

# What Does an Argument Culture Look Like?

DAVID ZAREFSKY

Department of Communication Studies  
Northwestern University  
1815 Chicago Avenue, Room 102  
Evanston, IL 60208-1340  
U.S.A.  
[d-zarefsky@northwestern.edu](mailto:d-zarefsky@northwestern.edu)

**Abstract:** A strong argument culture is characterized by at least five productive tensions, between: commitment and contingency, partisanship and restraint, personal conviction and sensitivity to the audience, reasonableness and subjectivity, and decision and non-closure. Differences in how communities manage these tensions explain why there are multiple argument cultures and, hence, why we need to understand arguing both within and among different cultures. The paper elaborates these five productive tensions, offers some examples of argument cultures that negotiate them in various ways, and considers what it means to argue across cultures in a world that is both increasingly diverse and increasingly atomized.

**Résumé:** Une culture qui valorise l'argumentation se caractérise par au moins cinq tensions entre : l'engagement et l'incertitude, le dévouement et la retenue, la conviction personnelle et la sensibilité envers un auditoire, l'esprit raisonnable et l'esprit subjectif, et la décision et la non divulgation. Les différentes façons que des communautés gèrent ces tensions expliquent pourquoi il a de multiples cultures d'argumentation, et donc pourquoi nous avons besoin de comprendre l'argumentation à la fois à l'intérieur de notre propre culture et parmi différentes cultures. Dans cet article on élabore sur ces cinq tensions productives, on offre quelques exemples de cultures qui valorisent l'argumentation qui négocient de différentes façons des arguments, et on examine la signification d'argumenter à travers des cultures dans un monde qui devient de plus en plus divers et isolé.

**Keywords:** argument culture, audience, contingency, cooperative argument, decision making, justification, reasonableness, risk

## 1. Introduction

It may have taken some courage for the organizing committee to pick as this year's conference theme "argument cultures." If the word got out, to many people in North America this phrase would be likely to conjure up the title of a book published a few years ago

by the popular U.S. linguist Deborah Tannen.<sup>1</sup> Her earlier book claimed to explain why men and women do not understand each other. Having addressed that issue, in *The Argument Culture* she bemoans a society she finds full of people too quick to take offense, too impatient, too insensitive to others. Contemporary U.S. culture, she maintains, is characterized by whining, bickering, complaining, griping, quarreling—or, in other words, by argument. For Tannen, argument is a pathology, and the way to a better life lies in diminishing its role.

Such are the vagaries of the English language—unlike many other tongues—that the words “argument,” “arguing,” and “argumentation” have two very distinct connotations. There is the popular negative connotation embodied in Tannen’s work and in the looks of people who sometimes ask me, incredulously, “You mean you teach *that*?” This, I can safely assert, is not our focus. Then there is a second connotation which animates our work. We are not all philosophers (though I have been accused of much worse), but we do all believe that the relationships among claims, reasons, and people offer material for serious study. We are committed to understand and improve the processes by which people seek to warrant their own beliefs and, through giving and exchanging reasons, to influence the thought and action of others. And our conference theme directs our attention to these activities within the framework of culture.

The term “culture” focuses our attention not on arguments as sets of disembodied propositions but on what people make and do when they argue. In the most general sense, a culture designates a body of norms and practices, and the people who engage in them, that are sustained across time. But the scope of the term “culture” is wonderfully ambiguous. It sometimes is understood in reference to a nation, as when we talk about French culture or American culture. Sometimes it refers to the organization of academic fields, as when we mention the cultures of philosophy or communication programs. Sometimes the reference is ethnic or religious, as in Slavic cultures, Muslim cultures, or Latino cultures. Sometimes what is meant is a particular viewpoint or focus, as in visual culture or postmodern culture. Sometimes general modes of inquiry are suggested by the term, as when we talk about artistic, scientific, humanistic, or professional cultures. In each of these cases, and many others besides, the cultural point of reference conditions how arguments are designed, practiced, understood, and evaluated. In this sense each of my examples could be thought of as a distinct argument culture.

---

<sup>1</sup> Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture* (New York: Random House, 1998).

