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Hermeneutic Range in Church-State Deliberation: Cross Meanings in the Los Angeles County Seal Controversy

Don J. Waisanen

The removal of a cross from the Los Angeles County seal created an intense local controversy in 2004. Hearings between the region's Board of Supervisors and different publics demonstrated how individuals can make similar judgments through hermeneutic range—or the various configurations of interpretive openness and closure that can be enacted in deliberation. Specifically, the interpretive leeway that audiences use in controversies constitutes one approach for understanding how discursive alliances may be formed. In this case, I constructed three different groups in the controversy, each corresponding to particular attributions of the monosemy or polysemy of history, religious symbols, and politics. Implications are charted for communication research and pedagogy.

Keywords: Church-State; Controversy; Deliberation; Hermeneutics; Polysemy

Whatever the interpretive process of intra- and intercultural exchanges, the rhetorical outcome depends on how different agents reweave their beliefs and practices as a result of exchanges.

—Steven Mailloux (Reception 18)

Despite a common admonition to avoid the topics in polite conversation, rarely a day goes by without religious and political discourses crossing in public affairs. In recent
times, many of the most pressing controversies have involved issues such as whether or not to build a mosque near the site of 9/11 in New York City, legal cases concerning what to teach in science classrooms, and Supreme Court deliberations over the removal of religious symbols from public spaces (Barnes, par. 4; Haberman, pars. 1–2; “Judge Rules,” pars. 1–3). Yet for all their continuing impacts upon politics, religious rhetorics remain a difficult area of investigation. A Washington Post and Newsweek forum even concluded that “religion is the most pervasive yet least understood topic in global life” (Meacham and Quinn, par. 1). Communication and rhetorical scholarship can helpfully address these issues (Medhurst 215), particularly by exploring how debates are wrought between local officials and citizens (Gastil 188).

In 2004, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to remove a small Christian cross from their county’s seal. The decision created a controversy in Los Angeles and throughout the nation, bringing out such surprisingly disparate advocates as Catholic and Protestant leaders, Buddhists, Jews, and atheists (Roberts, par. 3). Among others, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), talk show hosts, law professors, teachers, celebrities, and even a chef and a magician contributed to the debate (“06-01-04”; “06-08-04”; “09-14-04”). The seal case can be characterized as a social controversy, or “an extended rhetorical engagement that critiques, resituates, and develops communication practices bridging the public and personal spheres” (Olson and Goodnight 249). Overall, controversy is “a creature of the between”—involving many conflicting actors—and “temporally pluralistic” in opening fluid, expanding spaces for historical, cultural, and political argumentation (Goodnight 2). Similarly, the cross’s removal created a puzzling, hybrid moment for interlacing theological, historical, and political concerns in Los Angeles. This essay uses controversy to explore arguments between the public and the Board of Supervisors, but more specifically, to raise issues about deliberation and hermeneutics focusing on the construction of discursive alliances, the opening or narrowing of argumentative spaces, and the possibilities for commensurable communication in public debates.

Rhetorical studies can contribute to deliberation scholarship by exploring how increasingly diverse citizens and communities “process information and exercise judgment” (Carcasson, Black, and Sink 3). Similar questions have been raised in interpretation research. Jost and Hyde asked how religious believers and unbelievers should communicate with each other (“Rhetoric” 22), and Ceccarelli urged rhetoricians to explain “what keeps each audience from venturing into the reading frame of the other audience” (410)? While deliberation scholars focus on what citizens might do in interaction, researchers studying hermeneutics explore the role interpretive processes play in public reasoning.

I advance these lines of inquiry by arguing that hermeneutic range demonstrates a way in which individuals can make judgments and form provisional collectives, in this case, in a church-state controversy. Specifically, the interpretive leeway (or range of closure or openness) that audiences enact in deliberation illustrates how publics may form temporary discursive alliances through similar hermeneutic acts—that is, by sharing various configurations of monosemy or polysemy regarding several issues under dispute. I created three frameworks from individual’s arguments in
the controversy, each involving particular attributions of the monosemy or polysemy of history, religious symbols, and politics. The cross’s removal fueled a debate about these three larger, abstract issue categories among many individuals in the controversy. Given the layered, multidimensional character of such interpretive disputes (in which my very own interpretations play a part), this essay makes only a provisional claim about the kinds of hermeneutic threads that can arise in such critical public moments. Its aims are theoretically exploratory and pedagogical, intending to provide one heuristic perspective of emerging rhetorical dynamics in a modern controversy.

In the following sections, first, I bring into contact relevant points between literatures on public deliberation and hermeneutics (and monosemy and polysemy) to create the concept of hermeneutic range, and then outline my method of inquiry. Second, a context is provided for the seal controversy. Third, I construct three groups from the seal deliberations that correspond to three interpretive frameworks, and then finally chart the implications of this investigation for communication scholarship and pedagogy.

Public Deliberation and Hermeneutics

Deliberation scholars have raised questions about what communicative criteria are vital to a functioning democracy, how performances of citizenship exhibit or neglect norms of publicness (Asen, “A Discourse” 191), and “how and why lines among argument contexts are put up and redrawn through debate” (Goodnight 7). Public deliberation has been defined as “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (Chambers 309). Yet “some conceptions of deliberation can block its perspective-taking potential,” such as different styles and norms (Asen, “Toward” 290, 292–93). Deliberation researchers have thus generally examined how “an advocate’s discourse implicitly or explicitly widens or narrows discursive space for others” (Asen, “Ideology” 263).

The project to understand how communicative space for others is opened or closed under certain conditions may share a connection with interpretive openness and closure in hermeneutic studies. Hermeneutic inquiry has a long history, mostly referring to the contextualized study of “principles and rules that govern acts of interpretation” (Hyde 329), and how “we are always operating inside of an interpretive framework” in our approaches to texts (Holub 661). Rhetoric and hermeneutics are inseparable (Hyde and Smith 347); as Mailloux argued, “a rhetorical hermeneutics turns theories of interpretation in general into rhetorical histories of specific acts of interpretation” (“Hermeneutics” 319). Overall, “a clear[er] articulation of what hermeneutics could offer the reborn rhetoric of today is still needed” (Palmer 110).

