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Speaker & Gavel

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Call for Papers

Speaker and Gavel is an international, peer-reviewed journal publishing high-quality, original research in the field of communication studies. While it has its roots in the pedagogy of competitive speech and debate and welcomes submissions from that sub-discipline it is open to, and regularly publishes, articles from any of communication's sub-disciplines. **We maintain a focus on competitive speech and debate issues** but we are also open to submissions from all communication related fields including (but not limited to):

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Guidelines for Submission



1. Submission deadlines are January 15th and July 15th of each year. It is never too early to submit your article.
 2. Submissions should be made via email as Word document attachments with the author(s) contact information in a separate attachment. (Send to toddtholm@gmail.com)
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 4. The text should be double-spaced throughout and should be standard Times New Roman 12 point font.
 5. Personal identifiers should be removed from the title page and from the document. The rest of the information on the title page and abstract should remain intact.
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 7. Please provide information about any special funding the research received or conventions or conferences at which previous drafts have been presented so it can be noted in the publication.
 8. Once accepted for publication you will be expected to provide some additional biographical information, a headshot, and recommended pop-out box text.
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Speaker and Gavel Call for Submissions: Forensics Administration and Practice in the Age of Covid-19

Speaker and Gavel invites authors to submit manuscripts for an upcoming special edition focused on scholarship, pedagogy, research, competition, and administration in competitive and non-competitive speech and debate practices within and post the global Covid-19 pandemic. We welcome submissions from forensic coaches, communication scholars, and students (undergraduate and graduate).

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Operating during a pandemic presents the forensics world with an unprecedented need to administer and defend our practices, i.e. in person tournaments, travel, budgets, etc. However, it also presents our community with a potentially productive opportunity to review and question our practices in a changing technological, cultural, and economic landscape. The goal of this edition is to document these conversations so that we may share and learn from each other's experiences and use this time to further enhance the activity's pedagogical potential in today's world.

The Editors and Editorial Board invite scholarly discussion on administration and participation in forensics speech and debate during restrictions necessitated by the global pandemic. Topics of particular interest to the Editors and Editorial Board include but are not limited to: administration and participation of virtual tournaments, team social distancing practices, budgetary communication with administration, team retention, and team morale in a virtual world.

This special issue will be published in the Fall of 2021 allowing ample time for both qualitative and quantitative research projects. Submissions for or questions about this special issue should be emailed to *Speaker & Gavel* Associate Editor Dr. Stephanie Wideman: <mailto:widemans@uindy.edu>

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Deadline for submission is June 1, 2021.

When a Global Pandemic Gives You Lemons You Dig Deep and Find a Way to Make Lemonade Better

Todd T. Holm

***Editorial:** So far, the year 2020 has been fraught with obstacles. Australian brush fires burned over 18 million hectares of land, thousands of buildings, and killed hundreds of people. Indonesia, Japan, Puerto Rico, and parts of the continental US saw massive flooding. The Taal Volcano in the Philippines erupted and caused the evacuation of more than 300,000 people. There have been 45 earthquakes over 6 magnitudes in Turkey, The Caribbean, China, Iran, Russia, Philippines, India, and other countries. Algae blooms in Antarctica have caused the snow to turn green, and there are literally swarms of locust in parts India, Asia, and Africa. The US has seen the Boy Scouts of America file for bankruptcy, race riots, extreme stock market volatility, and murder hornets. But all of that has been eclipsed by the COVID-19 Corona Virus Pandemic. The global pandemic has closed borders, cancelled the Summer Olympics, cancelled professional sports in most countries. The pandemic has caused people to work from home, self-quarantine, and wear face masks to go to the store. It also caused the cancellation of all national college forensics tournaments and is well on its way to reshaping higher education and intercollegiate forensics forever. I would argue, that is not a bad thing.*

The COVID-19 Pandemic has arguably had a more significant impact on intercollegiate forensics than any other external event in history. Interstate Oratory was started in 1875 and has held competitions and crowned champions every year for 145 years. They didn't miss a beat for two world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the 9/11 terrorist attack the Russian Flu of 1889, the Spanish Flu of 1918, the Asian Flu of 1957, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, or the SARS Pandemic of 2003. The competitions persisted through changing political administrations, social movements, the addition of more than a dozen states to our country, and a dozen constitutional amendments. But the COVID-19 Pandemic interrupted that 145-year tradition.

The largest and oldest forensic honorary, Pi Kappa Delta, started its first national convention in 1916 and—with the exception of a five-year interim for World War II—it has never failed to have a scheduled national convention or tournament (initially they were held every other year, but that was part of the schedule). This year the National Forensics Association (NFA) and the American Forensics Association (AFA) broke their respective 49- and 42-year streaks of hosting national tournaments because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. We live in unprecedented times. A whole cohort of first year competitors had their national experience swept away and a cohort of graduating forensic students were robbed of their culminating experience. It is not just about competition. For many, the last national tournament is about bringing closure to their involvement in an activity that has taken up a good portion of their adult life.

I competed in forensics for four years in high school and for another four years in college. Then I spent 25 years as a coach. I owe as much to the activity as anyone could. I respect the activity as much as anyone could. I had some of the absolute best times of my life because of this activity and for the first time since I left the activity nearly 10 years ago, I can honestly say I am glad I am not coaching. I say that because I do not know how I could look at my graduating seniors and say, “I’m sorry, your national tournament has been cancelled.” I have the greatest respect and admiration for the coaches who had to have that talk with their students. In my heart I know that cancelling the tournaments was the right thing to do. I also know many of the people who were a part of making that decision, and I am sure it was heartbreaking for them as well. They did it because it was the right thing to do.

As we look ahead, we are uncertain of what the next competitive year, and the one that follows, will look like. We might have virtual tournaments, we might try recorded performances, or we might do something else entirely. That uncertainty can create a great deal of anxiety and fear. But if you think about it, that is where we—as an activity—do our best work. This activity does not teach students to hide fear or not be afraid. It teaches them to harness anxiety and turn it into positive energy, it teaches them to ride the wave of fear rather than fight it. That is what the leaders, coaches, and students of this activity need to remember. This is the environment in which we thrive.

Things will be different in the fall of 2020. What higher education looks like will be different, and what forensic activities look like will be different. But we get to decide what *different* looks like. We have always had the power to change the activity, but we have not always had the incentive to change. My 30 plus years in the activity has shown me that a lot of people work ridiculously hard to keep the system exactly the way it is. AFA and NFA event descriptions today are almost exactly the same as they were when I first started competing in intercollegiate forensics in 1983 (we have added Program Oral Interpretation, that’s it). But this fall will be different, it is up to us to determine *how* it will be different.

The applecart has been upset and it is up to us to decide if we are going to right the applecart and return all the apples to the neat and orderly display of red, yellow, and green apples we had or if—since it has already been upset—we going to decide now is the time to also offer apple cider, apple pie, apple butter, and apple jelly, or maybe branch out to other fruits like pears and plums. Maybe we could even add some fruits that don’t grow on trees, maybe this cart will be virtual, and our customers will get free one day shipping. How we right the applecart is up to us.

We have allowed ourselves to stagnate a bit as an activity. Unlike 30 years ago, virtually every classroom has the ability to project electronic slides onto a screen. Yet the prevalent mode of presenting visual material to an audience in a forensics competition is via pictures glued to a foam board. You would be hard pressed to find any other venue where that is common. Former national champion in persuasion (NFA 2000 and AFA 2000), rhetorical criticism (NFA 2000), and pentathlon champion (NFA 2000) Dan Hungerman wrote an article challenging the activity

to move away from using this approach in 2016 (Hungerman, 2016). But we have seen little change. We are comfortable with foamboards. Sure, foam board backed pictures are difficult to take on airplanes, they are expensive to make, they get damaged and need to be remade before nationals, and in large auditoriums (like the ones used for national final rounds) you really cannot see them. But we are comfortable with them. They are the devil we know. They are impractical, ineffective, and obsolete, but comfortably familiar.

We continue to use them because we know how to coach that. We understand what that looks like. We have seen all the pitfalls and found ways to work around their disadvantages (and forgive what we cannot fix). Besides, slides on a screen are boring. We have all been *slide-swiped* or fallen victim to *death-by-PowerPoint*. But if there is one group of people who can find the best practices for using slides during presentations, it is the forensic community. If you have ever wondered why there isn't a definitive set of rules for effective slide development, consider the idea that it could be because the forensics community hasn't tackled the issue. We are the laboratory for testing this kind of advancement. Give coaches two years and they will have identified the ten best practices based on their educated understanding of the communication process and in-round testing by hundreds of students in literally thousands of rounds of competition.

The level of stagnation is perhaps best illustrated by the hours many of us spent in meetings at the national level discussing the seemingly critical issue of the use of notecards in extemporaneous speaking. People argued the wording of the event description needed to be exact because that would determine how judges judged the rounds. Should notecards be *allowed*, *permitted*, *not punished*, *encouraged*, or *required*? This seemed to be the keystone question in the community. That level of administrative minutia further entrenches our activity and reinforces the idea that there is one right way to do things and we should all do it that way or be punished in some manner. We have spent hours trying to institutionalize the stagnation.

We are at a unique point where the opportunity to leap ahead has presented itself. PowerPoint and Prezi slides can be the new norm. We can teach people how to remain the focus while using the slides to augment, not replace, the human element. A rhetorical analysis of a 10 second public service announcement could actually include that 10 second video. That is an easy change. But other changes could strike at the very foundations of our conceptualization of the activity.

If one of the goals of forensic activities is to prepare students to give public presentations, then the types of presentations they are asked to give should reflect the presentations people will need to make in their futures. Events like extemporaneous speaking and impromptu speaking are good training for "real world" presentations. Rarely does one get the opportunity to stand and deliver an uninterrupted, 10-minute speech asking an audience to change and attitude, belief, or value or even to talk about a new discovery. Unless you are lucky enough to give a TED Talk, that is just quite rare. Yet all the prepared public speaking events are geared to a 10-minute, uninterrupted, presentation format. More realistic might be a five-minute pitch, a 90-second

elevator speech, or an interactive presentation (where you are judged on your questions of others as well as your presentation). Maybe this is the opportunity to change oral interpretation events to divide them along a performative style rather than a literary category. Maybe then they will not all sound the same.

If ever there was an opportunity for change, this is it. It is raining lemons and it is time we not only make lemonade—but make lemonade *better*. There is no question that the future of communication will include virtual elements. With the global pandemic forcing companies that were opposed to telework to allow (even require) workers to work from home, the work-world has been forever changed. Out of necessity we have found ways to collaborate online, field customer service calls from our living rooms and home offices, and we have seen the benefits of working from home firsthand. Communication in this new work environment will be more crucial than ever. The power of a person's voice will never have been more critical. We need to prepare our students for this new environment. That means we need to seize this opportunity to change. Necessity, the well-known mother of invention, has forced us to change. What we change into, what this activity becomes as a part of the change, is completely in our hands.

