DEBATE AND THE WEB: CREATING SYNERGY BETWEEN EVIDENCE RETRIEVAL AND PRODUCTION

Stefan Bauschard

The World Wide Web (www) was first developed by Tim Berners Lee as a means for researchers, primarily scientists, to share user-created content. Although it was originally developed as a dynamic tool, it has largely traditionally been a means for retrieving information supplied by others. Until recently, a majority of users have "surfed" the web for relevant information that they were seeking that has been provided by a minority of others.

Information retrieval has also been the dominant use by the majority of the debate community, as debaters and coaches initially turned to popular fee-based databases such as Lexis-Nexis and then general publicly accessible web research as the sophistication of search engines grew to make accessing that material more practical. Today, an overwhelming majority of evidence that is presented in debates is obtained through fee or free web-based electronic retrieval resources.

Many debate-specific websites emerged to facilitate the information retrieval efforts of the debate community. Debate-central (debate.uvm.edu), a project of the University of Vermont's Lawrence Debating Society, was developed to distribute as a means to distribute free instructional materials for debaters. The most popular pay site, Planet Debate.com, a project of the Harvard Debate Council, was begun in 2002 as a means to distribute low-cost evidentiary and instructional materials to debaters and coaches.

Although the web first evolved as a means of distributing information to a majority that was produced by a minority, the last two years have witnessed an explosion of user-generated web content, referred to as Web 2.0. Common popular Web 2.0 tools include message boards, blogs, photo-sharing sites such as fickr, and wikis. *Time Magazine* has recognized this explosion of user-generated content by naming all of us – "you" – as the person of the year.

Popular Web 2.0 sites include myspace.com, facebook.com, and gather.com. Myspace and Facebook are social networking sites that focus on the development of personal ties and friendships to more general audiences. The primary users of these sites are high schools students, college students, and twenty somethings. Gather.com is focused on the building communities of individuals who are interested in particular issues.

The development of web 2.0, and its supporting technologies and ideas, have provided many additional opportunities for the debate community, including social networking through message boards, student-professional interaction through blogs, and information sharing through wikis.

One of the simplest social networking websites, a site developed years before "Web 2.0" become a popular reference, is Cross-x.com. Cross-x.com is a popular forums-based social networking site where primarily high school students discuss arguments, debate camps, upcoming tournaments and results, social and political issues, and other topics of interest. Although the focus is primarily social, there are many question and answer forums where students share information on arguments, debating techniques, and general instruction. With the exception of posted email interview with Harvard professor Jonathan Schell, however, this content would generally not be considered acceptable evidence in debate.

Although Cross-x.com is limited to peer-to-peer interaction, the development of blogigng technologies has stimulated student-to-professional interaction. During the 2005-6 high school season, a Greenhill School (Dallas, TX) and University of Southern

California alum, and now law lecturer at Miami University, Lindsay Harrison developed a blog http://legaldebate.blogspot.com/ where she fielded questions related to a legal issues debate topic. She was even able to find other law professors to address many unique questions. Answers to the questions were posted in the blog and often read as evidence by debaters. This blog created a unique opportunity for high school students to interact with law professors.

Another example of debaters taking advantage of interaction with law professors to produce evidence involves Wake Forest debater Seth Gannon's interaction with George Washington law professor Peter Rosen who published a recent book *The Most Democratic Branch: How the Courts Serve America.*

Seth asked Peter Rosen whether or not overruling the Supreme Court's Morrison decision would be a violation of *Stare Decisis*[4]. This was a very targeted question aimed at soliciting a link or link answer to a disadvantage to one of the most popular cases on the 2006-7 courts topic. Rosen responded:

> There's room for debate about how to apply the idea of *"super* stare decisis*"* when it comes to the Federalism cases; but generally, as you suggest, I think judges should defer to Congress in the face of uncertainty. And I'm inclined to think that judicial flyspecking of Congress's power is more of an agenda item for the Republican base than a constitutional principle clearly embraced by a majority of the American people. For that reason, I wouldn't shed any tears if Morrison *were overturned.*

Leading up to the 2006 CEDA topic committee meeting, a blog (http://cedatopic.blogspot.com) was developed to facilitate the exchange of ideas on potential resolutions. Although the use of the blog before the meeting was not extensive, it was used heavily during the meeting. Hundreds of people viewed the blog and regularly posted in the comments section. These individuals were not limited to members of the immediate debate community – current debaters and coaches – but included many types of alumni, including law professors and lawyers. Their expert advice helped

to avoid errors and improved the wording of the topic. The postings of these experts have been quoted throughout the college season in many debates.