But that is not my approach this morning. I wish to bracket the question of what constitutes a culture and ask instead, for *any* understanding of culture, what happens when it becomes an *argument* culture—that is, a culture that values and encourages argumentation. I am assuming that no culture is an argument culture all the time. Sometimes it will have more urgent needs than encouraging reason-giving. But when a culture becomes an argument culture, what does it look like? What are the characteristics of an argument culture, and what are its predicaments?

At the risk of being too elementary, I would like to speculate about these questions. I will take disagreement between people as the paradigm case of argumentative exchange, but my remarks also apply to other argument configurations. The heart of my remarks will take the form of two lists—one, a set of six characteristics that I think an argument culture will possess, and the other, a series of five tensions that an argument culture negotiates. Let me begin, then, with six features that identify an argument culture.

## 2. Identifying features of an argument culture

First, an argument culture assumes the presence of an audience and emphasizes its importance. Argument forms can be elegant models whether they relate to anyone or not, but a culture implies connections among people. Arguments are addressed to people. The audience can be one person, as in the case of a dialectical encounter, or a small group engaged in deliberation. The audience even can be the same as the arguer, as in the classic dialogue between self and soul. But it also can be the third-party observers of a legislative or judicial hearing, or even a mass public attending to mediated messages, or an audience evoked by the arguer and inferred from the text.

One function of the audience is to establish the boundaries of acceptable argumentative practice. It is well and good to posit normative standards *a priori*, but the standards that really matter are the ones that the audience imposes in a given circumstance, constraining or directing the arguers. To use a simple example, the presence of two contradictory arguments means, logically, only that they cannot both be true. But those attuned to audience-centered argumentation will recognize that people often regard *both* of the inconsistent claims as unacceptable, because the contradiction calls into question the sincerity and trustworthiness of the arguer. In this case, the audience-based standard is more demanding than is a formal standard; in others, it can be less so. In all cases, though, the particulars matter. This finding encourages our concern with what rhetoricians would call the rhetorical situation, what informal logicians would call the context, what pragma-dialecticians would

call the activity type. Simply put, in an argument culture, practice begins in awareness of the specific circumstances of the case and of the constraints and opportunities it presents.

Relating arguments to audiences is a concern of the argumentation scholar and critic as well as of the arguer. For example, in the U.S. the *Federalist Papers* often are understood as an exercise in political philosophy, setting forth a particular perspective on the nature of a constitutional republic. In fact, though, they were written with specific assumptions of the beliefs and values animating delegates to the New York state ratifying convention, in an attempt to influence their votes.<sup>2</sup> I believe that we will understand these great documents much more richly when we examine their arguments as responses to a particular situation. Similarly, one can read the Lincoln-Douglas debates as abstract discussion of the morality of slavery and be offended by the seeming tentativeness of Lincoln's antislavery commitment. But one can read them instead with an understanding of a lay audience to whom they were directed: the Old Line Whigs of central Illinois who were both antislavery and anti-abolition, and whose votes would decide the election.<sup>3</sup> Realizing that audience beliefs and values constrained them helps one to see more clearly the strategic and tactical artistry of Lincoln and Douglas as they pushed the envelope. In constructing their arguments, each sought to exploit one set of the audience's commitments to position himself as moderate and his opponent as extreme.

The audience consists of those people the arguer wants to influence,<sup>4</sup> and they may or may not be those actually present. In any case, in an argument culture arguers take their audiences seriously and the argumentation takes place with an audience in mind.

Second, an argument culture acknowledges and may even embrace uncertainty. It was Aristotle who wrote that on matters that are certain, no one deliberates.<sup>5</sup> Why should they, when they

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Cecil L. Eubanks, "New York: Federalism and the Political Economy of Union," *Ratifying the Constitution*, ed. Michael Allen Gillespie and Michael Lienesch (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1989), 314-15. Eubanks concludes, however, that the Papers were less significant than one might think, because the argumentation was not adapted well enough to the audience.

<sup>3</sup> David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), esp. 1-39.