There is a gap, in particular, between the larger themes of hermeneutic inquiry and the more specific claims of polysemy research, which covers the degree of interpretive openness or closure people are afforded or assign to texts. Relative to rhetorical
hermeneutics, polysemy involves historically situated acts of a specific interpretive rule: that a particular subject has multiple meanings. Rhetoricians have been urged to acknowledge "the potential for polysemic, rather than merely monosemic interpretation" (McKerrrow 107), and to "expose the tensions within works that open up possibilities for distinct interpretations" (Solomon 64). Polysemy is an area where criticism can make productive contributions to the social sciences, explaining a phenomenon identified in much audience research (Zarefsky 638).

While Fiske argued that polysemy is a fundamental characteristic of texts that can be modified and contested, others scholars like Condit have found that polysemy does not necessarily permit unlimited interpretations, as audiences tend to decode bounded meanings from interactive readings. Condit distinguished polysemic from polyvalence, arguing the former term describes different interpretations of the same text, while the latter term describes texts that audiences interpret in the same way but have different attitudes about (106). Seemingly polysemic readings can also be determining forms of "ambivalence," where multivocal meanings are contained within larger hegemonic systems that only offer the illusion of interpretive choice (Cloud 314).

This research line has focused primarily on the reception of media texts; there has been little conception of monosemy and polysemy in deliberative encounters (or diachronic and interactive events between citizens). Controversies present fluid, less totalizing frameworks in which monosemy and polysemy can be configured in ways that do not fit well within the parameters of authored hegemonic systems. Asen stated that public policy discourses raise different polysemic considerations than more discreet texts, proceeding across time in multidirectional ways, with many more authors, institutional constraints, and the presence of oppositional conclusions, in which "debate participants may understand the objects of their deliberations differently" ("Reflections" 124–25, 133, 139). Similarly, my reading of the seal controversy constructs such events as characterized by webs of monosemy and polysemy, or converging and diverging lines of interpretive leeway in debate.2

To be clear, hermeneutic range offers a variation on audience based understandings of polysemy, positioning interpretation in controversies as about individual assessments of symbols, rather than as a collective quality. While one advocate may argue the cross is a narrow endorsement of Christianity with one meaning (i.e., monosemy), another advocate may assert the cross has many meanings (i.e., polysemy). From the perspective of collective achievement, one might see these two assertions as each representing single interpretations that aggregate as multiple interpretations in the forum. I argue there are heuristic advantages to starting with individual attributions, however, given the variety of people in this case. This lens gives people more agency to open or close meanings in each of their discursive acts, rather than placing the loci of hermeneutic action outside of the individual. Insight is hence generated into how, for example, various people that might normally be seen as "strange bedfellows" (see Tamm 696) converge and diverge in this context. An analysis of polysemy as merely about the aggregate of such views would miss this phenomenon.

Moreover, while much polysemy research constructs audience readings according to categories such as class, controversy hybridizes what we might think of as audience
along hermeneutic rather than identity-based lines. Different than prior schemes, hermeneutic range is a practice illustrating both polysemous and monosemous acts. The reasons that citizens choose to join a coalition’s cause are not my concern, nor do I claim anything about participants’ cognitive processes or motives beyond what the controversy made available for criticism. Rather, this essay simply constructs emergent moments of interpretive openness and closure to advance insights into how threads of unity and division may be drawn in deliberation.

I conducted a close reading of the 262 board meeting transcript pages covering the complete deliberations between the Board of Supervisors and various publics on three days between June and September 2004 ("06-01-04"; "06-08-04"; "09-14-04"), searching for patterns of meaning and distinctive moments across the texts. These official board transcripts documented every word spoken in the hearings between “pro-cross” and “anti-cross” forces. In this article, “pro-cross” merely describes those who argued for keeping the cross on the seal. “Anti-cross” describes those who wanted the cross removed. No value judgments about each side are intended in these namings. In addition, I also completed a LexisNexis search of news sources to situate and supplement the hearings.

In a pluralistic controversy with many different actors and organizations, the transcripts only provide a glimpse of those who were able to speak at the official hearings. Thus, I do not claim the interpretive threads this analysis constructs are necessarily representative of different individuals or groups. More importantly, while my abductive reading of the transcripts identifies various configurations of monosemy and polysemy among many people, the three collectives and other generated categories are very much my own. An analysis of public interpretations should take seriously an author’s own interpretive choices, so as much as possible this essay constructs differing hermeneutic ranges without attributing intentionality to individuals, singular functions to their discourses, or assigning an ontological rigidity to the categories I have created. Approaching the texts in this manner has the additional benefit of assigning some weight to my own hermeneutic range. It is impossible not to make some judgments (i.e., using interpretive closure) in such analyses. But given the exploratory, heuristic goals of this study, I hope to keep my own interpretations transparent while sustaining a sense for the controversy’s equifinality.

To focus the concept of hermeneutic range, three groups were constructed from the transcripts: pro-cross public-religious leaders, pro-cross public-religious citizens, and anti-cross private-religious leaders. For this article’s purposes, “public-religious” describes individuals who considered religion important to public life, or those who did not typically draw stark divides between church and state (and who made up a majority of advocates in the hearings). “Private-religious” identifies people who considered religion largely a private matter, drawing stricter lines between church and state. I am roughly defining “citizens” as non-leader, general members of the public, while “leader” describes public figures not in charge of a religious congregation. For instance, on the pro-cross side one of the supervisors, Don Knabe, is a practicing Christian political leader, just as Dennis Prager is a Jewish, conservative radio talk show host in Los Angeles. Both are leaders of broad constituencies, but neither are
pastors or rabbis of congregations. On the anti-cross side, Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky is a Jewish public leader, who similarly does not lead a religious congregation.

