

Alumni Challenge



Foamcore and the Future of Speech

Dan Hungerman

Miami University Alumni (1996-2000)



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Dan Hungerman graduated from Miami University in 2000. That year, he took first place in pentathlon at NFA. His favorite event was extemporaneous speaking. He has many favorite memories from speech, such as meeting his future wife, Laura Batt. He is now an economics professor at the University of Notre Dame. He credits much of his professional success with what he learned in speech.

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ALUMNI CHALLENGE: Forensic alumni can be a tremendous to individual programs and the activity as a whole. While we commonly ask alums to judge at tournaments or maybe even speak at a year-end banquet they don't get many opportunities to address the entire forensics community. Through our "Alumni Challenges" Speaker & Gavel offers our alumni an opportunity to speak to the forensic community. We encourage them to challenge us to re-examine, re-envision, and possibly re-invent they way we operate as a community.

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We live in an era where public speaking is a valued skill. Recent scholarship (e.g., Deming, 2015) has shown the continued growing relevance of social skills for earnings. Further, high-profile events such as the now-ubiquitous TED Talks have shown that public speaking remains a vital forum for sharing ideas. It may be boilerplate to say that public speaking is important, but it is a boilerplate that continues to be true.

It was thus with sadness that I learned of the demise of my alma-mater's speech and debate team. I graduated from Miami University in 2000, and I was very active on Miami's Forensics Team. I view my participation in speech as a highlight of my undergraduate education.

What caused the death of speech at Miami? As mentioned above, it does not appear that public speaking is any less important or otherwise less relevant than it used to be. But Miami's team apparently struggled to capitalize on the continued relevance of public speaking. This is a struggle that teams at other institutions face as well. Figure 1 shows Google trend searches for two terms: "American Forensics Association" and "TED Talks."

The first panel shows the relative change over time in searches for *American Forensic Association*; the second panel shows the change over time in searches for *TED Talks* (these are not changes in the visitations to any particular sites, but changes in the number of times these terms were used in a web search). Of course, TED Talks and the AFA serve different audiences. The point of the figure is not to compare the overall popularity in one search to another, Google trends would not do that well. The figures do not show the levels of popularity, but, as their names suggest, the trends. But the story told by the trends is not good for the forensic community, and it fits with the sad story on Miami's campus.

¹ I thank the editor and two anonymous reviewers for greatly improving this text. Of course, all remaining errors are my own.

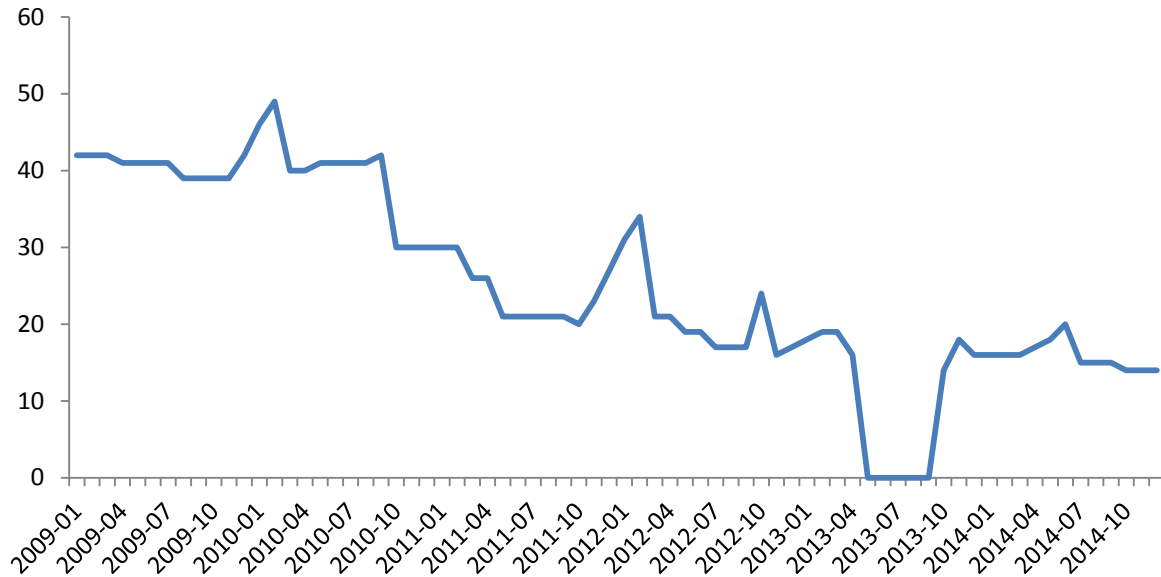


Figure 1: Searches for “American Forensic Association”

