THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education
The Chronicle Review

July 10, 2011

Fast-Talk Debate in an Accelerated World

By Debra Tolchinsky

In 2005 when I walked into the Hardy House, where the Northwestern University debate team practices, I expected to see students at podiums debating issues I could understand in a clear and persuasive manner along the lines of presidential debates. But then I saw the National Debate Tournament champion Josh Branson "fast talking"—rapidly and loudly sucking in his breath, filling up his lungs, and spitting out as many words as possible before running out of air and sucking in again.

Other debaters got up to the podium (actually a stack of empty banana boxes, Northwestern's trademark), all speaking so fast that I had no idea what they were saying. They gasped. They stuttered. They literally foamed at the mouth. I assumed I was observing some extreme exercise in *preparation* for a debate. Then I was informed that this is how policy debaters regularly debate, the fastest supposedly speaking in excess of 400 words per minute. I was totally stupefied.

According to many of the coaches and debaters I interviewed for my film *Fast Talk,* there is a simple explanation for why debaters began to talk faster starting in the late 60s: More arguments can be delivered in a shorter amount of time, and an opposing team will need to rebut them. In addition, according to Allan Louden, a communications professor at Wake Forest University, who chairs the National Debate Tournament Board of Trustees, speed was "a clear response to more information and more availability. When the community realized they could make copies of things, it revolutionized what was there to read in a round, increasing pressure to get it in."

Northwestern's former debate coach, Scott Deatherage, told me he believed fast talking also sharpened the pace of one's thinking, kept one sharper longer, and even staved off Alzheimer's.

Deatherage claimed there was ample evidence to back this up.

However, no one I subsequently interviewed could point to an exact study, and several, including Louden, admitted that any existing research would be neither "overwhelming nor definitive." Patrick Wong, an associate professor of communication sciences and disorders at Northwestern, whose research concerns central auditory processing and neurophysiology, mused: "There's evidence that speaking more than one language or doing cognitively stimulating activities could have a preventive effect for Alzheimer's. Perhaps talking fast with a lot of content could have the same effect, but I don't really know."

Many former debaters I spoke with believed the acceleration was gradual and could not pinpoint a particular school or person responsible. David Zarefsky, a Northwestern emeritus professor of argumentation and debate, told me: "This is in the eye of the beholder. During the 1960s, when I was involved in debate, people spoke significantly slower than they do now, but debaters from the 1940s and 1950s accused many of fast talking. ... Memory plays tricks on us here." However, Karen Straus, a lawyer in Evanston, Ill., recalls: "I was in high school from the fall of 1974 through the spring of 1978 at Albany High, and it seemed like it started during that time. We'd go to debate tournaments and encounter the shotgun style for the first time, and it took us by surprise. At first, the only team that used it was Bronx Science. But by the time I graduated, the phenomenon had spread. In large part because we all noticed that Bronx Science was succeeding with it. When it first appeared, we pooh-poohed it as some fad that wouldn't last—judges wouldn't stand for it—what kind of style was that? But we were wrong—big time."

Significantly, although the speed of debating has changed radically, the National Debate Tournament format has remained pretty consistent. Each year there's a group of professors who release a resolution, the idea that's going to be debated in all of the regional tournaments leading up to the national one. Usually it's a position that x or y should be done. In each debate, a two-person team takes the "affirmative" side and defends the resolution, presenting its first speech in which it shows there is some problem and that the team has a plan to solve that problem. Then the opposing two-person team gets to cross-examine before it presents its first speech, which lays out that team's argument against the resolution. Then the debate moves back and forth from there—affirmative to negative with the total time of the debate clocking in at one hour

and 12 minutes.

Admittedly, there have been changes besides speed. According to Jon Bruschke, debate coach at California State University at Fullerton, the recent "trend has been to incorporate questions of philosophy into debates that used to center on policy." A small number of debaters also incorporated evidence based on personal experience, while others use theatrical props and performative techniques. However, from my perspective, the biggest sea change has been the speed, because it has rendered the debates largely incomprehensible to outsiders like myself.

In 2004, as a part-time lecturer at Northwestern, I'd applied for a grant to make the film because I knew of Northwestern's prestigious team and was fascinated by the idiosyncratic Coach Deatherage. I'd imagined a documentary along the lines of 2002's *Spellbound*. We'd track team members while they participated in a very understandable and intrinsically dramatic endeavor. The project seemed straightforward and perhaps even a bit formulaic.

But I'm embarrassed to admit that when I applied for the grant, I hadn't actually seen the fast talkers in action. Once I did, it became clear that the documentary would face some serious challenges. Since viewers wouldn't be able to follow the debaters' arguments, once the eccentricity of the speed wore off, the debates would be boring and distancing to watch.

I briefly considered making a film about debaters *for* debaters that took the insular nature of the activity for granted. That would be much easier to construct. But I wanted to communicate with a wider audience, and I was interested in the relationship of debate to bigger concerns. Most central: Had debate morphed from an academic enterprise meant to educate future leaders to a training ground for single-minded winners regardless of whether they could form nuanced arguments, let alone communicate, connect, and persuade?

Equally essential, viewers needed to care about the characters and track the competition. My editor, Ron Ward, and I began experimenting, homing in on specific turning points and emotional moments, utilizing graphic representations, speeding up and slowing down footage, creating musical juxtapositions, and trying multiple iterations of a voice-over, all to make the film comprehensible and entertaining for a nondebate crowd. But it was slow going (no pun intended), with many dead ends.

