

INTERORGANIZATIONAL COOPERATION

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Perhaps our most venerable bromide is the claim "he who ignores history is condemned to repeat it." While we might quibble with it or stitch it on a sampler, we can also occasionally take it seriously. A discussion of inter-organizational cooperation is an appropriate occasion to do so. It is at least plausible to think that problems of interorganizational cooperation are best understood in the context of the problems which stimulated organizational proliferation in the first place.

The problem I want to discuss was not the sole cause of organizational proliferation; nor was it in every case the most obvious cause. But it was, for all that, a decisive component of the conditions of suspicion, distrust, and mutual antagonism which led to proliferation. And it was all the more powerful because it was rarely discussed directly and bluntly, or — at least— it was rarely discussed in quite the way I want to discuss it here.

Putting a label on the problem is hard. It would be wrong to call it "ethnocentrism" or "regionalism" or "corruption," because the problem was (and is) far more complex than these words imply. Perhaps the ordinary parlance of the forensics community would serve better. At the risk of sounding like Gore Vidal on the Trilateral Commission, I want to say that the forensic community of the past three or four decades got itself divided into "clubs." Like country clubs and men's smokers, these clubs differed in their admission requirements, exclusionary policies, and prices; but they were clubs for all that. While it wasn't always true, the National Debate Tournament circuit has recently developed into a single "club" — or at least one may be pardoned for thinking that it has. I want to consider how this happened, what its effects were, and how it led to organizational proliferation. And appropos to my opening bromide, I want to consider the ways the same thing will happen again.

I have two axes to grind. The first is obvious: a clear understanding of the problem may yield solutions — or, failing that, at least a more reflective way of dealing with the problem. The second is somewhat less obvious: I want to show that forensics practitioners — professional communication scholars — have proved remarkably insensitive to the communication practices of their discourse community. The forensics world, like every other discourse domain, is founded on its communication practices; and its problems are often bound to these practices. This is true, at least, of the club problem, and my

conclusions will be an SCA/AFA/CEDA version of still another bromide:
"physician, heal thyself."

When Worlds Collide: A Prediction

I start with a prediction. It doesn't matter if I turn out to be wrong. Just as science fiction writers sometimes use their genre as an incidental means for making points about contemporary problems, I want to use this prediction as a way of describing the conditions that led to organizational proliferation.

The Terror of Tiny Town

The National Debate Tournament circuit will pass away. The handful of schools currently supporting NDT circuit tournaments will gradually lose interest in attending tiny tournaments; CEDA tournaments will continue to flourish, and the NDT circuit teams will gradually start attending those tournaments. No big decisions will be announced. There will just come a day when we realize that no one is attending NDT circuit tournaments any more. Perhaps the NDT itself will one day be cancelled for lack of entries.

The Day of the Triffids

CEDA will grow and prosper. Tournaments will proliferate and will gradually become distinguished by skill levels — as they are now. A trend that had already started in CEDA, the teams sounding more and more like the NDT teams, will persist and intensify.

Monster on Campus

Budgets will be unequal. The schools with the most money will travel more widely than the schools with less. Thus will emerge (if it hasn't already) a distinction between schools with regional and those with national programs. A circuit or regular national circuit tournaments will evolve, not by plan but by happenstance. This gradual development will closely resemble the postwar development of the NDT circuit.

The schools regularly competing in the national circuit tournaments will develop close ties — personal ones between their professional coaches and between their debaters, and institutional ones as ride-sharing and tournament co-hosting increase.

Dawn of the Dead

People who see each other every weekend adopt regular, predictable strategies and tactics. Because they regularly interact, their arguments increase in sophistication and complexity with each passing week. Verbal shorthand becomes increasingly easy and desirable. Because they hear the same teams and arguments every week, the judges enter into a special community of discourse —

one whose background assumptions are as complex as the shared time permits. Presentational styles emerge which mark the regulars off from outsiders — not for the purpose of labelling insiders and outsiders, but from happenstance.

The regulars are now a club. They share similar budget sizes — which is how they became a club in the first place; they share a common background of experience — all the past debates they commonly know about; they share organizational and presentational styles; and, as a result, they share common theories of forensics, judging philosophies, techniques and strategies, etc. They know each other personally. Friendships develop; professional respect is mutually awarded; and — this is the kicker, really — standards of excellence become club property. None of this happens by conscious conspiracy; no foul motives are involved; no deals are struck.

The Stepford Wives

Viewed from the outside — which is to say, viewed ungenerously — the club is a close-knit, ethnocentric morass of corruption. They all sound alike, think alike, and vote alike. They vote for their friends and punish outsiders. They make it difficult if not impossible for outsiders to become insiders — and they do so for the perfectly self-interested reason that their success depends upon their being a tightly sealed club.

Castle of Dracula

Viewed from inside — which is to say, viewed from a posture of outraged indignation — the above picture is hopelessly naive. The club members are club members because they are good enough. Club teams beat outsiders because they are better. Merit is the sole criterion of success. The budget differential is admitted and lamented; and it is true that budgets are at least partially correlated to program quality. But budget differentials are not the club's fault. The outsiders are thus scapegoating the club for their budgetary limitations.