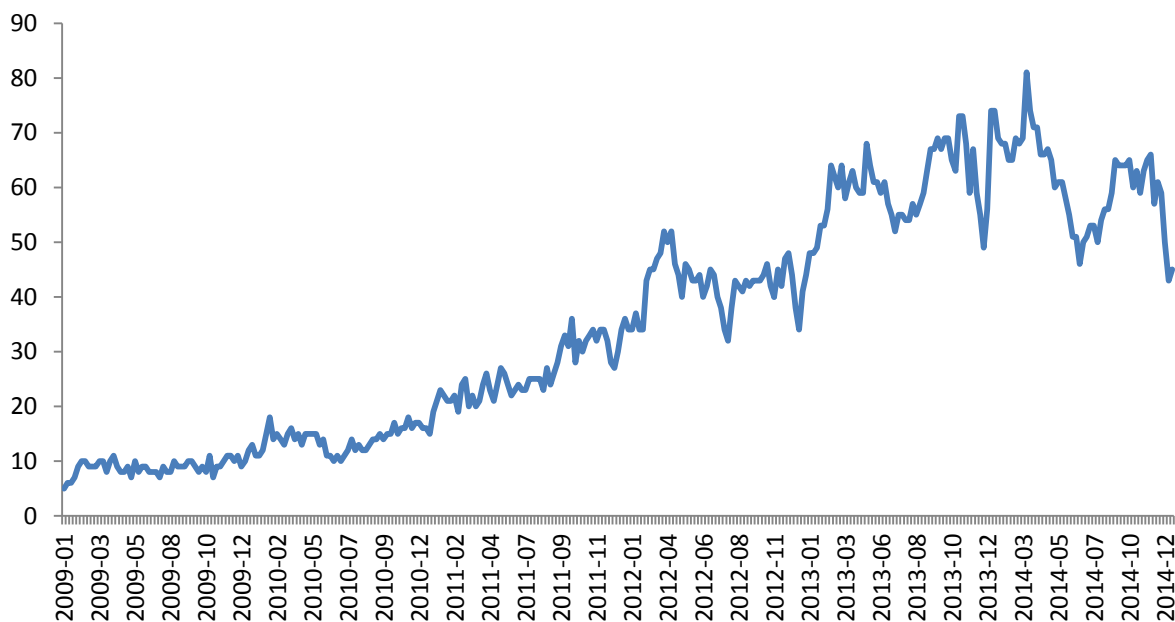


Figure 2: Searches for “TED Talks”

Note: Numbers in each panel represent search interest relative to the highest point on the panel. The month/week where the searched-for term makes up the highest fraction of all searches done on Google is given a score of 100. Thus the lines do not convey absolute search volume. The peak time in Panel A was in 2007 and in Panel B in 2015; extending the picture into these ranges does not qualitatively change the pictures (although TED Talks searches are close to zero before 2009 and AFA searches are close to zero for much of 2015).



Is it too Late to Change this Story?

Reviving Miami's team appears to be a daunting task. It has proven difficult for me to find someone at the university who can be persuaded that the benefits of speech warrant saving (now, reviving) the team. This is not because the leadership at Miami does not value public speaking, but because it is hard for me to convince Miami's leaders that traditional forensics prepares students appropriately for public speaking. In the past year I had the fortune of meeting with two deans at Miami. On both occasions I planned to bring up my concerns about the speech team with them. In both cases, I quickly had to shelve that idea. These deans understand the power of public speaking, but they are focused on preparing students for the *future of public speaking*. It would be something of an understatement to say that they would be more interested in talking about PowerPointTM, PreziTM, or BeamerTM than foamcore. Indeed, if these deans had gone to watch the speech team practice and had seen foamcore visual aids, well, that would have been the end of things right there. They would have thought it ridiculous and I would not blame them.

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The Road Ahead

Competitive speech would do well to consider how to modernize. As a starting point, I suggest the elimination of foamcore VAs. Below I discuss why foamcore should be eliminated; hopefully readers will understand these comments (a) as constructive and reflecting my continued love of forensics and (b) as part of the broader topic of saving competitive speech in an era when it is in danger. Competitive speech could likely take several different paths toward renewed health and relevance, but it is likely any such path would involve eliminating the very visible, outdated, and embarrassing idiosyncrasy that is foamcore.

At one time, foamcore made sense. Personally, I loved foamcore as a competitor and I credit it with some of my speech success. I once broke an ADS at nationals that was not entirely coherent but had one surefire joke: a gag that used foamcore to show that the name Spiro Agnew could be rearranged to read "Grow A Penis" (this really works). The joke wouldn't have been as funny with PowerPoint. Thus, I owe one of my first breaks at nationals to foamcore.

