The “Carousel Effect” in Forensic Research

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The “Carousel Effect” in Forensic Research

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Our purpose is to determine if an anecdotal pattern we have seen emerging at the National Communication Association (NCA) conference holds true. We have noticed that forensic panels at NCA, and specifically individual events (IE) panels, appear to revolve around similar themes. Scholars interested in IE issues may be repeating themselves. The result is a “carousel effect”: the papers/panels go round’n’round the same ideas. Our analysis identified two findings: (1) 25 research themes are evident in forensics and three themes comprise the focus of most of the research; (2) qualitative analysis showed repetition among the titles of forensic research. We argue the carousel effect has long-term implications for the forensic community and may prove damaging if not addressed.

Disciplinary conferences serve many purposes for the membership. One may attend sessions to learn new teaching strategies, to re-unite with colleagues, to share ideas and concerns at roundtable forums, or to present research papers for review. Conferences serve to guide a discipline as members investigate new ideas, concepts, issues, and theories. A key component of a communication conference is the opportunity to present research papers for review by peers before submitting the work to peer-reviewed journals. Comments from a respondent and the audience may provide significant insight for strengthening the paper before journal submission.

Our purpose is to determine if an anecdotal pattern we have seen emerging at the National Communication Association (NCA) conference holds true. We have noticed forensic panels at NCA, and specifically individual events (IE) panels, appear to revolve around similar themes. Thus, panels on very similar topics appear to routinely show up in the NCA conference program. Scholars interested in IE issues may be repeating themselves and not using disciplinary conferences to move their area of the communication discipline forward. The result is a “carousel effect”: the papers and panels go round’n’round the same ideas, and when they stop, nobody knows. The result is IE research may suffer. Scholars may not be improving IE research, may not be improving the activity nor improving the standing of individual events within the discipline. Rather, scholars may simply be covering the same ground again and again.

Research is necessary for forensics to be fully accepted into a professional community of scholars. McBath (1975) argued more than three decades ago, “If forensics is to improve its status with colleagues and in other disciplines, it will be through heightened emphasis on research and scholarship” (p. 34). Research is the core of higher education and provides the foundation for what we teach. Research, in fact, should provide the foundation for all we do in forensics.

Aden (1990) identified three reasons for conducting forensic research. First, forensic research provides a common ground for understanding the various events offered in intercollegiate competitive forensics. Aden acknowledged most institutions provide, at most, one course in forensic pedagogy, aimed at training scholars in forensics. Second, forensic research provides an opportunity for students to expand their understanding of forensics beyond the limited comments provided on competitive ballots. Third, forensic research provides the critical link between theory and practice for forensic professionals and students.

Our review of the literature unfortunately reveals forensics, especially individual events, has suffered a deficiency in scholarly production for an extensive period. The 1974 Sedalia Conference, the first national gathering to focus on forensics, addressed the issue of research. As Parson (1990) noted, “the conference clearly created a call to research in forensics” (p. 69). For more than a decade journal editors have publicly addressed the deficiencies in forensic research. Geisler (1993) noted “the associate editors have found a dearth of suitable material for publication in this journal [National Forensic Journal]” (p. 59). Ryan (1998) faced the problem of the lack of submissions: “A basic fact of a journal’s life is that the editor cannot publish essays that are not submitted” (p. 77), and Croucher (2006) highlighted a lack of theoretical density and rigor in forensic research. Croucher contended, “from a communication theory point of view … forensics research leaves much to be desired” (p. 1).

Herbeck (1990), Bickford (1990), Kay (1990), and Aden (1991) agreed forensics research needs improvement. The most significant problem, however, may be simply neglect. Harris, Kropp, and Rosenthal (1986) asserted forensics professionals tend to focus time and effort on forensics pedagogy (e.g., coaching and competition) and neglect the research opportunities the activity provides.

Forensic professionals are not devoid of scholarly involvement. 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 Table 1.) Few other interest areas come even close to the number of sessions available to forensic scholars. We contend more than 50 sessions should be considered a considerable amount of time devoted to forensic scholarship. In theory such an impressive array of conference sessions has the potential to produce an equally impressive array of quality journal publications. Our research revealed, however, the significant number of conference presentations does not logically correspond to the limited number of journal submissions and published journal articles.

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

![Table 1](#)

**Table 1**

**Sessions/Slots for Programming at NCA from 2005-2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
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<th>2008</th>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>53</td>
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</table>

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

One of the major hurdles forensic researchers face is the task of 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) argued, “for knowledge to advance, one must access and build upon published research in a given area of scholarship” (p. 505).

A dilemma confronting forensic professionals is access to the scholarship relevant to their research interests. However, if the majority of manuscripts are conference papers and the papers are not readily available for review, then the scholarship will face significant difficulties building on previous work and advancing the activity. Such a significant roadblock can quickly cripple a promising research inquiry.