The Context of the County Seal Controversy

In May 2004, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, consisting of Don Knabe (Rep.), Michael Antonovich (Rep.), Zev Yaroslavsky (Dem.), Yvonne Burke (Dem.), and Gloria Molina (Dem.), received a letter from the ACLU. The letter stated that the County seal "prominently depicts a Latin cross, a sectarian religious symbol that represents the beliefs of one segment of the County’s diverse population," constituting an "impermissible endorsement of Christianity" by the local government (Antczak, par. 2). The letter asked for the unconstitutional cross to be removed within a "reasonable time-frame" or face an ACLU lawsuit (par. 3). This demand came in the aftermath of a case in February 2004, in which the ACLU successfully persuaded the city government of Redlands, California, to remove a small cross from its city seal. During the previous five years, the ACLU had also facilitated the removal of crosses in various cities across the U.S. ("Will LA," par. 7). Only in one case, in Austin, Texas, did a federal court find that a cross on a city seal was part of the "historical legacy" of the region, and sufficiently among "secular symbols" to permit its presence on the sign (Anderson, "Cross in" N1).

On June 1, 2004, as part of the supervisors' weekly public hearings in Los Angeles County hall, the board and members of the public debated the cross issue. The supervisors' offices were bombarded with e-mails, letters, and phone calls. A spokesperson for Supervisor Knabe noted on June 3:

We alone have received more than 600 e-mails and 200 phone calls in the last 24 hours . . . . Every single one of them supported keeping the cross on the seal, except one. This is the largest amount of outrage to a county issue we've ever seen (Anderson, "Big" N1).

A second public meeting took place on June 8, 2004, with 2,000 members of the public protesting the cross's removal. This was the largest constituency at any board meeting in several decades (Anderson, "Vote" N1).

A final board meeting on September 14, 2004, culminated in a 3–2 vote for the adoption of a revised seal, with Democrats Yaroslavksy, Burke, and Molina voting for and Republicans Antonovich and Knabe voting against the cross's removal (Anderson, "Vote" N1). Not only was the cross taken off the seal and replaced with a mission, the symbol of the Roman goddess Pomona was substituted with a Native American woman, and the oil derricks on the top right corner were replaced with the Hollywood Bowl, which previously shared a space on the picture with the cross (Parkes 4; for images, see "Los Angeles").

Following the final vote, many citizens "discovered a deep and abiding reverence for the seal" (Snyder, par. 4). Various individuals and groups initiated lawsuits contesting the cross's removal was an "unconstitutional hostility" toward religion by the board; four conservative legal foundations vowed to fight the case pro bono, but various regional judges rejected the suits as "speculative" and contradictory in
nature ("Judge Denies," pars. 2, 5; see also "Judge Dismisses," pars. 1, 5). Mel Gibson promised more than $140,000 for a campaign to keep the cross on the seal (Papps 12). The Los Angeles County Heritage Coalition, financed by a local car dealership owner, among others, attempted to gather 200,000 signatures for a June 2006 ballot. The "Save the Seal" campaign fell short of the 50,000 signatures required, and after a fourth unsuccessful attempt to put up a measure in 2006, organizers relinquished the cause (Anderson, "3rd" N4; Anderson, "Cross Advocate" N5).

**Hermeneutic Range in Pro- and Anti-Cross Rhetorics**

Studying the county transcripts, I found three particular trends in the data, leading me to nominalize three groups corresponding to particular attributions of history, religious symbols, and politics. In my construction, a group of pro-cross public-religious leaders, pro-cross public-religious citizens, and anti-cross private-religious leaders advanced differing configurations of interpretive leeway, highlighting how communicators may converge and diverge in deliberation.

**The Pro-Cross Public-Religious Leaders**

This contingent in the controversy consisted of mostly Christian (non-religious leader) authorities, some non-Christian leaders, and even some irreligious leaders. These individuals employed a hermeneutic range in the hearings suggesting history has one interpretation, while religious symbolism and politics have many meanings. In other words, in the transcripts these people generally construed history as monosemous but religion and politics as polysemic.

Individuals can create discursive alliances when a correspondence is drawn between public, symbolic seals and "history," while other subjects are given interpretive leeway. Los Angeles city councilmember Janice Hahn enacted this web of monosemic and polysemic meaning throughout her statement to the Board. She argued that the seal, created by her father, former Los Angeles Mayor Kenneth Hahn, "is a reflection of the history of Los Angeles" (emphasis added; "06-01-04" 34). This was not a polysemous history, but the history reflected in the artwork. Yet the religious aspects of the symbol were interpreted as polysemous—"This seal in no way furthers the practice or promotion of any religion over another, just as the goddess Pomona certainly does not promote or encourage the act of pagan worship" (34). In characterizing "politics," Hahn underscored that "while what you’re going to hear is that the A.C.L.U has the law on their side," legalities are "always open for interpretation" (36).

In this regard, hermeneutic closure over the past can frame history as stable, unified, and complete, rather than subject to variable interpretations. Another Los Angeles city councilmember, Tom LaBonge, testified to the supervisors that "your great County seal has been seen by . . . people around the world . . . I think it’s wrong that you take away your history ("06-01-04" 37). To LaBonge, the region’s standing in the world was tied to a stable historical meaning. These interpretations of history
as monosemic contrasted with a contingent, polysemous political realm. Supervisor Knabe argued that to alter the seal would be "using litigation to re-write history" ("06-01-04" 41). Enacting interpretive closure with history meant it should not be "re-written" over, or subject to mutable political intervention. As Supervisor Antonovich too remarked: "I would urge that we retain the seal in the best interests of the public that we serve for historical accuracy, not political expediency" (emphasis added; "09-14-04" 291). Antonovich's juxtaposition asserts that politics can be full of polysemous choices over matters like procedural rules and government funding (155, 157, 288), but also that a monosemic historical hermeneutic should trump religious symbolism and socio-political affairs.

