Re: bylaw proposed by Tania Ayoub, OCSL, Area IV to allow computers in Public Forum.

Tania’s Rationale: The use of computers and other electric retrieval devices is allowed in each of the other debate events, as well as in Extemporaneous Speaking. There are arguments against the use of computers in rounds, including affordability, perceived competitive advantage, use of internet during round for research, and in­round communication with coaches and/or outsiders. However, seeing as in Policy, LD, Parli, and Extemp all expressly allow computer usage within some sensible, and readily­agreed upon guidelines (e.g. turning off internet in round), it appears as though the question of computers being good or bad for competitive equity have already been resolved in the abstract. The reasons for computer usage are exactly the same in PF as they are in other events.

Experience shows that there is no competitive advantage to use of computers in­round when compared to teams using paper. With the implementation of the basic guidelines referred to earlier, it is simply a choice of how a squad wishes to organize their research and files. It doesn’t allow a debater to access information any quicker than paper debaters. Efficiently finding information in your files, be they paper or electronic, is a function of how well one knows and has organized their files, not the apparatus of organization.

Computers allow programs to save a substantial amount of money and resources from not having to repeatedly print updated information. It gives students an incentive to continually refine and improve their arguments by making the editing process more convenient, allowing for better understanding of their material and an improved educational experience. Whether they use computers in round or not, virtually all research and argument writing during the week is done on computers anyway.

The days of scissors, glue­sticks, and tape haven’t been seen since I was a high school competitor nearly twenty years ago. As this new generation of debaters becomes adults, nearly all work they produce in college and the workplace will be paperless.

There numerous additional reasons I could continue to list for the allowance of computers in debate generally, but as mentioned above, that question has already been answered by CHSSA, and the determination has been clearly made that computers are something that enhance, or at least at minimum, don’t detract from the educational value or competitive equity of debate. With the acceptability of computers being clearly determined in the affirmative by CHSSA, the real question remains – why the double standard for Public Forum? Each of the other debate events can utilize what is a commonplace form of technology in 21st Century America. What makes Public Forum different?

First, the prohibition of computers for only PF sends a clear message to students competing in the event that they are somehow “less than.” Every other debater in every other event gets to utilize computers, but somehow PF debaters are either incapable of using them properly, or are participating in an event that is so simplistic that computers would just get in the way. I would sincerely hope that as educators, each of us would disagree with those conclusions wholeheartedly. However, that is at least part of the perception that such a double standard creates, be it intentionally or not.

Second, the prohibition on computer use creates a competitive disadvantage for numerous squads. As mentioned earlier, virtually all research and argument writing takes place on computers. For numerous squads competing at invitational tournaments, they make a choice to utilize laptops at those tournaments when allowed. In doing so, it forces teams to have to convert all their files to paper format for a single tournament on a topic when competing at a CHSSA­sponsored tournament. This creates an unfamiliarity with where files are, but is also an extremely wasteful and unnecessary use of both time and paper/toner.

Third, while I haven’t done an exhaustive search of all 49 other state associations, a brief search of approximately 15 states, including several states widely considered to be among the most conservative and restrictive state associations in the country (Missouri, Indiana, Kansas, South Dakota, Minnesota, Montana, Maine), I have been unable to find a single state that prohibits computer usage in any of the debate events, much less singling out a particular event as being unable to use computers while all other events can. Simply put, nowhere else in the country that I can find still has such a prohibition. That alone isn’t a reason to change, but it is certainly insightful as to how the event has evolved.

Fourth, Pubic Forum is intended to be an event that gives substantial weight to communication skills. However, whether a student reads off of a computer screen or a piece of paper does not affect their ability to be communicative. While it may be true that some students are speaking faster than might be prudent or some coaches would prefer, the cause is the choice of the student, and not what they are reading off of. A student can speak quickly and ignore a judge just as easily from behind a stack of paper as they can behind a computer. Similarly, a student can be persuasive and engaging using either medium. Problems in presentation and style are the responsibility of the student, and not how they organize their evidence.

Fifth, PF utilizes evidence in the same fashion as both Policy and LD. The topics for debate in PF (UN Peacekeeping, GMOs, Civil Rights, US drug policy, etc.) are complex enough to require a significant amount of research to discuss accurately and intelligently, and we should promote exactly that. While it may have been the case in its infancy a decade ago, PF is no longer an event where students will read only 3 or four pieces of evidence during a 4 minute speech. Whether such an evolution is desirable or not is another issue, but it has happened, and is unlikely to revert. Restricting debaters to using paper as a means to discourage being well­researched and knowledgeable on a topic of complexity and importance will not return the event to where it was ten years ago, and should have no place in an activity that is intended to educate students.

Thank you very much for your consideration.