Our goal is to assess the scope of forensics research. Our focus is on forensics research as a whole and scholarship presented at NCA from 1998 to 2007. We pose the following research questions:

- **RQ1**: What themes are present in forensics research?
- **RQ2**: To what extent are the themes in forensics research repetitive?

**METHOD**

A content analysis was chosen as the methodological approach for two reasons. First, content analysis affords the opportunity to study archived papers and panel presentations as the unit of analysis. Second, content analysis includes the use of manifest content to determine content, which may provide insight into themes.
Forensics Research Papers and Presentations

Titles of papers and panel discussions submitted to one of the seven forensics-related divisions (i.e., Argumentation and Forensics, American Forensics Association, International Forensics Association, National Federation of High School Speech, Debate & Theatre Association, National Forensics Association, Phi Rho Pi, and Pi Kappa Delta) at the National Communication Association were selected as the data source. Such papers and panel discussions serve as a major component of the tenure and promotion process, the socialization of academics, and as a major aspect of forensics pedagogy. Titles of papers and panel discussions were chosen instead of entire manuscripts for three reasons. First, a significant number of forensic papers are submitted to NCA as part of panels, not as competitive papers. Second, more than 60 percent of the forensics research presented at NCA since 1998 is not available through any NCA database or search engine. Either NCA did not collect and save the papers for post-conference distribution or the authors did not provide a completed copy of the paper to NCA. The limited number of available papers severely hinders any attempt at a systematic analysis of complete manuscripts. Third, to address the full depth of forensic engagement at NCA, we were compelled to include roundtable discussions, town hall debates, and similar spur-of-the-moment presentations. The titles for papers and panel discussions provided simply the most reliable and complete set of data available for investigating a potential “carousel effect” in forensic research. The titles were identified using printed versions of the official NCA program.

Sampling, Coding, and Analysis

A total of 424 paper and panel titles were identified for analysis. Once the paper and panels were compiled, one research team coded the data and generated framing devices. The primary research team then discussed the codes and clarified any questions with a separate research team. Each research team coded the papers and panel presentations, and intercoder reliability was calculated ($\kappa = .89$; Babbie, 2004). Framing devices were defined as the title of a paper or the title of a roundtable panel. Each framing device was inductively coded into a particular theme based on the overall purpose of the title. A framing device was determined if a paper title or roundtable panel mentioned a particular focus. Coders were instructed to add up the number of framing devices for each particular theme.

To explore $RQ1$, the frequencies of framing devices were analyzed to determine the overall themes present in forensics research during the past 10 years. A Chi$^2$ analysis was then conducted to determine if a significant difference existed between the frequencies of the themes. To answer $RQ2$, the researchers conducted a qualitative, deductive analysis of the themes during the 10-year period, paying particular attention to repetitive titles.
Table 2

Forensic Research Themes by Year

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<th>2001</th>
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</table>
RESULTS

Based on the analysis, 25 themes emerged from forensics research during the years 1998-2007 (RQ1). Table 2 shows the themes and the number of papers and panels for each theme. A significant difference emerged between the themes: $\chi^2 = 634.25, p < .0001$. Of the 25 themes, the three most common themes in forensics research were: “General Forensics” ($n=100$), “General Debate” ($n=56$), and “Argumentative Theory” ($n = 39$). “General Forensics” included papers and panels on a wide range of forensics-related topics that did not fit into a more specific thematic frame, including what is a comprehensive program; outside looking in on forensics; contextualizing forensics theory; the impact of constitutional revisions on forensics; purpose and value in forensics; and student-run programs. “General Debate” included papers and panels on issues specifically dealing with issues related to intercollegiate debate. Specifically, the papers included such topics as impact of parliamentary debate on teachers and students; use of evidence in debate; debate and citizenship; how to communicate outside debate rounds; and critical issues in debate. “Argumentative Theory” included a wide array of papers broadly on argumentation. Papers topics covered fallacies in arguments; the role of argument in society; patriotism and argumentation; and historical argumentative theory.

For RQ2, titles within the 25 themes were analyzed. The analysis looked specifically at whether titles were similar during the course of the 10-year period. The analysis revealed that many themes of forensics research presented at an NCA convention appeared to repeat themselves. Four examples of repetition were revealed. First, during the period of analysis, four very similar titles were presented at the NCA convention on how to coach interpretation events, particularly Program of Oral Interpretation.1 Second, five papers were written by different individuals during the 10-year period on how to effectively manage a forensics team’s budget. Third, 12 to 15 different analyses described how competing in forensics (speech and debate) impacted individuals' lives after completion of the activity.2 These personal experience pieces (excluding panels) focused on what individuals gained from forensics. Fourth, three to five analyses focused on how to advance or approach topicality arguments in debate (Lincoln Douglas and/or Cross-Examination). We are not arguing these papers all make the same arguments. However, it is impossible to ignore the stark similarities in the titles of these papers.

