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It remains a surprise I have been involved with competitive debate for five decades, a sobering self-reflection. Viewed more charitably, participating in history imparts a certain authority, a wisdom reserved to longevity, even as one’s memory reconstructs. This essay purports to provide a history of the National Debate Tournament for roughly the last 50 years. Doing justice to the historical sweep would be a book-length project, this summary much more modest. The essay is inevitably selective, recounted from a particular point of view. History never allows more.

It has been my experience that there are enduring prospects for organizations across time, especially those defined by competition. A historic lens discloses how the NDT has changed and what that may suggest for the future. This short history recounts the changes in debate through the lens of three core trends: structure, technology, and doctrine. The aim is to contextualize the NDT’s history as a series of recurrent downsides and opportunities, often inherent in organization’s purpose and function.

Structure

Organizational structures inevitably change yet the ebb and flow has a rhythm. It has been nearly forty years since the first National Developmental Conference on Forensics (McBath, 1975) and nearly thirty years since the Second National Developmental Conference on Forensics (Parsons, 1984). A major concern expressed in both conferences was the threat posed by the increasing fragmentation of the forensics community. Correspondingly, a special issue of Speaker and Gavel conjectured on what debate and forensics would be like in the 1980s. The articles in the 1980 Speaker and Gavel repeatedly warned that fragmentation in forensics was threatening the viability of our activity. The arguments held that many forensics groups all speaking as the voice of excellence threatened to leave little more than impotent fiefdoms. Of course the voices that expressed in these conferences were those of the NDT, established voices arguing from what they “knew” to be valuable.

The third Developmental Conference was convened in 2009 (Louden, 2010), a tenant of an Internet age in which connection and fragmentation were not only possible but the very nature of survival. The conference worried about debate and its promotion, reflecting on diversity, worldwide enactment, and technological implications for practice and purpose. For the National Debate Tournament the question of viability in a dispersed world of debate is ever present. The central speculation is now less about objections to competing debate forums and more one of highlighting value. The balkanization train has left the station.
The most significant organizational development was the separatist growth of the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) and the associated decrease in NDT participation. In the 1970s and early 1980s “debate was debate,” with vague reflections of the honorary organizations Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha (DSR-TKA) and Pi Kappa Delta, which no longer provided the stability or the central competitive focus for debate. The honorary organizations’ fracture was itself a split of “foremost” schools set against the rest of the debate universe, largely made up of state-sponsored universities. Pi Kappa Delta’s high point came in the late 1960s–early 1970s with the 26th biennial convention held at Arizona State University in 1969. One hundred eighty-seven schools sent nearly 1000 debaters to the desert competition (Norton, 1982).

The National Debate Tournament presence, at the honoraries high-water mark, resided as a singular tournament hosted by the United States Military Academy. Almost an auxiliary to the honorary organizations, schools vied to be rewarded with an invitation, but resided (organizationally) in larger communities. For the first twenty-five years the NDT convened at West Point. In 1966, the tournament, another victim of the Viet Nam war, was discontinued by West Point and associated with the American Forensics Association (AFA), hosted at rotating collegiate venues. The NDT, after its inception in 1947, increasing became the defining competitive quest, displacing the relative importance of other national championships. Organizational structure resided with the AFA. At the National Communication Association convention in Chicago the still singular tournament become known as the “NDT” complete with an organization structure with charters, standing rules, codes, and committees (Ziegelmueller, 1996). The NDT, to this day part of the AFA, became in reality self-governing when the Charter was amended the 1980s, divesting rule-making authority to the NDT Committee.

The NDT grew from an initial 24 teams invited until Post-district at-large bids were initiated in 1968 and pre-district bids in 1971 growing in stages to sixty-four teams. Since 1970, it became possible for a school to qualify two teams. The size was increased to seventy-four teams. Beginning in 1992, up to six schools can qualify a third team, and the tournament moved to the present size of 78 teams (Parsons, 1995). 8

Breakaway and Merger

As these developmental conferences were convened, competition with CEDA for membership began to accelerate. The NDT was still the center of the debate universe, but the disenfranchised were leaving for a climate where competitive success seemed more feasible and philosophical beliefs seemed more welcome. The world of team debate settled into rival camps each reinforced with the self-assurance that they were finer, greater, larger, healthier, or at least “somehow” better.

