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After Dinner Speaking: Problems, Causes, and Still No Solutions

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Abstract

Since its adoption as a competitive event, After Dinner Speaking has been critiqued and criticized by several scholars. Despite the quantity of literature produced on this topic, changes to the event have been minimal. This author chooses to look at four areas of controversy including: defining the event, differentiating After Dinner Speaking from Speech to Entertain, differentiating After Dinner Speaking from other platform events, and developing a judging standard for this event. With the use of humor, this paper not only examines these problems, but also the need for discussion surrounding the pedagogical goals of After Dinner Speaking as a springboard for improvement. Also considered will be the implementation of humor curriculums in forensics and/or higher education.

KEYWORDS: After Dinner Speaking, Individual Events, Platform Speaking, Forensics

I was judging a round of After Dinner Speaking last weekend, hoping for a laugh. Some competitors were successful through their use of wit, others used cheesy lines, and the last student was probably supposed to be entered in Persuasive Speaking. It was extremely difficult and frustrating to fill out the ballots. Should I have voted for the funniest person, the funniest looking person, or the most significant topic with some jokes thrown in at the end like laws on a California proposition? This is a question facing many individual events judges today, and the students competing in this event are equally confused. Although many forensics judges maintain that whoever can entertain them the most will take “the one” in an ADS round, AFA-NIET final rounds are consistently full of speeches jam packed with importance. This is just one example of how the waters of ADS have become murky. Since its inception, the After Dinner Speech has changed more than Obama’s cabinet picks. Therefore, it is important to analyze the communicative evolution of this event and the controversies that have arisen since its incarnation. In order to do so, we must first, peek into the past of After Dinner Speaking, ponder the present status of the event, and finally, have a premonition of how to pursue progression.

A (Very) Short History of After Dinner Speaking

Like Al Gore and the Internet, forensics members did not invent the ADS. After dinner speeches, also referred to as “evening illustrated lectures,” date back hundreds of years where they are assumed to originate in Britain. Yes, we can thank the Brits for something other than Harry Potter and colonialism. Today, there are still quite a few agencies in Britain and Scotland that offer the services of several famous after dinner speakers; their topics ranging from marketing to cricket. The name of the event is quite literal, as these speakers address the guests *after dinner*.

Though the forensic event of After Dinner Speaking does not take place after a meal (unless the judge ate a meatball sandwich during the first speech), the forensics community thought it would be a good addition to the family of events. Despite popular opinion, its induction was based on more than keeping the judges awake. Mills (1984) argued, “Speech communication texts have emphasized the use of humor in speech development for decades. Because of this philosophical stance that forensics should be an extension of what is taught in classrooms, After Dinner Speaking as a competitive event has emerged” (p. 11). This, however, does not account for why the popular classroom act of “lecture” is not an event. So, in 1973 the National Forensics Association added After Dinner Speaking as an event.

Controversy in After Dinner Speaking

A number of points of controversy surrounding the After Dinner Speech have surfaced since its appearance in the forensics community. Preston (1997) states, “the controversy surrounding after dinner speaking traditionally revolve[s] around three issues: 1) the purpose of the event in terms of the role of humor and the serious point, 2) the extent to which sources should be used, 3) what, if anything, should be the real-world master analog for the event” (p. 99). While Preston points out key areas of controversy, problems in this event span beyond three components. Like the number of brain cells in George W. Bush’s head, there are four areas of controversy I will discuss: defining the event, differentiating After Dinner Speaking from Speech to Entertain, differentiating After Dinner Speaking from Informative and Persuasive events, and the necessity for judging standards.