The content analysis revealed two key findings. First, the quantitative content analysis demonstrated there are 25 general themes in forensics research presented at the NCA convention over the past 10 years (RQ1). Of these 25 themes, the three most represented at NCA have been “General Forensics,” “General Debate,” and “Argumentative Theory.” Second, the qualitative content analysis showed repetition among the titles of forensics papers presented (RQ2). During the 10-year period, many titles appeared repetitious on a variety of forensics-related subjects.

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1 Specific titles of papers are not presented in the analysis, as we do not wish to single out or accuse specific authors of repeating research.

2 This number is between 12 to 15 because some of the analyses focus on personal experiences and a secondary issue in the title.
DISCUSSION

We fear a trend Swanson predicted in 1992 is becoming increasingly dominant. Swanson (1992b) argued intercollegiate forensics is isolating itself from the curriculum of the communication discipline. Research is the central component of any curriculum. Research is the binding force for a discipline and its sub-disciplines. Conference papers, which go round’n’round without moving the activity forward, and do not, in general, move toward publication limit the role, influence, importance, and relevance of individual events within the communication discipline. Forensic professionals must grasp the long-term implications of the drought of current published research. Forensics runs the risk of becoming a second-class citizen within the communication studies discipline. Published research is the means by which forensic professionals demonstrate their contributions to the discipline. Ryan (1988) issued a warning to forensic professionals: “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” (p. 77). Harris, Kropp, and Rosenthal (1986) extended Ryan’s argument claiming “many colleagues feel that we are merely, in the words of Plato, teaching a _knack_ which is not worthy of academic treatment” (p. 14).

We also concur with the arguments of 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” (p. 34). Forensic specialists may have become complacent believing conference papers and panels are sufficient to demonstrate involvement in the scholarly expectations of the discipline. However, the lack of availability of papers (and the immediate loss of panel discussions after the session is over) to guide literature reviews impacts the ability of forensic research to substantively move forward with research agendas. Conference papers (and panels, to a degree) provide a first-level of review for research ideas; publication is the ultimate goal. Unfortunately, a problem identified by Parson (1990) more than two decades ago still resonates today: “The problem is that we have failed to heed the recommendations of the [1974] Sedalia Conference” (p. 72).

As forensics faculty continue to justify the budgets for programs and faculty lines, the faculty may find themselves having to justify the quality of their research. Administrators are increasingly turning to factors such as journal impact factor (JIF) and article influence as means of evaluating research quality (Feeley, 2008; Levine, 2010). The most-well known social science index of JIF was created by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) and is known as the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) (Feeley & Moon, 2010; Garfield, 2006). Unfortunately, no forensics-related journals are in the SSCI, and little forensics-related research is published in SSCI-indexed journals. The lack of forensic journals and research in prominent indices may prove problematic for professionals basing job-search applications and tenure-promotion files, on forensic-related research. Faculty who leave their work at the conference level and do not submit

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3 Journals must apply for membership into the SSCI. The Index has multiple requirements for admission (e.g., number of subscriptions, article influence, number of citations, timeliness of publication). Currently between 30-40 communication-related journals are in the SSCI (Levine, 2010).
research for publication to a journal may have particular difficulties in the publish-or-perish academic world, particularly in tenuous economic times.

The primary limitation of our study is that we were unable to use completed manuscripts as the units of analysis and instead had to use titles of papers and panel presentations. As previously discussed, more than 60 percent of the forensics research presented at the NCA since 1998 is not available in its completed form. For one reason or another, the majority of forensics-related research is not posted to communication databases. Thus, arguments in our analysis were based on titles of papers, which should represent the overall focus of the paper. Future studies of forensics research should collect completed papers and use the text of the papers as the unit of analysis.

A call to the forensic community to engage in the production of published scholarship is, unfortunately, not new (Croucher, 2006; Hample, 1981; Kay, 1990; Kerber & Cronn-Mills, 2005; Klumpp, 1990; Logue & Shea, 1989; Logue & Shea, 1990; McGlone, 1969; Ryan, 1998; Walwick, 1969). Based on the surfeit of papers and panel presentations at NCA every year, the forensic community is not devoid of ideas for research nor retreating from the research process. The shortfall appears to be taking the next steps in the scholarly process and further developing the papers and panel presentations based on commentary from conference respondents and audience members.

An expectation of improvement based on critique from a respondent/judge/audience is highly familiar to the forensic community. Forensic scholars constantly work with their student competitors to review comments and triage the importance/relevancy/necessity of the comments to improve the speech/interpretation/performance. We encourage forensic professionals to apply the same work ethic to scholarship, which they ask a student competitor to apply to a speech/interpretation/performance.

The ability, knowledge, and expertise are readily available in the community to turn forensic scholarship into a bastion of published research. The “call to arms” need just be heard and answered.

*Note:* Our research is supported by a grant from the Manchester AFA-NIET Scholars Series. Components of the manuscript are used, with permission of Larry Schnoor, conference director, from Cronn-Mills, D. (2008). The pitfalls, perils, and promise to increasing forensic research. In D. Cronn-Mills (Ed.), *Published Proceedings of the National Developmental Conference on Individual Events* (pp. 8-11). Mankato, MN.

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