Debate competition in the 1960s and 1970s experienced an institutional high point with more schools fielding traveling teams than in the present decades. The swell of participation was the confluence of a number of factors, including the coming of age of Communication departments, whose influential
faculty emerged from forensic backgrounds, departments did what they knew and what drew attention to their roots in oral communication. It was also a political backdrop geared to oppose dictatorial regimes and ideologies, best contested by reason. Critical thinking training was rewarded, critical stances were not.

In the 1980s the absolute number of programs contracted, perhaps by half. Costs began to compete with more mature departmental needs, constrained administrations, and a culture of inquiry more concerned with published research than an education steeped in activity-based learning. In the last twenty years debate has not contracted significantly as much as it has migrated.

Moves toward division are not inevitable, however, and the merger of CEDA and NDT in 1996 was seismic in NDT’s and policy debate’s evolution. The pressures associated with a smaller community were a major factor in the redefinition of the debate world. NDT and CEDA split and merger speak to the "natural rhythms" of organizations for perpetuation and attenuation.

CEDA had basked in the self-assurance of two decades of steady growth but was beginning to experience the same competitive dynamics that produced an elite core in NDT. Many in CEDA, especially the competitively strong, reasoned why not compete with those of like mind. Also, CEDA was faced with defections to Parliamentary and National Education Debate Association (NEDA) debate formats, and a travel schedule nearly as insane as that practiced in NDT.

NDT, on the other hand, over the 1980s and 1990s, remained fairly stable in participation. This “stability” of that period was achieved less by the introduction of new programs or retention of “marginal” programs, than by the expansion of the number of teams from a shrinking pool of institutions. While major tournaments remained viable, the community was feeling the pressures of becoming increasingly insular. Regional competitive outlets shrunk, restricting affordable travel. The celebration of depth (translation: “quality”) over breadth (translation: “mediocrity”) sufficed for a rationalization in the short term, but the collective community was beginning to feel the pinch. The NDT community was ready to “welcome back” its CEDA friends.

Simply stated, the merger happened because it served most programs’ interests. It was jump started by some wily politics that "surrendered" the topic selection process, but the underlying currents were in place.

**Technology**

The Internet revolution is fifty years old, the span of debate considered in this essay. It was not until 1992 that the World Wide Web became reality, and it would be another few years before general use became available. Nearly everything in our lives has been impacted by this revolution so it is not surprising that Debate has also been transformed. The most obvious impact is mechanical, moving from “cards” fifty years ago, to “blocks,” to jump drives shared during debates. The quantity and variety of evidentiary support similarly have burgeoned.

Technical transformation in debate owes much to the work of Rich Edwards (Baylor University), Gary Larson (Wheaton College), and Jon Bruschke (Cal
State Fullerton), who among others have led the technological revolution in tournament practice. Real time tournament transparency, results and procedures, on-line broadcast of debates, ballot entry from mobile devices are some of the applications. Brent Hinkle who manages Joy of Tournaments, a tournament management web site, commented on how technology has fundamentally changed the way tournaments are run, “compacting schedules, making them healthier via the magic of the computer.” He talked about how small items like “self-check-in” further compress tournaments.

Computerization has also made Mutual Preference Judging (MPJ) a practical reality. MPJ produced fairness, evaluator predictability, and control resting with the participants, who pressed for and sustain the reforms. There is almost no tournament under the CEDA/NDT auspices without MPJ. Research and technical advances allow narrower and narrower margins of agreement among the judges teams have preapproved. While satisfying constituent demands, MPJ has also been greatly criticized, a topic I return to later.

Karla Leeper (2010) articulates the hopeful standpoint regarding change, “Technology will allow debate practices to become more effective. Current innovations such as social networking, paperless debate, and virtual debating, as well as near-future possibilities such as online debating or open-source evidence production hold tremendous advantages for the community.”

Innovations affecting NDT’s practice include a plethora of advances, the most visible being the move to paperless debate in the last five years where the Tubs) led by Aaron Hardy, Whitman College, Jeff Jarmans work with CEDA Forum, Wiki scouting allowing case sharing, started by JP Lacy at Wake Forest all have changed the landscape. Much like the Wikipedia format, every debater potentially is the “author” of evidence and arguments; and, participants collectively are scouts, judge evaluators, theory and topic experts; turning traditional theories of pedagogy on their head. Also, “Open Source,” the sharing of a team’s research with the entire community, initiated by Georgetown and Wake Forest (Atchison & Miller, in Press) is gaining ground as the ease of distribution and access break down competitive interests.

