

Specific Information: Marginalization and Detriment to Public Argument¹

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The current use of "specific information" as a means of excluding data from parliamentary debate rounds poses a hazard to reasoned and informed public debate. "Specific information" is data introduced by one team into a parliamentary debate round that the opposing team perceives as too detailed, personal, unique or inaccessible. The National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) Championship Tournament rules state:

Debaters may refer to any information which is within the realm of knowledge of liberally educated and informed citizens. If they believe some cited information to be too specific, debaters may request that their opponent *explain* specific information with which they are unfamiliar (*Italics not in original*) (Trapp, Appendix A).

Unfortunately, in many cases, rather than requesting an explanation, debaters ask that the information be excluded from the debate round. I find this practice problematic for two reasons. One, it can be used to limit the informational content of the round. Two, it may not uphold the goal of providing a public model of debate. I contend that by removing the "specific information" clause from the NPDA Tournament rules, parliamentary debate would more closely reflect two aspects of public argument: unrestricted content of the discourse and less reliance on procedural argumentation. In Dr. Robert Trapp's article "Parliamentary Debate as Public Debate" he outlines his perspective on parliamentary debate. Building on Dr. Trapp's conception of the goal of parliamentary debate as "reasoned and informed public debate" (85) I will argue the "specific information" rule has no objective foundation and may exclude marginalized viewpoints. Additionally, I will argue that "specific information" is not an acceptable form of public argument.

¹ Webmaster's note: This article is as it was originally published, with the exception of changing a URL listed in the references. The old URL will be listed in brackets; the current URL is listed in the reference.

Specific Information Challenges as a Debate Tactic

The contemporary use of the "specific information" clause of the NPDA Tournament Rules takes two forms. Teams use either form after one team introduces a piece of information into the debate. One side, proposition or opposition, asserts they lack adequate knowledge of the subject matter brought up by the opposite team. The team opposing the "specific information" may then challenge this information in one of two ways. They may request that the opposing team give further details about the data in question. They may also ask the adjudicator to exclude the information from the round because they (the challenging team members) lack prior knowledge of the information. The team then justifies the exclusion of the data with the "specific information" argument.

Teams may use both challenges effectively; however, the notion that information can be excluded due to the "specific information" rule is incorrect. The first challenge is simply the use of a "point of information." The "specific information" clause states that a debater may ask for further clarification of information believed to be too specific. In short, this clarification is one type of question or point of information. The second challenge, in addition to being inconsistent with the "specific information" clause, is a form of argument from authority which appeals to the rules of the NPDA. Rather than arguing the merits of the information, teams use the second challenge to exclude information due to ignorance.

Goals of Parliamentary Debate

While the NPDA has not adopted a formal statement of goals, Trapp offers one perspective on the pedagogy of parliamentary debate:

The unique character of parliamentary debate emerges from the extemporaneous nature of the debates and from the exclusion during the debate of published resources NPDA encourages genuine, engaging debate among participants who may draw only from their own knowledge and personal resources (Trapp 85).

The goal of "reasoned and informed public debate" consists of three complementary components: 1) Reasoned 2) and Informed 3) Public debate.

The first component of Trapp's goal is reasoned debate. Trapp suggests that "[G]ood debating of any kind [should] focus on reasons that underlie the acceptance or rejection of propositions"(85). Reason involves the invention of one's own arguments and the refutation of an opponent's arguments. When a debater argues the second challenge to "specific information" as cause for the rejection of her/his opponent's argument the component of reason is being employed. The reason or logic they employ is "specific information" challenge.

A debater's focus on reasoning helps him or her to cultivate critical thinking skills. Due to the extemporaneous nature of parliamentary debate, students must develop the ability to reason quickly. Because topics can vary greatly, students must also gain an understanding of how to approach and reason through unfamiliar topics.

In addition to reasoning, Trapp also argues "All debaters need to be well informed on the subjects they debate. Since parliamentary debaters do not know their actual debate topic until a few minutes prior to the debate, they must be well-informed on a wide variety of topics"(86). We expect that debaters will have a wide breadth of knowledge. This captures the concept of reasoned and *informed* public debate. The debate experience should cultivate a broad base of knowledge. Like other forms of debate, better-informed individuals are more likely to succeed.