The Terror of Party Beach

Both sides have missed an important point — a communication problem they really ought to have been sensitive to. The club hasn't evolved by corruption or foul motives; the budget differentials have had their effect; but there is a more profound barrier between insider and outsider. Shared discourse is privileged discourse. Debaters and judges who interact regularly achieve common understandings about discourse that permit elision and economy. Regularity in interaction leads as well to shared philosophies and standards. The net effect is that a discourse domain arises whose outer barriers are virtually impenetrable. The outsiders DO get beaten by insiders. People who play in other

people's ballparks often do. And they get beaten fair and square, by the rules. Cheating isn't necessary when the cards are already stacked.

Godzilla on Monster Island

To continue the prediction: one of the regular tournaments gradually becomes a way of selecting a national champion. Or, perhaps not much more fantastically, a new national debate tournament is created. It is infused with CEDA values, to be sure, but it is a national debate tournament all the same. Its creation will be a natural outcome of the gradual development of a regular national circuit within CEDA.

The club gets better and better; outsiders feel increasingly alienated; and a handful of alternative tournaments gradually emerges — probably from tournaments which had previously been local ones.

In other words, CEDA now looks exactly the way the NDT circuit looked in 1960 or thereabouts. The pressures for reform are enormous. Distrust, suspicion, and overt hostility — insider versus outsider — are rampant.

Rosemary's Baby

An alternative circuit starts to grow. It attracts schools with smaller budgets and, more important, the CEDA rebels — the ones fleeing the corruption and clubhouse atmosphere which have metastasized throughout CEDA. A children's crusade begins to drive the infidel from the Holy Land.

The crusade takes its toll. The new circuit waxes; CEDA wanes. Talk is afoot that CEDA may soon pass away.

Alien: In An AFA Meeting No One Can Hear You Scream

I trust this not-too-subtle allegory can end here. My point is that professional communication scholars have not performed admirably. It is not an awe-inspiring spectacle when an academic discipline misses the whole point of its subject matter.

The question arises whether I have posed a problem which cannot be solved. Budget inequities and regularities in professional associations seem to be givens. The existence of clubs is probably unavoidable. If I am right about the importance of the club problem, are we not faced with a Kafkaesque — which is to say distinctively French — dilemma?

There is some value merely in getting an issue reflectively discussed. For one thing, it may help us avoid futility. One might propose, for instance, that interorganizational cooperation would be enhanced by information-sharing and enhanced joint ventures. If I am right about the club problem, such ventures will not accomplish much. I doubt we need a CEDA-NDT hotline; the war

has already happened. And, if my prediction has any merit, CEDA already has the NDT egg on board.

Nor will the creation of a new umbrella organization get around the problem, though it might solve other problems. The organizational structures we must now work with are symptoms, not causes. In some respects, the present state of proliferation may not be an unqualified evil. After all, individual events coaches often have more in common with one another than with debate coaches who are unfamiliar with individual events practices and traditions. The schism in debate circles, if I am remotely right in my discussion here, will be brought intact into a new organization. So it is not absurd to try to grapple with the problem within the present institutional structures.

I am taking for granted that, if the AFA did not exist, we would have to create one. The need for a professional, disciplinary organization to publish the scholarly journals, plan conventions, fund research, and promote scholarship in the discipline surely needs no defending. The forensic professionals, after all, are communication scholars first and debate coaches second — come tenure time at least. The pressures on forensic professionals to conduct research and publish will increase powerfully in the coming years. Membership in a highly visible professional, disciplinary organization that specifically legitimates the debate activity will become increasingly necessary. Of emphatic rhetorical importance is that the scholarly organization be of international stature. Seemingly localized or arcane organizations will not yield the scholarly excellence — or the perceptions thereof — larger international organizations can.

Let me proceed now as if my explanation of the club problem has elicited wide agreement. I'll be surprised if it doesn't, but it would be fortunate if I were wrong. My proposal, in a nutshell, is that communication professionals ought to be able to talk through and arrive at ways of avoiding its worst effects. The AFA (or any other organization, for that matter) should create the circumstances propitious to this result — whatever it takes: convention programs, conferences, special study groups, and educational programs to publicize the results. A special study group at Alta would be easy enough to get started. Convention seminars can easily be arranged. The talk should start now.

Several years ago, David Zarefsky proposed that forensic scholars regard academic debate as a phenomenon worthy of study in itself. Forensic practices are not so different from real world practices as we have supposed, he argued, and careful observation of debate practices may yield insights into other sorts of practices. The club problem I have discussed is certainly not unique to

academic debate. If I am correct in thinking that the problem stems from the communication practices of the community, the study of and the solution for the club problem may be worthy undertakings. The debate community is filled with communication professionals accustomed to thinking in the language of plans. Thus I cannot believe that debate professionals cannot hash out the problem. I doubt they can solve it, but they can eliminate its worst effects by sensitizing students to its ground rules.

I close with a statement riddled with suspicion, mistrust, and hostility: If we cannot deal with this problem, we probably are not qualified to teach debate. Our sophistication has to be equal to the subject matter. This problem is our chance to find out.