Topic selection now takes place with the committee operating in open online meetings, with the commentary of debaters and coaches offered from around the country in real time. Communication allows lobbying and research throughout the night, mirroring the 24/7 research cycle at tournaments, mining the Internet for the next best update. Debate rounds are live-broadcast through the inventive work of Ricardo Saenz, an enterprising Georgia Tech debater.

In the debate world of the last fifteen years, research can proceed all night, supplemented by shadow squads back home. The national tournament is a week-long 24-hour operation, with sleep found in shifts. When the world is at your fingertips the research burden often sacrifices social times among competitors and coaches. The debate community, like most, more easily recognizes changes in other fields. Entire industries go away almost overnight. We remember when coaching in the morning meant trying to locate and mark up the front page of the New York Times, yet fail to see ourselves in the demise of newspapers and journalism.
Debate is changing at a pace that excites but spawns lingering feelings that in the not-too-distant future the activity may be unrecognizable. There are real questions if tournament debate will survive when multiple ways to communicate are easier\(^1\) and cheaper than getting past airport security. We are familiar with struggles for budgets and recognition, yet find the technological shifts, at once exhilarating and disquieting. Carly Woods et al. (2006) consider the implications of the integration of a single new technology of a “Digital Debate Archive” for the practice of debate. “These changes hold promises in efficiency, argumentation, and beyond. However, these resources may also negatively impact the community, eliminating some key skills, fragmenting the community, increasing resource disparities, or reducing spaces for innovation.”

It remains unclear whether debate is managing technology or technology is managing debate. Ross Smith, Wake Forest University, noted for example, “the ability to rank judges has created a procedure of assigning judges that we use because we can. . . how does the ability to do something drive its use?”

**Doctrine**

Organizations can be viewed as oscillations: structures weaken and strengthen, technology controls and is controlled, and consensus wavers. Debate’s most central principles celebrate openness and engagement, inviting discord and resolution. A never-ending characteristic is the “debate about debate,” continually charged and forged via competitive clash. Debate theory, or the “what, why, and how” of practice, has always been forged with much contradistinction.

Often theory is a way of leveling the playing field. Comparative advantage advanced the Affirmative, the PIC counterplan regained ground for the Negative. The major trends for the late 1960s to the early 1990s quibbled over argument ground (e.g., topicality) or situated the judge’s decision (e.g. hypothesis testing), but these disagreements were largely undertaken through shared assumptions about debate. In the last twenty years, new theory has flattened the competitive frames, often by redefining the very enterprise.

Those familiar with NDT debate in the 1960s-mid 1980s will remember stock issues, an orientation more rhetorically accessible to the general public. As speed rapidly increased and policy making replaced the public model, debate became more analytical, geared to expert audiences. In the 1970s and early 1980s hypothesis testing emerged as a challenge to the prevailing policy making orthodoxy, and in spurts and starts, gaming and tabula rasa perspectives mixed and followed. The term paradigms was tossed about to capture argumentative strains, but consensus remained that one needed to debate at least a "reasonable" version of the topic.

In 1991 "the kritik" recast debate. The approach moved through various stages for the following years, producing a split in debate between critical and policy approaches which, as Roger Solt (2004) observes, “. . . has gone beyond culture war to full-blown clash of civilizations.”

Kritiks fundamentally indict something about the way in which actions are justified. They have evolved from linguistic-turns questioning meaning and as-
sumptions, often with suggestions of real world effect. Tracks have included questions of overarching political ideology; kritiks of capitalism, realism, rights, the law, the border, and the state launched by radical environmentalists, feminists, and critical theorists of all stripes. They echoed the academy’s turn to postmodernist, post-structuralist, and critical theories; Martin Heidegger to Slavoj Žižek, Neo-Marxism to Critical Race Theory, debaters in the last two decades are exposed to wider literatures than previous generation of debaters.

"Methodological" kritiks (Solt, 2004) were in fashion in the early 1990s, arguing that traditional methods of proof (science, empiricism, expert testimony) are flawed, offering instead alternate modes of argument (personal narratives, irony, poetry, music and film). The result was a shift in argumentative ground from policy conclusions to assumptions, ideologies, discourses, ethics, activism, performance, methodology, and representations.