<sup>4</sup> Here I follow the approach of Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1357a.

can discover knowledge or resolve disagreements by far more efficient means? Of course, not much is “certain.” Even our knowledge of the external world is mediated by our own perception, and what seems certain has that status only in the sense that it is universally accepted. But when direct perception or appeal to a mutually accepted authority can resolve a disagreement or answer a question, there is no reason to argue about the matter.

In contrast, matters that are uncertain are potentially controversial; they always could be otherwise. However strongly we may believe about them, we cannot know *for sure*. Argumentation, then, is characterized by the existence of opposing viewpoints, and an argument culture is one that valorizes dissensus rather than seeking either to ignore or to squelch disagreements.<sup>6</sup> Continuing the discussion is a higher priority than is achieving an artificial settlement. Some conflicts can be resolved; others can only be clarified. But argumentation can be productive in either case.

This being so, in an argument culture people respect one another regardless of the beliefs they espouse. Disagreements take place over standpoints, not individuals. Any arguer deserves respect for contributing to the conversation, not disdain for prolonging it. (In turn, each person has an obligation genuinely to contribute, not merely to rehash or to distract.)

Third, an argument culture is one that, even in the face of uncertainty, values conviction. To put it another way, individuals do not wallow in uncertainty, indifferent to choices and content to follow the path of least resistance. Nor are they paralyzed by the inability to decide conclusively. On the contrary, they argue both to form and to test their beliefs. They do the former through problem-solving discussions; the latter, through dialogue, disputation, and debate. Even when people have beliefs so strong that they think they know for sure, like the Minnesota high school students who wrote me that everyone knows that human life begins at conception and abortion is chosen only for convenience, still they test their beliefs by submitting them to the scrutiny others will offer through argument. To be challenged is not a sign of weakness, nor is answering a challenge a sign that the challenge was unfounded.

What sustains convictions on this view is not prejudice or closed-mindedness, not reaffirmation of cant or dogma, but the fact that the convictions have withstood meaningful testing through argument. What leads one to change convictions is not force or seduction, not indifference or withering in the face of a challenge,

---

<sup>6</sup> See G. Thomas Goodnight, “Controversy,” *Argument in Controversy: Proceedings of the Seventh SCA/AFA Summer Conference on Argumentation* (Annandale, Va.: Speech Communication Association, 1991), 1-13.

but acknowledgment that the original position could not withstand testing through argument. And arguers do not adhere to convictions forever and always, but only until they are given good reason to change. Precisely because uncertain matters always could be otherwise, in an argument culture there are commitments to positions but there are no final victories.

Fourth, an argument culture embraces the process of justifying, rather than proving, one's claims. Because matters are uncertain, there is an inferential leap between one's premises and one's conclusions. Argumentation recognizes this leap and offers reasons for making it.<sup>7</sup> The reasons are acceptable if they would convince a reasonable person who was exercising critical judgment. If so, we may say that the claim has been justified. The more critical the "critical" listener, who assents to the argument, the more confident the arguer can be that his or her claim is sound.

Justification, then, is subjective and is dependent upon the particular audience. It says not that something *is true* rather that a person *should believe* it. What is "justified" is commitment to a position or standpoint, not certification of its truth. In emphasizing justification rather than proof, an argument culture implies that people are open-minded and willing to be convinced without the assurance of truth, yet skeptical enough not to take statements just on faith. Moreover, justification has degrees of strength, ranging from the merely plausible to the highly probably, and the strength attributed to the argument will vary accordingly.

What counts as justification—the sorts of evidence and reasoning structures that will be convincing—will depend on the context, including such factors as the importance of the issue to the participants, the status the arguers have in the controversy, and the possibility of reversing course if the justification is found to be in error. The meaning and importance of justification remain constant, but the criteria for and strength of justification are context-specific.<sup>8</sup>

Fifth, an argument culture is one in which, despite its seemingly adversarial character, argumentation is fundamentally a cooperative enterprise. This feature directly counters the image of arguing as bickering, quarreling, or eristic disputation. It

---

<sup>7</sup> This position is discussed more fully in Wayne Brockriede, "Where Is Argument?" *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 11 (Spring, 1975), 179-182. The journal is now titled *Argumentation and Advocacy*.