Speech could take several different paths toward renewed health and relevance, but any such path would involve eliminating the very visible, outdated, and embarrassing idiosyncrasy that is foamcore.

I can also see why foamcore persists. It is portable, cheap, wireless, and it can be used outside. It is easy and it gets the job done. When I was a student and modern public speaking technology like projectors were a rare luxury not found in many campus classrooms, foamcore was more affordable and feasible. But times have changed. I have also heard the argument that the main benefits of competitive speech do not involve learning the latest technology fads but rather learning more substantive skills.



As an outside observer who loves speech, I have come to view these as inadequate reasons to continue using foamcore. Modern VA systems like PowerPoint™ are not a fad, they have been around for a quarter century and do not appear to be going anywhere. The main concern from my days as a student—the scarcity of projectors and expense of modern VA technology—is a relic of the past. In fact, the economic arguments now run the other way; foamcore is more expensive than flashdrives. You don't have to pay an airline \$50 to carry on a flashdrive, either. The expenses of foamcore increases even more when one takes into account the possibility of it being damaged during the year; even usable foamcore VAs can look like trash by the spring. Speaking of trash, foamcore is also less environmentally friendly than flashdrives.

The Real World

It is true that there will be technical problems, where projectors fail, a PowerPoint™ presentation loads wrong, a flashdrive gets lost. But so what? Those are *real world* problems. I was once a visiting professor in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I went to see a high-profile talk in the economics department at Harvard. A faculty job position was potentially at stake. First, I ask you to guess what sort of VAs are typically used in talks like this: PowerPoint™ or foamcore? You get zero points for guessing correctly. But on this particular day the speaker's PowerPoint™ presentation didn't work. If you want to be prepared to get the job at Harvard some fine day, then you need to practice PowerPoint™ talks and you need to know what to do when they fail. Speech competition is obviously a place where both skills could be mastered if students were using PowerPoint™ in competition. The threat of technological snafus is not a defect, it is a selling point.

Some people find PowerPoint™ talks less engaging than talks using other visual aids. I agree. I almost never use PowerPoint™ when teaching. (Do I use foamcore? Of course not. I don't use anything.) Again, the fact that PowerPoint™ can be boring is a *real world* problem. Further, we should be willing to bet on the speech community to save the day here. If anyone can find a way to make modern VAs captivating, it will be the speech community.

A trickier thing is that a fundamental change to speech would likely threaten the insularity of the speech community. The coaches who are coaching speech now are good at it. Why should they walk away from their hard-earned expertise doing speech the old way? Current competitors may also have mixed feelings about the decline of forensics. If I were at a nationally competitive program, and I heard that Miami's team had disappeared, a small part of me might think, "Well, at least breaking at nationals might be a teensy bit easier."

Frankly, I am sympathetic to concerns and thoughts like these. I'm not necessarily advocating a total overhaul of competitive speech or a dramatic increase in the size of the speech community. But the persistence of foamcore (along with the overall inability of the speech community to reflect the modern public speaking environment) is a threat to competitive speech's survival. Let me re-raise that idea of a dean walking in to see a PA event with foam core. What coach wouldn't cringe at that thought? Doesn't that give you pause, full stop?



What should take foamcore's place? Anything, including nothing, would be better. Just eliminating it would be an improvement. Or how about this: each year, the national championship tournament could designate a particular PA event to be done in the style of a TED Talks (including its use of VAs). Or just make a new PA category using TED Talks as a theme. Then, the national champion would be invited to give their talk as an actual TED Talk. Obviously TED Talks would have to agree. But the quality of competitive speech can prove itself here—if you were to show TED Talks people a national-championship caliber speech, they would want it. The students would love it. It would add a nice edge to the national finals and be a great marketing device, both for future competitors and for administrators. This would not be hard or expensive to do. Everyone is winning with this idea.

Despite the debt I owe to foamcore personally, I now oppose it. I oppose foamcore because it is a disservice to tell students you are preparing them for modern public speaking while handing them foamcore visual aids. It is no longer the 1990s when nobody could afford modern visual aid technology (indeed, it is no longer the 19-anything). If the current forensics community does not adapt to modern public speaking they will be replaced by something that does.

Eliminate foamcore.

In several months I will return to Miami's campus, and there is a good chance I will meet with Miami's leadership once again. I have not given up on reviving Miami's team and their once proud tradition. I am still a firm believer in the excellence of competitive speech. But I fear that, unless the speech community takes action to become a leader, rather than a laggard, in the era of modern public speaking, the story at Miami will prove to be both unalterable and indicative of things to come. The need for change is existential. Let it begin with dropping foamcore.





References

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