The latest trends focus on debate as "performance" where debates are less about policy than about identity, narrative understandings, and confrontation of life’s disparities. Tournaments are contested on Debate’s exclusionary posture toward a variety of minority groups, evidenced in poetry, music, and text; as one tournament winner boasted, their “performance and narrative was based on Lady Gaga.”

These strains, ideological in some instances, have attempted to demarcate the focus of debates and the activity’s purpose. Increasingly, the resolution is not advisory, instead focusing the locus of discussion on the venality of debate, which institutionally, it is argued, is unable to welcome contrasting voice. Discussion of race, identity, and dignity characterize engagement, in and out of contest locations. Pressures to comprehend are also accompanied by reactions aimed at maintaining “policy” as the heart of debate pedagogy.

The new stresses of coming together and coming apart pattern former division and merger but also have a personalization and championing of societal and individual causes, less amenable to concession. The future of the NDT self-definition remains uncertain when this article was penned.

**Welcomed Demographics**

The current doctrinal debate is associated with one of the most important trends in NDT participation. As the activity shrunk, participating schools proportionally have greater representation of elite institutions as smaller state institutions absorb budget cuts. Participation reflected even more accelerated trends of exclusiveness in the high school ranks; policy debate was often the custody of resourced, frequently private, institutions. Minority and lower socio-economic participants were present throughout the last 50 years but in familiar nominal levels. The last ten years have witnessed minority and less privileged in increasing numbers, in part the maturing of the Urban Debate League movement. There are now over twenty-fine Urban Debate League organizations, spanning cities from New York to San Francisco. Numbers of secondary schools participating in debate have steadily expanded, having real effects on the demographic makeup of collegiate debate squads (Baker, 2010), as well as impacting the nature of acceptable argumentation. Performance born in education/social
movements has moved to competitive debate and, depending on who is consulted, is nearing majority status. The cultural shift in argument, growing out of “new” participant’s voice, has changed the playing field of policy debate. While this is breaking elite singularity, the influx, long overdue and welcome, nonetheless also changes culture (Moss, 2001).

That doctrinal issues tie back to the revolution wrought by technology should surprise no one. The riddle of how best to guarantee judging fairness and expertise has existed since debates were contested. Each debate generation has worked to “improve” judging to better adjudicate eminence. Development of computer programs made it possible to move judge assignment away from tabroom discretion. The default has been to reflect the wishes of coaches and debaters, seeking, as much as possible, mutuality. The practice, around since the mid-90s has become known as Mutually Preferred Judging (MPJ).

Of course, any logarithm for judge placement is based on assumptions, permitting almost infinite variations on judge selection. MPJ is often the model for transparency but as Edwards and Jon Bruchke observe, “the downside is judge compression where the natural tendencies to balkanize, driven by competitive advantage and ideological friends, is entrenched. The judging pool is more preferred, better versed, but also more insular and overused (2010).

MPJ is also critiqued as dissembling the judging pool, thereby entrenching doctrinal splits in the community. Responsive judging, valued by debaters and coaches, becomes polarized, encouraging and rewarding argument departure. One irony of contemporary NDT debate is that tech’s laudable goals have the side effect of increased polarization, including charges that MPJ underrepresents minority, women, and judges with a few years on their resume. It is also fair to note that MPJ also allowed argument innovation, creating voice for women and minority participants. As factors are addressed, other divisions and opportunities are produced.

**Conclusion**

In constructing this essay the content transformed into more an *interpretation* than a detailed unfolding of historical events. The major changes that have transformed the NDT in the last 50 years—structural change, technological makeover, and doctrinal divergence—interconnect in ways that conjoin and divide. One is drawn to ask, “Will the NDT survive (or survive in a recognizable form or an improved version)?” One conclusion from this fifty-year retrospective is that debate, as an activity, is likely to survive challenges, and will strengthen, the solutions emanating from debates about and within the debate community.