By drawing lines of interpretive openness and closure in similar ways, I suggest these pro-cross leaders can be viewed as an interpretive coalition. At this early point in the development of hermeneutic range, it is best to withhold value judgments about these operations—since configurations of monosemy and polysemy could serve multiple functions in deliberation. It would be premature to associate monosemy with closed-mindedness and more polysemic orientations with open-mindedness, for example. Public policy controversies probably demand not only some openness to multiple viewpoints, but closure and outcomes so that public issues have decision points. In this light, calls for interpretive stability over historical facts likely constitute one way in which these leaders attempted to produce an outcome, anchoring their case in at least some monosemy while leaving other areas open for flexible interpretation.

Marking history rather than religious symbolism as monosemous could also serve as a way to avoid negative audience reactions to religious appeals (see Powell and Neiva 74). These individuals seemed to conceive of an inclusive, abstract God, whose distance from humanity was sufficient to allow for some human decision-making and interpretation. But they also juxtaposed a language of religious and political choice against historical fact. As Supervisor Knabe summarized: "We have a seal that was dictated by history" ("09-14-04" 291). In this formulation, history becomes a kind of agent, narrowing the boundaries of interpretation. Knabe argued framing the past in contingent terms was "Orwellian" given the "Genesis" of the County's history ("06-01-04" 43). "Genesis" could connotate that a certain history with fixed beginnings and ends applies to the policy question, drawing hermeneutic lines of difference between these leaders and others.

Moreover, maneuvering between polysemy and monosemy could allow individuals to shift between two levels of interpretation communicating both contingency and judgment. To the pro-cross supporters, history had a fixed interpretation but religious symbols carried many meanings. A prominent public health advocate asked the board: "Would you ask us to remove the cow [on the seal] because it is offensive? And where do we stop? This is a symbol. And, many times, symbols represent many things to many different people" ("06-01-04" 54; "A Brief" pars. 1, 8–9). Since the cross is merely a symbol, it is polysemic, but the history that the symbol represents is fixed, as implied by "where do we stop?" Postures of both interpretive openness and closure were thus presented, perhaps to create perceptions of open-mindedness in a public sphere demanding some level of tolerance.
Given these degrees of interpretive openness and closure over various subjects, hermeneutic range provides a common communicative space, demonstrating that ad hoc hermeneutics may form coalitions as much as other factors like group identity. One attorney, a pro-cross, self-described “atheist and ACLU’er” breaking ranks, represented the national artist who made the seal. I situated him within the hermeneutic range of this group from arguments that a cross on the county seal was polysemic, but history was not:

One of the things that gives me a fit...is the lack of recognition of symbolism in a case that’s all about symbolism. The A.C.L.U decries that this is—that the cross is the symbol of Christianity... But symbols don’t necessarily have one meaning and can be used in different meanings. (“06-01-04” 58–59)

In these depictions, symbols only become symbols outside a factual domain of history. Supervisor Antonovich drew a similar polysemous line of reasoning with religious symbolism and politics, as opposed to a single interpretation of history: “We have a great community and we look at the diversities that we have and we appreciate that but we don’t re-write history to appease everyone because you can’t do that. You’re talking here about a historical fact” (70). Despite this fixed history, the cross’s meaning was stretched widely beyond Christianity, so that interpretations of the cross exhibited polysemic rather than polyvalence.

In turn, hermeneutic range provides a partial explanation for how kairotic coalitions of “strange bedfellows” (see Tamm 696) may be formed in contemporary societies. A nationally syndicated talk show host told the supervisors that he was Jewish and joined by rabbis, atheists, and Buddhists in the pro-cross efforts. He explained that while “you might have thought that this was the advocacy of Christianity in our society,” the issue for all of them was really “the erasing of history” (“06-08-04” 46). Coalitions are often discussed in terms of common cause and common ground, but a “common hermeneutics” may also form emergent rhetorical spaces. Lev Stark, an orthodox Jew, also underscored the polysemic of religious symbolism: “The issue at hand goes beyond just a Christian issue. It is beyond a Jewish issue. The cross on the seal of Los Angeles represents the harmony with which our freedoms allow us to live” (62). Overall, attributing monosemy to history and polysemic to the cross highlights how people may converge under a controversy’s “temporally pluralistic” (Goodnight 2) conditions.

Rather than covering the limited interpretive leeway available from authored, top-down hegemonic systems (see Cloud 312), interpretive formations in controversy evidence developing, interactive configurations of monosemy and polysemic. A pro-cross law professor blamed the supervisors for being too religious in their public expressions, while maintaining a broad need for religious symbolism on government property: “I want to tell you that, in my expert opinion, not only is this County seal, as it stands, perfectly constitutional, it’s certainly more constitutional than the prayer you began your session with (“09-14-04” 260). Just as Rousseau once encouraged some generalized “sentiments of sociability” toward religion in the public square (102), these individuals interpreted religion as only broadly applicable to the situation.
Public opinion research has shown that in the absence of a concrete issue or policy situation, a majority of Americans will demonstrate a separationist attitude between church and state. Similar to the pro-cross leaders in the controversy, however, accommodationist attitudes between church and state come into the open when “cultural considerations regarding ‘America’s religious heritage’ are at stake” (Servin-Gonzalez and Torres-Reyna 592). While this study only claims to introduce and explore the concept of hermeneutic range in the cross case, further awareness about its operations might inform public debate. Through pedagogical recognition of interpretive openness and closure in controversy, publics can learn about one way in which lines of argument can be constructed. At the very least, hermeneutic range provides a vocabulary for further empirical work seeking to explain, for instance, if certain levels of critique and reflection about such processes could advance more intersubjective relations among various deliberators.

