

# TELE-DEBATE: THE FUTURE OF FORENSICS?

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## Abstract

Given the economic and technological realities of our modern world, traditional forensics tournaments may be on their way out. Travel is expensive and potentially dangerous. Travel can also be extremely time-consuming when a team has to get to some far away tournament. The advent of the Internet and teleconferencing technology suggests the possibility of a low-cost, and potentially more attractive, alternative to the traditional tournament. This essay is a preliminary attempt to explore this possibility and to lay the groundwork for future Tele-Debate Tournaments.

## **Introduction**

An informal discussion took place at the Stephen F. Austin State University tournament in the spring of 2005. It was something less than a formal meeting and something more than a casual hallway conversation. I had gotten a bee in my bonnet about the rising cost of forensics and the possibility of using computer and Internet technology to run a 'virtual' tournament. But what would an Internet debate look and sound like? Would it even work? My thought was to enlist the cooperation of a couple of other coaches, set up a three-way teleconference using our school resources, and then run a remote IPDA debate with one debater each at two different schools and the judge at a third. In addition to what we might learn about Internet-mediated debate, I thought the experiment might eventually lead to a good co-authored convention paper.

So when the opportunity presented itself, I pulled Stephen Jeffcoat and Jorji Jarzabek aside and told them about the idea. They were both enthusiastic. We agreed to check out the equipment and resources on our respective campuses. We would then report back to one another to set up our test debate. But as Robert Frost has so eloquently put it, “. . . knowing how way leads on to way . . . ,” there was very little follow-up from this meeting. In fact, Stephen was the only one who did any initial research. He worked out the system needs and was able to set up a working model of the necessary technology.

And there things stood for about a year. Then, I was able to do some follow up research which led me to the same conclusions that Stephen had reached. While the idea of an Internet debate tournament was basically sound, the technology that would make such an event practical did not yet exist. The basic problems were technology and cost.

School video-conferencing systems had the technical quality and reliability for a teleconference debate. But the usage limitations, bureaucratic requirements, and

expenses associated with this technology make it too expensive, laborious, and limited to use as the basis of a long-distance forensics tournament.

By contrast, ‘over the counter’ web-cam systems were readily available and well within the budget of most forensic programs. But at the time, they lacked the quality and reliability needed to run a virtual tournament.

And beyond equipment, the Internet itself imposed bandwidth and reliability limits which made running a virtual tournament virtually impossible.

But, given the rate of technological improvement, Stephen and I were optimistic that the day would come when hosting a long-distance, mediated, debate tournament would be both technically possible and affordable. And given the current deterioration of the economy and improvement in technology, that day may already be on the immediate horizon.

So the purpose of this paper is to pre-think such a tournament. Hardware aside, there are two big questions which will need to be addressed before any computer mediated tournament would be possible.

1) What might the software requirements be? Is it worth some bright individual’s time and effort to start designing a software package now for such a tournament? Such a design project would, of course, be speculative – but what a jump on the competition. We know how often the first product on the market tends to become the standard. So this paper is, in part, a preliminary sent of design parameters for our bright individual.

2) What would the procedures and other requirements of such a forensics event look like? How about the rules, timetables, forms, postings, etc? And how would the software needs vary and integrate among tournament hosts, tournament directors, coaches, judges, participants, and audience member? This paper will attempt to anticipate the future and answer as many of these questions as possible.

### Tele-Debate

I’ve chosen to call this long-distance event “Tele-Debate.” During initial conversations and while working on the convention paper I had called it ‘Virtual Debate.’ But upon reflection, the word ‘virtual’ didn’t make sense. A ‘virtual’ event of any kind does not really exist. A virtual dinosaur exists only in the computer. That didn’t sound right for our distance debating event. I also thought of using the term, ‘Conference Debate’ as in a ‘Conference Call.’ Conference calls are mediated forms of distance communication which often include conflict and debate. But I didn’t like the sound of that term either. A debate is not a conference and I didn’t like the idea of blurring the distinction. Finally, I thought about calling it ‘Mediated Debate,’ since it is debate through and over the media. But this phrase has already been appropriated by those who advocate direct debate coach/judge intervention in debate rounds.

And so I came back to the prefix “Tele” which, as we know, is Greek for ‘distance.’ Telegraph (words at a distance), Tele-phone (sound at a distance), Tele-vision (sight at a distance), and, of course, Tele-communications (communications of all kinds at a distance). I liked the sound of Tele-Debate (TD) and Tele-Debate Tournament (TDT) better than any of the other options. And the more I thought about it, the more comfortable I became with the phrase. So Tele-Debate it became for the convention paper and Tele-Debate it has remained.

### **Perspectives**

What follows is a systematic consideration of the various aspects of a futuristic Tele-Debate Tournament as seen from the perspectives of the main players in such an event.<sup>1</sup>

The main perspectives I’ll be considering will be those of the:

Tournament Hosts and/or Directors (HD),  
 Directors of Forensics and/or Coaches (DoFC),  
 Debater-Participants (DP),  
 Judge-Participants (JP), and  
 IPDA (The Organization and the Executive Secretary).

I will take up this analysis in the order posted above. The main analysis will fall under the perspective of the HD, since everything at the tournament will revolve around the needs and activities of the tournament host and the tabroom director.