Defining After Dinner Speaking

When tournament invitations, NFA rules, AFA rules, Phi Rho Pi rules, and individual directors all have a different notion of what the After Dinner Speech is, confusion arises. While each of these places might wield a few similarities, the differences are often plentiful...like the number of brain cells in *my* head. For example, Mills (1984) examined descriptions of After-Dinner Speaking listed on several tournament invitations. He found several criteria for this event including: time limits, originality, the ability to produce more than a string of one-liners, wit, creativity, humor that is in *good taste*, and that the speech should make a serious point. Dreibelbis and Redmon (1987) note that many invitations characterize the ADS as being either persuasive *or* informative, further noting, “a number of tournaments are specifying in their event descriptions that the ADS should not be a ‘funny informative’” but rather, persuasive in nature (p. 97). Today, invitations might also include something about the number of sources recommended, plagiarism of famous comics’ bits, and the inclusion of a dinosaur joke. Mills further notes that many of the words used in these invitations (such as “good taste”) are ambiguous and raise several questions for judges and competitors alike. Some of this ambiguity is almost certainly derived from the multiple organizations within the forensics community.

After Dinner Speaking v. Speaking to Entertain

One strong area of contestation arises when critics question the significance of academic content and development in this event. Without a strong thesis, some After Dinner Speeches are cast off as the red headed stepchild of forensics. Questions surrounding the content of the ADS marked an early area of controversy involved with After Dinner Speaking, causing us to ask: Is the event about being funny with a bit of significance or significant with a bit of funny? Klopff (1982) wrote,

An after-dinner speech does not have to convert an audience into a howling mob

convulsed with laughter; a speech that is brightened with humor and that offers a good natured approach to a worthwhile subject usually is more appropriate. A speaker achieves his or her purpose through the use of anecdotes, illustrations, and humorous stories, if these are appropriate to the audience and the occasion and are related to the subject. Many beginning speakers fail because their material is not in harmony with the mood of the listeners and the occasion. (cited in Hanson p. 28)

Furthermore, Mills (1984) explains a connection between entertainment and significance through the difference between wit and humor. He says both of these types of language “play an integral part in the development of the serious point of the speech” (p. 14). However, he finds these two laughing matters may be connected, but are distinct entities. Whereas wit springs from a “serious motive” and has an overall purpose, humor can “just be” and

does not need a point to work (Gruner as cited in Mills, p. 14). Even with such definitions, the emphasis on humor versus persuasiveness varies based on the organization hosting the event. Driebelbis and Redmon (1987) differentiated After Dinner Speaking from the commonly substituted Speech to Entertain, determining that Phi Rho Pi's definition of Speech to Entertain focuses on entertainment. They state, "the rules for STE differ from those of ADS in that there is no mention of the 'serious point' (p. 101). This potentially leads to confusion among those students who attend both the Phi Rho Pi National tournament and NFA Nationals, or for those of us without a big budget, students who attend the Santa Rosa tournament and the California opener in the same year.

Differentiating After Dinner Speaking From Other Platform Events

As noted above, the After Dinner Speech often adopts the qualities of a persuasive or informative speech. I speak from experience when I say that some students find it easy to have jokes in their speech when they are signed up for informative, and embarrassingly enough, no jokes at all when they are competing in After Dinner Speaking. The standards become unclear when a student's speech can fit into more than one category. Part of the confusion may stem from the universal platform standards enacted by the forensics community. In 1984 at the 2nd National Conference on Forensics, Resolution 45 was enacted, which created standards for judging platform events or public address events as they were commonly referred to at that time. The resolution included the following standards:

1. the speaker's presentation should identify a thesis or claim from which the speech is developed;
2. the speaker's presentation should provide a motivational link (relevance factor) between the topic and the audience;
3. the speaker's presentation should develop a substantive analysis of the thesis using appropriate supporting materials;
4. the speaker's presentation should be organized in a coherent manner;
5. the speaker's presentation should use language which is appropriate for the topic and the audience;
6. the speaker's presentation should be delivered using appropriate vocal and physical presentation skills. (cited in Hanson, 1998, p. 25)

Hanson addresses the concern of whether or not such standards are applicable to the After Dinner Speech. While it may be easy to see similarities and differences amongst all platform speeches, there is indeed something that sets the after dinner speech apart from its siblings: entertainment. This element can vary through the use of props, facial expressions, and the various types of humor that exist. Miller (1974) noted, "Some speakers use various forms of humor better than others. How effective are you, for example, in using exaggeration? understatement? puns? irony? Can you talk entertainingly about the peculiar traits of people? Are you effective in treating serious

ideas lightly or light subjects seriously?" (cited in Hanson, p. 27). Each of these questions, if answered, could create unique guidelines for the After Dinner Speech and set it apart from other platform events.