The blog dynamic was enhanced by a live video feed of the meeting that was provided by the host. Many who were "watching at home" posted their reactions, usually immediately, into the blog. Others sent emails directly to the committee members, "real time" interaction.

The Cross-Examination Debate Association (cedebate.org) has now developed its own blog site (http://www.cedatopic.com/) to support continued topic development. This author started his own blog to support the high school topic meeting in August, 2006 (http://www.planetdebate.com/cxguide/cxguide_blogs.asp?mode= 15). The blog solicited, and received, opinions from many high school coaches on the developing resolutions slated for vote for the 2007-2008 season.

Blog-based web sites have been used to push the development of debating applications beyond the needs of the immediate policy debate community. DebateScoop.org, a site co-founded by Ross Smith of Wake Forest University and Tim O'Donnell of Mary Washington University, takes advantage of blog software to support the analysis of contemporary politics by involving both undergraduate students and academic experts in a dynamic analysis of political debates.

Just as in the news industry, these interactions and productions have led to questions as to what constitutes legitimate evidence and whether or not the published results are appropriately peer-reviewed. Other concerns relating to the idea that answers have been produced based on leading questions have also been expressed[4].

Law professor Lindsay Harrison notes that her posts are not "peer reviewed" and may not pass as evidence in debates. This is an interesting disclaimer, but it is undermined by the subtitled description of the blog as "a forum for law professor interaction with the high school debate community." The subtitle deconstructs its claim of a lack of authority. The "truth," of course, lies in the

ambiguity between the disclaimer and the subtitle. The authority is unclear – it is a law professor writing in a non-peer reviewed publication. It is a source that lacks the quality of peer review, but it is a qualified source nonetheless.

It is certainly superior to many popular forms of debate evidence, including wire reports, columns by court reporters who often lack law degrees, and even many law review articles that are written by law students. All of these sources are widely accepted as legitimate in both high school and policy debate.

In fact, introducing evidence from this new media should only serve to stimulate debate by amongst students over the value and utility of claims delivered through such sources. Experience with, and evaluation of, new media sources is now an additional feature of a debate education. The fact that these issues are hitting the forefront of discussion is educationally productive, because as the articles referenced below indicate, these are questions that society at-large, not just the debate community is struggling with. It can only be productive to have debaters weigh in on these issues.

Moreover, questions raised by individuals such as Seth Gannon in the exchange with Peter Rosen help contribute to the further development of ideas. Similarly, the clarification obtained via email by Michigan debate coach Josh Hoe in the exchange with Ledowitz relating to his claim about domestic violence and "terrorism," helps argumentative analysis and even enhances basic understanding. This is similar to the role played by bloggers in scrutinizing media reports.

In addition to message boards and blogs, the debate community has also begun to take advantage of the wiki knowledge sharing systems. This year, Wake Forest debate organized its popular tournament case list around a free wiki tool -- http://opencaselist.wikispaces.com/. This site allows users to enter and modify case list information not only for the Wake Forest tournament but throughout the season.

Some discussion has occurred about the potential for a wider sharing of evidence through wikis systems. One model for such a system is spacedebate.org, a website started by a former debater

that contains an extensive collection of evidence in the forms of quotes on the various controversies within the space militarization debate.

Wiki systems intuitively have a lot of potential for information sharing across the debate community. While that potential exists, wikis have been little utilized by the debate community. The opencaselist submissions simply did not happen after the November tournament–(http://opencaselist.wikispaces.com/page/history/home). Almost all of the information entered to date has been entered by the Wake Forest coaching staff. The mere existence of the tool has not adequately incentivized contributions.

Over the last ten years, members of the debate community have become heavy users of the World Wide Web. Mirroring society at-large, the debate community initially used the web as a means of information retrieval and now has begun to use it in a more collaborative fashion. Collaboration has worked the best through the use of social networking sites such as Cross-x.com and blogs. These collaborative sites have introduced new questions relating to what properly constitutes "evidence," and such discussions are valuable for all participants. Debating about the value of these particular sources has enhanced the educational experience provided by the activity.

The experience of the college 2006 topic meeting demonstrates that collaboration can work best when multiple technologies, such as blogs, video feeds, email, and online research tools are used simultaneously. This integration of more traditional static content with new networking tools enables debaters to take full advantage of all internet-based technologies creates a synergy that enhances both the independent values of all of the technologies as well as the educational experience.

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Stefan Bauschard (M.A., Duquesne) is Director of Debate for the Lakeland Schools (NY), proprietor of PlanetDebate.com, and works with the Harvard Debate Program as a coach.