
How the Rosenkranz Foundation is injecting substance and civility into public policy discourse through its modern Oxford-style debate program by Bryan O'Keefe

February 14, 2007

With the rise of an increasingly biased media, brash and shrill blogosphere, and endless shouting matches on cable news networks, it would be easy to conclude that the days of polite, civilized debate on important public policy issues are fast becoming history.

The New York-based Rosenkranz Foundation is trying to alter that trend with Intelligence Squared (IQ2) US, a new Oxford-style debate series that emphasizes respectable, intellectual public discourse over the emotional, hyper-partisan wrangling so commonplace today.

“We wanted to create something that was different and just doesn’t exist right now” says Dana Wolfe, executive director of the Rosenkranz Foundation and executive producer of the Intelligence Squared US series. “There are very few formal debate venues these days. Many think tanks are just preaching to the choir, and you just hear punditry on cable television news. We wanted to establish an Oxford-style forum where you can come and hear both sides of an issue and appreciate everybody’s arguments, even if you don’t always agree with them.”

Robert Rosenkranz, chairman and founder of the foundation, first got the idea for Intelligence Squared US after watching a British version about a year and a half ago, in London. Even though a formal, Oxford-style debate might seem outdated, the series has been running successfully in Britain since 2002. Rosenkranz thought the concept would be popular in the United States too, especially with people like himself who wanted to raise the level of public discourse.

Rosenkranz pursued the concept aggressively. He bought the U.S. rights to the show and decided to produce it through his foundation. He also hired Wolfe, a former Nightline producer for ABC News, to help coordinate the new series.

So far, Rosenkranz’s gamble has paid off. Since the first debate this fall in New York City, the series has become wildly popular, with approximately 300 people--a standing-room only crowd--paying \$40 per ticket to attend each of the most recent debates.

The audience represents a cross-section of people from all walks of life. “We get people from the business world, media, think tanks, colleges and universities. These are the type of people that ‘read the newspapers.’ They care deeply about current affairs,” Wolfe says.

And a national following is developing, thanks to National Public Radio. NPR records each event,

edits it into an hour, and distributes it to 820 member stations. Intelligence Squared US has already broken into well over half of the top 50 markets, including the large NPR affiliate in San Francisco.

The debates themselves have tackled some of the hottest public policy topics. Motions debated this past fall included “We must tolerate a nuclear Iran,” “Freedom of Expression must include the license to offend,” “A democratically-elected Hamas is still a terrorist organization,” and “Hollywood has fueled anti-Americanism abroad.” The participants are intellectual heavyweights such as Joshua Muravchik, Reuel Marc Gerecht, Christopher Hitchens, William Kristol, Alan Wolfe, and Roger Kimball. The moderators are also well-known, including The New Yorker’s Jeffrey Toobin and National Public Radio’s Robert Siegel.

“We try to pick topics that are a mixture of foreign and domestic policy. We want to cover the hot button issues of the day, and we try getting the recognized experts,” Wolfe says. “We also pride ourselves on being unbiased. Too much of the news is biased. We just pick the topics and let them debate.”

A confluence of factors has contributed to the program’s success. For starters, the structure of each debate encourages audience participation and engagement, ensuring that audience members are part of the action and not just observers.

“Audience participation is an important part of the debate. We have found that people on both sides of the issue really like to take part,” Wolfe says.

The audience participates in several ways. At the beginning of each debate, a motion is proposed and the audience is polled on whether or not they support the motion, oppose it, or are undecided. Each side then has three speakers debate the motion, followed by questions from the audience. After the debate is formally concluded, the audience votes again on the motion, allowing the debaters to see who did the better job of persuading the masses.

In another break from the usual public discourse where opinions seemingly never change, many audience members actually switch their votes after listening to the other side. For example, before a November debate on the motion “A democratically-elected Hamas is still a terrorist organization,” 60 percent of the audience supported the motion, 19 percent were against it, and 21 percent were undecided. After listening to the debaters, 53 percent were in favor, 30 percent against and 17 percent undecided.

Though the debates themselves are serious and intellectual, there is also an appealing social element. For many people, Intelligence Squared US is an entire evening out. Prior to each debate is a cocktail hour, and afterwards many of the debate participants and audience members adjourn to area restaurants to continue the lively discussions.

“It’s primarily about intellectual stimulation, but a small part of it is social. You know when you go

to Intelligence Squared that the other audience members are also interested in the issues being debated,” says Wolfe.

For those people who do not live in the New York City area or cannot pick up the NPR broadcast, Intelligence Squared US has designed an interactive website (www.intelligencesquaredus.org) that allows visitors to experience each debate. Transcripts, pictures, and the NPR audio can be downloaded, free of charge. There is also an online polling feature, which allows people to vote prior to the event in the same way the actual studio does. Full-length DVDs of each debate can be purchased through the website for \$20.00.

The inaugural spring series of Intelligence Squared US kicks off on February 7, 2007, with the topic of “America is just too damn religious.” Other motions that will be considered in the coming months include “Global warming is not a crisis,” “Beware the dragon: A booming China spells trouble for America,” and “Better more domestic surveillance than another 9/11.”

In particular, the domestic surveillance event should be a crowd-pleaser with David Frum, Andrew McCarthy, and John Yoo—a principal author of the Patriot Act—squaring off against former Republican congressman and noted Patriot Act critic Bob Barr, Jeffrey Rosen, and Nadine Strossen. The global warming event will also feature perhaps the most well-known global warming skeptic today, prolific author Michael Crichton, arguing alongside and against several distinguished scientists.

Wolfe notes that committed audience members are already buying tickets. Package deals are for sale to accommodate audience members who would like to attend all of the events. Sponsorships are also available at three levels: Bright (\$1,000 donation), Brilliant (\$5,000) and Genius (\$10,000). All levels include seating at the debates, while the Brilliant and Genius donors are also invited to post-debate dinners with debate participants and special guests.

As for the future, the Rosenkranz Foundation hopes to keep expanding the series, with as many as five debates each planned for next fall and spring. While the topics have not yet been set, motions under consideration for the Fall 2007-Spring 2008 series include “Russia is our enemy again,” “Aid to Africa has done more harm than good,” “Civil unions ‘yes,’ gay marriage ‘no,’” “Spreading democracy in the Middle East is a bad idea,” and “America’s newspapers are dead.”

The Rosenkranz Foundation is seeking funding partners to expand the program to other cities, garner television coverage, and strengthen public demand for intelligent debate.

“We believe in the test of the marketplace,” Wolfe adds. “Robert Rosenkranz likes to say, ‘if we are the only ones who think Intelligence Squared US is a good idea, then it probably isn’t.’”