic/IE article written by a person in attendance at the tournament) and NIET district tournaments (best forensic/IE article written by a person in the district).

3. Social Incentive—Recognition by Listing. Organizations can also tap into the forensic ethos for recognition by an even cheaper means. List in the national tournament booklet all publications, theses, and dissertations published/completed since the previous national tournament. And list all forensic publications, not just from the organization's own journal. Spread the word of forensic research with a wide

net. The organization may wish to limit the list to research applicable to their "branch" of forensics (e.g., the NIET would list only individual-events research and not debate research). Students and coaches/judges read the national booklet. Students and coaches/judges will see which individuals are active forensic scholars (and inversely who is not). The listing of articles may spur on students/coaches/judges to engage in discussions of the research. The listing of articles may spur on students/coaches/judges to read forensic research. The listing of articles may spur on students/coaches/judges to write, present and publish research so their name may join the list in the future. The social incentive of recognition by listing is also not limited to national organizations and tournaments. The same practice could be carried out at invitational and district tournaments.

What we really need to do strengthen forensic research is respect it, promote it, disseminate it, and discuss it.

My primary call here is to move forensic research to the forefront of the activity. Make research and researchers visible. Provide researchers with incentives to produce and our journals will (hopefully) overflow with astounding scholarly works.

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Endotes

[i] The award was previously presented at the AFA-NIET banquet but was moved to the opening ceremony when the banquet was discontinued at the 2007 tournament.

[ii] The award was previously presented at the AFA-NIET banquet but was moved to the opening ceremony when the banquet was discontinued at the 2007 tournament.

[iii] I am proud to admit I wrote and presented the original proposal that compelled the AFA-NIET to create the NIET Scholar Series. The Series was later named in honor of long-time forensic scholar Dr. Bruce Manchester.

[iv] The NIET parent organization, the American Forensic Association, does present the Daniel Rohrer Memorial Outstanding Research Award which "honors the outstanding research monograph published in argumentation research during the given year" (Honors and Awards, 2005), and an award for top thesis/dissertation in forensics.