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I understand that change is scary and forensic competitions online are not the same as face-to-face competition. But we might find that we have more students interested if they don't have to miss school as much and that they can have part of their weekends free (or all of it free if we hold "prose tournaments" on Wednesday nights). We might find it is easier to get judges if they can join from home to judge just one round rather than driving several hours to judge all day. Coaches might even find that they do not miss climbing into a van at 10:00 pm and driving students four hours home only to be back in their offices for an 8:00 am class.

The new world might be a better world for all of us. Maybe coaches will not burn out. Maybe more students will be involved. We can have larger judging pools. Tournaments will not have to take up our entire weekend. The events can be better training grounds for success after college, and ultimately, we can be better and stronger because we found a way to not just make lemonade from lemons, we found a way to make lemonade *better*.

Holm: Editorial

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EXPLORING THE IMPACTS OF AN OPEN DOOR POLICY AND A MINDFULNESS ROOM AT THE INTERCOLLEGIATE SPEECH (INDIVIDUAL EVENTS) TOURNAMENT

C. Austin McDonald II and Samantha Burke



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Exploring the Impacts of an Open Door Policy and a Mindfulness Room at the Intercollegiate Speech (Individual Events) Tournament

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C. Austin McDonald II and Samantha Burke

Abstract

Two distinct tournament features were offered at a regional intercollegiate individual events swing: 1.) an open door policy for all competition rounds and 2.) a mindfulness room for students. A 16-item survey (with both qualitative and quantitative prompts) was administered at the conclusion of the swing to gain a sense of participants' perceptions of past tournament experiences and experiences with the newly implemented features. Seventy-one (n=71) respondents participated (competitors, coaches, tournament staff, and hired judges). Analysis of the data revealed: 40% of participants had felt the need to leave a round in the past (a disproportionate 80% of which were women, nonbinary, or genderqueer), a clear quantitative increase in perceived confidence that competitors felt to leave the room as needed after the reading of the open door policy, judges and students had divergent perceptions on the effectiveness of the open door policy, and while the mindfulness room concept was praised, the main criticisms were the size and levels of accessibility to the room. The authors offer suggestions for administering an open door policy and a mindfulness room in a forensics context.

Keywords: forensics, open door policy, mindfulness room, speech tournament, individual events

The 2018 National Communication Association Convention featured multiple forensics panels concerning trigger or content warnings for individual events tournaments. How do competitors and judges manage self-care practices in formalized contexts (like a competition)? How do we provide productive challenges for students while avoiding potentially (re)traumatizing experiences? Forensics (speech and debate) is not an inherently traumatizing activity. The structures of the activity invite public discussion of contemporary issues—many of which may be very difficult to process as a viewer, especially recently. “At the time of publishing, one indisputable trend across all forensic categories is the inclusion of trauma within the performance. . . . Movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #IEToo permeate speech rounds” (Walker & Samens, 2020, p. 23). With exposure to several rounds of performances addressing topics like sexual assault, suicide, and hate-based violence, competitors and judges experience emotional exhaustion (Ward, 2018), triggerings (Walker & Samens,

2020), or overstimulation (Soibelman et al., 2020). Sometimes tournament participants need, for lack of a better word, a rest.

Yet, the “unwritten rules” of forensics suggest one should remain in the performance space for the entirety of the round, or at least ask for permission to leave the round (Paine, 2005). Still, students (Soibelman et al., 2020; Ward, 2018) and judges (Walker & Samens, 2020) who participate in individual events occasionally feel the need to leave rounds to practice self-care. Norms suggest if one *really* needs a break, there are few spaces where one could go such as a stall in a less-frequented restroom location: “At tournaments, I hid in corridors, empty classrooms, and bathroom stalls across the country to cope with overstimulation” (Soibelman et al., 2020, p. 126). Are these really the practices we want to uphold? The conversations at the 2018 NCA Convention, as well as the newly-implemented open door policy and “quiet room” at the 2019 National Forensic Association national tournament, suggest we are ready to reevaluate our norms. Still, by all appearances, no research has been published regarding an open door policy or a mindfulness room in a forensics context. Dr. Nicole Freeman, the NFA 2019 Research Committee Chair, noted in a personal correspondence:

No official research was conducted regarding the NFA’s newly adopted open door policy (and use of a quiet room) at the 2019 National Forensics Championship Tournament. Since this was the first year implementing the policy, we approached it similarly to a pilot year; expecting that some edits would likely need to occur after we saw how it functioned in practice. I think this coming year would be an excellent time to conduct formal research on the policy and practice, however. (N. Freeman, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

COVID-19, however, compromised the 2020 nationals season, resulting in alternative (online) venues for forensic performances and outright cancellations of all in-person national intercollegiate speech tournaments. Without collected data, we do not know the full extent of the efficacy of these features. Because forensics has been recognized as a co-curricular activity (Ehninger, 1952; Littlefield et al., 2001), an extension of the classroom, a reevaluation of tournament wellness practices could assist forensics educators in refining these new tournament features.

We surveyed participants in Fall 2018 at a regular-season regional individual events swing (two tournaments in one weekend) which offered two distinct features: 1.) an “open door” policy for all competition rounds and 2.) a mindfulness room. Since students have not only needed a structure to allow abstention from viewing potentially upsetting performances, but also a designated place of refuge, these two features were billed as a complementary set. As one respondent noted: “Every tournament should have [mindfulness rooms]. I have had to decompress in echoey cold stairwells before...NOT as helpful! This was awesome!” The results of this study suggest students benefit from both the open door policy and the mindfulness room in notable ways that warrant further inquiry.

Exploring the Impacts of an Open Door Policy

Previous scholarship on how competitors manage potentially stressful situations in tournaments is limited. Conferences panels are not much different. The 2018 NCA conversations about trigger and content warnings seemed hindered by their lack of evidence beyond fractured, informal (auto)ethnographies. Discussions were often relegated to anecdotal firsthand experiences or observations as a previous competitor, coach, judge, tournament director, or educator. In short, conversations devolved into *presumptions* about the phenomena taking place at forensics tournaments (the student experiences) while rarely *including* undergraduates in such paper or panel discussions. Scholars often *speculated* on the possible modes of action without knowing fully the latent problems students encounter at a typical speech tournament. Holm (2017) noted the forensics community, especially, for having “. . . good presentations at NCA but then [we] rarely see those NCA papers and panels developed into something more permanent and accessible to our discipline” (p. 59). To avoid what Cronn-Mills and Croucher (2013) referred to as a “carousel effect” with forensics conference presentations, we offer the results of this study to assist conversations beyond the anecdotal and to encourage further research to a clearly pressing set of issues in the forensics community.

Our tournament structures deserve further consideration. One of the researchers (of this study) recently judged a mid-season national warm-up tournament outround in which “CW: sexual assault” was written on the board. When it was time for that speaker to perform, the

outround chair noted the presence of the content warning and suggested that if anyone wanted to leave before the performance began, “now is a good time.” Instances like these have benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, someone who may negatively experience such material

Is there a way we can normalize exiting rounds for legitimate reasons?”

has a clear opportunity to leave the space without experiencing potential distress. On the other hand, this structure clearly singles out anyone willing to disclose their varying levels of discomfort with a particular concept or subject matter. Is there a way we can normalize exiting rounds for legitimate reasons?

To answer this quandary, we partnered with the two host schools of a regional swing to implement an open door policy for competition rounds and a mindfulness room for student use. Descriptions of the open door policy and the mindfulness room as new features of the tournament were provided in a “points of information” email to attending schools days before the swing occurred. Directors had the opportunity to disseminate this information to their coaches and competitors as they saw fit.

We composed a set of survey questions directly in relation to the open door policy and the mindfulness room to gain a sense of how such changes impacted the tournament experience for its participants. This inquiry was guided by several questions:

RQ1: How many participants have experienced a tournament round in which they felt compelled to leave?

RQ2: Do judges and competitors experience competition rounds differently?

RQ3: Does the reading of the open door policy change the experience of the round?

RQ4: Are participants' perceptions more likely to change with the increased exposure to the oral reading of the open door policy?

RQ5: Should tournaments feature a mindfulness room (distinct from a student lounge)?

The purpose of this essay is to provide findings from our collected data to inform conversations and policy-making regarding future intercollegiate forensics tournaments. Throughout this essay, when we refer to forensics, we mean individual events as they are generally conceptualized by organizations like AFA, NFA, PKD, and PRP¹, respectively. To clarify, this particular discussion focuses on experiences at individual event tournaments specifically. The host schools of this particular swing regularly attend the AFA National Speech Tournament. Throughout this article, we use the term “tournament participants” to refer to anyone interacting with the tournament, which may include (but not be limited to): competitors, coaches, judges, tournament directors, tournament staff, and observers.

We first offer a review of literature addressing relevant themes related to the study. Second, we explain the method of the study (such as design and procedures). Third, we detail the results with points of discussion. Finally, we acknowledge limitations and directions for future research.

Review of Literature

Two primary themes emerging from previous literature are tournament norms and wellness in forensics. Prevailing notions of tournament administration (putting one together, running it) and of tournament practices (participants' behavioral expectations) are a matter of cultural conception. What is considered acceptable at a tournament is negotiated between tournament host, participants, and regional/national sensibilities. The tournament is a site in which cultural norms are continually upheld, reevaluated, and to a lesser extent, challenged.

Perhaps one reason why tournament practices seem “stuck” in their recursive habits is emulation. As Freeman, Rogers, and Hopkins (2017) note, due to frequent lack of formal training, younger coaches (and tournament directors) have a tendency to emulate what they have observed in their own coaches' behaviors. With recent scrutiny of unethical and abusive practices from former forensics coaches (Kitchener, 2019), younger coaches simply emulating what they have observed is unacceptable. Further, younger directors may be overloaded with

¹ American Forensic Association, National Forensic Association, Pi Kappa Delta, and Phi Rho Pi

Exploring the Impacts of an Open Door Policy

meeting the basic expectations of a tournament (which is a feat in itself) to even consider which structures deserve modification.

Tournament norms are upheld through what Paine (2005) distinguishes as rules and norms:

Rules are often formal and explicit whereas *norms* tend to be informal and implicit. Rules may be enacted at a particular moment by an official governing body, while norms are habits or patterns which evolve over time among the members of a community. (pp. 79-80, our emphasis)

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What if we could change a norm through explicating a new policy or “rule”? This seemed to be the idea behind the features offered at the 2019 NFA tournament. One particular norm that intersects with the open door policy is:

the way we enter rooms (“wait quietly outside the door if the round is already in progress and only walk in when you’re absolutely sure nobody is speaking”), [and] the way we leave rooms (“ask the judge’s permission to leave if you depart mid-round to get to another event, but don’t wave and shout ‘good luck’ to the other contestants”). (Paine, 2005, p. 81)

Clearly, some norms have changed. Paine (2005) also notes that sensibilities with these norms not only vary among individual competitors, coaches, and judges, but also vary by region. Because these are *embodied practices*, norms vary from tournament to tournament. “But in the choice between chaos and clarity, the unspoken rules provide functional directions” (Paine, 2005, p. 81). Since competitors are the most vulnerable population at a tournament, who wrestle with decision-making that takes into account the competing expectations of self, peers, coach, judge, tournament director, and forensics culture at large, it is no surprise that students resort to the well-established norms of their respective contexts. Put simply, students are structurally encouraged to set aside their personal needs to meet cultural expectations.

