

WHY SPEED KILLS

by James Talley

The use of a high rate of a delivery in academic debate has long been an issue of controversy, leading old-school judges to withdraw their allegiance from the activity, fueling dissatisfaction and encouraging the formation of alternative debating leagues and formats. It is unfortunate that the main outcries against speed debate are based largely on misconceptions and flawed conventional wisdom.

The most often heard objection to speed debate is that the practice results in poor analysis of the issues and arguments. This charge is, itself, fallacious. How rapidly one speaks has no necessary effect on the quality of one's argumentation or the rigor of one's thought. A brilliant debater will remain a brilliant debater whether she speaks like Alvin the Chipmunk or like Paul Harvey. Speed can be used as a ploy to mask shoddy analysis, however, but the solution to this problem is to encourage sound reasoning at all levels of experience and at all rates of delivery.

The second major complaint leveled against rapid delivery is that speed destroys debate's benefits as a communication training ground. If students were taught from the beginning of their debate careers to use ample jargon, word economy and rapid delivery, this criticism might be more valid. However, the norm is more likely to recognize a variety of judging preferences, paradigms, and familiarity levels, and thus teaching rightly focuses on adapting to the audience. If one's audience can follow and understand, and actually prefers a rapid delivery peppered with jargon, then providing "speed and spread" is consistent with precepts of good communicative adaptation. Hopefully, a debater can vary his speed and presentation to adapt convincingly to other audiences as well, and few debaters leave high school under the impression that audiences in the "real world" will comprehend, much less enjoy and find persuasive, speeches ranging from 250 words per minute on up.

Let's be honest, however: few debaters use speed to better adapt to the preferences of a judge. Speed is used to win rounds, and not by way of any lofty concepts of judge

adaptation. For the most part, the rapid delivery strategy is simple: lodge enough arguments of varying degrees of quality that the opposition will be unable to address them all, then focus on the unaddressed arguments and use these--in combination with the "no new issues in rebuttals" rule--to claim victory. It is in circumstances like these that "disadvantages improve once dropped," as a debate colleague once put it. An argument which, on its face, is inadequate and easily answered, takes on decision-rule finality once the time for the first affirmative rebuttal runs out.

Neither of the standard objections to rapid delivery serves to refute this practice. Critics of speed debate have not chosen their arguments well, preferring to base their

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gripes on what they generally observe in competition (the correlation between shoddy argumentation and rapid delivery), without giving much thought to whether the harms they diagnose are actually caused by debate speed or merely associated with it. Instead of complaining about deficient analysis or improper communication, these critics would do better by assailing rapid delivery where it is actually vulnerable: in its ethical implications.

Since its beginning, debate has been used and justified as a means of ascertaining the probable truth of a proposition, or at least as a method for selecting the better among competing ideas. This ancient purpose still resides at the core of most traditional debate ethics. In this model, argumentation is a search for the probable truth, with each advocate testing the claims of the opposition for errors and fallacies, which, once weeded out, will clear room for a critic to evaluate a proper course of action based on the truth that has emerged

unscathed from both sides of the controversy. This view instructs us that anything which avoids argumentation and the clash of opposing claims is a retreat from the ethical purpose and justification of debate. Each claim must be tested to determine its worth, or "debate," as such, does not actually occur.

Nearly every form of unethical behavior in debate is an avoidance of clash; a hiding of, and hiding from, the truth or the means for determining the likelihood that a given claim is truthful. Falsification is not merely intellectual dishonesty. It is the conscious construction of supportive material that does not, in actuality, exist. How can falsified or fabricated evidence be legitimately tested by the opposition? It cannot. (Exposing falsification with proof from the original is not the same as testing the reasoning of a falsified claim but rather a "crying foul" against the rules violation.) It is deception designed to dodge honest inquiry into the internal reasoning upon which a claim's support is based. Use of falsified evidence deprives the opposition of the ability to logically test the falsely supported claim, an ability that is both the opposition's obligation and an integral component in debate's function. It is a case of running from a fight one does not believe can be won--usually because the fabricator is, at base, a coward.

Misuse of rapid delivery is a similar breach of ethics. The very nature of this strategy is a retreat from argumentation, an escape from clash, an avoidance of the mutual testing of competing claims which is intended to result in the discovery of the probable truth. The advantage of this strategy is that it allows a speedy debater to take the easy way to victory, but the easy way is not a proper course for the ethical debater. Like the fabricator, the speed tactician is usually afraid of letting his arguments receive an honest and thorough testing by the opposition.