### **The Tournament Hosts and Directors**

Where to start? When I first sat down to write this essay I had a lot of ideas and a lot of material. But where should I begin? And how should I organize things? Having given the matter a lot of thought (and after a few false starts), I found that all of this makes the most sense if we begin by looking at the Tele-Debate Tournament (TDT) event from the perspective of the Tournament Host/Director (HD). When organizing the material in this essay, it became obvious that everything revolved around and flowed out of the needs of the HD to design and run the event.

**A Tournament CD:** If we assume some bright individual has designed a TDT program, it would ideally exist as a simple CD available for purchase, at some not-unreasonable price, from IPDA. A prospective HD buys a copy of the CD and installs it in a personal computer. If our designer was careful, everything loads and runs beautifully.

The CD would be likely to include the following main programs:

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve limited this to IPDA debate, both to make this analysis more streamlined and doable, and because IPDA is my main concern and interest. It would be fairly simple to apply this analysis to another format.

1. Some informational files and tutorial programs. These would be optional, but recommended, to the purchaser. The HD could read the informational files and run the tutorial programs from the CD before installing anything.
2. A downloadable, customizable tournament web site. This program would be designed to help the HD set up a completed TDT web site customized to the needs of the host program. It might also include instructional programs for anyone who needed help in setting up a web site.
3. All of the sub-programs needed to run the TDT. These will be discussed in more detail later in this essay.

Having read the basic informational files and gone through the tutorial programs, our HD is ready to set up her TWS.

**The Tournament Web Site:** Based on my best current thinking, everything associated with TDT would initially be organized around a Tournament Web Site (TWS). This web site would be a kind of hub or Internet touchstone for everyone who was interested in the event. After the tournament started the focus would shift to the tab room. But until then, the TWS would be the center of attention.

The Tournament CD would walk the HD through a customizing process. The program would call up a default version of the site and start asking questions. The HD would answer the questions and/or could make specific modifications of her own along the way. She would provide such information as the tournament name, dates, location, fees, requirements, etc. The program would update all of the materials and forms on the web site. Everything needed for the tournament would be included. The HD could even incorporate graphics into the TWS including the school and/or debate team logos.

The HD would end up with a complete TWS on her personal computer. She could cruise through it to make sure everything was right. She might even be able to test the external links. That is, she could hit a link in her web site and her browser would take her there. But the TWS wouldn't itself be hooked into the Internet yet, so no one else could access the site from the outside. Then with the help of an ISP and/or a school computer guru, this web site would be set up on a host computer and be open for business.

What might the TWS look like? As I envision the site as include the following sections:

**Main Page:** The main page of the web site could be customized to include any number of things. A school graphic. An announcement of the tournament. A message of welcome from the HD. Some marketing features about the tournament. Whatever. There would be a clear and intuitive set of site links so interested individuals could quickly find what they were looking for.

**Official Tournament Invitation Page:** There could be a special section with an Internet version of the official tournament invitation. Press a button and that invitation could be downloaded or sent to a printer if you wanted a hard copy.

**Tournament Details and Requirements Page:** Another section would describe the nature, rules, procedures, schedules, and requirements of participation in the Tele-Debate tournament. Participation would require that participating debaters and coaches have the proper computer equipment and software. So there would be a link to another section about these requirements.

**Hardware-Software Set-Up Page:** The equipment-software page would include a description of the proper hardware (and perhaps some links to where it could be obtained over the Internet). This section could include all of the software that participating DoFC s or any of their debaters would need to run the hardware. These downloads would be included with the TDT-CD. The downloads might also be made available on the IPDA website. And each download might include a double check system to insure software was installed correctly and that the hardware was working properly.

**Registration Page:** There would be a registration page with all of the usual items you'd expect to find when registering for a forensics tournament. This could be customized for each tournament at the same time the TWS was being set up.

**Fee Calculation/Payment Page:** The registration process would also include a fee calculation page. The fee calculations would automatically take place as the registration form was completed. And with the proper set up, a DoFC would be able to pay the registration fee with a credit card.

**A Links Page:** The TWS might also include a set of links to other web sites, such as:

- The Host School
- The Host Forensics Team
- A Tabroom Link -- Operational Only During the Tournament
- The Main IPDA Web Site
- The Home Pages for Individual Forensics Team Members
- Resource content links related to a tournament topic theme if there was one
- Etc.

I'm sure the final version of such a TDT web site will be significantly different from my conception presented above. On the other hand, this description was only intended to be a useful starting point for thinking about a TDT software design project. Hopefully it will be useful toward this end. And whatever the final design, I'm reasonably confident that some form of TDT Web site should serve as the main hub for the event.

**An Email Tournament Announcement/Invitation system:** The TDT-CD could also include a built in system for emailing the tournament invitation out. Just plug a set of Email addresses into the program and once the invitation is ready, it can be sent out automatically. The same would be true for additional announcements, updates, and corrections concerning the tournament.

**Hosting Requirements:** Hosting any tournament involves making sure you've got all of your material needs, facilities needs, personnel needs, etc. covered. I tried to envision the main needs to host a TDT and came up with the following list:

**A physical site for the tournament headquarters (THQ):** It may eventually be possible to host a TDT using a staff of individuals who are scattered far and wide around the world. Then again, this may never be possible. But even if possible, it may never be desirable. So I think it would be best for the large majority of staff members to be physically located in close proximity.