Paine (2005) also acknowledges unwritten rules regarding in-round behaviors, such as being “good audiences” and avoiding undesired behaviors such as:

. . . memorizing [one’s] own speech, painting [one’s] nails, staring out the window, or even taking a nap . . . There is no “written rule” to force students to politely pay attention to each other, but the operation of unwritten norms helps to ensure that student performers are minimally likely to be “thrown off” by deliberately rude or callously indifferent auditors. (p. 82)

These particular norms may be the closest to highlighting student apprehensions regarding the focus of this study--leaving a competition round for personal reasons. Aside from Ward’s (2018) work on competitor burnout, forensics scholarship rarely (if ever) acknowledges that students have legitimate reasons for leaving competition rounds. As students, judges, and coaches tend to restore familiar tournament behaviors, discussion may only acknowledge competitors as they

intersect with the functions of the competition, such as asking judges for permission to leave the round, usually under the assumption of one going to another competition round. From all appearances, students' needs to leave competition rounds for personal reasons are simply ignored.

Only until recently (during revision of this article) more fruitful research was finally published. Walker and Samens (2020) primarily focus on trauma, specifically judges' experiences of being triggered when judging a round. Norms played a significant role:

Over half of the participants (67%, n=32) commented on how forensic tournament norms impacted how they experienced traumas at tournaments. Noted tournament norms included completing judge responsibilities, following tournament etiquette, the need to deprioritize individual needs, and topic and performance trends. (p. 29)

Judges, too, feel constrained by the norms of the activity, often subjecting themselves to potentially triggering experiences--even when they supposedly have the (perhaps unpopular) ability to pause between performances and take a break. Respondents of their study also noted subject matter of performances to be triggering, as well as the personal lived experiences of the judges being comparable to the performances in the round (Walker & Samens, 2020, p. 29). Competitors are not the only tournament participants who feel "trapped" by their responsibilities (Walker & Samens, 2020, p. 29). This work signals that trauma has not only become a norm in forensic performance subject matter, but *experiencing* trauma (and its coping strategies) appear to have unduly become silent, undesired norms of the tournament experience. New tournament structures are needed to abate these norms.

Aside from trauma as a lens to understand experiences of needing to leave a round, Soibelman, Seick, and Trader (2020) share their autobiographical accounts of being disabled forensics competitors to confront ableist norms in the tournament experience. As Soibelman notes:

I am a disabled person. Using the adjective "disabled" implies that the disability is no fault of my own; rather, it is the fault of a society (or activity, in this case) that disables me. . . . Collegiate forensics organizations must consider disabled competitors in their pushes toward equity. (Soibelman et al., 2020, p. 127)

Soibelman's autobiographical narrative, in particular, may be one of the first published accounts of an autistic forensic competitor's experiences at intercollegiate speech tournaments. The description is worth quoting at length:

During my second year of competition, I almost exclusively watched limited preparation events and Communication Analysis. These events had the least emotional affect on the speaker's part, so it was easier for me to engage with the material. . . . I watched the [2016 AFA-NIET] Prose final. . . . With each ten-minute increment filled with emotion and sound, my chest tightened and stomach churned a bit more. At the end of the round, I sobbed, but not because I was moved by the performances; I was completely

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overwhelmed. . . . Embarrassed, I ran to a quiet, secluded spot I found earlier during the tournament, breathing heavy and holding back tears. . . . My disappearing act, as comforting as it was, had to end. Even today, I try to take tasks at the ballot table so I do not have to judge interpretation events. (Soibelman et al., 2020, p. 126, our emphasis)

Experiences like Soibelman's exist, and researchers are due to document these accounts if we are to make informed policy decisions. These works (Soibelman et al., 2020; Walker & Samens, 2020) are valuable in recognizing needs and locating better practices, and they expose our tendency to overgeneralize the experience of "feeling the need" to leave a round. Clearly, participants have several *distinct* reasons for finding rest areas at speech tournaments. Page | 18

The second theme of relevant literature deals with wellness in forensics. Focus on personal health in forensics has made strides but, for decades, has focused on the challenges of the forensics *educator* rather than the student. By far, Kay's (2018) review of literature demonstrates this disparity. Yet, some work has been student-focused. Some articles recognize student health as a significant concern or disadvantage of participating in forensics (Billings, 2011; Quenette et al., 2007).

The idea of mindfulness is still being defined within the broader discussions of forensics wellness, but the idea of a "mindfulness room" is not necessarily a novel one. Olson (2004) proposed one way of implementing a "wellness tournament" was through a "wellness lounge" that:

. . . should strive to be a comfortable environment in which to relax, perhaps visit with friends, and serve as a departure from the stress of the regular tournament. . . . Perhaps soft music and other strategies that encourage participants to relax can provide a much-needed respite from the rigors of competition. (p. 45)

Unfortunately, forensics scholarship has placed little focus on wellness spaces at speech tournaments.

Similar types of spaces have gained traction on college campuses since Carnegie Mellon University implemented its own mindfulness room (Mindful Staff, 2014). Even U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, Minnesota recently incorporated ". . . a sensory-inclusive room, providing fans with autism, dementia, Down syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder and other conditions a quiet, safe and soothing atmosphere. The space will also be staffed with licensed behavioral specialists during every home game" (Minnesota Vikings, 2019, para. 2). Clearly, wellness and neurodiversity are two distinct but interweaving threads in the contemporary discussions of mindfulness rooms. Perhaps more scholarship on *non-competitive* places at the intercollegiate speech tournament may help us understand further the benefits of an open door policy (ODP) and a mindfulness room (MR).

Method

After obtaining CHSR (IRB) approval, descriptions of the open door policy and the mindfulness room were provided days before the swing in a “points of information” email to coaches who registered their attending teams.

To maximize the potential amount of exposure tournament participants would have to the new policy, we aimed to have a slip of paper featuring the following statement taped to every set of preliminary and final round ballots for the Saturday and Sunday portions of the swing. (We did learn a few rounds were missing the slips of paper, but a supermajority of rounds were assuredly provided this statement.) Judges were asked to read this statement at the start of every round they judged:

*****READ THIS STATEMENT ALOUD TO THE ROOM BEFORE BEGINNING THE ROUND*****

Competitors and judges are reminded that the [Tournament Name] Swing has an open-door policy for every round. Please feel free to leave the round as needed. Judges are reminded that competitors and observers shall not be penalized for exiting a round at any time.

Competitors had access to this statement: 1.) by listening to their coaches (if coaches shared the information from the email) and 2.) by listening to the judge (if the judge complied with the mandate to read the statement aloud at the beginning of each round). In other words, students possibly heard about this policy statement for their very first time during their first few rounds of competition.

We administered the survey after final rounds before the awards ceremony for the Day 2 portion of the swing. Pre-awards was an ideal time and space to gain participant attention and offer the opportunity to participate. Littlefield and Sellnow (1992) noted conducting their study in a similar pre-awards time-space at the 1989 AFA-NIET: “twenty minutes before the awards ceremony” (p. 3). We followed suit.

Before awards, we provided a brief description of what unique features were made available at the tournament (the open door policy and the mindfulness room) and expressed interest in their thoughts about those changes. We provided a brief oral description of the survey, the purpose of the survey, and the process of considering participation and providing consent. Informed consent forms and paper surveys were given to all judges, coaches, and competitors physically present in the award ceremony space. (For hired judges, we offered the opportunity to fill out the survey at the conclusion of their service to the tournament. Only a few judges abstained.)

We presented paper surveys to everyone physically present and explained that if they did not want to participate, they could simply draw a picture or write down their favorite lyrics to a song. Paper surveys were used to reduce the chances of any one person feeling singled out as participating or not participating in the study. We also encouraged students to relocate if they

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wanted more privacy to complete their responses. We stressed again that participation was completely voluntary. Two separate collection boxes were provided at the back of the space (behind the seating area) to clearly separate identifying information in the consent forms from the survey responses. The collections in each box were then further physically mixed in random order to reduce the chances of researchers being able to correspond a response with a respondent. Thus, the responses were anonymous.

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Paper surveys were used to avoid distractions like media notifications or participants using devices to potentially communicate with one another--which could impact the validity of their answers. An electronic survey could have been administered after the tournament, but we believe participation would have dropped significantly. Most importantly, because the survey asked about their perceptions of the tournament experience, it was important to conduct this inquiry as close as we could to *in situ*, or in the situation of the experience. Finally, this time period was ideal because performances were complete. Students were no longer actively preoccupied with focus on their own events. Students also typically use the pre-awards time to congregate, to decompress, to socialize, to reflect on their experiences, and to await results.

The Survey

The survey was designed to gain feedback from tournament participants about the effectiveness of an experimental open door policy and a mindfulness room. Once conversations multiplied at NCA about the variety of anecdotal experiences people had, it became clear the results of a survey could be of value to broader conversations about better tournament practices.

The 16-item survey (see Appendix A) addressed several interrelated aspects of one's tournament experiences and prompted for a mix of quantitative and qualitative feedback. The first two questions dealt with demographics in terms of forensics position (student, coach, etc.) and gender identity. Question 3 asks about ever feeling the need to leave a competition round due to the content of a performance. Questions 6 and 7 address the comparison of feelings associated with leaving a round (previous experiences vs. this particular weekend). Questions 10, 11, and 12 addressed the effectiveness of the mindfulness room--both its structure and knowledge of its existence. For qualitative prompts, responses were coded by recurring themes. Quantitative prompts were analyzed for the mean, standard deviation, and statistical significance.

Finally, we are by no means health communication experts. We are, however, active members of the forensics community concerned with the wellness practices of tournaments and the support structures for its participants.

Results & Discussion

Results suggest as many as 2 out of every 5 participants at a forensics tournament have felt the need to leave a round for mental health reasons due to the content of a performance. 40% of all

participants surveyed responded “Yes” to having ever felt like they needed to leave a round (Question 3).

Remarkably, of those that responded yes to Q3, 82% identified as women, nonbinary, or genderqueer; only 17% identified as men or simply “cis.” The reasons for this gender disparity are elusive. One possibility is that women and GSM (gender and sexual minority)

people are often related to the subject matter of material performed at tournaments. Especially in the last few years, subjects of sexual assault, consent, et cetera have become the foreground of several conversations at tournaments and conferences. Future research could follow the lead of Walker and Samens (2020) to identify how often competitors witness performances of trauma that resemble their own personal experiences.

A trend in the responses between competitors and coaches/alums is worth noting. Of those sampled who said yes to Question 3, 82% were competitors, 17% were coaches/alums. Perhaps this result was due to sample sizes, but it is clear competitors feel the need to leave more frequently. This contrast may be due to power differentials within the round. Judges are endowed with the agency to uphold or modify expectations of the round. Competitors, however, must negotiate their personal convictions with the expectations of the tournament, the judge, their programs, and their peers.