The Pro-Cross Public: Religious Citizens

In my construction of the controversy, this group consisted mostly of Christian citizens and some Christian leaders who supported keeping the cross on the county seal. These advocates interpreted history, religious symbolism, and politics as each corresponding to only one meaning. That is, these citizens positioned each of these areas as monosemous, generally perceiving the sacred and secular as inseparable.

An invariable hermeneutic seemed to permeate these citizens’ arguments. Many articulated specific faith beliefs and histories in support of their points. One citizen told the panel, “I want to congratulate the two, you know, supervisors that stood up for what was right and stood up for Jesus Christ and for history” (“06-08-04” 114). The supervisors’ actions were interpreted not as support for a general symbolic emblem with many meanings (i.e., the way the two pro-cross supervisors themselves understood the cross), but as backing for one religion over others in the public arena. To another advocate, the cross on public property corresponded to only one meaning: “Jesus Christ is the representation of our lord—he is our lord and his representation is that cross” (“06-08-04” 130). One citizen also made clear that “the faith” of America’s founding fathers stood against the ACLU’s “revisionist and intolerant agenda” (“06-08-04” 85), i.e., which threatened to make these historical and religious meanings polysemous.

While hermeneutic alliances can be constructed among a controversy’s advocates, historical, religious, and political monosemy may also foster a form of reasoning and reasonability in which interpretive closure on one issue easily chains out to other issues. Underscoring the direct associations between a single interpretation of history, religion, and politics, Glen Jackson stated that “the Mayflower compact, the first contract signed in the United States, called for the proclamation of the gospel, the Declaration of Independence” (“06-08-04” 86). Here evidence took the form of rhetorical slippage between the historical and religious dimensions of the Mayflower compact and the political purposes of the Declaration of Independence. Jackson
equated freedom of religion with the propagation of the Christian faith, fitting the U.S.'s founding documents within a monosemic framework.

Calls for such interpretive stability may aim to establish communal facts and norms in policy contexts. Opposing polysemy, a county resident stated, "Soon the A.C.L.U. will be demanding that we remove everything from our seal, leaving only a white space, and allow everyone to put in that circle whatever L.A. means to them" ("06-08-04" 128). One function of such closure could be to institute rhetorical borders for a community, given perceived threats to order. For this group, interpretive precision seemed warranted given parallel monoemic efforts by others to limit religion to a purely private practice. Yet to these individuals, differing historical interpretations would lead to differing interpretations of the future, a slippery slope toward which any symbol could mean anything to anyone. Thus, as much as public discourse about disagreements focuses on differing "positions" or "strategies," advocates degrees of interpretive openness or closure also has bearing upon the boundaries of deliberative contexts.

These citizens approached religious symbolism with monosemic, different than the public-religious leaders. One participant explained: "Why waste time and remove a symbol, the cross, that means always Jesus is forever" (emphasis added; "06-08-04" 136). Another announced that "since this struggle is about the symbol of the cross, it's only fitting that I read from the words of Jesus" (143). The two individuals did not refer to a more abstract, generalized God, like the pro-cross leaders. Rather, the cross on the seal made an exclusive claim on society. A biblical counselor stated that "my lord and savior died on that cross and it would be horrible for me to just let it be erased without saying a word" (73). In other words, the body of Christ is a synecdoche for the body politic, and the interpretation of what the cross means to this citizen is the interpretation of what the cross means on public property.

During some moments, this type of hermeneutic closure seemed to imbue citizens' rhetoric with life-and-death stakes, fostering porous, absolute pronouncements between historical, political, and theological domains. One advocate argued that the "A.C.L.U. today is going after the symbol of the cross. Tomorrow, they'll go after the symbol of the Star of David. And you know that's what caused the holocaust in Germany." One Sudanese man compared the cross's removal to his country's struggles with religious liberties and the events of 9/11 ("06-08-04" 51, 125). The cross's removal was linked to the Taliban, and even a "satanic attack" that was "perpetrated by pagan, devil worshippers, heathens, new age practitioners, and especially NAMBLA who support...the right of males to abuse and murder and to sodomize young children" (91; "09-14-04" 281). To some citizens, the cross's erasure would create pluralistic, relativistic madness. Relevant to deliberation, wholly monoemic interpretations appear to advance judgments so quickly that polysemic easily became sodomy.

As much as controversy "pushes the limits of the available means of communication" and expands social arguments (Goodnight 2), debate can equally be narrowed by limiting interpretive leeway across a range of issues, mapping the monoemic of one area on to others. Some interpreted the fight against the ACLU as a biblical battle of David versus Goliath ("06-08-04" 112). The county hall location
itself became a church—with citizens praying at the microphone and calling for repentance through altar calls to the board (80–84, 144, 150–51). For this interpretive alliance, the cross in the public location essentially transformed the secular into sacred space, narrowing political meaning so that the supervisors became congregants rather than public leaders. One citizen told the supervisors, “You all are ministers... ministers of God” (109), possibly implying the seal decision was not about political choice, but divine will.

In turn, the three monosemous attributions appeared to advance a deliberative epistemology centering upon transcendent mandates. One citizen told the board, “I happen to be fairly knowledgeable in matters of God. He speaks to me. He’s been speaking to me for seven years.” This individual access to the divine brought the citizen to the conclusion that “there’s very little difference between the Law of Moses or Levitical law and the laws we pass here in boards like these” so that “politics is religion and religion is politics” (“06-01-04” 61, 62)! Under these characterizations, religious monosemity fused with history and politics, potentially symbolizing the very effacement of human interpretation in decision-making processes.

Publics are formed through discourse (Warner 50), so hermeneutic range constitutes an approach for how such publics might be formed. Under a monosemic hermeneutic range, a member of the California Republican African-American coalition explained to the supervisors: “In the holy scriptures, it says that your words and your actions and your deeds say who you are” (“09-14-04” 285). Making the language and behaviors of others wholly transparent, or subject to one privileged, all-perceiving interpretation, this monosemity may function to promote direct and unmediated visions in deliberation. Facts, as the old saying goes, simply spoke for themselves. Even the supervisors’ body language became an area for unequivocal interpretation by these advocates (“06-08-04” 92).