**Lots of bandwidth:** This is another technical issue which is likely to change over time. But video conferencing technology tends to be bandwidth intensive. I don't have enough expertise to discuss this in detail, so I mention it and leave it to the techno-geeks to work out the requirements.

**Lots of computer capacity:** As with bandwidth, the main THQ computer is going to be very busy. The HD needs to be sure that the computer system will be sufficiently muscular and reliable to handle the load. How big would that be? This is another question for the techno-geeks to answer.

**Sufficient technical support staff:** The HD better have someone, or a small crew of someones, available to deal with technical problems in real time as they might occur. It's better to have them available and not need them, than to need them and not have them available.

**Sufficient non-technical helpers:** The HD is likely to need the help of a whole lot of 'gophers.' [For anyone unfamiliar with this term, it refers to the grunts who are available to run errands. They 'go fer' this and 'go fer' that.] Aside from fetching coffee and organizing materials, the gopher staff may be called upon to fill a wide variety of tournament rolls.

**Lots of telephone capacity:** The HD better have another small crew available to deal with problems in real time as they are called in. I would expect a semi-constant stream of phone calls and Internet messages.

**Contact phone numbers:** This may sound more like a procedural issue than a physical need. But I believe that the tabroom will need a list of telephone contact numbers for every debater, judge, and coach to make a TDT run smoothly. I therefore include this requirement as part of this list.

**An official set of tournament rules and procedures:** TDTs would require some strict adherence to procedure to work. And those procedures would need to be carefully worked out and laid down in writing so that everyone would know what they are. The tab room should have a written copy of these rules and procedures available.

**Traditional supplies:** It almost goes without saying that the tabroom will need various physical supplies to run a TDT. The needs may not be as extensive as for a traditional tournament, but I don't think the use of computers would eliminate those needs entirely. People need scratch pads, something to write with, calculators, paperclips. etc. And let's remember the care and feeding of the tabroom personnel. You're likely to need a lot of junk food, caffeine, and potables (not to mention some 'good' food for the Tournament Host and the Tabroom Director).

**Virtual Machine Interfaces:** Another feature of the TDT bright individual CD program might be a heavy use of Virtual Machine Interfaces (VMI) to make things as simple, intuitive, and idiot-proof as possible. I'll come back to these VMIs individually for each category of participant below, but we can consider the HD and some of the Telephone Gophers here.

When the Tabroom Director fires up her computer on tournament day, what first appears on the screen might resemble a physical control panel. There would be categories of buttons for different functions. This button takes you to the topics page. The next button calls up a list of judges, organized by round. The next button takes you to the current tournament results and standings page. And so on.

**The Line Between the Tabroom and the Tournament:** The VMI would create a kind of boundary between the tournament participants and the tabroom. This is analogous to a conventional tournament and tabroom. The room is set physically apart. Participants can get messages through, but they are encouraged to NOT disturb the tabroom creatures in their lair.

Some materials, such as cum sheets, remain in the tabroom and are kept strictly private until the tournament is over;

Some materials, such as the topics for each round, start out as private but become public as the tournament progresses; and,

Other materials, such as the tournament schedule and pairings, starts out as public information and if changes are made they get posted as quickly as possible.

At a traditional tournament, keeping the private material private can be a problem. I imagine it would be less of a problem at a TDT. The CD program would know what it's doing and it would be much more difficult for the occasional nosey coach to slip into the virtual tabroom and steal a glance at the cum sheet. You'd still have the problem of gopher informants or VIP spies. And you'd still have the problem of gabby HDs. But

there's nothing unique in all that. The bottom line is that confidentiality would be easier to maintain at a TDT.

**Automatic Task Performance:** One of the big advantages of a TDT, assuming it is being run from a central computer, would be the potential for the automatic performance of certain tasks. A last-minute drop would be no problem at all. The computer could make all of the necessary changes and then post them automatically. Such a system could perform many, if not most, of the tournament tasks automatically and help insure things kept running on schedule.

Debaters and judges would not be able to 'go to the wrong room' because the computer wouldn't let them. Everyone would check into their rounds through the main system. As a procedure, debaters and judges might be directed to fire up their systems and log into their rounds 5 minutes early. But even if they showed up at the last possible second, it wouldn't faze the computer. If a round were running late, the system could make automatic adjustments and send out warning messages without losing any time in the process. And there would be no 'passing' time required for a debater or a judge to get from one round to the next.

When it was time for a round to start, the computer would automatically release topics to all debaters in all divisions at once. The tabroom would get a warning a few minutes before the draw was scheduled to take place. This would let them put the draw on hold if there were some need to do so. Otherwise, the draw would take place automatically, exactly on time, for every round.

Ballots would be distributed, collected, and recorded, automatically. The tabroom wouldn't even need to look at ballots unless they wanted to do so. Warning lights and/or buzzers would sound on the virtual machines to alert the tabroom to any irregularities or problems that required human intervention. All of the tournament record keeping, calculations, and form preparations would take place automatically behind the scenes.

**The Virtual Tournament Environment:** In addition to the administration of the tournament and the organization of individual debate rounds, the TDT program could create a Virtual Tournament Environment (VTE). This virtual environment would be designed to make the tournament experience easier and more rewarding for the participants. There might be some special chat-type 'rooms' set up in the program to allow for individual and group interactions outside the strict limitations of the competition.