We wanted to understand the level of comfort participants felt in leaving rounds during previous tournaments in comparison with during a tournament with an open door policy. The survey asked participants to rank their comfort level in leaving a round on a scale from one to ten, one being low comfort and ten being high comfort. Regarding previous tournaments, we received 69 responses. The average comfort level was 4.07 with a standard deviation of 2.93. During a tournament with an open door policy, we received 69 responses. The average comfort level was 8.09 with a standard deviation of 2.02. The average increase in comfort level was 4.07. In a two-sample t-test where 1 (previous tournaments) < 2 (tournament with an open door policy) has a t value of -9.36. 2 is significantly greater than 1. Thus, our results indicate a strong correlation between the feelings of comfort in leaving a round and having an open door policy at tournaments.

How the policy affected in-round climate

Question 15 asked: “How did the atmosphere in the room change after the policy was read?” Did participants perceive a shift, if any, in the in-round climate? Results indicated coaches and judges experienced the effects of the read policy in contrasting ways from competitors. While 76% of

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coaches/judges reported no obvious change in climate after the reading of the policy, 70% of competitors reported a noticeable positive change.

Table 1

	Reported no obvious change	Reported a noticeable positive change	Miscellaneous comments
Coaches/judges (21)	76% (16)	19% (4)	5% (1)
Competitors (50)	22% (11)	70% (35)	8% (4)
TOTAL (71)	38% (27)	55% (39)	7% (5)

There are several potential reasons for this disparity. First, the policy was written for the benefit of competitors, which may influence competitors specifically to have fairly consistent positive experiences with in-round climate. Second, because judges are endowed with the agency of running the competition round, judges (which includes coaches) may not fully realize how much their behaviors, like reading an ODP, impact in-round climate at tournaments. Finally, it is possible judges felt their needs were beyond the scope of the policy. As one coach participant asked: “How can a judge leave the round that they’re judging?” Another coach participant noted: “NOT FOR JUDGES - this does nothing to protect coaches. How am I allowed to leave if this is my job?” This may help answer why coaches/judges were reluctant to report a positive change after reading the ODP.

Results also suggest how limited coaches and judges may be in understanding competitors’ in-round experiences. The contrast in perception of in-round climate between coaches/judges and competitors clearly indicates that undergraduates offer an essential standpoint in conversations toward building tournament policies. If judge

The contrast in perception of in-round climate between coaches/judges and competitors clearly indicates that undergraduates offer an essential standpoint in conversations toward building tournament policies.

and coach perceptions were the only ones included in this analysis, the results would indicate that the reading of the open door policy was ineffective. But with student responses, the open door policy, even in its experimental run, clearly produced perceptions of increased positive in-round climate. Student input is valuable and essential.

The Mindfulness Room

43% (n=31) of all surveyed participants reported visiting the MR. We asked participants who used the MR to rate its effectiveness on a scale of one to ten, one being not effective and ten being very effective. With 31 responses, the average was 8.67 with a standard deviation of 1.37. On average, applicable participants found the mindfulness room to be highly effective.

This experimental run of the mindfulness room, however, did have its obstacles. By far, the most common qualitative response we received was the mindfulness room was too small. The room was indeed small, approximately 10' x 15'.

Figure 1



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Those who visited the MR were asked for one aspect of the room they would change (Question 12). The most popular response (30%) was to find a larger space. As many tournament directors know, demand for rooms adds up quickly (for competition, extemp prep, tab, and judges' lounge). The MR space was a study lounge and could comfortably seat approximately 5-7 people at a time. As a related theme, roughly 15% of comments (for Q12) noted the potential effects the small space would have on several competitors needing to decompress in the same space together. As one competitor noted: "I think complications could arise if competitors are going to the same room for a number of reasons - PTSD, catching breath, an anxiety attack, etc. are all mood-shifting circumstances." As another related theme to the room itself, roughly 18% of responses (Q12) suggested more seating or furniture to accommodate more visitors. Admittedly, in the already small space, only two bean bag chairs and a few chairs and a table were made available. Clearly, there was higher demand for the MR than anticipated.

The second-most popular theme (20%) in responses (Q12) when asked about potential changes was accessibility to the MR. Several responses noted the rather "out of the way" location of the MR, which was on the second floor of the main tournament building inside an office suite. Tournament directors noted this location for reasons that were part logistical (other rooms in use) and part privacy (ensuring those using the room were not put on display). Suggestions had subthemes of disability, convenience, and privacy. Some noted the second-floor could hinder access for physically disabled people and to increase accessibility by moving the MR to the first floor. Others noted the inconvenience of not being able to easily locate the MR and suggested the possibility of providing multiple mindfulness rooms.

Miscellaneous responses dealt with MR monitors and norms. One response noted: "I'm not sure about the moderator [*sic*]. That made me kind of uncomfortable." Anecdotally, one competitor verbally confided perhaps a peer monitor (like a competitor from a host school) might be more helpful than a judge or coach. A monitor sitting outside near the doorway may be more preferred than sitting in the actual room. One comment out of the 39 seems worth distinguishing in its own right regarding which norms were acceptable in the MR: "some expectation about talking/no talking/asking if it's okay to talk?" Due to the lack of specific expectations set in place for this novel space, students are met again with a perception of "unwritten rules" (Paine, 2005). Only 3 out of 39 (7%) of the comments had no criticisms.

Carmack (2016) noted forensics educators "run into problems" when trying to implement wellness strategies at tournaments and then facing "real logistical constraints" (p. 16). Based on the feedback we have received, we offer some ideas for tournament hosts considering a mindfulness room. These are by no means definitive or comprehensive and meant to serve as possibilities rather than rules:

1. Location - House the mindfulness room on the first floor of the main tournament building. If able, provide two rooms with plenty of space and opportunity for adjustable lighting. Avoid scheduling competition rounds next door.

2. Seating - Consider providing a variety of seating options for visitors. Bean bag chairs, blankets, and pillows are appreciated. Some students may use the space to rest.
3. Privacy - If the room space has a number of windows accessible to hallways, consider using curtains or paper to provide more privacy for visitors.
4. Monitor - A monitor for the mindfulness room helps ensure the safety of all visitors. Consider having a monitor sit outside of the room by the doorway so they are available as needed.²
5. Setting Norms & Expectations - Visitors will want to know the acceptable modes of behavior. Consider including an information sheet or welcome card. We encourage tournament directors to confer with current competitors to see which behaviors may be most helpful, but here are some possibilities:

“Welcome! We are glad you’re here. Here are a few considerations for your time in the Mindfulness Room:

 - We encourage you to rest, to sleep, to stim, to read, and to scroll on your device as needed.
 - We ask you to keep any necessary conversations to a whisper to avoid disturbing other visitors. Please take all phone calls, social conversations, and audio playback of any kind to another location. Help us make this room mindful!
 - Do not disturb any visitor who is resting. If you are concerned about the well-being of another visitor, please notify the monitor (who is right outside the room) right away.
 - Attend your rounds as you are able. We appreciate your use of this space. Please stay mindful of your rounds and help us keep the tournament on time.
 - We appreciate any feedback you can offer to make this space more helpful. Please leave feedback in the card box.”
6. Getting the Word Out - Consider using multiple avenues to share information about the tournament mindfulness room such as...
 - a tournament invitation.
 - a tournament “points of information” email to attending schools.

² According to the AFA-NST Title IX Officer, Dr. Kittie Grace, plans for the 2020 national tournament included providing certified counselors near the quiet room during competition hours. (K. Grace, personal communication, June 14, 2020).

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- a statement provided in the registration folders for attending schools on the day of competition.
- a sign outside of the mindfulness room.
- an announcement posted on the wall near the round schematics.
- a handout for visitors to take with them and share with their programs (which can be included in the MR, registration folders, and ballot packets).
- any corresponding social media disseminating information about the tournament.

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General Approval

Question 16 allowed for any further comments respondents wished to share regarding the ODP or MR. From 51 respondents, we isolated 76 unique comments. Themes emerged: approval (66%), suggestions (25%), norms (9%).

An overwhelming majority of comments (66%, or 50/76 comments) conveyed approval in some form. Subthemes were *positive adjectives* (n=22) like “good” or “incredible” or “super dope,” *gratitude* (n=15) like “thank you” and “appreciate,” *affinity* (n=9) such as “like” or “love,” and *personal experiences* (n=4) relevant to the ODP and/or MR, such as “As a person with PTSD, knowing that I can leave made me less scared in every round. I didn’t have to look over my shoulder, if you will.” An overall sense of approval for the ODP and MR, at least in concept, was evident.

Another theme of suggestions (25%) offered concerns or potential solutions for the ODP and MR rather evenly. Finally, some comments discussed norms (9%) related to these features. While many comments conveyed skepticism about changing the norm like “. . . it might take people [sic] a while to break norms,” some comments expressed interest in changing norms: “I really hope other teams follow suit” and “I’ll talk to my coach about implementing [sic] similar changes to the next tournament we host!” The open door policy and mindfulness room were clearly valued features for tournament participants.

Limitations

The data gathered for this study were from a single individual events swing. Further, no two tournament participants will have the same degrees of interaction with the two features of the swing. For example, hired judges may only serve for a few rounds. A school’s travel coach may trade places with another coach from Saturday to Sunday. Participants were not asked if they attended both days, but the majority (implicated by Speechwire) attended both days. For these reasons, we focused on perceptions rather than behavioral responses.

While we did receive a substantial amount of responses, these cultural expectations may be contained to their particular time and space-related contexts. Tournament trends vary by time

and region. But we argue the information presented here, at the very least, will aid forensics participants to gain more productive traction in finding better practices.

Finally, responses were limited in depth. We were not able to engage in a dialogue or open-ended discussion with participants about the complex details of each prompt. These glaring limitations signal clearly a need for future research.

Future Research

Our open door policy did not actively take into account the needs of the judges. Survey results provided a few questions about supporting judges. What options do they have to leave a round they are judging? Are they *required* to disseminate information about the policy? Coaches may not disclose to their competitors all the details of the tournament or what their philosophies are against the policy. The open door policy is a text in continual refinement. For a Spring 2019 tournament, we implemented a revised version of the policy:

Please remember the [Name] Swing has an open door policy for every round. Feel free to leave the round as needed. Judges are reminded that competitors and observers shall not be penalized for exiting a round at any time. Judges are encouraged to take a brief break as needed in between performances.

In Fall 2019, a revised version of this policy was adopted for the 2020 American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament.³

Building on the work of Walker and Samens (2020), future research must find ways for judges to practice self-care. One possibility may be similar to how we code against competitors or institutions. What if judges had the capacity to code against certain types of content? While this is not a cure-all by any stretch, a judge should have a say in what they are unable to process. The judge is responsible for adjudicating a round in its entirety. They may pause briefly between performances but, by all appearances, do not have the opportunity to leave. In the past few years, judges have tried to address these quandaries independently. Some judges will solicit coaches in the region to give a fair warning about certain types of content. Some judges will ask for only certain types of events (perhaps some events use pathos appeals and explicit material less frequently than others). Researchers could find value in exploring the effectiveness of a “coding against content” policy.

A distinct difference of perception between students and judges/coaches permeates the tournament experience. This may seem obvious through anecdotal experience, but more thorough research could reveal the sensemaking differences over “unwritten rules.” Perhaps this

³ The language adopted by the AFA-NIET committee at the 105th National Communication Association Convention on November 13, 2019 (before the name-change to AFA-NST) for the 2020 AFA-NIET tournament was: “The AFA-NIET has an open-door policy for every round. Competitors and observers may leave the round as needed and shall not be penalized for exiting a round at any time. Please wait to return in between performances. Judges are encouraged to take a brief break as needed in between performances.”