A paradox could be operating in such strictly monosemic acts. The instantiation of many monosemic perspectives cannot completely perform its narrowing rhetorical boundaries in practice. Bracketing my use of polysemity as about individual’s interpretations for a moment—viewing polysemity as a collective achievement in the forum shows that many individuals making numerous points underscores how some contextual polysemity is necessary to even constructing a discursive coalition. At the same time, I find that fissures and tensions developed between this group and the public-religious leaders. Supervisor Knabe often tried to restrain citizen advocates with comments like, “Just be respectful. Okay? This is not name-calling time” (“06-08-04” 53)—demonstrating that in pluralistic controversy, other interpretations of events are always looming.

In a study of Operation Rescue, tensions were found between the goals of the movement’s founder and the discourses of “rank and file-activists” (Williams and Blackburn 180). Smith and Windes further related how “religious communities divide and negotiate about acceptance of homosexuality,” so that “adherents of any one package contend among themselves over appropriate lines of rhetorical action” (28, 30). In the fluid enactments of religious-political controversy, the cross debate highlights how different hermeneutic ranges may create disjunctures between people
pursuing the same cause. Ultimately, confronting these matters should provide a segue for further clarity about monosemy and polysemy in public deliberation.

The Anti-Cross Private-Religious Leaders

Constituting a minority in the hearings, my construction of this group consisted mostly of leaders who believed that religion should be a private concern separate from the secular, public realm. These individuals conceived of history and politics as having many meanings. Religious symbolism, however, generally corresponded to singular, specific faith interpretations. Three out of the five supervisors evidenced this hermeneutic range in the transcripts.

Polysemic interpretations of history were used throughout the debate. Supervisor Yaroslavsky stated this case directly: “If history is the issue, there are a number of ways to reflect that history” (“06-01-04” 47). He also called into question the other groups’ monosemic historical interpretations: “I’d just like to ask each of you one question because you make the historical case, the case that the seal is of historical significance. Of course, the seal was only adopted . . . in 1957. The county is considerably older than that” (37–38). Widening the available meanings, the audience was also urged to consider histories excluded from the seal, such as its omission of Native Americans, “who were here before all of us” (40).

The anti-cross private-religious leaders created interpretive leeway for different pasts. They did not deny the existence of certain histories; rather, issues were taken with singular interpretations of history bypassing marginalized voices. Supervisor Molina responded to discussions about the history of Southern California missions by pointing out that, contrary to the rosy picture others were presenting, many of the missions were built by slaves. Molina underscored that “if we want to be historic and appropriate, there are many, many ways that we can preserve the richness of the California missions” (emphasis added; “06-01-04” 78–79).

It is telling that each of the groups in the controversy had at least one issue that was subject to monosemic interpretation, perhaps because completely polysemous communication could forgo the need for a deliberative outcome and, in another sense, because it is the job of elected representatives to enact strict interpretations of policy. While the anti-cross, private-religious leaders largely constructed history as polysemic, they often attempted to bring closure to the debate through monosemic attributions of religious symbolism. Yaroslavsky explained that when the county originally filed for the seal in the late 1950s, the county document illustrated the issue “was not simply historical,” rather “religion was the phrase that was used, church” (“06-01-04” 46). He clarified this concern in a later hearing: “if the issue is history and not religion, then there are a thousand and one ways to depict history” but “they didn’t say it was part of our history, to represent our history. It was one word. They said religion” (“09-14-04” 164).

As such, hermeneutic range may have bearing upon the rhetorical knots that have emerged in legal discussions of religion and politics. When the law has been applied
in comparable cases, it has typically focused on whether specific religious (i.e., monoessm) interpretations have been advanced by sectarian symbols. Similarly, the leaders in this group relied upon legal precedent to narrow the cross’s meaning. Yaroslaysky quoted a Ninth Circuit case stating that “a Latin cross by itself on the county seal is [an] impermissible government endorsement for Christianity” (“06-08-04” 183). The three supervisors also followed a monoessm legal definition involving crosses on county land, where “the courts indicate that a reasonable observer would find this to be a reference for or endorsement of Christianity” (186). These references bear similarity to the Supreme Court’s Lemon Test, which “asks whether a law or action has the intent of furthering or affecting religion, whether it does so primarily, and whether it ‘excessively entangle[s] religion and government’” (qtd. in Keller, par. 14).

Yet there is some precedent for maintaining religious symbolism on government property. Less narrow interpretations have been made in cases involving the biblical Ten Commandments in courthouse buildings, which have been ruled acceptable so long as they are adjunct to other secular images (Young A11)—a criterion that the previous Los Angeles County seal appears to have met. In the U.S. Supreme Court, for example, a representation of Moses is accompanied by other historical figures such as Confucius and Hammurabi (A11). In a Supreme Court case upholding the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, Justice O’Connor also explained that governments can “commemorate the role of religion in history” (qtd. in Anderson, “Supervisors” N1). The board’s legal counsel charted some of this history (see “06-08-04” 183–88), so my point is not to endorse whether or not the cross on the seal was an appropriate decision, but to spotlight a larger consideration about the dialogue—that comparative configurations of monoessm and polyssm may be threaded through such efforts, not only drawing lines of debate and marking decision points among people, but likely provoking the kind of resistive readings exhibited by the pro-cross citizens.

Equally noteworthy was how these leaders seemed to bypass the hermeneutic range of the pro-cross leaders. In interpreting who a “reasonable observer” of a religious symbol may be, the three supervisors deferred to the pro-cross citizens’ monoessm rather than the pro-cross leaders’ polyssm. For instance, Supervisor Burke became even more convinced of the singular religious meaning of the cross at the end of the second hearing, given the crowd’s behavior. Burke came to this conclusion from hearing “people here praying” and “going into testaments” (“06-08-04” 171). At one point, Burke was even shouted down by the crowd, prompting her to opine: “Clearly, this is as close to the Inquisition as we have seen in the 21st century” (172).

