Escaping the "Uncanny Valley":
Humanizing Forensic Address through Public Narrative

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There's no point in dissecting the words he said, because they have been vetted a thousand times over. It's how he said them that matters. He was nervous at the beginning and angry in the middle, but he never seemed, well, human, at anytime. . . . Where was the real person behind the corporate logo that has become "Tiger"? All we got today was a robot.
- Dan Levy, Sporting News

The negative reaction of sports writers to Tiger Woods' February 19, 2010 comeback press conference echoed three terms: "insincere," "coached" and "robotic." In fact, the latter criticism caught on with the on-line public to the extent that a "Tiger Woods is a Robot" fan page is featured on Facebook, while an episode of "Tiger Woods Robot Theatre" can be viewed on Youtube. Tiger's press conference media accounts, a performance analysis of Al Gore's 2000 presidential campaign, and an overview of the latest business presentational texts suggest that nothing will disengage an audience more quickly than a robotic delivery style. Perhaps the only character that audiences find more appalling than a robotic human is a nearly-human robot.

The "uncanny valley" is a place where movies go to die. Films like "Beowulf," "Final Fantasy," and "The Polar Express" all bombed, at least in part, because of the uncomfortable feeling erected by characters that are nearly human, but not quite. Japanese roboticist, Masahiro Mori, coined the term "uncanny valley," borrowing from Freud's notion of the uncanny and referring to the valley created when one plots a character's believability (or realism) on a graph with audience acceptance. When a character appears to be almost real, but not quite, audiences find them to be disturbing, unsettling and unnatural. This revulsion referred to as "the uncanny valley" has also been demonstrated in Macaque monkeys ("The Uncanny Valley," 2010). So robots, avatars, zombies, video games characters, animated personae and Hollywood creative blends share the same fate as Tiger Woods and Al Gore, for a similar reason, audiences find what is not quite real to be "creepy."

Forensic public address risks falling into an uncanny valley of its own creation. The distance between public address and forensic public address is confounding and disturbing. Students of public speaking exposed to forensic public address for the first time invariably notice the difference between contest speaking and effective public speech in other contexts. And while some of this gap can be explained by pedagogical goals and methods, much of it appears to be rooted in insular, unsubstantiated performance norms and fads. When college students respond to national final round speakers, arguably the nation's brightest and best, with phrases resembling the sports writers' criticism of Tiger

Woods—"insincere," "coached" and "robotic"—then it is time to both explain the nature of "the uncanny valley" and explore methods for bridging the gap between what forensic educators are teaching and what forensics educators should be teaching in public address events.

Gaps in Public Address Pedagogy

The value of public speech training offered by a forensic education is immense. Forensic public address not only expands the borders of the communication classroom, but it potentially provides a rich, comprehensive, in-depth educational experience that frustrates, challenges, rewards and celebrates students beyond another grade in the book, another brick in the wall of the classroom. The numerous social, political, educational, artistic, intellectual and humane contributions made by forensic students does more to dispel the myth of Burnett, Brand and Meister's (2003) "education as myth in forensics," than any adopted resolution or compiled document. However, a document produced by the National Forensic Association's Pedagogy Committee, "What Are We Trying to Teach" (2010) spells out a litany of lessons learned in public address events including ones related to: analysis of audience and occasion, topic selection, research, organization, language use, vocal delivery, physical delivery and memorization. These general areas of analysis take on more meaning when viewed specifically in the context of Rhetorical Criticism, After-Dinner, Informative and Persuasive Speaking. There is little reasonable doubt that forensic public address competition has taught great numbers of students valuable lessons through the years. The questions confronting forensic educators today include: how can this activity better prepare students for public speaking beyond the forensic context? and to what extent do current competitive practices enhance or diminish this preparation?

The gap between effective, natural public speech delivery and what is often rewarded in forensic competition is perceived and clearly articulated by college students who view national final round competition recordings. In recent years, student reaction to these performances has grown increasingly negative. To a forensic educator of many years, this response is disturbing to say the least. A study was designed in June of 2010 to measure student reaction. A total of 25 students from two separate sections of our college's basic public speaking class entitled, "Rhetoric and Public Address," were provided with questionnaires that included the following open-ended instructions. After having viewed several NFA 2007 final round Informative and Persuasive speeches:
1) List five words that come to mind when you consider the delivery of the speeches.
2) List five words that come to mind when you consider the content of the speeches.