**A Virtual Tournament Lounge:** Any participant could poke the 'lounge' button and the screen would fill with the names of everyone who happened to be in the lounge at the moment. By poking that button, the participant's name would be added to this list. The rest of the tournament participants, who were not in the lounge, might be listed at the bottom of the screen, or on a separate page. Or the program might list all the participants and simply highlight or star anyone who happened to be available in the lounge.



**Virtual Tournament Prep-Rooms:** The TDT program could also set up one or more virtual Prep Rooms for small groups or teams to use when sharing information or ideas about their upcoming debates. Each prepping debater could be identified on the main screen by school, side, and topic. In this way you could invite one or more individuals to work with you on an upcoming round.

And that's about as far as my speculations took me with respect to the tournament host, the tournament director, tournament administration, and the tabroom.

### **The Directors of Forensics and Coaches**

In some ways, the 'coaching' perspective was the easiest and in many ways simplest to predict. Which I suppose means, I've missed the important points completely. Oh well, time may tell. But it seemed to me that a TDT would be much easier for a DoFC to 'attend' than a traditional tournament would be. There would be many fewer costs and problems associated with setting up the tournament, vehicle rental, travel, hotel, etc.

**The Set Up:** Once the initial few TDTs had been completed, all of the hardware and software systems would presumably be in place and de-bugged. The only need in this regard would be to bring new team members and judges on line. And as the number of team members grew who were already familiar with setting up new web-cam systems, the coach would have a pool of helpers to whom this task could be delegated. So things might become progressively easier for the DoFC over time in this regard.

Having read the tournament invitation and gone through all of the nonsense associated with setting up the technology, the DoFC would arrange his entry in the usual way. Debaters and Judges would be identified and the necessary information about each collected, then the entry would be submitted over the Internet.

**Long Term Records:** To make things even easier for the DoFC, the TDT CE could include a semi-permanent list of debaters and judges in its data base. So instead of having to retype data for each tournament entry, the DoFC would record each new team member and judge into his own system. Then for a new tournament, he need only point and click to add debaters or judges.

**The Physical Arrangement:** On the day of the tournament, individual DoFCs would have a lot of flexibility about how to physically set up their participants. At one school, the whole team and possibly the judges, might assemble in one room. At another, the DoFC could break the participants into groups based on division or experience or food preferences. At yet another, the DoFC might have all of his participants debating individually from their dorm rooms or homes.

**Location:** The DoFC himself would likely choose to come on campus for the tournament. But that wouldn't be a necessity. The big cheese would have the option of staying home and running things from bed.

**No more ballot inspection:** This might be a minor issue, but the use of the computer system would essentially eliminate the need for a ballot inspection period during the tournament. The judge might have made a mistake of some kind – but once the system had accepted the ballot, the tabroom records would not indicate what that error might be. For example, if the judge meant to give one speaker a 5 on delivery and only gave her a 4, this wouldn't be detectable or correctable by the tabroom. And the calculations, which are all done by the computer, wouldn't be in error unless the whole system was on the fritz. So there might be very little for a DoFC to inspect.

**Additional Possibilities:** The use of computer technology for mediating a tournament also presents some nice possibilities from the coaching perspective. From the comfort of his VMI a DoFC could drop in on any of the debates going on at the tournament and listen in. The DoFC could also record any or all of these debates for later discussion and analysis.

As I said, I found thinking about the TDT from the perspective of a DoFC to be the least difficult aspect of this research project. By-in-large, at least as far as my fuzzy ability to envision the possibilities is concerned, a TDT would, in many ways, make the DoFC's life simpler rather than more complex.

### **The Judge-Participants**

Given IPDA's emphasis on lay judges, the TDT would have to make things simple and keep them that way for the Judge-Participants (JP). The ideal, consistent with fulfilling the administrative needs of the HD and the educational needs of IPDA, is to put minimal strain on the judges and make their participation as enjoyable and rewarding as possible.

**Signing up new judges:** Initially, registering a new JP for a TDT would be a bit more complex than for a traditional tournament. The DoFC would send new judges to the internet to pull up the Judging Background Form (JBF). The judge would fill it out online. But once this information was entered into the main IPDA computer, the judge would never have to repeat this process again, except for recording changes. But simply registering a new JBF would not make that judge official.

**Orientation and training for new judges:** Once registered, the judge would access an official Lay-Judges Orientation/Briefing/Training program (OBT-P) web page on the main IPDA web site. All they would need to do is watch a short video training program and perhaps pass a simple test about it. Then, having completed the OBT-P the individual would forever after be registered as an officially qualified IPDA judge.

**The JPs TDT Experience:** From the perspective of the JP, the whole tournament experience might start out seeming a bit futuristic and alien. When it was close to the time they were scheduled to judge, a JP would go to her computer, access the tournament web site, click on the judges' link, and find her name on the judges' page.

There would be a countdown timer for the next debate she was scheduled to judge. All of the information she would need about the topics and the debaters would be there as well. And everything would be very intuitively organized on her VMI. There could be a big reminder message to stand-by her contact phone before, during, and after the debate (until she had returned their ballot and gotten her confirmation message, after which she would be free to go). The VMI screen would include a tabroom contact phone number.