<sup>8</sup> This is similar to the distinction Toulmin drew between field-invariant standards and field-dependent criteria. See *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1958), 15, 30.

distinguishes the culture that distains or merely tolerates argument from the culture that valorizes and extols it.<sup>9</sup>

If the popular image of argumentation is that it is sublimated fighting, in what sense can it be said to be at all cooperative? In an ideal argumentative encounter, the arguers share a common goal of reaching the best possible decision under the circumstances. The seemingly adversarial elements of argumentation—attack and defense, refutation and rebuttal—are means toward the achievement of this common goal. It is as though an intelligent designer (pardon the reference) had assigned the arguers to play the role of committed advocates for opposing positions, so that the proposition or standpoint under examination would receive a particularly rigorous test. A standpoint that survives such careful scrutiny is more likely to warrant our trust than one that does not.

But, of course, actual cases of argumentation fall far short of this ideal. Competing arguers may be interested in the best decision, but they believe they already know what it is and want for their view to prevail.<sup>10</sup> But these harsh factors do not negate the beauty of the common goal. Committed advocates, sure that they are right, will be induced to develop the strongest case for their position because they know their views will be examined by equally committed advocates for the opposing view. They owe it to the seeming truth of their position to give it their best case. Just as if there were an “invisible hand” (again, pardon the reference) guiding the process, standpoints will be tested rigorously, and the decision-maker—in this case, probably a third party, since the arguers themselves will be at an impasse—will be enabled to make the best decision under the circumstances.

Beyond their common goal, arguers will cooperate in other respects too. They will agree on the starting points of

---

<sup>9</sup> The material in this section is heavily influenced by the work of Douglas Ehninger. See especially “Argument as Method: Its Nature, Its Limitations, and Its Uses,” *Speech Monographs*, 37 (June, 1970), 101-110. The journal is now called *Communication Monographs*.

<sup>10</sup> This is the central idea behind the program of “strategic maneuvering” developed by van Eemeren and Houtlosser. See Frans H. van Eemeren and Peter Houtlosser, “Strategic Maneuvering: Maintaining a Delicate Balance,” *Dialectic and Rhetoric: The Warp and Woof of Argumentation Analysis* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 131-159. Given the objectives of their program, however, van Eemeren and Houtlosser stipulate that the strategic moves are subordinate to the dialectical goal of resolving disagreement. Not all approaches to argumentation would share that view. The position here is that in an argument culture, whether arguers are committed to cooperative action or not, their argumentative behavior serves a cooperative goal similar to that specified by van Eemeren and Houtlosser.

argumentation.<sup>11</sup> These will include procedural conventions such as turn-taking, reciprocal obligations such as the need to support claims when challenged and responsibility to take objections into account rather than merely repeating the initial position, norms such as what counts as evidence, meanings of the key terms and concepts in the discussion, and values such as modesty, respect for the audience, and respect for one's interlocutor. These agreements are often tacit, but they can be made explicit when questioned. An argument culture is one characterized by these levels of cooperation and by the recognition that seemingly adversarial disputation has the positive function of facilitating decisions of good quality, whether by consensus of the arguers or by the judgment of a third party.

Sixth and finally, an argument culture is one in which individuals are willing to take risks. Any arguer accepts two principal risks.<sup>12</sup> One is the risk of being shown to be wrong and needing, therefore, to alter one's system of beliefs, attitudes, or values. Cognitive change of this sort can be unsettling, and the more so when one's fundamental convictions are at issue. The second is the risk of loss of face among relevant others as a result of unsuccessful argumentative performance. This can be threatening to a person's self-esteem and sense of worth. If a person knew, for sure, that he or she was right, that person might be unwilling to take these risks. And each of us probably has some aspects of our lives about which we will not argue, just as some historians will not engage with those who deny the existence of the Holocaust or other generally accepted facts, and some scientists will not argue with those who deny generally accepted scientific theories such as evolution.

But an argument culture is one in which these zones of exclusion are relatively small. Arguers believe that they are right, but they do not know *for sure*. They will strengthen their confidence if they can gain the assent of valued others, but only if assent is freely given. For the sake of free assent, they will place their own convictions on the table so that they can be examined by others, and while seeking to convince their antagonists, they run the risk that they will be convinced instead. In Henry Johnstone's view,

---

<sup>11</sup> This is also an assumption of the pragma-dialectical research program of van Eemeren and colleagues. See, for example, Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1992), 35.

