THE DOWNSIDE OF INTERNET DEBATING

by David M. Berube, Ph.D.

Although once proclaiming an end to meatspace (defined as person to person interaction in a shared physical space) and suggesting contest-debating use the Internet as a forum for competition, I retain many reservations. These remarks will be further explicated in a paper to be presented at the International Debate Education Association Conference in Budapest this October. Simply put, my job here is to play the "devil's advocate". By considering some of these arguments, a stronger case for Internet debating might be fashioned. In other words, I am a cautious fan.

First, it may be impractical. Technology associated with Internet communications develops very quickly. When I have the opportunity, I try to watch ZDTV to learn about new software, hardware, etc. By the time new software is installed, we learn new updates are already available. Unsurprisingly, technologies supporting Internet debating are very embryonic.

There are various problems. For example, varying baud transmission rates make real time video nearly unattainable for the commercial user and real time audio largely unlikely. Connection speeds and clutter results in annoying buffering delays. The quality of hardware on the receiving end, such as processing speeds, contributes to the difficulty as well.

In addition, contest-debating prizes quickened delivery and this exacerbates the problem. The activity is not designed for unspecialized spectators, so debaters do not tend to accommodate the Internet audience by adapting to the technological limitations.

Current deficient technology might make moving to this format problematic, since early failures might discourage experimentation. Especially of concern is the clamor of the advocates for this new format when so little feedback has been assessed. As I watched the national intercollegiate championships in "meatspace" and in cyberspace, there wasn't a case to be made that the Internet debate was anything close to the real thing. Furthermore, a premature commitment to Internet debating might still its birth. Tout it when it should be touted and not before.

Second, it may be inadequate. Consider one caveat. Contest debating includes the exchange of documents as well as speaking, Except for some sophisticated and expensive teleconferencing programs; document attachment is a serious problem. One end would need to attach a file and send it appended to the data stream or send it separately altogether (the first is nearly impossible and the second inconvenient without a second parallel connection). Send the documents subsequent to a request would delay the progress of the round. Whether interest can be sustained in rounds completed within a time frame exceeding current rounds remains unknown. Of course, as rounds last longer and longer, debaters may break a round to solicit a document as a delaying tactic in order to return to research while the round is occurring. Indeed, waiting for document delivery might provide a window for research updating. While this may favor programs with deep research staffs, it would probably produce more informed debates (maybe a final extension to the plan disclosure process). In response, Internet debating might ban the exchange of documents, but that would seem excessive. Of course, debaters and critics make mistakes recording debates especially in less than ideal situations like on-line transmission. Documenting evidence read into a debate allows the validation of claims. We know all texts are texts both oral and transcribed. The oral text of the debate remains incomplete if the perusal of documents is restricted to notation and recall. Just one potential drawback.

Third, it may be unsatisfactory. Leveling the playing field is a popular metaphor for this experiment, but the entry fee into this club remains expensive. The minicam most of us can install on top of our monitors is inadequate for Internet debating. To record audio-visual data, a digital camcorder is necessary and they can run from $1,000 to much more expensive. The software currently used that takes the digital moving picture and audio and packets them for broadcasting is wedded to Apple products and Apple Quick-Time which while adequate for streaming video is seriously challenged by continuous broadcast in real time. The lack of coherence between video and audio broadcasting makes sustained viewing and attention incredibly difficult. Additionally, without some way to reduce the speaking rate, the nearly incomprehensible chatter in a live debate become mostly gray noise when broadcasted over the Internet.

On another level, many people in the contest debating community are not comfortable with Internet and computing technology and they are mostly the senior citizens of contest debating. Ageism has been a serious problem in contest debating for some time. Often times, senior directors and coaches are driven from the activity because they are denied their own space. While expense is a serious consideration, another more insidious one is technological discrimination.

Fourth, it may be counterproductive. Contest debating programs have been seriously challenged by institutional neglect. Internet debating may become the excuse for restricting all tournament debating related travel. Simply put, school systems may decide the debate and individual events programs should compete on-line rather than via expensive travel to other campuses. It is important to understand that the tournament format is only sixty years old, and it supplanted the single college team against single college team competitions in the 30s and early 40s. The rationale: contest tournaments were more efficient. A similar argument might be made about Internet debating versus tournament debating.

Finding some middle ground might be in order. The compromise might involve using Internet debating as an adjunct to the current structure. While this may seem prudent to a debate educator, it may seem like an unnecessary perk to a high school or college administrator. Also, even if a few tournaments were retained, the Internet debate training for them may be weakly transferable at best. As well, resolving disputes over which travel tournaments to retain in the Internet debating world would be knotty.

Most importantly, the interpersonal dynamic of face-to-face ("meatspace") debating would be lost. On-line interaction has begun to be seriously studied recently. Psy-

chologists and sociologists are learning that on-line behavior is different than "meat" behavior. To date, we have anecdotal support relating to aggressive behavior such as flaming, Net-terrorism as play, and Net-dependency leading to socio-neurotic isolation and despondency. The contest debating community may be a queer one, but at least, it is a public organization with teachers, managers, directors, coaches, critics, and participants communing with each other.

Contest debating is an activity that teaches students that the person with whom you disagree has value. Ideas do not make someone a pariah except in the most egregious circumstances. The ritual resolution of each debate is the handshake, a moment when "meat" meets "meat", a powerful tactile experience. The realization the hand in your grasp belong to a person with a family and with fears and hopes much like your own makes disagreement more an alternative to violence.

In conclusion, before celebrating the transition from "meatspace" to cyberspace, we may need to address two primary questions. (1) Is the technology sufficiently developed to accommodate us? And (2) are we sufficiently developed to accommodate it? My point of view, at this time, is negative on both fronts.

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