When the countdown timer reached zero, the debate would begin. A split screen might come up with the two debaters appearing as they, themselves, logged into the TDT web site for the round. Once the debate started, the JP could simply sit and watch. Many of the tasks lay judges often perform at traditional tournaments would be handled by the computer. There would be no need, for example, for the JP to keep track of time or to provide time signals.

From the perspective of the very lay judge, there would be no need to worry about anything except concentrating on the debate and entering speaker point information. And the JP's system might also record the event to make judging easier. This would allow the judge, if she so desired, to review all or part of the debate afterward.

**The JP's VMI:** The VMI for judges could also admit the possibility of letting the judge type notes into the computer while the debate is in progress. These notes could appear on a separate window, or they might appear as text which was superimposed over the debater's video image.

**Delayed Adjudication:** TD has another unique advantage. Since each round is automatically translated into digital form for transmission, any round could be easily recorded. So if there happened to be a judging shortage during one round, or if a judge didn't show up, or if some judge had to be disqualified for any reason, it would be rather easy to have some other judge view the recording and adjudicate the round at some later time.

**Filling out the ballot:** Once the round was over, and everyone had said their thank yous and goodbyes, it would be time for the judge to fill out the ballot. And the tabroom could easily set controls in such a way that 'oral critiques' – which cause so many tournaments to run late – would be impossible. Within a minute or so of the end of the round, communication between the judge and debaters could simply stop. On the other hand, oral critics could be built right into the ballot.

And this is where a TDT could make things VERY easy for Lay judges. The Virtual ballot would be part of the VMI for the round. **I envision the TDT ballot as a two-part form.** It would follow the content and style of the standard IPDA paper ballot, but there would be some big differences.

**Part one of the form:** The basic who won: 'Aff or Neg?' and 'Which debater?' double-check redundancy would still be there. In fact, you could add a third level of verification, ask the judge to click on one of two images of the debaters taken

during the round. The computer would not accept the decision, unless all three answerers were in agreement.

Then you'd have speaker points, which might be filled out during as well as after the round. This point grid, with which we are all familiar, could appear in a separate box, or it could be superimposed over a speaker's image during a debate. The VMI might include a 'help' link on the speaker-point chart which would take the JP to a generic advice page about how to fill out speaker points and what the point totals mean.<sup>2</sup>

In any event, part one of the ballot would be completed entirely, by pointing, clicking, and punching numbers. The form would have to be filled out properly and there would be no possibility of missing data or addition errors. And, in the event of a 'low-point win,' this would be pointed out to the JP and she would be asked to either verify that this was her intention, or she would be asked to adjust speaker points so that the winner had an equal or higher point total. Imagine that, no more confusion over low-point wins.

Part one of the form could/should/would be submitted very quickly following the end of the debate.

**Part two of the form:** This would be equivalent to the various comments sections on the standard ballot. For each debater – what were their biggest strengths and areas for improvement? For the debate in general – what were the general comments and reason for decision. **HOWEVER**, in addition to or instead of the option of writing out comments, JPs could provide a recorded 'oral critique' which would become a part of the ballot and could be distributed back to the various debaters and coaches when the TDT was over. In other words, the judge could fill out part two of the ballot without ever typing a word.

**Tabroom verification of ballots:** As mentioned above, judges could be required to complete and return part one of the ballot within a certain time limit following the end of the debate. If this didn't happen on time, the system would prompt the judge, the tabroom, and the JP's DoFC. But once the ballot did come in, the main TDT computer could send the judge and both debaters a confirmation message. Basically, this would be a 'you can leave now' message. Until then, both debaters and judge would remain on stand-by, waiting somewhere in earshot of their telephones.

**Real time communication with the tabroom:** Unlike traditional tournaments, the TDT VMI would allow a JP to contact and communicate with the tabroom and vice-versa at any time during or immediately after the debate. The staff of gophers could field inquiries or concerns from JPs and the HD would have the advantage of being able to verify information almost immediately by computer or by phone. So not only would the judges – both lay and experienced – be on a tighter leash, they would also have access to a much greater level of assistance if they required such.

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<sup>2</sup> To see a judging handout sheet from the past, contact IPDA or the author.

## **The Debater-Participants**

This may be the most important perspective to consider when thinking about TDTs. If the whole point of academic debate is the care and training of our student debaters, we'd better be sure, as a debate association, to get this part right.

**The DPs TDT Experience:** What would an IPDA Tele-Debate Tournament experience be like from the perspective of a Debater. For the DP, the advanced preparation for a TDT might be quite similar to that for a traditional tournament. The student would sign-up, practice, prepare, and be ready to go come tournament day.

**Check-In:** For a traditional debate tournament, involving travel, the main check-in takes place as a kind of group exercise. At a home campus tournament, folks may wonder in separately. So check-in for a TDT would probably feel more like check-in for a traditional home tournament.

**The Grey Zone:** Between check-in and the first round, there is a period of time between which I think of as a "Grey Zone." That is, I know a lot of things are likely to be going on during this time, but I find it hard to envision them, vis a vis a Tele-Debate, with any clarity. I just can't predict this activity well enough to discuss it here. Lots of different options are likely to be available for the DPs to spend their time on. And as with a traditional tournament, various DPs may use this time in a variety of different ways.