When critics reward knowledge of a broad range of issues in debates, students have additional motivation to investigate various topics. Just as they must reason quickly, debaters must process information rapidly and in numerous contexts. Hence, parliamentary debate can foster an environment in which debaters may refine their ability to process a wide variety information.

Trapp offers the third component of debate: the emphasis on public debate. "Rather than being accessible to only a technical audience, parliamentary debate ought to be accessible to an informed and intelligent public. Debaters learn how to argue in ways understood by well-informed lay audiences rather than in ways understood only by

technical experts" (86). Parliamentary debate seeks to foster debaters who will be well-informed members of the community at large. It also seeks to foster well-informed audiences. Steve Johnson extends the conception of parliamentary debate as public debate when he states:

I believe the unique opportunity inherent in parliamentary debate is its ability to provide a genuine setting for public debate. . .to provide the general public with a venue in which they may observe or participate in a dialectic that shape perceptions of fact, value and policy. . . 'to bring debate back to the people' (2).

I share Trapp's and Johnson's conception of "parliamentary debate as a forum for public argument" (Johnson 2). It is the synthesis of all three components of Trapp's goals for parliamentary debate which make the activity valuable.

Specific Information Challenges and Informed Debate

A debater's use of the second "specific information" challenge undermines the goal of *informed* debate in two ways. First, the "specific information" rule lacks an objective standard of evaluation. The wording of the rule defers to the individual debater's judgement. "If they believe some cited information to be too specific, debaters may request that their opponent explain "specific information" with which they are unfamiliar" (Trapp Appendix A). Debaters cannot reasonably know the life experiences and educational background of their opponents. When the debater decides what information is inadmissible, the role of adjudication shifts from the critic to the participant. The audience no longer evaluates the debate.

Much in the same way a debater cannot be expected to have knowledge of the opponent's expertise, the critic cannot be expected to have knowledge of what the teams do and do not know. For a critic to be able to properly evaluate a claim of "specific information," two contingencies are necessary which are not currently present in the NPDA rules. First, the critic must have operational comprehension of what is *too* specific for a given topic. Second, the critic must know how much each team knows about the challenged information. The first condition cannot be met. Debates center on an unlimited number of potential topics. Even if we could formulate a standard for "specific

information" it would not be productive to limit the type and nature of information brought into the discourse. In such an educational activity, we have the responsibility to allow a totality of perspectives to be represented.

Specific Information Challenges and Marginalized Discourse

Though we must consider the possibility of creating a clear standard, we face a more serious problem with the use of "specific information" challenges. When a team initiates a "specific information" challenge, they use the "common knowledge" standard. The "common knowledge" standard suggests that we share a culturally defined body of information and experience and that this body of knowledge should serve as the parameter for acceptable debate discourse. The challenging debater argues that a particular piece of "specific information" should be excluded from the debate because it lies outside of "common knowledge." While "common knowledge" is an uncomplicated justification for the "specific information" challenge, it keeps marginal discourse excluded from debate.

Sonya Foss and Eileen Berlin Ray write "The communication discipline has theorized interaction primarily within traditional hegemonic models. As a result, alternative theories that are from different communication experiences have been marginalized" (243). Parliamentary debate is not immune to this indictment. Inherent to the second type of "specific information" challenge is the exclusion of information from the discourse. Experiences that are outside common knowledge are likely to be part of excluded and marginalized information. In the early 1980s, the indigenous farm-workers of Guatemala, in an attempt to form trade unions, became the target of genocide by the Guatemalan military (Bugos-Debray xiii). A team introducing this information into a debate may face a "specific information" challenge. A team may use this narrative to explicate the oppression of indigenous peoples, the dangers of authoritarianism, and the challenges the labor movement faces. By excluding these viewpoints, we delegitimize the importance of these conditions and decrease the diversity of perspectives within the realm of parliamentary debate.