The strategy is based on two factors: the drop rule in debate which holds that an issue unanswered from constructives cannot be answered in rebuttals; and the debater's ability to "spread" the op-

position, usually during the negative block. The existence of both the drop rule and the negative block is an idiosyncrasy of academic debate, and neither has any necessary relation to the truth or falsehood of any claims made in the round. To be sure, both factors have their purposes. The drop rule is intended to seal-off constructives so that arguments do not proliferate without an end in sight. The negative block is a consciously constructed counterbalance to the affirmative's privilege of having the first and last word in the debate. But when rapid delivery is employed by a negative team as a tactic for winning the round, the original purposes of the two rules which allow spread tactics to operate become eclipsed and in fact reversed. Both the drop rule and the negative block were intended to promote fairness, equity and sound debate. Neither was created to allow or promote a strategy which defeats the very purpose of argumentation, the clash and mutual testing of competing ideas.

Yet this is the result of speed used as a tactic. The negative team hopes that some of its arguments will be "time-dropped" by the first affirmative rebuttalist--not because this speaker is incapable of speech time management, not because s/he takes a sloppy flowsheet, not because s/he is without a response that would illustrate the deficiencies in negative's positions--but because s/he simply has not attained the purely technical and mechanical ability to speak at 300 words per minute. Delivery rate has more in common with debater pen-twirling than it does with the critical thinking skills debate attempts to promote. A speed debater asks for a decision based on two flakes of the activity, the drop-rule and the time constraints of the round--rules which exist to improve the search for truth, not impede it. The round is to be based on claims that have gone untested. The message sent is that quality, analysis, and truth do not matter so much as quantity and pure technical finesse at flapping one's lips. This message strikes at the justifying foundations of academic debate, and it is echoed in the words of every debate critic who complains about a wonderful affirmative that was unable to answer a mindless argument at the tail end of the 1AR and thus lost the round. Such critics act as if they are

forced by the rules to render what they describe as an unfortunate, unfair, or even tragic ballot, when in reality, they are abdicating their responsibilities to maintain the activity as a forum of true argumentation.

The two main objections to speed most commonly seen have little to offer us unless seen in the light of debate's ethical dimensions. The "poor analysis" complaint could be dismissed because it mistakes a correlation between speed and logical sloppiness with a causation, yet it is the connotation of the spread strategy which is at fault here. There are grounds to believe that the use of rapid delivery as a tactic implies that arguments need not be up to snuff so long as there are many of them on the flow. The use and success of the spread send a message to debaters that the quality of an argument matters less than the quantity of arguments lodged. It also suggests that the easiest way to a winning ballot is a veritable cancer of positions, when in actuality arguing ten implausible or poorly constructed disadvantages requires much more physical work and wastes far more wood pulp than arguing one or two finely crafted and rigorous ones which cut to the heart of the affirmative proposal. The only "ease" involved in the spread is the relative laxity in critical evaluation and selection required of negatives when viewing and attacking the case, but this free lunch is paid for in extra effort to cram all the spread positions onto the flow and into the constructives. The spread tactic requires little critical skill to execute. It is akin to killing someone with a shotgun blast: one's aim need not be terribly good to achieve the desired result. Conversely, critically examining the case for its flaws and vulnerabilities, then selecting arguments which target those vulnerabilities is more like marksmanship, requiring study, practice, and a higher dimension of critical skill.

In terms of effective communication, speed debaters are speaking to critics whose level of ethical understanding is not fully developed: these judges see nothing wrong with a tactic that renders a substantive rule of the activity a mere technicality. Few critics would smile on a team that mumbled its arguments when faced with an opponent who was

hearing-impaired. A speaker's partial deafness has as little to do with his debating ability as his skin color has to do with the content of his character. But this connection is seldom made by either the debaters who employ speed as a tactic or the critics who award this strategy with negative decisions.

To be sure, speed can be used by affirmatives as well as negatives, and there is something of a difference between gratuitous and necessary speed. Affirmatives already possess the substantial advantages of framing the debate, choosing a proposal to focus the resolution, defining terms, preparing well ahead of competition, and having the first and last word in the round. There is little need for affirmatives to add to their privileged position by beginning the round at mach 2 in hopes of burying the opposition. But the spread tactic was originally a negative innovation, and for the most part, it is used exclusively by negatives.

Necessary, as opposed to gratuitous, speed is, at base, a judgement call of the critic. The critic's experience with debate will instruct her whether rapid delivery is required to cover all the ground. As a rule, the first affirmative rebuttalist should be expected to pick up the pace, and rightfully so; the existence of the negative block--irrespective of spread tactics--presents the 1AR with a great deal to address. For the most part, a seasoned debate judge can tell when the spread tactic has been brought into play by either team, and if this statement is seen as a call for subjectivity in judging, some subjectivity is unavoidable in debate evaluations. Let those who claim to know a purely objective critic produce him or her. It is not a question of subjectivity versus objectivity, but rather one of justifiable versus unjustifiable subjectivity.

Critics are asked to choose the team that has done the better debating. If debate is a session of argumentation, and if argumentation is the clash and mutual testing of competing ideas, then the better debaters will be those who eschew the temptation to take the "easy" way out and spread their opponents in hopes of a default victory based on misinterpreted rules of the activity.

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