It should be noted that the students had viewed seven speeches, five persuasive and two informative from beginning to end. They viewed the introductions of the remaining five speeches. The viewing occurred during the first and second weeks of class, and great care was taken by the instructor not to influence the reaction in any way. Full discussions of the speeches occurred later in the term.

The students displayed creativity and variety in their answers, producing 76 separate delivery terms and 74 individual content words. Nineteen delivery terms were repeated by more than a single student, and fifteen content words were repeated. A chart of the words mentioned more than once follows.

Table 1: Repeated Delivery Terms

Word	Number of References	Percent
robots	9	36
fast	8	32
fake	7	28
dorky/nerdy	5	20
confident	5	20
overly enthusiastic	3	12
emotional	3	12
rehearsed	3	12
good	3	12
vocal	3	12
memorized	2	8
polished	2	8
practiced	2	8
purposeful	2	8
annoying	2	8
interesting	2	8
funny	2	8
visual aids	2	8
nonconversational	2	8
Total number of terms		76
Positive or positively leaning terms		28
Negative or negatively leaning terms		29
Neutral terms		19

Table 1 demonstrates clearly a slightly negative audience response to forensic speech delivery. Of the top five most often occurring terms, four reflect negative connotations. The most often occurring term, "robots" or "robot" or "robotic" is expressed by more than one third of the respondents, followed closely by "fast" and "fake." And while 20% of viewers are reminded of "dorks" or "dorky," slight solace can be taken that the same percentage find the speakers to be "confident." Overall, the numbers of positive descriptors and negative descriptors are almost equal.

Table 2 shows that audience members are more positively predisposed to speech content. Three of the top four terms are obviously positive, including "interesting" at 36%, "well-researched" at 32% and "well-supported" at 16%.

"Boring" leads the negative list at 16%. Only four of the fifteen repeated terms possess clearly negative connotations. Overall, positive descriptors outnumber negative ones by a wide margin, 37 to 21.

Table 2: Repeated Content Terms

Word	Number of References	Percent
interesting	9	36
well-researched	8	32
well-supported	4	16
boring	4	16
informative	3	12
sources	3	12
significant	3	12
weird	2	8
new	2	8
documented	2	8
organized	2	8
misleading	2	8
relevant	2	8
attention-getting	2	8
not well-researched	2	8
Total number of terms		74
Positive or positively leaning terms		37
Negative or negatively leaning terms		21
Neutral terms		16

Table 3 depicts the pronounced contrast between attitudes toward delivery and content. Of the 25 student responses, 15 (60%) could be characterized as totally negative or more negative than positive regarding speech delivery. Conversely, when content is considered, the same number (60%) are totally positive or more positive than negative. While 28% of the students use terms that are totally positive in relation to content, not a single respondent could be classified as totally positive regarding delivery.

Table 3: Term Analysis

DELIVERY TERMS
(N=25)

	Totally Negative	More Negative Than Positive	Neutral	More Positive Than Negative	Totally Positive
# of terms	4	11	2	8	0
% Total	16%	44%	8%	32%	0

CONTENT TERMS
(N=25)

	Totally Negative	More Negative Than Positive	Neutral	More Positive Than Negative	Totally Positive
# of terms	1	5	4	8	7
% Total	4%	20%	16%	32%	28%

The standard for delivery excellence in forensic public address differs from expectations in other contexts. For forensic educators, this gap is important to understand. Does delivery polish that results in audience perceptions of "robotic," "fast" and "fake" serve educational ends, or does it more accurately reflect competitive norms, the simplest form of "count-the-stumbles" judging criteria, and/or a return to the formulaic, stylized prescriptions of the elocutionary movement? What are we teaching?

The descent of forensic public address into the uncanny valley cannot be adequately explained by examining delivery alone. Several factors more closely related to speech content separate forensic public address from most contemporary public speeches. Certainly the frequency and detail of source citations (VerLinden, 1996), the presence of three main points of analysis with its accompanying transitional dance (Gaer, 2002), and similarity in structure within events, based on prescribed (and enforced) areas of analysis (Ballinger & Brand, 1987; Billings, 1997; Sellnow & Ziegelmueller, 1988) add to the perception of "sameness," or formula. The cumulative effect of watching numerous presenters making the exact same rhetorical choices no doubt leads to the robotic vision. A strict adherence to the unwritten rules (Paine, 2005; VerLinden, 1997), prevailing fads and competition norms of forensic public address stifles innovation while encouraging conformity (Ribarsky, 2005). The resulting Stepford speakers appear "robotic, fast, fake" etc., flashing insincere smiles all the way through national final rounds.