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is due to the power differential. But recent work (Walker & Samens, 2020) confirms that judges also experience the need to leave and, at times, feel pressured to prioritize their role as adjudicator over their own personal needs. Such work demonstrates how soliciting responses from a specific population (judges who have been triggered) reveals tremendous insights to in-round experiences. More work should follow suit.

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One clear area of future research is to detail thoroughly why specifically women, nonbinary, and genderqueer competitors have been more likely to feel unsafe in competition rounds. A qualitative, interview-driven study may assist in locating practices that better support forensics community members. More in-depth work must be done.

Researchers interested in intercollegiate forensics must examine experiences related to neurodiversity. Research lacks in-depth interviews with autistic people in forensics, especially with regard to the potentially high amounts of social interaction and sensory stimulation that comes with a typical speech tournament. Quite simply, how autistic people navigate their forensic tournament experiences, and even their *existence* at forensics tournaments, has been largely ignored by forensic researchers. Such scholarship has been unduly dependent upon autoethnographic accounts to generate discussion. As one respondent of this study noted: “I would love an additional judge statement about understanding neurodiversity . . .” More research is clearly needed.

Future scholarship must enumerate the various reasons participants may feel the need to leave the round. Labeling these experiences as simply “harmful,” “triggering,” or “overwhelming” fails to apprehend different lived experiences. Experiences of autistic people (such as overstimulation) may be unduly conflated with the experiences of trauma survivors (such as being triggered). We recognize this as a limitation in our own study. Further work must be done to clarify these distinct lived experiences in order to produce commensurate solutions.

Scholarship may also help remedy logistical concerns for directing a tournament (Carmack, 2016). If a student misses a round, we believe the tournament director reserves the right to provide reasonable accommodations for any participant. Accommodations are (and should be) a regular feature of tournaments, such as dyslexia-friendly fonts and blocks for specific round locations for physically disabled students. Should a student miss a round for personal reasons, we encourage tournament directors to find the most reasonable possibility, given the circumstances. For instance, if a student misses the first round, could it be possible to enter that student into two sections for the second round? If the student misses the second round, could it be possible for the judge to wait for the last competitor to perform before ranking the round (as often is the case with students running late)? As educators honor accommodation plans in the classroom, a clear avenue of future research is exploring how accommodation plans could be more formalized in a forensics context.

Finally, what makes a room mindful? Researchers could place exclusive focus on the MR to collect more nuanced responses. With NFA 2019’s commitment to open door policy and a “quiet room,” forensics educators and participants have a responsibility to confirm if such

changes are indeed helpful. Considering that national tournaments develop at a relatively slow and infrequent speed, data from even regional tournaments can be valuable.

Conclusion

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Overall results indicated competitors experienced an increase in feelings of confidence to leave rounds as needed. Women, nonbinary, and genderqueer competitors disproportionately reported having felt the need to leave a round for mental health reasons due to the content of a performance. Coaches/judges have diverging perceptions from those of competitors regarding in-round climate changes after the reading of the open door policy. Students found the mindfulness room great in concept but needing improvement in execution (such as the size of the space, accessibility, and clearer expectations of accepted behaviors).

Competitors and non-competing undergraduate forensics students (admin assistants, etc.) must be included in the decision-making processes in their forensics communities--including but not limited to elected positions of representation, panels, symposiums, and surveys. While conducting research may add some time to administering the tournament experience, published

Let's research. Let's document.
Let's provide a better blueprint for
those doing this activity after us.

research provides a more formalized venue for vastly different standpoints on the activity to meet each other where we are--and deliberate on where we could be.

We hope implementation of open door policies will empower students with more agency to use at *their* discretion and will guide better practices for the next generation of forensics coaches. Let's research. Let's document. Let's provide a better blueprint for those doing this activity after us.



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Exploring the Impacts of an Open Door Policy

APPENDIX

Exploring the Impacts of an “Open Door” Policy at the Intercollegiate Speech (Individual Events) Tournament

The researchers would like you to detail your tournament experiences from current and previous seasons. You are welcome to discontinue at any time if you wish to not complete the survey. Please answer as fully as you are willing - the more detail you provide the richer the data we have to work with concerning the impacts of the “open-door policy” and “mindfulness room” on intercollegiate forensics competition culture. Thank you for taking the time to answer this survey!

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1. Circle the description that most fits: I am a(n)....

coach hired judge competitor alumnus observer

Other (please specify): _____

2. What is your gender identity? _____

3. Have you ever felt like you needed to leave a speech tournament round because the content of a speech or performance did/could put you into dangerous or potentially harmful mental space?

Yes or No

4. How many times did you hear the open door policy read aloud in rounds this weekend? (If not sure, provide an estimated number of times.) _____

5. Have you attended another tournament that implemented a clear “open-door” policy?

Yes or No

6. In the past, on a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest) how comfortable did you feel with the option of getting up to leave the room if the content of a speech or performance did/could put you into dangerous or potentially harmful mental space?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Low comfort

Mid-comfort

High comfort

McDonald and Burke

7. This weekend, on a 1-10 how comfortable did you feel in the option of getting up to leave the room if the content of a speech or performance did/could put you into dangerous or potentially harmful mental space?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Low comfort				Mid-comfort				High comfort	

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8. Did you believe that the open door policy being read before round made people in the rooms feel more comfortable with having the option to leave if the content of a speech or performance did/could put you into dangerous or potentially harmful mental space?

Yes or No

9. On a scale of 1 to 10, how effective did you find the reading of the open door policy at the beginning of each round?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. Did you use the mindfulness room?

Yes or No

10a. If yes, on a scale of 1 to 10, how effective did you find the mindfulness room?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11. Did knowing the mindfulness room existing at this tournament increase feelings of safety or support?

Yes or No

12. What is one thing you would change about the mindfulness room?

Exploring the Impacts of an Open Door Policy

13. Here is the wording of the open door policy:

“Competitors and judges are reminded that the [name of regional] Swing has an open-door policy for every round. Please feel free to leave the round as needed. Judges are reminded that competitors and observers shall not be penalized for exiting a round at any time.”

After hearing the policy read aloud in rounds this weekend, do you believe the wording of this policy is effective? Do you think there are any parts of the policy wording that should be changed? If yes, what would you change?

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14. What changes, if any, would you feel need to be made to the open-door policy that could make it more effective?

15. How did the atmosphere in the room change after the policy was read?

16. What further comments do you have about the open door policy and/or the mindfulness room? Any feedback is truly appreciated!

Thank you for taking time to complete the survey! Please fold this paper in half and leave in the submission box.



Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative Rhetorically Constructed as an Act of Corporate Social Responsibility

Rachel Kaplan



Rachel Kaplan (PhD, Duquesne University)

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Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative Rhetorically Constructed as An Act of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Rachel Kaplan

Abstract

Walmart is the largest publicly owned retailer in the world (Fishman, 2008). Walmart operates in a contested rhetorical environment because of an aggressive pricing strategy, low-paying wages, and discrimination claims made by women. This paper argues Walmart created several Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs to help improve corporate image and reputation. CSR encourages companies to consider a triple bottom line: people, the environment and profit. Consumers who practice socially responsible consumption choose to support companies they perceive give back to the community, participate in CSR initiatives to help people, and incorporate sustainable practices into the lifecycle of their products. This paper adds to the conversation about communicative functions of CSR and narrative creation. Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative appears to be a small part of a much larger overall goal of reputation repair. This paper explores the historical development of CSR from the viewpoint of proponents and critics of CSR, most notably this work frames Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative as an act of CSR. Lastly, the paper considers a rebirth of the new corporate image created by myriad CSR programs at Walmart.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; corporate image; reputation repair; Walmart; rhetoric; narrative

Walmart is the largest publicly owned retailer in the world (Fishman, 2008). Sam Walton opened the first Walmart store in Rogers, Arkansas, in 1962, with the expressed goal of bringing the lowest possible prices to consumers (Fishman, 2008). This lofty goal has come at a high price in terms of the company's reputation. The rhetorical landscape surrounding Walmart's intentions are highly contested. However, Walmart is currently undertaking intentional efforts to repair its infamous reputation (Taylor, 2017).

Walmart is viewed in a negative light by some stakeholders, particularly facing opposition when moving into a new town, as many are concerned about decreased home values, the creation of low-paying jobs, traffic, and the loss of small, niche retailers (Pope & Pope, 2015). The negative sentiment towards Walmart is rhetorically constructed from the aggressive pricing strategy that Walmart employs. "Walmart has the power to squeeze profit-killing

concessions from vendors” (Fishman, 2008, p. 15) and has been cited publicly for being both powerful and aggressive with suppliers.

The contested rhetoric surrounding Walmart’s reputation continues to form negative sentiments from not only aggressive pricing and low-paying wages, but also its mistreatment of women. Walmart’s poor treatment of women is widespread and pervasive, “Almost 2,000 women in 48 states claim that Walmart discriminated against them for pay and promotions” (Hines, 2012, para. 1). Women who work and have worked for Walmart are pursuing a lawsuit against Walmart claiming, “Walmart systematically favors men for raises and promotions” (Hines, 2012, para. 2). The women are still in the process of litigating their claims against Walmart.

In 2018, Senior Judge Rosemary Collyer, U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, dismissed lawsuits against Walmart regarding people with disabilities. The “federal judge has dismissed an U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission suit accusing a Walmart store of failing to accommodate two deaf employees, concluding the complaint fell short of stating a proper disability discrimination claim” (Mulvaney, 2018, para. 1). Walmart is operating in a rhetorical landscape filled with pessimism and negativity about its business practices and their intentions toward multiple stakeholders.

Nonetheless, Walmart reports its “mission [is] to create opportunities so people can live better. We [Walmart] consider it our responsibility to make a positive impact in the communities we serve” (Walmart Foundation Our Focus How We Give, 2018, para. 2). Walmart’s low pricing strategies do help the poor, as the low pricing strategies are considered an antipoverty force in America, “Walmart saves a typical American family of four about \$2,500 a year. That’s about what a family of four gets from the government in food stamps” (Kestenbaum, 2017, para. 4). Furthermore, Walmart helps to improve the lives of farmers in third-world countries. Walmart factories hire low-skilled farmers to work and earn a dollar day. This dollar is life-changing for the farmers as it allows the farmer to purchase electricity and running water for the first time; it greatly improves “their living standards” and “their longevity” (Kestenbaum, 2017, para. 5). Walmart and the Walmart Foundation have “donated 1.4 billion dollars in cash and kind” (Walmart Foundation Our Focus How We Give, 2018, para. 1) and have a variety of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, including grant programs that focus on opportunity, sustainability, and scholarship programs helping team members and their families further their education.