**Pre First Round:** OK, it's almost time for round one to begin. The DP has checked her system – everything is working. She's checked the postings and identified her opponent and judge. She's read the judge's background information sheet. Perhaps she's spent some time in the virtual lounge talking with other debaters to see how much can learn about her opponent and judge. Then time runs out, as it inevitably does; a warning light/buzzer on her system goes off. DPs can set their advanced warnings for any time they like. In her case, round one begins in three minutes.

**Round One – Topic Selection:** The DP pushes the debate button on her VMI screen and is taken to the start of round one. All the necessary information is on the screen: Start time. Opponent, Side (in this case she's negative), Judge, etc. She has the option of making advanced contact with either the opponent or the judge to ask a question, say hello, or whatever. There is a count-down timer showing on one corner of the screen. 1:23 left until the topic draw.

Another buzzer/light goes off. Five topics appear on the screen. The affirmative has some set time – say 2 minutes – to make the first strike. The countdown timer resets to 2 minutes. Once her opponent makes his strike, the countdown timer resets again and our DP will have two minutes to make her first strike. When the last strike is struck, the final topic appears on the screen and the countdown timer switches over. It now informs the debaters and the judge how much time remains before the start of the debate.

But what if time runs out, and the first debater has failed to make a strike? Unless there was a tabroom override, the clock would reset and the negative would get to make the first two strikes. Then the process would return to normal. And if the opponent hasn't shown up at all, the negative would make the second two strikes as well. She would, thus, select the final topic. Then the round would proceed as it normally would just as if one of the debaters hadn't been lost in the ether during the topic draw.

**Round One – Prep Time:** Now it's prep time. Because a TDT is run through the Internet, it means that every competitor can be expected to have access to Internet search engines, news sites, and debate sites for prep time. This may, in large part, eliminate the need for bulky, extemp-type prep files. Or it might mean that big physical files would be replaced by a keychain sized flash drive. Debaters could access those prep files using the same computer they use for the TDT.

Meanwhile, the timer keeps counting down. 1 minute to go, our DP takes her position and gets ready. The screen is still blank. Oh dear, she forgets to push the ready button on her VMI. She does so. The screen splits two ways. On the left is her opponent who seems to be checking his notes. On the right is the judge who looks a bit apprehensive himself.

The system might admit the possibility of at least two web-cam views. A log shot and a close up. This much could be easily accomplished with one camera of good quality and software. In this case, both opponent and judge are seen in the large view. But our DP prefers close-ups to better see facial expressions. She clicks some buttons and the views enlarge.

The countdown timer indicates 6 seconds to go . . . 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . And a final light/buzzer. The screen now has a banner message across the bottom: Round 1 – Resolution: It's time to move it, move it. – Affirmative: Hari Berry, Farmer's College. – Negative: Ohno Enyo, University of the Mysterious. Hari has begun his speech. The banner at the bottom of the screen keeps repeating until Ohno turns it off.

**Round One – The Debate:** If one debater doesn't show up on time, there would be some delay period allowed for a late arrival. This would be preset for the tournament by the HD. A grace period of five or ten minutes might be reasonable. After that, the missing debater forfeits the round and any protests would shift to the tabroom. But assuming everything starts on time, the Tele-Debate itself might appear to be reasonably similar to a traditional debate.

The first speaker finishes. He presses his 'end' button. The system records this and informs the judge of how long the speech lasted. If it went overtime, an alert icon to this effect might light up. Once the 'end' button is pushed, a countdown timer begins for the cross-examination. There may be a 30 second break allowed here. If the opponent hasn't hit the start button by then, time will begin automatically. The question and answer session looks really cool to the lay judge who watches the two debaters go at it on his split screen.

When the C-X period is over, the questioner hits her end button. There is another countdown – say one minute – to the next speech. And again, once time is up, if the negative hasn't hit her start button, the speech time will begin automatically.

[What happens if the speaker begins early and doesn't hit the start button at all? Does that give the debater an extra two minutes of speaking time? Not really. The audio feed doesn't begin until the virtual start button is pressed. So the opponent and judge can see Ohno's lips moving, but there is no sound. The judge presses an alert button and an alarm goes off on Ohno's computer. There is an alert panel on the side of each screen with a short list of common messages. This one reads: "We can't hear you – Press your start button and begin again." Ohno does.

**After the Debate:** When the final speech is over, and the final button is pushed, everyone is on stand-by. The debaters can get up and wander around, but they should keep in earshot of the computer and of their stand-by phone. If everything runs smoothly, the judge completes the first part of the ballot and sends it. The tabroom computer records that ballot automatically. Then it automatically sends a tabroom confirmation message to both debaters and to the judge. Now, they are all free to wander off. The judge still owes the tabroom the second half of the ballot, but that can be submitted later – even much later. And if part two never comes in, it does not affect the tournament.

**And so on:** Soon it's time for round two and the process simply repeats itself. Eventually, the last preliminary round is over and it's time to post the breaks and the pairings for the outrounds.

**Posting Breaks and Pairings:** Breaks could appear on the web site just moments after the last ballot came in. Since the computer is doing all the computations this would be no problem at all. On the other hand, the tabroom might set the system to hold the results until the humans had a chance to look them over first.