The Necessity for Judging Standards

With judging standards unclear, boundaries enacted what I like to call the invisible electric doggy fence theory. If a student went too far, they often didn't know it and got zapped back into their place when they got their ballots. The smoking of the six really hurt some students. Thus, local tournaments began to suffer with enrollment rates. Holm (1996) noticed what many of us have seen in our districts: that ADS is a favorite room-packed event at nationals, but entries at the local level seem to have dwindled. He lists several reasons for this decline. The winner: judges. He cites complaints from several open competitors such as "judges with hangovers" and "judges who try not to laugh" (p. 1). More specifically, Holm returns to the idea that a tailored set of standards for judging the after dinner speech is non-existent, leading to confusion, frustration, and murder. No murders have occurred to date, but it is possible. Students are prompted to then ask, "Why do speeches which aren't funny make it into the finals?" "Why are my rankings so inconsistent?" and "Why do they teach us about audience analysis in public speaking classes and say we should modify our speeches to meet the demographics of the group and then turn around and say "Never use forensics humor" in [ADS] Forensics is the one thing we all have in common" (p. 1).

In response to these questions, and just out of sheer nosiness, Edwards and Thompson (2001) conducted a content analysis of ADS ballots. During the 2000-2001 Forensics season, these authors collected ADS ballots from several tournaments in the upper Midwest. Edwards and Thompson found that most of the comments on the ADS ballot fit into two headings: content and humor. To give you an idea of which category weighed heavier in the minds of the judges, they stated, "Content had two hundred and twenty-one related comments while humor had one hundred eight-nine." (p. 1).

Billings (2003) further examines judges' tolerance of topics and specific language in this event. He points out that After-dinner speeches aren't as funny as they used to be and the primary reason appears to be the fear of potentially intolerable or offensive humor. Because of this problem, Billings studied focus groups comprised of forensics judges in which he asked them to define "the line" and identify their tolerance of different types of humor. Those topics that were generally not tolerated included humor regarding: handicaps, homophobia, violence,

disorders, and sexism. This means that I won't be able to talk about my paraplegic, gay, narcoleptic, bigot of an uncle, and that is some funny stuff. Billings claims that this intolerability to many of the topics that are prevalent in our society only works to stifle creativity in this event.

Each of these studies reiterates the same theme: there is a seriously large grey area for criteria and standards in After-Dinner Speaking. Each of these controversies needs to be addressed and analyzed for further development and improvement not only within this event, but also our community.

Suggestions and Future Directions

I have elaborated upon four major areas of controversy within After Dinner Speaking that need our attention. While I would like to say that God helps those who help themselves, I know that will not get me published, which is why I will offer some suggestions; both on a broad scale and more specific to each issue.

First, many of the controversies discussed here could be solved by the implementation of humor curriculums in our education systems. While there is little research done on the actual teaching of humor to students, several scholars do note that humor is a valuable teaching tool (Baym, 2005; Bryant & Zillman, 1989; Johnson, 1990; Kher et. al., 1999; Ruggieri, 1999). Forensic students are teachers in their own right. If you dig through the informative speeches on bees and motorcycles, there are a few speeches that you might find intriguing and fascinating. Often times it is the lack of excitement or entertainment, however, that often prevents people from listening to these speeches, let alone learn from them. The After Dinner Speech should serve as a remedy for this due to its use of humor as a pedagogical tool.