The enhancement of communication education in forensic public address requires amending the pedagogy of practice. However, current practice, even the imitative style, teaches valuable lessons in clarity of organization, credibility of documentation and important analytical processes in informative, persuasive and rhetorical genres. The forensic community, professional organizations and individual programs need to weigh the value of invention and innovation against the value of presently prescribed practices to determine the future direction of forensic public address. Regardless of the outcome of such discussions, the gap between human public speech and not-quite-human forensic public address persists. One means of escaping the uncanny valley without a major overhaul or paradigm shift in existing events is through public narrative.

Public Narrative and Forensic Practice

New media and new technology have blurred the line between public and private communication. And while public speakers have been quick to adapt to the stylistic demands of new technology, forensic public address has changed little, if at all. Increasingly, speakers are called on to "tell their own story" on public platforms. The formality that once pervaded public speaking settings is giving way to a more personal, public rhetoric. And while business and professional presentational "gurus" expound on the benefits of personal branding through storytelling, forensic judges and coaches seem to be headed back to the era of polished elo-

cution. One should not misinterpret the nature of this criticism. In a time when far too many public speakers display the attitude that it is, in fact, "all about them," forensic professionals should not be reaffirming this misplaced emphasis. Personal stories should not replace hard evidence in persuasive speaking, or anywhere else. As a forensic professional who has recently repeatedly cringed in public speaking settings where speakers have made inappropriate self-references and totally ignored audiences, while pushing their own personal agendas, it is with great trepidation that the subject of public narrative is approached—which is precisely the point. Speakers are called upon to meet the personal/public demands of new public contexts. Forensic educators can lead the way in developing meaningful theory and practice for 2010 and beyond, or we can crucify our students on the elocutionary "cross of gold" of the last century. Public speaking pedagogy is far too important to leave up to the purveyors of personal branding.

Personal narratives, or even personal examples, have largely been pushed from the forensic stage. Three decades ago it was quite common to hear personal examples used in impromptu, or even at times, in extemporaneous speaking. Occasionally, a persuasive speaker will make a passing, personal reference, but with the exception of after-dinner speaking, personal narratives are generally, and sometimes quite forcefully, discouraged on critiques. While Fisher's narrative paradigm (1984) caught the attention of many communication scholars in the 1980s, it went largely ignored in the forensic community outside of an occasional round of rhetorical criticism. In the intervening decades, the narrative paradigm has made its mark across disciplines, particularly in the area of literary studies (McClure, 2009).

Fisher's basic notion that humans are essentially storytelling animals places narrative at the heart of communication. Fisher's conception that narratives are inherently rhetorical represents an attempt to rescue rhetoric from the stranglehold of the rational paradigm. Fisher (1984) explains:

> The narrative paradigm challenges the notion that human communication—if it is to be considered rhetorical—must be an argumentative form, that reason is to be attributed only to discourse marked by clearly identifiable modes of inference and/or implication, and that the norms for evaluation of rhetorical communication must be rational standards taken essentially from informal or formal logic. The narrative paradigm does not deny reason and rationality; it reconstitutes them, making them amenable to all forms of human communication. (2)

In defense of contest oral interpretation, forensic educators have argued for decades that argumentation can take the form of prose, poetry and drama. Fisher contends that all human communication is essentially narrative. From his perspective, narrative speaking deserves a place at the center of public address. At a time when the rigors of the rational paradigm seem to have edged forensic public address to-

ward the uncanny valley, the humanizing rhetoric of narrative offers an escape that is both logical and personal.

Public Narrative in Forensics Practice
Two Possible Approaches

Event Description: Public Narrative
Students will share a personal narrative designed to inspire social or political belief and/or invite social or political action. The speech will develop a student's personal story, enhance audience identification with an issue or set of issues, and characterize the urgency of the moment. The speech may be delivered from manuscript, notes, memory or any combination thereof. Maximum time limit: 10 minutes.

This event grows directly from the work of Harvard University professor and leadership expert, Dr. Marshall Ganz. *The Boston Globe* refers to Ganz as a "legendary political organizer" who worked alongside Cesar Chavez in the United Farm Workers and served as an organizer and consultant to political candidates from Robert Kennedy to Barack Obama (Guerrieri, 2009). Ganz is largely credited with building the grassroots organizing structure that was instrumental in electing President Obama. In an article from *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Kephart and Rafferty note the rhetorical influence, most notably the phrase "Yes we can," wielded by Ganz in the campaign (2009). In his courses at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Ganz formulates an approach to leadership built entirely around public narrative (Ganz, 2008).