While attempting to advance political polyssm, Burke interpreted the crowd’s religious monoessm as closing space for other meanings—providing some evidence that deliberation may lead individuals to become even more monoessm or polyssm in their commitments—perhaps matching Sunstein’s research, which has found that deliberation generally causes people to become firmer in their assurances. Burke emphasized to the crowd “I’m an attorney, first of all” (“06-08-04” 171), i.e., I’m here to engage political processes first and foremost, but to little avail. For the
same reasons, Supervisor Molina remarked that the debate was “very religiously charged...the testimony today probably gave me a stronger feeling as to why I should defend my position” (175). Viewed through hermeneutic range, interpretive choices in deliberation can be subject to the interactive taking in of others’ interpretive commitments (i.e., for this group, the pro-cross citizens’ monoeyse), and should thus not be perceived as static categories. In such comments, an additional tension appears manifest between the authority derived from the leaders’ technical, government positions and the kind of authority gaining force in the forum from different speech acts. Hermeneutic range may thus also offer one way to locate and assign variable weight to the use of institutional and cultural status in controversies.

Constructing as an interpretive coalition, these discourses show how configurations of hermeneutic range might be related to the possibilities for wide or narrow deliberative spaces. Juxtaposed against religion, this group perceived politics as an open domain amenable to multiple interpretations. On the last day of hearings, Yaroslavsky asserted, “My religion is my business and your religion is your business. And it’s not the government’s business to make my religion your business or vice versa” (“09-14-04” 298–99). In this framework, it is the government’s role to keep politics open for pluralism and inclusive interpretations of religiosity.

Ultimately, such issue commitments carry more polysemous and monoeyseous patterns than have been recognized, but further empirical work could also operationalize how open or closed individuals are to one another’s arguments, given varying interpretive attributions in deliberation. At a minimum, understanding hermeneutic range demonstrates the processual, pedagogical role that communication research might play in covering this complex territory, showing how publics are formed and deliberative impasses reached in controversies.

Interpretation and Interaction in Public Life

In the seal controversy, a diverse body of communicators with varying religious and non-religious affiliations, backgrounds, and interests may be understood as uniting and dividing along ideological lines. Rhetorical inquiry can play an important role in illuminating hermeneutic frameworks in these difficult public debates, however, as an antidote to fixed positionality. There are a number of implications emerging from this analysis.

First, hermeneutic range constitutes one way of perceiving discursive alliances in controversies. Just as “emergent collectives” in contemporary debates now “fit less comfortably in a conception based on essential group identity” (Asen, “Seeking” 433, 438), and religious and other movements should be more accurately “defined as rhetorical styles rather than institutions, groups of people, or individual leaders” (Maddux 291), I find that threads of monoeyse and polysemous among various advocates may function to unite and divide individuals in deliberation. Moreover, hermeneutic range appears to constitute a way in which “issue cultures” (Smith and Windes 28) are formed. By conceptualizing discourse along hermeneutic lines, critics can trace when and where interpretations are both widening and narrowing the
content and form of debate in controversies (which create fluid conditions for hermeneutic alliances). Hermeneutic range could thus be a critical concept for political communication research, advancing discussions of “framing” and similar constructs (see Paxton 43).

Overall, deliberation scholars should take seriously not just the analytic categories by which deliberation can and should be organized (Gastil 20), and the motivational factors affecting civic engagement (Svendson 203), but the hermeneutic range that audiences enact in public debates. As Palmer emphasizes, “A rhetoric informed by hermeneutics would not view understanding as something transparent and unproblematical to be hurried over or taken for granted” (126). Since controversies often involve “stasis points of fact, definition, and quality” and “less frequently discussed areas of procedure and forum” (Jasinski 115), greater political literacy might be also fostered by reflecting on such events with hermeneutic perspectives.

Second, the opening or narrowing of deliberative spaces could be tied to the opening or narrowing of hermeneutic range. Given the various ways that monosemy and polysemacy can be enacted by individuals in a controversy, at this point, evaluations of emergent discursive alliances are probably best made on a case-by-case basis, given the potentially manifold functions of these interpretive webs. In this study, some data supported the idea that fully polysemic orientations to public controversies can admit processual space for the incorporation of other perspectives, but may forgo the need to produce interpretive closure, or establish certain norms, facts, or policy outcomes that could be necessary to move communities forward. On the other hand, fully monosemic orientations could close too much space for alternative points of view, imposing unmediated judgments at each discursive turn.

At the very least, hermeneutic range reveals that understanding monosemy can be as important to controversies as polysemacy. The direction of communication and media studies for the last three decades has been to focus on how texts can be subject to various audience and scholarly interpretations. While “policy debates constitute polysemous texts” (Asen, “Reflections” 136) and messages can be constructed by critics as “radically polysemic” (Rowland and Strain 215), it is also the case that audiences approach events with monosemous assessments. Jasinski found that in polysemic research there has been a tendency to disdain interpretive closure, urging scholars to explore if this “frustrates the traditional connection between rhetoric and public advocacy” (441). As much as individuals may desire to stay open to the multiple perspectives that emerge in political contexts, my construction of all three groups showed that some necessary space for final judgments (i.e., interpretive closure) loomed large over the debate. This finding comports with Jensen’s conclusion that without clarifying language, polysemacy can function to confuse public debates, creating policies which harm the public good (396). It also relates to Rogers’s argument that polysemic indeterminacy that completely levels interpretive authority—making anyone’s interpretation as good as anyone else’s—may actually create the “illusion of engaging otherness” (62).