The Minneapolis Federal Reserve conducted a study to see if Walmart had a negative or positive effect on counties where a Walmart was present, and the results were positive for Walmart. The Fed’s report concluded, “Firm growth, employment and total earnings were somewhat stronger in Wal-Mart counties” (*MSNBC/Forbes*, 2008, para. 2). It seems that the company is having difficulty convincing the public Walmart is good for communities as, “a Pew study cited by the report, 24% of Americans think the company is bad for the economy, and 31% had an unfavorable view of it” (*MSNBC/Forbes*, 2008, para. 2). The company has constructed a

variety of CSR programs to both help the community and increase goodwill with stakeholders. Doug McMillon, the CEO of Walmart, recently said in an interview, “If the world knew what we’ve done for the past 10 years and what we’re doing to make things better holistically, I think our reputation would be dramatically better” (Ignatius, 2017, para. 42). The company is on a mission to make those efforts known.

Because of their contested rhetorical landscape, in 2018 Walmart launched the Opioid Stewardship Initiative as an act of CSR aimed at reducing the number of opioids dispensed in an effort to alleviate the opioid crisis. This program is an act of CSR because its main focus is on helping the other. Mike Hunter, attorney General of Oklahoma, explains the importance of Walmart’s program in ending opioid abuse. Hunter said, “We appreciate good corporate citizens like Walmart for serving as an example of how private businesses can play a major role in ending this epidemic,” and Hunter elaborates further and stated, “Implementing these changes in all of its 4,700 pharmacies nationwide is an immense undertaking and I appreciate the company’s continued efforts” (Gerszewski, 2018, para. 19). Attorney General Hunter underscores the need for responsible corporate behavior as a tool in combating the opioid epidemic.

The Opioid Stewardship Initiative

This particular initiative is interesting for analysis because the medical community is calling upon the private sector to act as more people are dying from drug-related overdoses than died during the entire Vietnam War (Welch, 2017). Moreover, this case is insightful because an analysis could help us understand if there is a *genuine good* associated with Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative. The genuine good is to be interpreted in an Aristotelian sense, which seeks to protect and promote the health and welfare of the polis and not simply profits. “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim” (Aristotle, n.d., p. 1). In Walmart’s case a genuine good would emerge when communicating a shift in their actions including corporate social responsibility programs that benefit the other. This paradigmatic shift towards care of the consumer reinvents the narrative including positive elements of the new corporate ethos.

Moreover, this case is insightful because an analysis could help us understand if there is a *genuine good* associated with Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative.

Aristotle’s work encourages consideration of telos, meaning the end use or ultimate use; for example, the telos of an acorn is an oak tree. Given the proper conditions, an acorn will grow and flourish. The telos of life is to live a virtuous existence contributing to the polis (community), with time for

contemplation, and developing one's potential (Aristotle, n.d). The telos of business is generally thought to be profits, but the Opioid Stewardship Initiative allows for a virtuous telos to emerge; saving lives by reducing the amount of opioids in society.

Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative claims that "the health and safety of [Walmart pharmacy] patients is a critical priority" and Walmart's pharmacies will be "part of the solution to our nation's opioid epidemic" by limiting opioid prescriptions and putting measures in place to reduce the abuse of prescription opioids (Walmart, 2018, para. 1). In this way, Walmart is communicating the importance of community health to its internal and external stakeholders through this costly initiative. The genuine good of saving lives appears to be the telos of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative. The Opioid Stewardship Initiative restricts prescriptions to short-term use, provides a disposal kit for any leftover pills, ensures all pharmacies stock ample doses of naloxone (an opioid overdose antidote), and provides funding to sponsor community education sessions warning about the dangers of Opioids.

Additionally, this analysis is an important step in understanding how CRS programs like the Walmart Opioid Initiative aids organizations in revamping corporate image. Finally, this initiative is interesting for analysis as this case study further extends the idea that CSR efforts serve a communicative function in reinventing a narrative that may allow for a creation of a new corporate ethos.

This work explores the historical development of CSR, explains the construct of corporate societal marketing as a communication tool to spread awareness of CSR initiatives, and provides several successful examples of CSR in current business environments. The theoretical lens applied in this work is narrative theory. The purpose of this paper is to explore the construct of CSR in relationship to Walmart's new Opioid Stewardship Program. Most notably the paper seeks to understand if exploration of the programs at Walmart provides insight into the communicative functions of CSR programs, reputation repair, and narrative creation.

Background

The social responsibility of businesses has been widely debated. Nobel-prize-winning economist Milton Friedman argued businesses do not exist to be socially responsible; rather, Friedman explains businesses exist to make a profit. Friedman (2009) explains,

there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud. (p. 133)

Friedman's book *Capitalism and Freedom*, published in 1962, has been met with criticism. Friedman's rhetorical position is based on the idea that corporations have no responsibility to improve the community. There is a "small but articulate" (Mohr et al., 2001,

p. 67) group of consumers who have become discerning and want to engage in business with companies who act in socially responsible ways and support causes and organizations important to the consumer. In 1881, F. Y. Edgeworth wrote about the economic principle of self-interest and rationality: “The first principle of Economics states that every agent is actuated only by self-interest” (p. 16). Following this principle, the consumer would be most likely to purchase an item with the lowest cost and of similar quality to the competition. Although the principle of self-interest is widely accepted, and in turn, most consumers act in their own self-interest with purchasing, this may not always be true, especially for “consumers who are actively practicing SRCB [socially responsible consuming behavior]” (Mohr et al., 2001, p. 68). The aforementioned group of consumers who practice SRCB feel a sense of pride when they purchase from socially responsible companies and feel as if they are punishing companies by refusing to purchase from companies who are not acting socially responsible (Mohr et al., 2001). Therefore, there is a group of consumers willing to pay more to purchase from socially responsible companies.

Companies responded to this call from consumers and established corporate social responsibility departments and now companies are communicating CSR efforts to consumers. Companies must consider two factors when communicating CSR messages, source and cost (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). The source matters because companies fear the companies’ messages can appear overly self-serving and the message can backfire, hence CSR programs may be communicated best through “third party endorsements” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 112). The cost of a CSR initiative matters because excessive marketing of a CSR program “may create the impression the company is more interested in generating publicity” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 12) than supporting the cause itself. Chaudhri elaborates, “In sum, the corporate communication of CSR serves several interrelated functions including building an organization’s image, identity, and reputation; inviting stake-holder support and identification by creating awareness, information-sharing, and pro-active deflection of (anticipated) criticism” (Chaudhri, 2016, p. 421). Throughout this work, Walmart is framed as creating and supporting CSR initiatives as a way of improving image and reputation.

A Cone Communications’ CSR study, encourages a redefining and “pushing the traditional boundaries” of what corporate social responsibility is and how it is implemented and communicated (Anderson, 2017, para. 1). The Cone Company concluded, “Companies are to share more intangible values – such as what they stand for and what they are willing to stand up for” (Anderson, 2017, para. 1). The Cone Company’s conclusions coalesce with Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative; this is a clear example of a company taking a firm stance against the over-dispensing of opioids. The Walmart Corporation has taken note that customers want more from the company in terms of its reputation and the treatment of its employees and customers. An article entitled, *Walmart has spent more than \$18 million on tear-jerking ads to fix its infamous reputation* outlines the measures the company is taking, including investing 2.7 billion dollars on increasing wages for employees, training programs for employees, and scheduling programs to aid employees (Taylor, 2017). The company has also established a

Walmart Academy providing workers with an intensive training program equipping them with a multitude of skill sets. Walmart has made vast monetary investments in programs to change its reputation from an anti-worker company that values profit above all else, and its monetary investment in these programs is vast. *Forbes* reports, “Consumers now have higher expectations of what brands should contribute to the world. Companies who connect their brand to positive social action earn strong reputations that encourage buying and customer loyalty” (Ludema & Johnson, 2018, para. 9).

A relational approach to corporate communication situates relationships, dialogue, and trust at the core (Chaudhri, 2016). Companies enter into dialogue with consumers in the relational approach, as the company attempts to form a relationship with consumers and potential consumers. The goal of this dialogue is to understand consumers’ concerns and then the company attempts to develop a mutually agreeable solution and enter into dialogue creating shared meaning (Golob & Podnar, 2011). This approach develops a network for companies to develop CSR programs based upon consumers’ concerns. Email, websites, and various social media platforms serve as channels for *interactivity*, therefore consumers are able to communicate concerns directly with companies (Kaul et al., 2015). Companies in the current business environment are responding to the ever-changing economic and communicative climate in a variety of ways, including using CSR programs to shape or reshape corporate identity.

Application of Narrative Theory

The narrative paradigm has five basic fundamental assumptions: “humans are homo narrans or storytellers, the mode of human decision making is good reasons, production and practice of good reason is ruled by history, biography, and culture” (Fisher, 1984, p. 7). Narrative probability exists with a coherent story (Fisher, 1978). Narrative fidelity exists if the story “rings true” and the world is full of stories which one must choose (Fisher, 1984). Stories that have coherence and ring true are the stories most people are likely to believe.

Narrative analysis is the most appropriate tool for analysis because people both inside and outside the organization use organizational stories to communicate and socially construct a shared understanding of the organization. Narrative theory is a good fit for analysis of the Walmart case study because it allows for exploration of questions such as; Are people speaking about Walmart in a positive manner despite the contested rhetorical environment surrounding the corporate ethos of the company? Will the narrative Walmart is crafting “ring true” with consumers, or does the narrative created from CSR programs lack narrative fidelity? Narrative theory is an appropriate methodology for this study because it is through the examination of the narrative’s creation that we can see the role of the CSR in the social construction of the narratives that lead to an organizational ethos.

Historical Development of CSR and Mega-Corporations

The Walmart Corporation is the largest retailer in the world and is a Mega-Corporation. Mega-Corporations emerged in the United States in the 1870s as the railroad and petroleum industries moved toward monopoly status resulting in public debate about the power of monopolies (Cheney, May, & Roper, 2007). Responding to public pressures, the United States government passed laws to limit the power of monopolies; for example, in 1890, Congress passed the Sherman Anti-Trust Act with the intention of promoting competition and to prohibiting any mechanism to fix prices (Peppin, 1970). A huge shift occurred in society after the end of World War II with an economic expansion in the postwar economy. Then, “[a] view that came to be known as ‘corporate social responsibility’ emerged as a coherent position shortly after World War II” (Terris, 2005, p. 41). This view of CSR encompassed the victory of free enterprise, and the universal recognition of American influence on a global scale provided a foundation for a perspective that “endorsed capitalism but sought to humanize [it]” by serving social ends (Terris, 2005, p. 41). CSR was conceptualized as a tool to aid businesses to do “good” in the community and CSR has the communicative function to alert stakeholders to what the company is doing to help others (Holladay & Coombs, 2011, pp. 109–113). CSR emerged as a checks-and-balances tool to ensure mega-corporations are giving back to the communities they serve.

In 1953, economics professor Howard R. Bowen developed what became known as the “social responsibilities of businessmen”; Bowen stressed that with the widespread nature of American prosperity, there was a need for a “more generous role of the corporation in society” (Terris, 2005, p. 41). Bowen’s ideas are foundational to understanding the development of CSR in America. In short, Bowen explained the social pressures on businesspeople to act in socially acceptable ways drive businesspeople to act ethically. Bowen elaborates on what he deems “informal social controls”: businesspeople want to be admired and respected, and they enjoy the role of educating and leading the “broader public,” so once businesspeople realize they have the power to lead, educate, and better the broader public, businesspeople “can play a part only by making their organization into good corporate citizens” (Bowen, as cited in Terris, 2005, p. 42).