<sup>12</sup> The concept of risk assumed by arguers is developed in Henry W. Johnstone Jr., "Some Reflections on Argumentation." *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Argumentation*, ed. Maurice Natanson and Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1965), 1-9, esp. 3.



they bestow human dignity and personhood on their interlocutor, and thereby claim the same values for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

So far I have suggested that an argument culture can be characterized by six attributes: consciousness of audience, comfort with uncertainty, expectation of personal convictions, commitment to justification rather than formal proof, realization that the enterprise is essentially cooperative, and willingness to assume risks. I am not yet prepared to say that these are necessary or sufficient conditions for an argument culture, but I do think that they are general descriptions of such a culture.

It may occur to you that some of these characteristics are at cross purposes, if not inconsistent. Indeed, I believe that argument cultures exist in productive tension among these characteristics. This is also why there are no final victories in argumentation, seemingly settled questions can be reopened, and today's minority view can prevail another day.

### **3. Productive tensions among the features of an argument culture**

What then are some of these productive tensions? At the risk of burdening you with another list, let me briefly suggest five.

One is the tension between contingency and commitment, between accepting the uncertainty of the situation and committing oneself to standpoints one is prepared to defend. In an argument culture, people make commitments in the face of contingency, and at the same time contingency makes them just a bit skeptical about their own commitments. This tension prevents the culture both from wallowing in Hamlet-like indecision and from degenerating into a culture of closed-minded true-believers.

A second tension is between partisanship and restraint. Arguers are partisans for the cause they espouse. Except perhaps in interscholastic debate contests in which the goal is to develop argument skills for their own sake, arguers sincerely want their position to prevail and believe that real consequences are at stake. Yet they are not willing to use any and all means to achieve that end. They forego force and bribery, for example—not just because of fear of failure but also because assent under those conditions would not be worth having. President Kennedy referred to nuclear war as one in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our

---

<sup>13</sup> Johnstone, "Some Reflections," 9; Henry W. Johnstone Jr., *The Problem of the Self* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1970), 150.

mouth.<sup>14</sup> At a less cosmic level, arguers are saying in effect that unrestrained partisanship would produce the same result, a victory that is not worth having. An argument culture recognizes that the posture of restrained partisanship will best protect the culture over the long haul.

A third tension is between personal conviction and sensitivity to audience. An arguer seeks the assent of an audience and therefore will tailor his or her argument choices to the expectations and beliefs of the audience. But the arguer will not go to the extreme of pandering to the audience, telling it whatever it wishes to hear at the cost of fidelity to his or her own convictions. An argument culture will penalize a person who is thought willing to say anything that will help his or her cause; such a person is disparaged as a “flip-flopper.” In a seminal essay over fifty years ago, Donald Bryant described the function of rhetoric as “adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas.”<sup>15</sup> Much the same could be said about argumentation, in the sense that arguers both adapt their ideas so that they will be palatable to the audience and also try to move the audience to acceptance of their ideas. In the process, both audience and ideas are changed somehow, and to that degree a new social world is created.

A fourth tension is between reasonableness and subjectivity. Arguments are reasonable if they would be generally acceptable on their face by people exercising their critical judgment. People exercise such judgments in what may be highly subjective and idiosyncratic ways, preferring this or that value, giving different weight to this or that criterion, bestowing this or that interpretation on facts or evidence. Every one of these different criteria for choices may be individual and subjective, yet their cumulation in the form of acceptance is what makes an argument reasonable. An argument culture will embrace this tension; its ideology will be less visible and more complex than one which does not.

A fifth and final tension is between decision and nonclosure. If I have sounded any consistent note in these remarks, it is that there are no final victories; continuing the conversation is valuable in itself. An argument culture sustains itself by not closing off argument. And yet arguments do end; things do need to get decided. In the United States, for example, albeit at great cost we have decided that slavery and officially sanctioned racial discrimination are wrong. I do not expect those questions to be

---

<sup>14</sup> “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba, October 22, 1962,” *Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy, 1962* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 807.