Third, hermeneutic range charts a path for juxtaposing arguments in favor of the power of critique and reflection with challenges regarding the limiting interpretive
prejudices to which all people are subject. This has been an unresolved scholarly debate that was instantiated between Habermas ("Moral"; "Zur Logik") and Gadamer, in particular. Different than reception studies of media texts, which have tended to concentrate on the narrow interpretive leeway audiences are afforded, interactive deliberations put the limited hermeneutic choices of many individuals up for critique and reflection. While this study could only make limited claims in constructing hermeneutic range from official transcripts, the very conditions of controversy bring into contact different people who cannot completely insulate themselves from other publics. Further empirical work could operationalize and determine if and how individuals waver or stick with their convictions as a result of such contact.

The very diversity of a forum at least provides some heuristic grounds for learning how webs of monosemy and polysemy can be spun (and re-spun) among communicators. Mailloux’s rhetorical hermeneutics finds that we can never escape our cultural contexts, but they can be slowly transformed ("Reception" 17)—and that “practical wisdom” should continue to serve “as a signpost for the close relationship between rhetoric and hermeneutics” ("Rhetorical" 457). With small steps, increased theoretical and pedagogical attention to hermeneutic range might at least continue to foster more mindfulness about such communicative processes.

The idea that people hold fundamentally incompatible and intractable positions is perhaps nowhere better found than in talk of religion and politics. Questions continue to abound about how different religious groups might better understand one another and commit to the tolerant coexistence necessary to even begin political life (Appiah xvi, xix). Condit argued that scholarly projects on polysemy should aim to “teach students a range of decodings for possible texts” (120). I would add that scholars should also articulate a vocabulary of interpretation in public analysis and pedagogy, perhaps identifying times interpretive spaces are broadened or narrowed, questioning why particular choices are made in critical public moments, or explaining the kind of hermeneutic consistency communicators maintain over time. Additionally, scholars should continue to cast a reflective lens upon their own interpretive commitments in such analyses.

Another area for inquiry involves looking at the “polysemic scaffolding” of public symbols, focusing less on audience interpretations and more on the textual structures that act as a foundation for polysemy (Perks 270). There is also a question about how controversies such as these may bypass material problems, given Los Angeles County’s underfunded programs in child care, neglect of its jail system, and the closing of a rehabilitation hospital—as some reporters put it, caring about the cross instead of “the welfare of our neighbors” constituted a misplaced priority (Greene, par. 21; Keller, par. 1). As far as I can tell, this is likely a key reason why a group of anti-cross private-religious citizens did not emerge in the controversy.5

Our common proclivity to reduce or expand meanings may divide us or be a source of unity amidst diversity. Studying polysemy and public memory, Hasian suggests that “instead of bemoaning all of these interpretations, we need to accept their rhetoricity, the partialness of their vision” (370). There is perhaps no better purpose in these matters than to pull back from the swirls of controversy and demonstrate the
partial interpretive choices to which all communicators are prone. Toward this end, future studies should continue to analyze church-state controversies, aiming to increase our rhetorical awareness and hermeneutic humility.

Notes

[1] Associating deliberation with hermeneutics necessarily invokes at least a brief reference to the debate between Habermas and Gadamer, whose questions still remain unsettled and brought into the context of rhetorical inquiry (Jost and Hyde, "Prologue" xviii). The debate began with Habermas’s Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften and continued across books such as Gadamer’s Truth and Method (given the difficulty of translating the discussion, I draw mostly from Mendelson’s touchstone summary). Habermas’s well-known project to establish the intersubjective conditions of free communication came head to head with Gadamer’s belief that a person’s background prejudices or interpretive “horizon[s]” and “historicality of understanding” severely limits one’s ability to engage in such processes of social intelligibility (Gadamer 235, 238). Gadamer called into question Habermas’s belief that “the force of the better argument” should be emphasized in public engagement (see Habermas, Moral 158–59), given the confines of human interpretation (Mendelson 4, 44). Subsequently, Habermas argued that Gadamer did not sufficiently understand critique and reflection, which can help individuals rise above authority, traditions, and interpretive embeddedness (Mendelson 57–61). My case study does not put this debate to rest, but does seek to explore hermeneutic operations in deliberation so that a rhetorical vocabulary is further expanded over such matters.

[2] Polysemy in controversies thus does not fit easily into Czeckarelli’s three types of polysemy, which describe: a) “resistive readings” that center upon an audience’s power to affirm or oppose media texts; b) “strategic ambiguity,” which includes works “planned by an author and result in two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text”; and c) “hermeneutic depth,” where a critic does “not make a claim about how audiences ‘actually’ read a text, but instead, offers expanded ways that audiences should read a text” (395–94). In one sense, the seal hearings can be viewed as a polysemous text, since participants’ comments demonstrated differing interpretations about its meaning. But in the case of a public controversy over a religious symbol (rather than, for instance, a television show or single speech), it is difficult to parse what constitutes a resistive reading. This case is not characterized by a single oppositional reading, as various audiences claimed a mantle of opposition. Further complicating the notion of a resistive reading, there were also two more subjects invoked for interpretation beyond the cross’s religious symbolism, namely, history and politics. It is thus equally difficult to say that abstract issue categories such as history, politics, and religious symbolism were created by an author with strategic ambiguity. While some discussion of the seal’s creators appeared in the controversy, overall, an advocate’s rhetoric was least at issue. Different than “hermeneutic depth,” I am constructing a reading of how some audiences in the controversy approached the texts, but my concern is less with making value judgments about those readings than demonstrating how hermeneutic range was leveraged in this particular case.

[3] The ACLU used sections of a 1957 county letter supplementing the seal’s implementation as support for its claim that the cross constituted a government endorsement of Christianity (Anderson, “Public” N4).

[4] A new seal description explained: “The Native American woman represents the early inhabitants of the Los Angeles Basin, including the area we now call Los Angeles County” and “Mission San Gabriel, the first in Los Angeles County, represents the historic role of the missions in the settlement of the Los Angeles region” (“County of,” pars. 1, 7).
By my count, across all three days of the deliberations, only one person who would have fit into this group testified.

References