I observed fast talkers particularly adept at responding quickly to a variety of arguments. In fact, they appeared almost superhuman in their ability to trigger the right "card" depending on which argument was "run" by an opposing team. And beyond the technical skills of fast talking, and perhaps because of the intensity, the Northwestern team exhibited a highly developed work ethic and an unsurpassed drive to win. Students who were on the team but not currently scheduled to debate devoted themselves passionately to supplying research, practice, and general support for those students scheduled to debate. Moreover, I witnessed a close connection between Deatherage and many of his debaters that I assume had something to do with the pace and intensity of the activity.

On the flip side, I heard that some fast talkers had trouble slowing down, talking too quickly in nondebate contexts, and experiencing insomnia and eating or drinking problems. I also discovered that some debaters didn't talk fast and claimed fast talking was a tool of the privileged that discriminated against low-income and minority students. To learn the necessary skills to fast talk entailed attending expensive summer institutes before college.

Additionally, some debaters maintained that the present state of debate alienated women. High-school and novice teams are tipped toward female debaters, but by the National Debate Tournament, female participation has diminished and/or women don't excel. One female coach commented that debaters look unattractive while fast talking, and women are conditioned to be more self-conscious about the way they look. Furthermore, to do well one has to be particularly aggressive, which for women is often seen as a liability.

Even after following debate for a few years, I still couldn't tell who was winning and who was losing. I felt like I could switch one voice with another and it wouldn't matter. And as I continued to study my footage, I was disturbed. Not only were the debaters under tremendous pressure, they seemed to lack all perspective. Frequently, if they won a trophy but not the top trophy, they seemed downright disappointed, and if they lost, they were devastated. After a particularly intense debate, which Northwestern loses, Deatherage says, "It's like falling off a cliff. There's an emptiness. Is that all that's there? Is this it?"

Yet, simultaneously, looking at the same footage, one sees how deeply the debaters care about one another and about their activity.

When knocked out of the tournament, many openly weep. And no one would argue that fast talkers aren't learning a great deal about how to support or attack a resolution. Even though inaccessible to a general audience, debate in its present form is clearly training its participants to think quickly and nimbly about complex issues, to be leaders in law and politics who will make important contributions.

So is debate broken, or has it evolved? Most people I talked to conceded that for better or worse, speed is here to stay. According to LaTonya Starks, a Northwestern alumna, "There is an influx of debaters from my generation of debate (I graduated NU in 2004) who are judges, coaches, and even program directors now. These debaters grew up practicing speed reading and have taught their debaters to follow the practice."

Still, there are those who continue to be disturbed by the acceleration. I've spoken to several people who abandoned debate because of the speed either in high school or early in their college careers. And many current debaters see speed as part of an umbrella of problems that continues to plague the activity. Of course, if teams that are unable to or choose not to fast talk were to end up winning the tournament, debate might eventually slow down. But is such a scenario possible? Is it desirable?

As the 2006 National Debate Tournament approached and I watched the Northwestern team prepare, I wondered how best to represent in key moments individual debates that actually last more than an hour. Though the fast talkers appear to be an exotic species, filmmakers too habitually speed things up, editing cuts progressively faster as impatient viewers become more adept at taking in information.

But there is a crucial difference. Filmmakers condense time to keep an audience engaged, but for fast talkers, engaging an audience, at least a nondebate one, seems beside the point. Most of the debaters I talked to didn't really care that they weren't communicating to nondebaters and shrugged off their shrinking audience. It was sufficient that the debates were of interest to their fellow participants.

As I continued to film and experiment with my material, I was appointed as a tenure-track assistant professor of radio-TV-film. Like all junior faculty, I felt tremendous pressure to produce more work in less time, ironic given the questions my film was raising.

By the end of 2006, my crew and I had amassed almost 200 hours of material, and I was immersed in the subject, not knowing where it would take me. More frighteningly, given the tenure clock, I didn't know how long it would take to finish.

I pushed ahead, recalling successful documentaries like Steve James's *Hoop Dreams,* a project which supposedly had started out as a simple, 30-minute short with a three-week production schedule and ballooned to 250 hours of footage, ending as a 170-minute feature that took eight years to complete.

Then again, *Hoop Dreams* was made in 1994. Now filmmakers, faculty, and students have 24/7 access to computers, the Internet, and mobile technology, and we are able to produce more quickly. The downside is that such production has become the norm, and the ability to keep up the pace has a price. As I look forward to the premiere of *Fast Talk* and assembling my tenure portfolio, I wonder: Did I achieve enough quickly enough?

Students are under similar pressure to bring home not just trophies, but straight A's, internships, participation in high-prestige service projects, and whatever else will give them an advantage over their peers when applying for jobs. Some of my colleagues and students feel they don't have enough time for sleep and depend on coffee, Adderall, or other stimulants to stay awake. So while the fast talkers might seem like freaks, maybe they're just a prominent example of a more universal acceleration.

I congratulate Northwestern's debate coach, Dan Fitzmier (who succeeded Deatherage), and the debaters Stephanie Spies and Matt Fisher on their 2011 championship victories. Those mark Northwestern's 14th win at the National Debate Tournament, confirming the team's status as the winningest in the tournament's 64-year history. And of course it's significant that a woman was half of the winning team.

Whether society's accomplishments more generally are of the right kind, and happening at the right speed—well, the debate goes on.

Fast Talk *is scheduled to be screened at the University Film & Video Conference at Emerson College, in Boston, on August 6; at the Supreme Court Institute, Georgetown University Law Center, Washington, with an accompanying panel featuring Supreme Court advocates, on September 8; and at the Gene Siskel Film Center in Chicago with an accompanying panel in late September. For more information, visit http://fasttalkthemovie.com.*

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