Ganz's article, "What is Public Narrative," (2008) outlines three essential considerations for the development of effective public narrative: "the story of self," "the story of us" and "the story of now." These stories are directly reflected in the event description. Ganz (2008) emphasizes several important ideas related to telling "the story of self."

> Telling one's story is a way to share the values that define who you are—not as abstract principles, but as lived experience.

> We construct stories of self around choice points—moments when we faced a challenge, made a choice, experienced an outcome, and learned a moral.

> We construct our identity … as our story. What is utterly unique about each of us is not a combination of categories that include us, but rather, our journey, our way through life, our personal text from which each of us can teach.

> A story is like a poem. It moves not by how long it is, nor how eloquent or complicated it is. It moves by offering an experience or moment through which we grasp the feeling or insight the poet communicates. The more specific the details we choose to recount, the more we can move our listeners …

The development of one's story not only provides a valuable, engaging experience for listeners, but it also requires potentially enlightening self-reflection by speakers.

Beyond the development of "the story of self," lies "the story of us." Ganz's explanation of this trope brings to mind Burke's rhetorical concept of identification (Burke, 1950). "The story of us" connects the speaker's personal experience to the audience in a meaningful way, transforming personal experience into public issue. "The story of us" fosters a collective identity. Ganz (2008) explains:

> For a collection of people to become an "us" requires a storyteller, an interpreter of shared experience. In a workplace, for example, people who work beside one another but interact little … never develop a story of us. In a social movement, the interpretation of the movement's new experience is a critical leadership function.

Success in developing "the story of us" is what moves the narrative from an exercise in personal recognition to a significant moment of shared consciousness.

Finally, "the story of now" develops the urgency of the moment. Ganz (2008) describes it as follows:

> A story of now articulates an urgent challenge—or threat—to the values that we share that demands action now. What choice must we make? What is the risk? And where's the hope?

The "story of now" places the significant belief or issue in an immediate context. Burke's pentadic element of scene offers further rhetorical grounding for the "story of now" (Burke, 1945). These three areas of narrative articulation, along with more traditional notions of character, plot and moral shape Ganz's approach to public narrative.

The danger of sharing three areas of analysis is that it can so easily, and inappropriately, be formulated into a preview statement. Ganz (2008) argues that these areas naturally overlap and that a linear development of them is missing the point. Public narrative requires no preview or explicitly articulated organizational pattern because the structure of the narrative itself is the prevailing structure. While these three "stories" may follow a natural flow within the speech, calling attention to the rhetorical strategy of identification with phrases like "Now we will move to the story of us" defeats the purpose.

Event Description: Personal Narrative
Students will articulate an important personal value or belief and share a narrative that inspired this conviction. Notes are optional. Maximum time limit: 5 minutes.

This event is based on Edward R. Murrow's radio series, "This I Believe," and National Public Radio's recent revival of the program, in which individuals share their personal statements of belief in essay form. A forensic approach to

this event would emphasize both the oral nature of the experience and the centrality of narrative to the essay development. Because the nature of the radio format translates so well to the forensic experience, little is needed by way of explanation. The website, www.npr.org/thisbelieve, offers access to numerous examples as well as the following useful advice:

Tell a story: Be specific. Take your belief out of the ether and ground it in the events of your life. Consider moments when belief was formed or tested or changed. Your story … should be *real*.

Name your belief: If you can't name it in a sentence or two, your essay might not be about belief.

Be positive: Please avoid preaching or editorializing. Tell us what you do believe, not what you don't believe. Avoid speaking in the editorial "we." Make your essay about you. Speak in the first person.

This last idea is particularly important in order to avoid the inclination to sermonize. In their statement of the project's goal, the aim of evangelizing or preaching is discouraged further:

The goal of "This I Believe" is not to persuade Americans to agree on the same beliefs; the goal is to encourage Americans to begin the much more difficult task of developing respect for and reaching a deeper understanding of beliefs different from their own.

When added to the speaker-centered goals associated with the development of a personal narrative, the stated purpose serves the forensic community well.

These events encourage the development of public address criteria that differ significantly from those currently in place. The breadth of rhetorical choices currently present in contemporary public speech reveals the narrow scope of forensic public address. The inclusion of narrative speaking challenges paradigms and requires forensic educators to listen and learn. Escaping the uncanny valley may actually require genuine human interaction.

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