Also, in a traditional debate tournament, the outround contestants are posted as soon as possible let the debaters know who is going on and who is out of the running. Then, an intermission is usually scheduled to let the coaches, judges, and competitors get some food and catch their breath. But while everyone else is taking a break, the tabroom is working at a furious pace to set up the outround pairings, rooms, and judges. But at a TDT, the computer could calculate all this at the same time it was figuring the breaks. So everything could be posted at the same time, almost immediately after the final ballot came in. The decision, to include an intermission for food and recovery, would become an option rather than a necessity.

**Outrounds:** I would expect the outround debates to run very much like the preliminary rounds. But some adjustments would have to be made. Obviously you've got three or more judges. Debaters could look up the background-philosophy sheets for all of their outround judges. That's no big adjustment. But how to show them on the computer screen? Going from 2 to 4 or more faces cuts each image down by at least half. This would be, to some degree, the debater's problem. But perhaps the software could help.

**Outround Results:** As with the preliminary rounds, results could be posted as soon as the ballots were in. They could be posted for each round separately or for all rounds at once. And as with the preliminary rounds, the pairings and judges for the subsequent outround could be posted as soon as the computer had it worked out and the tabroom was ready to release the results.

**Awards:** The subject of awards turned out to be an extremely interesting aspect of TDTs – at least as a thought experiment.<sup>3</sup> Given the virtual nature of the tournament, there would be no compelling need to go to the trouble and expense of providing physical trophies. Each tournament could design and award virtual trophies as images which participants could download and print and which could be posted indefinitely on a tournament web site.

**Feedback:** Once the tournament was over, or on whatever schedule the tabroom decides to release ballots and cum sheet data, it would immediately become available. DoFCs could specify in advance as part of their registration form whether ballots were to be returned exclusively to the coach, to the coach and individual debaters, or made public to all interested parties. And since these preferences would be pre-loaded into the system, debaters might be able to get their ballots automatically and quickly as soon as they were scheduled for release.

### **The International Public Debate Association**

Our discussion so far covers the main perspectives of the individuals who would participate in a TDT. But there is one more, behind-the-scenes perspective that I'd like to consider. I've labeled it the International Public Debate Association, but as a practical matter it's the perspective of the IPDA Executive Secretary.

**The Executive Secretary:** The IPDA Executive Secretary is the individual who does all of the tournament sanctioning and is responsible for keeping track of all the results. I can tell you from personal experience that tracking down results, checking out and correcting errors, and maintaining the IPDA web site were the biggest part of the job. These were the tasks that sucked up the most time, and led to some of the biggest sources of friction and annoyance.

**IPDA and a TDT:** For a TDT, the reporting requirements for IPDA would be performed automatically by the computer. Once the last ballot was in, and the results checked and certified by the HD, a button would be pushed. This would cause all of the tournament data required by IPDA to automatically download into the IPDA web site. The web pages would automatically update and all of the necessary information would be added to the Executive Secretary's files. Bingo. Done.

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<sup>3</sup> This section on Internet awards is greatly expanded as a flight of speculative fantasy in the original convention paper. The possibility is raised of creating three-dimensional and even animated virtual trophies.



**Possible Benefits for IPDA:** Beyond the ways in which computer and Internet technology can help achieve the everyday bureaucratic requirements of administering a debate association, I believe that computer and Internet technology hold a great potential promise for IPDA. If this association were to get in on this potential first. . . . And if IPDA should be the debate association which leads in the development of TDT software, web sites, and the procedures to make it all work, it would probably have a number of very positive impacts on the future of our association.

The public relations value, if properly pushed, might be enormous. Consider the possibilities if IPDA were to successfully sponsor and promote the first Tele-Debate Tournaments.

*First*, we would be the first. And that's always a big plus when introducing something new. It's like presumption in debate. If you want media recognition for your achievement, but you weren't the first one on the scene, you'd better have some other, really impressive, claim to greatness.

*Second*, given that we're using Internet technology and expenses will be minimal, we could make this a truly international enterprise from the start. If the first HD would just recruit one or two debaters on the East Coast to enter, a couple more from the West Coast, and perhaps a handful of others from countries such as Canada, England, Israel, and Australia, this premiere event would also be a truly international contest.

*Third*, with a little work, IPDA might be able to attract some national media attention. After all, we're at least national with debaters from both coasts entered and possibly international as well. And the computer technology means we would have some excellent video clips to go with the story.

*Fourth*, this story could be pushed to the media in a number of ways. Aside from the obvious debate aspect, which may be of the least interest, you've got:

- The software development angle,
- The video-conferencing angle,
- The money-saving, business angle,
- The new technology/Internet angle, and
- The general educational/pedagogy angle.

*Fifth*, someone could dress up the IPDA web site with a TDT section and include some downloadable clips from the tournament. These should include some of the most impressive tournament moments. IPDA might decide to post some entire debates as well.

*Sixth*, TDTs would offer a real opportunity to develop a wider audience interest in public debate. Instead of having to show up in person to a real-time event, to see

what's going on, potential audience-observers could simply listen in on their computers. They could select which debate to listen to based on any kind of filtering criteria: School, debater, topic, round. And they wouldn't have to listen to the debate while it was taking place. Recorded debates might be available for any length of time following the tournament. This could be a chance to build a real audience for IPDA.