Informed debate cannot take place when perspectives are forcibly omitted. The "specific information" rule offers debaters a tool of which exclusion is an unfortunate byproduct. We should approach marginalized discourse by seeking the inclusion of alternative information and incorporation of the material into the debate process. This would mean we must forgo the notion of common knowledge as a legitimate standard for evaluating appropriate debate material. While debaters lose an easy challenge to unfamiliar material, they gain additional and important perspectives.

Specific Information Challenges and Public Argument

The notion of "specific information" is absent in the public sphere. Bob Dole cannot announce that President Clinton is using "specific information" in his discussion of the Bosnia issue and expect the discussion to be dropped. In public argument the test of information appropriateness lies with the audience's acceptance or rejection of the data and reasoning. As Trapp states, "Debates, if well conducted, ought to inform the audience not only about the topic of the debate but also about the nature of argumentation" (87). Audiences should learn about argumentation through debate of the issues and not through 'debate of the debate'. In a public format, the "specific information" challenge is not accessible for a "universal audience." Johnson argues, "As in any public forum, the test for "allowable" tactics or strategies in parliamentary debate is still that of rationality: if it makes sense, argue it" (1).

The public forum offers parliamentary debate as an argumentation model that prepares students for potential future situations, but it should also allow them to shape the community in which they live. To this end, debaters must be permitted to introduce information that is common knowledge as well as information representing marginalized viewpoints. When critics or debaters defer to "specific information" challenges, they resign the debate to reshaping old (but familiar) information. This does little to expand the knowledge of the debaters and the judge and does not help foster an informed audience.

Alternative to Specific Information Challenges

Debaters can clarify issues without the use of the current "specific information" clause. In practice, this challenge is just a specific type of point of information and, as a result, the "specific information" rule is redundant and abused. Debaters may use points of information to ascertain further detail of data without the "specific information" clause. Without the "specific information" clause, debaters may no longer exclude information. By retaining the "specific information" clause we limit the informational content of debate and diminish the integrity of public argument. Lacking no objective standard, critics' evaluations of this rule become difficult and we marginalize alternative perspectives. Additionally, we restrict the ability of this activity to foster informed audiences and debaters and the debates themselves become less accessible. For these reasons I suggest the following alternative: 1) Elimination of the "specific information" rule, and 2) Notification of member schools of the change to the NPDA Championship Tournament rules.

Eliminating the "specific information" clause altogether also solves the problem of excluding material from a debate. Absent the "specific information" clause, debaters will be forced to deal with the information presented within the context of the debate. This will encourage more public argument and less procedural argument. However, this should not be interpreted as an indictment of procedural arguments in general. While this solution eliminates the foundation of the problems, it is not enough.

We must notify NPDA member schools of the elimination of the "specific information" clause to promote an understanding of the change. In the status quo, we experience misunderstanding of the "specific information" clause. By notifying member schools, we eliminate ambiguity and use of a (then) non-existent clause.

If the NPDA embraces this alternative, it would move toward a more public model of debate; public debate, which is open to all perspectives, relies on public rather than procedural argumentation. By integrating elimination of the "specific information" clause and notification of this change we help to ensure that appealing to the rules in order to exclude information would stop. We will be one step in the direction toward inclusion of marginalized perspectives. Overall, we

must note the outstanding job the large majority of critics are doing in adjudicating debate rounds. From directors of forensics to lay critics, most people have a firm grasp of the rules. It is the abuse of the "specific information" rule that makes this policy adjustment necessary.

Conclusion

The current use of the "specific information" rule is problematic. If parliamentary debate's goal is to promote "reason and informed public debate" then we must address the problem detailed in this essay. The alternatives I have presented deserve serious consideration. Steve Hunt maintains "I for one believe we cannot let the inmates run the psychiatric ward nor can we let the debaters solely determine the standards in a debate round" (131). While Hunt wrote of the crisis facing policy debate, his comments remain salient in light of problem posed by the use of the "specific information" tactic. As the NPDA grows it should continue to offer a forum for students to develop into reasoned and informed public debaters, we should not let the misuse of a rule stand in the way of this goal.

Works Cited

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