Regardless of the tumult of any given moment, the National Debate Tournament merits acclaim for valuing excellence and training generations of the Nation’s top thinkers. Tim O’Donnell communicated debate’s value, likely endorsed by all:

*Intercollegiate debate, positioned at the nexus of liberal learning, is uniquely located to rejoin the call to renew the promise of the American experiment. Debate is a technology that connects the explosion of political speech*
with a civic-oriented vision for the future as well as a mode of speech and inquiry that is constitutive of citizenship: people (students) become citizens both in and through their participation in debate” (2010).

References


Endnotes

1 Previous Histories of the NDT are available at a variety of locations, including articles summarizing NDT history in the 1930s and 1980s (http://groups.wfu.edu/NDT/Articles/perspec.html) and articles speculating on the future of the NDT in 1997 (http://groups.wfu.edu/NDT/Articles/future.html). Concise history of the NDT’s move from West Point to the modern tournament is provided by George Ziegelmueller (1995), a founding eyewitness, and a later organizational history (Ziegelmueller & Baren, 2000). Donn Parson, long-term Director of the NDT, provides summaries of NDT decades from 1950 to the early 1990s (1995). Bill Southworth, Redlands University, publishes a frequently updated book, The History of the N.D.T. 1947-latest. Some of the information in his book at the official records of results, hosts, awards, etc. at http://wfu.edu/NDT.

2 The first conference endorsed diversity as well, leading eventually to AFA’s creation of the National Individual Events Tournament (NIET). (Parson, 1995). For an early history of debate in America see Cowperthwaite & Baird (1954).

3 Speaker and Gavel, 17.

4 In 2010, as reported in the book Navigating Opportunity: Policy Debate in the 21st Century, Anjali Vats (2010) annotated debate web sites that were organizations that serve primarily debate. The list did not include state associations, individual programs, forensics organization focusing on individual events, Facebook and other social networks (now significant outreach for programs). She found well over one hundred organization or specialty sites that offer purposeful content for significant communities.

5 DSR-TKA is itself a product of merger in 1968. H. T. Ross, The story of the merger. In Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha Chapters Sponsor’s Handbook. DSR-TKA and Pi Kappa Delta remain active organizations, their primary emphasis on individual competitions. DAR-TKA sponsors this journal; Pi Kappa Delta publishes The Forensic. (Also see histories for PKD, Nabors, 1963; Nichols, 1999).


7 http://groups.wfu.edu/NDT/HistoricalLists/Sites1.htm

8 A rule adopted in 2013 will allow a 79th team from the host institution if they did not have a regularly qualifying team.

9 And there was yet a multitude of forensics organizations to be founded. Five Principal organizations were founded between 1981 and 1994. Two by avowed purpose did not affect participation in NDT and CEDA. The American Parliamentary Debate Association (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Parliamentary_Debate_Association#Relationship_to_Other_Tournaments_and_Organizations) founded in 1981, comprised primarily New England schools not formerly associated with the NDT. The National Education Debate Association (NEDA) (http://www.neda.us/) was founded in 1994 as a rule-based invitation-only association, primarily located in the Upper Midwest. NEDA by design does not
competitively cross-over with other organizations. Another offspring, the American Debate Association (ADA) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Debate_Association#History) founded in 1985 in the Mid-Atlantic region detached but membership continues to largely overlap with NDT. CEDA and NDT were increasingly pressured with the founding of National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Parliamentary_Debate_Association#Relationship_to_Other_Tournaments_and_Organizations) in 1993, finding initial strength, like CEDA, in Western states. Membership consisted largely of migration from mainstream debate organizations.

The NPDA is experiencing similar membership pressures as CEDA and NDT experienced. It also feels competitive pressures rendering debates more similar than dissimilar to CEDA/NDT (Buescher, 2010).

The 2000s have witnessed a slight uptick in participation as schools add, and programs field more teams.

Several online forms of debate are now available, including tournaments, for example the University of Southern California’s “Annenberg Digital Debate Initiative” (http://www.usctrojandebate.com/page/annenberg-digital-debate-initiative-addi) and World-wide hookups through the support of the University of Vermont (Snider, 2010).

The Urban Debate League movement was founded in Atlanta Schools via the auspices of Emory University in 1985 (Breger, 2010; Wade, 2010). Levels of participation continue to expand with many league debaters making their way into the collegiate ranks (Baker, 2010). The UDL movement is increasing showing evidence of significant educational impact among participating populations (Anderson & Mezuk, 2012; Wade, Wade, & Hailmayr, 2009; Winkler, 2011).