<sup>15</sup> Donald C. Bryant, “Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 39 (December, 1953), 401-424.

reopened. And yet even there, underlying arguments remain open: once we have committed ourselves to equality, what does that mean and how far does our commitment go? These are questions underlying controversies on affirmative action, reparations, education policy, and the significance of the election of Barack Obama. An argument culture embraces the tension between decision and nonclosure, recognizing the need to settle certain matters while at the same time keeping the conversation open lest standpoints harden into dogma. Disputes settled on one level may mutate on another.

#### 4. Argument cultures: Ideal or actual?

To this point I have speculated about six characteristics of an argument culture and five tensions such a culture exploits. What, finally, is the status of these speculations? Have I described a counterfactual normative ideal, or are there actually argument cultures as I have imagined them? The answer is yes, some of each. My notion of argument culture *is* something like the universal audience, the ideal speech situation, or the critical discussion,<sup>16</sup> in the sense that it is a goal toward which we should strive but usually fall short. But it also is a state that sometimes is actually achieved, or at least approximated, by cultures of many different types—not always, of course, but when their discourse is at its best. National cultures become argument cultures when they are self-reflective and especially when they can understand the basis of claims advanced by others. Disciplinary cultures—not excluding our own disciples of logic, dialectic, and rhetoric—become argument cultures when they move beyond self-serving proclamations about who works for whom and instead focus on the consequences of both their differences and their similarities, and on the justification for their methods.

Lest I leave this question in the abstract, I would like to close by briefly identifying moments at which political discourse in the United States—what I tend most to study—took on many of the characteristics of an argument culture. One occurred in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the states and the people considered whether to ratify the proposed Constitution. The discourse in the state ratifying

---

<sup>16</sup> These are the normative standards proposed, respectively, by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, by Jurgen Habermas, and by Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst. See Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 31-35; Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), 308; Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation: The Pragma-Dialectical Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 21-23.

conventions reflected cognizance of the audience, justification for positions taken, the acceptance of risks, the competing demands of contingency and commitment, and—despite the sometimes excessive passion or hyperbole—the shared goal of framing the best government for the new nation.<sup>17</sup> One who studies the ratification debates, I believe, will notice the prominence of argument in the evolution of the controversy.

Another, perhaps surprisingly, took place in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as advocates grappled with the moral, legal, and political problems posed by American slavery. With the benefit of hindsight, we may see the coming of the Civil War as inevitable, but it certainly did not seem so to most people at the time. For most of the 1850's, people of good will exchanged arguments about who was qualified to settle the issue, what avenues of compromise might be available, and whether there was a way in which the issue could be outgrown or a decision postponed. It was not until the symbolic violence of the late 1850's—the sack of Lawrence, Kansas, the attack on Senator Charles Sumner, and John Brown's raid—that people first despaired of settling the issue through argument.

I have less confidence in identifying contemporary moments when U.S. civic discourse has become an argument culture. One probably was the period leading up to the first Persian Gulf War, when the nation argued about the comparative merits of military action and of giving United Nations sanctions more time to work. Another may have been the period of 1967-68 when an extended national argument led many Americans to reassess their beliefs about the Vietnam War. Yet another might be the national discussion after the disputed Presidential elections of 2000, when people learned about arcane elements of the Constitution and remained patient and calm, even while media commentators proclaimed that the nation was facing a crisis and that decisions must be made without the luxury of argumentation.

My point is that at moments like these, U.S. political culture could and did become an argument culture, placing its bet on the processes of reason-giving and justification. And at different moments, other cultures will do the same. Our task as argumentation scholars is to appreciate such moments and to try to enlarge their frequency and scope. We also must recognize that, especially in our multicultural but atomized world, many different argument cultures may be functioning at once. Translating among them is a tall order, but the concepts and terminology of

---

<sup>17</sup> An excellent sample of the discourse produced during the ratification controversy in the individual states is *The Debate on the Constitution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn (Library of America, 1993), 2 vols.

argumentation theory may themselves form a kind of common currency. By doing what we do—all the different things we do—we may not only understand but also help to build argument cultures, cultures in which the practice of argument is welcomed and prized.