Take for example late night comedy shows. The 2004 Pew Survey found that 13% of people ages 18-29 “report learning from late-night talk shows such as NBC’s *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno and CBS’s *Late Show* with David Letterman” and *The Daily Show* is a rising source of political information” (cited in Baym, 2005, p. 260). Baym continues, the “unique blending of comedy, late-night entertainment, news, and public affairs discussion has resonated with a substantial audience” (p. 260). This blending of significance with entertainment sounds familiar. If we recognize that forensics students are educators, then the need for humor as a teaching tool becomes more apparent. However, if one does not know how to use humor effectively, the value of comedy and the After Dinner Speech is unapparent. By developing a humor curriculum, we would be giving our students a tool that they can

utilize throughout their forensics career and throughout a lifetime of communication and education. If you do not believe me, go back and review some of my jokes. If you did not laugh, it was not my fault. I was not taught how to be funny.

In regards to defining the event, Preston (1997) believes that there should be improvements made to this event and suggests that we “provide a thorough event description for all events, including after dinner speaking, to assist critics” (p. 97). Not only should there be thorough event descriptions, but I would also advocate for a universal description used by NFA, AFA, and Phi Rho Pi. Currently, the event description for After Dinner Speaking listed for the NIET reads,

An original, humorous speech by the student, designed to exhibit sound speech composition, thematic coherence, direct communicative public speaking skills, and good taste. The speech should not resemble a night club act, an impersonation, or comic dialogue. Audio-visual aids may or may not be used to supplement and reinforce the message. Minimal notes are permitted. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes (AFA-NIET).

Aside from the four typos that I had to fix when transcribing this passage, there are a few words I would like to point out. This list of what not to do is often echoed in tournament invitations across the country. This might include “not a string of one liners,” or “not stand up comedy.” Kay and Borchers (1992) believe that event descriptions should not limit the student as much as they do. They state, “Students in after dinner speaking are doubly penalized—not only do the event rules fail to prescribe a public arena model, but the rules actually take away the most popular and appropriate public arena models (stand up)” (p. 168). Holm (1988) concurs with their statement as he says, “to the new competitor A.D.S. is unlike anything they may have seen in the past. For many the only thing they can compare it to mentally is a stand-up comedy routine” (p. 7). These limitations do not help a student to understand what the event is. Instead of telling students what not to do, the event description should focus on what the event *should* look like. It’s like abstinence only education. If you don’t teach them how to use a condom, the itch gets worse. Speaking of which, the idea of “good taste” is quite vague and subjective. While most of what we do in forensics is subjective, having a term like this in a paragraph that is supposed to break down rules and standards is not helpful, but instead confusing. A description that may be useful looks like this:

An 8-10 minute speech that uses several types of humor as a vehicle to persuade, inform, or otherwise show analysis of a significant topic. Entertainment should be balanced with the significance of the topic at hand

through the use of sources and effective delivery skills. Participants should be less concerned with the quantity of humor and more with the quality of humor. The student should use language appropriate for the audience and topic. Audio-visual aids may or may not be used to supplement and reinforce the message. Random humor is discouraged.

I do not contend that this is a perfect description that should be adopted immediately by all tournaments, NFA, AFA, and/or Phi Rho Pi. However, I do hope that this opens up conversation amongst directors, coaches, and students to change the hundreds of descriptions that exist today and base them on our objectives for this genre.

Next, as the scholars cited here have made clear, we need to differentiate between Speech to Entertain and After Dinner Speaking. By allowing students to qualify for nationals in one event by using their legs from the other, forensics organizations are doing students a great injustice which does not honor the work that they put into this activity. Students who compete in tournaments who offer “Sports impromptu” do not get to take the legs from that swing to go to AFA in regular ole’ impromptu. Then again, if you are at a tournament that offers that event, you probably aren’t going to qualify anyway. If you do not like my radical third wave forensicism ideals, then Dreibelbis and Redmon (1987) offer three other solutions to this conundrum:

1. Coaches should read the rules listed in the event description when going to a tournament with what appear to be different event categories.
2. Students who transfer from two-year colleges or graduate from high school should familiarize themselves with the rules appropriate for intercollegiate tournaments.
3. Coaches and judges should judge STE’s using STE rules and criteria and the same should hold true for ADS. (p. 103)

These suggestions attempt to relieve the confusion students experience in the funny v. serious arguments that make an ongoing appearance on ADS ballots. I know my students do not want to memorize two different speeches for the same event. Preston (1997) continues by advocating for clearer distinctions between After-Dinner Speaking and Informative and/or persuasive. Although he vowed to do a content analysis and comparison of Informative and Persuasive ballots against the ADS ballots, 14 years have gone by and we still have not seen that research (p. 97). Perhaps somebody in the community could take on this task to improve the knowledge we have for differentiating platform event standards.

