Adjusting to Technological Change in Competitive Forensics
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Technology is simply a tool—a means to reach an end more efficiently. Forensics is also a tool—a pedagogical one. While few may argue that emerging communication technologies have been unimportant, too little attention has been focused on the impact of technology in competitive speech and debate. If technology is a tool, then perhaps it is best left to others to discuss its particulars. However, public speakers may be missing an important opportunity by ignoring the possibility that technological understanding and communication competence will be closely linked in the 21st century. This essay explores the possible problems, advantages and uses of emerging communication technologies in forensic competition.

Three particular problems stem from increasing integration of technology in forensics. The first potential issue is the shift towards alternative (and less important) skills. If technology is more than a tool, that is to say that an understanding of technology is a study of values, the pedagogical intention of the activity must also change. Directors must become aware of current and emerging technologies and the educational impact of using them. Do debaters get less out of the event if a computer does all of the research? Would competitors network with others in an online tournament? Tulloch (2000) asserts that the line between online and offline instruction have become blurred. In other words, the forensics director simply cannot separate their responsibility to help students grow and their task of understanding the technologies their competitors are utilizing.

Second, technological integration has the potential to create further financial strain on programs. Programs with tighter budgets, to remain competitive, would be required to play catch up with technology. Given the rate of obsolescence in technology, remaining technologically competitive has the potential to be extremely problematic. One of three scenarios may occur. First, the director will simply not enter the race at all. And if the integration of technology changes the values guiding the activity, a student would be placed at a disadvantage—competitive success may be determined by technological access as much as by rhetorical skill. Another problem concerns the hosting of tournaments, which would require a vast amount of technological resources. In this area, the forensics director would face a most difficult challenge—most likely passing on the responsibility and the benefits of hosting a tournament.

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Second, the student may be required to shoulder the burden of technological expectations. Many colleges are now requiring students to purchase laptop computers to help facilitate their own education. Just as a student is required to make purchases to maximize success, such as professional attire and, in some cases, meal money for trips to tournaments, perhaps the students participating can be held financially responsible for their involvement. The potential problem, however, is that the cost to the student may be prohibitive. Additionally, a disparity may occur within the team itself—some competitors having access and others without. This makes the creation of team cohesion more difficult and presents a roadblock for coaches and directors to achieve relational equity in the face of technological and economic divergence.

Or, the director may choose to dive head first into technology—at the expense of other areas. A program, under this scenario, would be forced to cut corners to stay current with technology. A program may reduce the number of tournaments attended, eliminate meal funds, place a limit on the number of participants, or place a fundraising expectation on competitors.

The third issue surrounding the integration of technology and forensics is the threat to the view of the activity as a "community." The primary challenge to the community nature of speech and debate is the potential for tournaments to be held online through computer networks or interactive television systems. While one may argue that having these kinds of tournaments could actually save money for programs due to the elimination of travel costs, these types of tournaments represent a minimization, at best, and a disintegration, at worst, of the bonds that connect forensic teams to themselves and each other.

Innovations such as the word processor helped competitors to reach their competitive goals. Additionally, the activity is competitive in nature because of the values served by competition. In essence, competition is as much a tool of education as the word processor is. However, by eliminating the community of forensics, we jeopardize its primary values. Competition is no longer a tool—it becomes the goal. Gergen (2000) calls this new community, shaped by technology, a "relational imaginary." In a community formed this way, identities are formed that are not linked in a concrete way to the participants. Relationships proceed and occur not because of tangible relationships but through positioning in the electronic discourse. The forensic community no longer exhibits a geographic locus—competition and experiences become robbed of the contexts that make forensics relationally value-laden.

However, as Voth (1997) states, competitors are shortchanged if they are being prepared for speech roles that do not exist in everyday practice. Indeed, there are several ways that emerging technologies can bolster the pedagogical values of the activity. First, integrating technology and forensics can help students prepare for a multimedia work environment. For example, a persuasion speech may be given as a Power Point presentation. The judge must then assess the student's use of technology in terms of its relevance and creativity. The potential danger, though, is that multimedia may become a competitive expectation, resulting in the harms previously discussed. Also, the educational utility of an event should still be to
understand persuasion. If the event becomes a comparison of technological acumen then technology has sabotaged the purpose of the activity.

Second, integrating technology with forensics activities may increase involvement. Program directors have the responsibility to illustrate the benefits of their programs to receive funding and support. As universities increasingly value the importance of technological preparedness as an educational priority, framing the forensics experience as technological skills training can augment programs and increase visibility among students and administration.

Ultimately, this essay argues that technology, when used as a tool, has the capacity to enrich and modernize the activity. Unfortunately, if emerging technologies become the pedagogical focus of forensics, the interactions and purposes of the community are placed in jeopardy. When outlining goals for a competitive forensics team, a director must contemplate the impact of supporting or implementing technological strategies. From economic disparity to value violation, this issue will continue to confront members of the forensic community.

References