In many corporations, “CSR programs form the backbone of many advertising campaigns” (Terris, 2005, p. 42) and CSR efforts are highlighted along with the product in commercials and print ads. Dawn dishwashing liquid’s property of removing oil from animals covered in oil during an oil spill or Tide’s campaign highlighting the company’s humanitarian efforts to help people clean their clothing after disasters are examples of CSR initiatives being included and illuminated in advertisements.

CSR is an amalgamation of ideas encompassing the role of the corporation and philanthropic efforts of the corporation toward service initiatives to the community. In this historical moment, CSR is under attack from both the Left and the Right. Cheney, May, and Roper (2007) note that from a neoliberal economic perspective, CSR efforts are often deemed “wrong-headed” (p. 3) and critiqued, because CSR violates the “principles of free enterprise” (p. 3) while also confusing the roles of “the private, governmental, and nonprofit sectors” (p. 3);

and from the Left, CSR is “at best a public relations strategy for complacency and control” (p. 3). CSR may be a way to have a sort of checks-and-balance system, as “unchecked corporate power is problematic for democratic society” (Cheney et al., 2007, p. 3). The aforementioned commentary makes the point that CSR operates in a contested environment. There are concerns about CSR not being a sincere effort rather that CSR can be a public relations stunt, but in a positive sense CSR can serve as a checks and balance tool to serve the community. CSR is defined as “the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it peruses its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 6). Corporate societal marketing is a means of communicating the various functions of CSR programs.

CSR—Triple Bottom Line

When considering the construct of CSR, Coombs and Holladay (2011) suggest consideration of the “triple bottom line—people, the environment, and profit” (p. 8). The term *triple bottom line* originated with Elkington in 1994 (Elkington, 2018). A triple bottom line “agenda focuses corporations not just on the economic value they add, but also on the environmental and social value they add—or destroy” (Elkington, 2004, p. 3). According to Coombs and Holladay (2011), “Corporate social responsibility is the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it pursues its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole” (p. 8). CSR in praxis often includes a driver of the triple bottom line (Elkington, 2004).

Elkington (2004) explains there are seven drivers important to a triple bottom line: markets, values, transparency, life-cycle technology, partnerships, time, and corporate governance. Each of these drivers is facing a paradigmatic shift in the “third millennium, as society is shifting towards a ‘global cultural revolution’” (Elkington, 2004, p. 3). Each of the aforementioned items is part of a *revolutionary shift* creating mini-revolutions within corporations. For example, Elkington explains markets were once focused on compliance; however, the focus of the new paradigm is competition both domestic and internationally.

Transparency is another driver of the triple bottom line, as both internal and external stakeholders demand to know. The shift away from traditional authority and a traditional hierarchy “means that a wide range of different stakeholders increasingly demand information on what the business is going and planning to do” (Elkington, 2004, p. 4). Another mini-revolution related to transparency is what Elkington refers to as the life-cycle technology. The life cycle refers to knowing about the product from cradle to grave.

Starbucks is a corporation that has focused on transparency in their sourcing from start to finish. Approximately 15 years ago, Starbucks entered a partnership with Conservation International, and the company committed to ethically sourcing its coffee beans (“Starbucks Responsibly Grown,” n.d.). Starbucks’ website explains their project as “making coffee the

world's first sustainable product to improve the lives of at least 1 million people in coffee communities around the world" ("Starbucks Responsibly Grown," n.d., para. 1). Starbucks has prioritized concerns about the environment and the farmers who grow their coffee. Additionally, the company recently announced they are concerned, not just about coffee bean sourcing, but also about the end use of their product. "The change is part of Starbucks' commitment to increasing recyclable materials in their drinks, eliminating plastic straws by 2020, and replacing the straws with recyclable plastic lids" (Nace, 2018, para. 5). The fourth driver of the bottom line is partnerships. Elkington (2004) predicted, "Revolution 5 [partners] will dramatically accelerate the rate at which new forms of partnership spring up between companies, and between companies and other organizations—including some leading campaigning groups" (p. 5). This is seen in the aforementioned Starbucks example of a strategic partnership with Conservation International, and this is a trend in the marketplace.

The sixth driver of the triple bottom line is time (Elkington, 2004). Information of news events that occur in various parts of the globe are instantly known to those thousands of miles away. The constant flow of information affects the construct of time and makes the world seem *wider* and more accessible in an instantaneous fashion (Elkington, 2004). However, this moment-to-moment view of time is revolutionized when considering the triple bottom line, which focuses on a longer-term time horizon.

The last and perhaps most important driver of the triple bottom line is corporate governance. Corporations are made up people who are decision makers; "the business end of the TBL agenda is the responsibility of the corporate board" (Elkington, 2004, p. 6). Corporate governance boards are expected to handle questions regarding pay structure and stock performance. However, in addition, board members are now asking about the role of the business in terms of CSR and questioning whether corporations have an ethical obligation to help the community at large by balancing the triple bottom line with shareholders profits (Elkington, 2013). Corporations with large profit margins can affect the world around them, and corporations are responding to this ability with policy changes and a vast array of CSR initiatives.

The Opioid Crisis and the Opioid Stewardship Initiative at Walmart

In the current business environment, corporations are responding to questions about the opioid crisis in the United States. Because opioid-related deaths are at historic levels, Walmart is answering the call to help reduce opioids in circulation. The purpose of this section is to provide a brief overview on the scope and scale of the opioid crisis in America.

In 2017, drug overdoses claimed more than 72,000 lives; drug overdoses killed more people than did car accidents, HIV, or guns (Sanger-Katz, 2018). An article entitled "*Two Innovative Approaches for Treating Opioid Addiction*" released in 2018 by Blue Cross and Blue Shield points out, "Each day more than 115 people die from opioid overdoses" (para 1). According to the Mayo Clinic Staff (2018), "Anyone who takes opioids is at risk of developing

addiction” (para. 1). Hence, addiction does not discriminate by gender, age, or race—anyone can become addicted.

In her book *Drug Dealer, MD*, Anna Lembke (2016) outlined how long courses of opioids can actually make the pain worse for patients. Lembke described how the Perdue Pharmaceutical Corporation hired doctors to speak at medical conferences about the benefits of opioids; they called these paid spokespeople *thought leaders*. One of the foremost thought leaders was Dr. Russell Portenoy (Lembke, 2016). Portenoy championed the use of opioids for chronic pain in the 1990s (Catan & Perez, 2012). Portenoy and other thought leaders successfully influenced their colleagues toward a pro-opioid stance (Kaplan, 2018). “In 2012, health care providers wrote 259 million prescriptions for opioid pain medication, enough for every adult in the United States to have a bottle of pills” (Paulozzi, Mack, and Hockenberry, as cited in, Dowell, Haegerich, & Chou, 2016, p. 1).

The Walmart Corporation has taken note of these astounding figures—hence the birth of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative. Walmart has chosen to abandon the old paradigm whereby doctors write prescriptions for opioids, and pharmacies fill the prescriptions with no questions asked. Walmart is responding to the crisis by implementing strict protocols.

Walmart is taking a multifaceted and comprehensive approach with the Opioid Stewardship Initiative. First, the company is tackling the issue of fraudulent prescriptions; as of January 1, 2020, Walmart will only fill e-prescriptions for controlled substances. The rationale for e-prescriptions is two-pronged: e-prescriptions are less prone to errors and are trackable. The trackable nature of e-prescriptions encourages pharmacies to use NarxCare, and this allows pharmacists to see how many other prescriptions patients have. “Narxcare is a tool that helps pharmacists make dispensing decisions and provides pharmacists with the real-time interstate visibility that currently exists” (“Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative,” 2018, para 3).

Another major component of the initiative is to keep the amounts of opioids prescribed at a low quantity and dosage. One of the most impactful parts of the initiative is that “Walmart and Sam’s Club will restrict initial acute opioid prescriptions to no more than a seven-day supply nationwide, with up to a 50 morphine milligram equivalent maximum per day” (“Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative,” 2018, para 6). This policy is in alignment with the CDC guidelines for opioid use, which suggest short-term usage of opioids for acute pain to reduce the likelihood of addiction (CDC, 2018).

Another component of the Initiative is to provide a free disposal program. “DisposeRx enables patients to dispose of leftover medications responsibly in their trash at home. Patients filling any new Schedule II opioid prescription at the company’s pharmacies receive a free DisposeRx packet” (“Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative,” 2018, p. 2). The aim of the DisposeRx is to dispose of medicines safely so that those who may be curious to experience an opioid are not exposed to the drug. An element of the program aimed at youth is Prescription for Life, a high school-based curriculum program sponsored in part by Walmart aimed at educating teens about the opioid crisis and the dangers of opioids.

The final two pieces of the initiative involve reducing the number of opioid related deaths. Walmart is committed to stocking all of its pharmacies with the drug naloxone, which has life-saving properties for those in the midst of an overdose. Finally, Walmart is committed to supporting legislation that implements a seven-day limit for opioid prescriptions.

The Argument for CSR at Walmart

I explored the Opioid Stewardship Initiative by examining Walmart's website dedicated to the initiative, reviewing concerned politicians' comments about Walmart's new policies, and reporting branding experts' comments about Walmart's launch to repair its reputation. I researched public commentary on the Walmart Stewardship Initiative. Attorney General Hunter is a pervasive force in combating the Opioid Crisis in America, bringing lawsuits against Purdue Pharmaceuticals, Teva Pharmaceuticals, and Johnson and Johnson for their roles in the opioid crisis (Sant, 2019). I followed Hunter's commentary closely and analyzed how he provided a third-party endorsement of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative.

The new narrative construction includes the news that Walmart was invited to political discussions on the opioid crisis in America. Walmart's Regional Health and Wellness Director, Lisa Smith, was invited to share information about the Opioid Stewardship Initiative with members of the Oklahoma Commission on Opioid Abuse (Gerszewski, 2018). Inviting Walmart to provide insights and partake in the discourse surrounding policymaking regarding opioid misuse is significant. Walmart in this instance is not being perceived in a negative light; rather, the state government of Oklahoma has publicly praised the company—in fact, the Attorney General referred to the Walmart Corporation as “good corporate citizens” (Gerszewski, 2018, para. 19). Lisa Smith (as cited in Gerszewski, 2018) said,

Walmart recognizes the impact the opioid epidemic has had across the country and has taken proactive measures to ensure we are part of the solution. Much like the Oklahoma Commission on Opioid Abuse, Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative continues looking at policies and procedures we can implement to combat the epidemic, while ensuring the highest quality care for those we are serving. (para. 16)

Notably, this quote by Lisa Smith shows she has aligned Walmart's interests with the government's interests to combat the opioid epidemic rather than aligning Walmart's interests with profits. This realignment highlights a change in the corporate ethos to portray Walmart as a good corporate citizen and shows Walmart's influence as a tool to combat opioid addiction and overdose death.