With a bit of luck this would not only give the IPDA format a gigantic P.R. boost, it might do as much or more for the professional careers of the leaders in this association. This is something that's really worth thinking about, people. But the time to start thinking about it is now.

### **Some Additional Issues**

The purpose of this paper was NOT to try to work out *all* of the future details of Tele-Debate and exactly what a TDT might require and look like. The purpose of this paper WAS to guesstimate the approximate look and feel of what TD and a TDT might be like. And this was done as a starting point for future discussion and research. So let me conclude by offering a short list of additional issues which cropped up while working on this writing project.

**Etiquette Issues:** How should we train our students to project politeness in a Tele-Debate? What are the potential hazards they should learn to avoid?

**Stylistic Issues:** Etiquette aside, what kinds of stylistic differences are likely to exist between real-world debate and TD? A critical goal of IPDA is to help train our debaters to better persuade real audiences. Our student-speakers are supposedly learning to be effective advocates before real-world audiences in the face of active opponents. Would this skill require a different style of presentation when speaking before a web-cam?

**Procedural Issues:** Beyond the guesswork presented above, how would participation in a TDT change various forensics procedures? We've got procedures for just about every aspect of IPDA from team practice sessions to tournament administration to reviewing post-tournament ballots. All of these procedures from every perspective might have to be rethought.

**Marketing Issues:** At present, there is only a modest need for HDs to 'market' or 'sell' their tournaments. The cost of travel limits many, if not most, forensic programs to attending tournaments in their own geographic region. But TD might open a whole world of possibilities for DoFCs. Why not attend the Oxford tournament in England instead of the tournament across town. And this raises all kinds of questions about how IPDA tournaments should be scheduled and marketed.

But TD may also allow individual forensics programs to greatly increase in size. They might no longer be limited by their travel budget. And this suggests a greatly expanded

demand for tournaments of all sizes, so I suspect that big prestigious tournaments would not be likely to drive the smaller ones out of business.

**Practical Issues:** One very important practical issue about TDT s is how big they should be allowed to become. The Internet and computers may, at least theoretically, permit hundreds or even thousands of entries for a single tournament. But tournament administration is not entirely a matter of computers, is it? There are still all of those participants who may call in with problems. So an ideal maximum size for a TDT and/or a ratio of participants to Host School resources will have to be worked out.

All this raises another practical concern: what about competition from other forensics associations. Assuming IPDA jumps on the TD possibility ahead of everyone else and make it work beautifully, I would expect other forensics leagues to follow along quite quickly. What might this co-existence look like and what coordination would be required to make it work.

One other practical issue facing TDTs involves judging. In what ways would the judging pool be affected?

**Economic Issues:** Money is a practical issue which borders on the ethical. It's also a driving issue so I gave it a category of its own. And I'm not going to delve too deeply into this issue. But one major concern is how to decide that the time is right. How much money would we have to save before IPDA launched into sponsoring TDTs? A second major question would be, how should revenue s be divided between the tournament host, tabroom personnel, the CD software developers, and IPDA.

**Ethical Issues:** Tele-Debate is likely to create a whole new set of ethical issues and problems. How can or should we control the 'reading' of evidence when you can't see or prove that a Tele-Debater is doing so? What, if any, limits should be placed on using the Internet as a prep-time resource? What ethical or even legal limits should be placed on the use of recorded materials from TDTs? Would you like to see your greatest verbal stupidity in a debate round posted on YouTube and made available for all eternity?

If there are to be ethical rules, to what degree should they be formalized as written laws, to what degree should they be set out as guidelines and merely encouraged, and to what degree should they be allowed to evolve as customs? What should the penalties be for violation of various rules? And how should rules be policed and enforced?

### **Conclusion**

This paper may leave the reader thinking Tele-Debate is nothing more than a kind of science fiction. If so, you may feel it's best left in the realm of light speculation. On the other hand, Tele-Debate already exists in the real world. Every time you see a pair of split screen, talking heads on a news program, you're watching a crude kind of Tele-Debate. "We have with us tonight, Ben Heartfelt, Chairman of the *Liberal Coalition for Do-Gooding*, joining us from Softwood, California. And with us also, is Betty Bottomline,

Director of the Conservative Think-Tank, *Kill-the-Beast*. She's joining us from Rockton, New York. Betty, let's start with you . . .”

Or consider the corporate move to teleconferencing, which saves all kinds of money associated with travel. Surely, some of those teleconference discussions involve disagreements which turn into informal debates. The media has shown the U.S. president in teleconference discussions with the president of Iraq. We also saw him being briefed by teleconference on Hurricane Katrina just before it hit. So this technology must be in growing use at all levels of government and must also be a growing trend around the world.

Oratory has always made use of technology. And each new technology requires the development of new skills sets. Early speakers had to learn to project their voices in natural amphitheatres. Centuries later orators were learning to communicate effectively using electronic amplifiers, radio, television, and now the internet. If the future is going to involve Internet mediated debate, it is important our students develop skills to communicate effectively using this technology.

Tele-Debate and TDTs should not do away with traditional forms of debate. People will always gather to discuss problems and argue about the best way of solving them. So traditional, real-time, face-to-face debating skills will always have a place in forensics education. But Tele-Debate may very well be the wave of a quickly advancing future. So preparing ourselves to teach our students to effectively debate through this medium might be a wonderful addition to our forensics curriculum.