Thus, the initiative is an act of CSR:

By engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, companies can not only generate favorable stakeholder attitudes and better support behaviors (e.g., purchase, seeking employment, investing in the company), but also, over the long run, build

corporate image, strengthen stakeholder–company relationships, and enhance stakeholders’ advocacy behaviors. (Du & Bhattacharya, 2010, p. 8)

I assert the Walmart Stewardship Initiative is an act of CSR because corporate societal marketing in all forms are a “progeny of philanthropy” (Drumwright & Murphy, 2001, p. 165), with a low emphasis on economic goals. CSR is defined as “the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it peruses its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 6). This initiative focuses on helping the other with a low emphasis on economic goals.

CSR at Walmart, Narrative Construction, and Narrative of Coherence

The Walmart Opioid Stewardship Initiative is a voluntary program that is creating goodwill with stakeholders. CSR can be “strategic when it is integrated in larger corporate goals” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 29). Walmart has publicly stated its goal of changing its public perceptions

The Opioid Stewardship Initiative is transformative in regards to a corporate ethos—the company is publicly taking a stance against the overprescribing of opioids causing harm and potential death to customers.

(Taylor, 2017). “Walmart is an interesting case study because it has undergone a transformation of corporate ethos, branding, and reputation management” (Mainwaring, 2017, para. 2). The Opioid Stewardship Initiative is transformative in regards to a corporate ethos—the company is publicly taking a stance against the

overprescribing of opioids causing harm and potential death to customers. Walmart is arguably attempting to rewrite its corporate narrative to show it has evolved from a company focused only on profits to a company that cares about people. Narratives are a way for management to build “acceptance of and cooperation with” CSR initiatives (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p 45). This exhaustive CSR history explores some of the skepticism about CSR in general regarding whether CSR programs are enough to change the narrative of the company.

Arguably, the Walmart Corporation is taking the risk that many consumers may switch pharmacies because of its policies; clearly, there is a low emphasis on economic goals. Moreover, Walmart appears to be focusing on longer-term goals and influencing public policy. In fact, with bipartisan support, the federal government will release a new policy: “Senators reached a deal to advance legislation that had long been stalled following House passage of a similar package to combat the epidemic of opioid addiction in the country” (Itkowitz, 2018, para. 2). Several of the components of the opioid stewardship initiative were included in the bill. For example, dosage and the addictive qualities of opioids are being addressed. Republican Senator Lamar Alexander (as cited in Itkowitz, 2018) said,

It allows the FDA to require prescription opioids to be packaged in set amounts like a 3- or 7-day supply of blister packs, and spurs the development of a new non-addictive painkiller. The House has already passed its version of the act, and there is a bipartisan urgency to work with our House colleagues to get the legislation to the President's desk. (para. 11)

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Walmart is a multibillion-dollar company with far-reaching influence. Further, the impact of three- or seven-day opioid courses should reduce the number of opioids circulating in public, as well as reduce initial addiction. Walmart supports this legislation and is credited publicly; therefore, this is now integrated into the Walmart narrative.

The legislative efforts were successful as “President Donald J. Trump on Oct. 24, 2018 signed into law legislation aimed at ending the nation’s opioid crisis” (Garvin, 2018, para 1). The new legislation that passed was entitled “Substance Use Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act” (Wynne & Joyce, 2018, para 2) and one of the goals of the bill is to “ease the epidemic” (Wynne & Joyce, 2018, para 3). Because of the new law “The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can now require drug manufacturers to alter opioid packaging so doctors can prescribe smaller quantities, such as a three-or seven-day supply, rather than the traditional 30-day supply” (Wynne & Joyce, 2018, para 16).

In addition, John Auerbach, president and chief executive of policy of Trust for America’s Health, which focuses on public health and prevention issues, has publicly praised Walmart’s Stewardship Initiative. Auerbach (as cited in Court, 2018) said, “It’s a positive move for a business to become involved in helping to control the opioid epidemic, and so Wal-Mart is to be applauded for that” (para. 17). Walmart has communicated its efforts to combat the Opioid Crisis and is beginning to be recognized publicly, thus illustrating a communicative element of CSR, a third-party endorsement. A third-party endorsement complements and reinforces CSR messages (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). These messages regarding Walmart—the information on Walmart’s website, the comments by members of Congress, Attorney General Hunter’s comments, Lisa Smith’s public appearances, and John Auerbach’s public statement—have reinvented the narrative to include a new ethos that Walmart cares about customers. Fisher (1984) claimed narrative beings have “[an] inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story, and [a] constant habit of testing narrative fidelity” (p. 8). The company is benefiting from narrative coherence—diverse voices on the topic, including health care professionals, members of Congress, and branding experts, have been encouraged by Walmart’s shift toward responsible opioid dosing. The coalescence of the stories of Auerbach, Smith, and Attorney General Hunter regarding the positive elements of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative has created an element of narrative coherence. These elements are communicating a rebirth of a new corporate ethos.

Implications, Discussion, and Narrative Fidelity

Economist Milton Friedman (2009) long held the position that corporations exist to make a profit and do not have the responsibility to give back to the community. CSR can provide a company with a noble telos beyond making profits. In fact, CSR initiatives have multiple benefits, such as improving corporate image, shifting the company toward socially conscious consumption, and improving rapport with stakeholders. Improving Walmart's reputation is the main "reason why Walmart continues to support and launch new corporate responsibility programs, which it does at an almost dizzying pace" (Buss, 2017, para. 1). CSR programs at Walmart are good for business and for its reputation in the communities it serves; these programs have far-reaching influence with "stakeholders, including officials, suppliers, employees, and customers by making good on the *live better* part of its *Save Money. Live Better* tagline" (Buss, 2017, para. 1). Several of Walmart's recent CSR programs include supporting Fight Hunger, Spark Change (focusing on food insecurity), providing financial support for the 2017 Women's Economic Empowerment Summit, sponsoring the McGinnis Venture Competition for young entrepreneurs at Carnegie Mellon University, and supporting Project Gigaton, aimed at eliminating one gigaton of emissions from manufacturing and materials by 2030 (Buss, 2017). Walmart is rhetorically crafting a new image, and each CRS program is a small piece of its new, improved reputation.

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Throughout this work, the Opioid Stewardship Initiative is framed rhetorically as an act of CSR. The Walmart Corporation has had and continues to have influence over public policy. Several parts of the Substance Use Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act (SUPPORT) bill have already been implemented at Walmart pharmacies across the county. Walmart's corporate image has long been associated with squeezing profits from suppliers and chasing small businesses out of communities; however, the initiation of the SUPPORT policy at Walmart and the Walmart Foundation demonstrates a paradigmatic shift toward philanthropic efforts.

This work sought to answer the following question: "Is there any genuine good associated with the Opioid Stewardship Initiative?" I discovered there is a genuine good associated with the Opioid Stewardship Initiative and other CSR programs at Walmart. Walmart is purposively creating and implementing CSR programs to create a new corporate ethos. In addition, Walmart is taking specific actions to protect and promote the health and welfare of its pharmacy customers with the Opioid Stewardship Initiative. Thus, there is a genuine good associated with this program—Walmart has voluntarily provided strict regulations, potentially risking losing pharmacy customers as the price of doing what it deems best for society. CSR programs can provide a path forward in pursuit of a noble telos. The noble telos can include benefiting the other in a variety of ways, including community improvements and life-saving programs.

Most notably, this case study provided insights into communicative functions of CSR and narrative creation. It appears that the Opioid Stewardship Initiative is a small part of a much larger overall goal of reputation repair. However, the rebirth of the new corporate image created

by myriad CSR programs raises the challenge of what Coombs and Holladay (2011) termed the “CSR promotional dilemma” (p.111). This dilemma exists when there is too much effort to create awareness of initiatives; this excess effort “can have a boomerang effect as stakeholders become cynical and skeptical if there is excessive self-promotion about CSR initiatives” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 111). In essence, this dilemma creates a double-bind challenge. This challenge may explain why much of the news coverage of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative has stemmed mostly from a factual standpoint in terms of the company’s public statements. However, Attorney General Hunter and John Auerbach, president and chief executive of policy for Trust for America’s Health, publicly made positive statements praising Walmart’s efforts to combat the opioid crisis. Thus, the narrative about the company has shifted toward the good efforts of the company and away from the negative factors—all while the company relied on external people to talk about it.

To explore the rhetorical dimensions associated with the creation of a new ethos, this work analyzed internal stakeholders’ perceptions, such as CEO interviews, the internal communications posted on Walmart’s website, public officials’ statements about this policy, and finally, brand experts’ comments about the company’s efforts. The company seems to be in a cycle of rebirth regarding changing its actions to build a better reputation with its entire collection of CSR programs. Doug McMillion (as cited in Ignatius, 2017), CEO of Walmart, recently said in an interview,

I’m really proud of our work in environmental and social sustainability—including the commitments we’re making on greenhouse gas. If the world knew what we’ve done for the past 10 years and what we’re doing to make things better holistically, I think our reputation would be dramatically better. (para. 42)

It appears that the company may be purposively engaging in programs to achieve just that. In 2018, McMillion (as cited in Green, 2018) said, “Walmart has undertaken initiatives to become more sustainable by cutting waste and taking carbon out of its supply chain. It started offering store employees better wages and expanded maternity leave, and began to give back to its communities” (para. 14). Rhetorically, Walmart is relying upon the communicative functions of its CSR programs to recreate a narrative to build a reputation as a company that cares about the communities it serves so customers can feel good about shopping at the retailer.

Walmart is constructing and creating a narrative based on its CSR programs. Walmart’s narrative involves caring about pharmacy customers. Moreover, the narrative now includes supporting veterans through a partnership with Goodwill Industries, as well as many environmental endeavors to reduce pollution. The overarching and unanswered question involves narrative fidelity: “Does the new narrative created by Walmart ring true to internal and external stakeholders?” I assert it is premature to answer this question with any degree of certainty—the CSR efforts at Walmart are relatively recent developments.

In conclusion, applying the narrative theory lens to the Walmart case study extends the idea that CSR can be a tool of narrative construction and can create a rebirth of corporate ethos. The narrative theory lens supports a conclusion that the corporation's narrative can communicate a rebranding of sorts, and CSR can be the basis to construct a narrative of rebirth and rebranding. The new narrative of Walmart includes elements of concern for customers, not just concern for profits. The CEO publicly stated if people knew of Walmart's environmental and social efforts, the reputation of the company would improve. The analysis of this case study indicates the narrative of a new more caring company has emerged. Fisher (1984) claimed people are inherently storytellers; thus, people will continue to interpret their experiences with Walmart. Over time, narrative fidelity will become clearer. According to Fisher (1984), people make sense of their lives through stories; Walmart is allowing a new narrative to emerge to inform consumers about the company and its new corporate ethos. The important takeaways from this case study are as follows: (a) CSR can serve as a tool of narrative creation, (b) narrative analysis is the most appropriate analysis tool because people both inside and outside the organization use organizational stories to communicate and socially construct a shared understanding of the organization, and (c) CSR can provide a company with a noble telos beyond that of simply making profit.

The narrative theory lens supports a conclusion that the corporation's narrative can communicate a rebranding of sorts, and CSR can be the basis to construct a narrative of rebirth and rebranding.



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