While some scholars, like Preston, have stated that we need to differentiate After Dinner Speaking from Informative or Persuasive, I disagree. It seems as though there is a battle between the informative ADS and the

persuasive ADS. If we can agree that the primary purpose of this speech is to use humor as a vehicle, then the end result should be left open. Furthermore, I advocate a new direction in After Dinner Speaking. Why not allow your students to use humor to engage the audience in a rhetorical criticism or communication analysis? We should let our students take the tools they learn in these other platform events and apply them to the speech that everyone wants to watch. People got it wrong when they started to call the informative the “speech to bore.” While a good CA is interesting, the language and density that most competitors use to construct it prevent them from getting the audience they deserve. The amount of time that goes into a Communication Analysis deserves at least five people in the room to watch it. If we regularly saw humor being used to explain the movements, media, and language that we encounter daily, then we would truly be using the After Dinner Speech to make a serious point worthy of investigation and ultimately we could reinvent this event as we know it.

Finally, although forensics coaches sometimes like to live vicariously through those who they coach, we all must admit that this activity is for the students. If we acknowledge this, then it is of great concern that 35% of students surveyed regarding the ADS stated that a lack of uniform judging criteria is the biggest problem facing ADS competitors today (Billings, 2003, p. 4). With such a variety of outcomes in the data that has been produced, several scholars propose that there should be a new set of standards on which to base our judgments for After-Dinner Speaking (Billings, 1997; Dreibelbis and Redmon, 1987; Hanson, 1998; Holm, 1988; Jensen 1990; Mills 1983; Preston, 1997). However, before we propose judging criteria for this event, there are preliminary steps that we as a community must take.

Before we can create a set of criteria, the forensics community must identify the pedagogical goals of this specific event. Until we agree upon what the educational value of this activity is, then we cannot agree upon a clear set of criteria for judging the ADS. Stimulating this conversation will provide clarity to some of the controversy discussed here. Therefore, I would like to offer a list of goals/objectives that I have identified for this genre:

1. Students should be able to understand and effectively use humor as a vehicle of persuasion, informing, and/or analyzing.
2. Students should learn and be able to use a variety of different types of humor.
3. Students should be able to use humor extemporaneously.
4. Students should demonstrate the ability to create a coherent argument/thesis.

While these are only a few suggestions, they serve as a starting point from which we can develop a fruitful conversation on the pedagogical value of the ADS.

Strengths and Limitations

Despite the fact that many people have been waiting for my generosity in supplying the community with a set of criteria for judging ADS, we have to admit that there are a number of limitations such a set of standards will bring us. When we define the “line” and create a boundary for students to stay within, we may be stifling their creativity. Most of us would agree creativity is the defining feature of an after dinner speech. Forensics encourages students to think outside of the box and challenge the status quo. As more and more standards and rules are introduced and more guidelines become “unwritten” rules, students may be less likely to reach this goal of the activity. Gaer (2002) argues that our need to simplify events into a formulaic list of requirements may promote energy in the activity by way of competition, but certainly does not nourish creativity and the education of our students.

However, I would argue that by creating the “line” we are also creating the space beyond that line where many of us challenge our students to daringly enter. If we did not have criteria for any event, then there would be no uniqueness to stylistic choices. This space beyond the line is like dark matter: we cannot see it, but we know it exists and it is really freaking cool. This space is where innovation truly happens. Many coaches urge their students to rub up against the boundaries that are there in order to stand out and make an argument about *our* system. It is hard to forget the students who put colorful pages in their black binders to emphasize a point, the student who did not speak throughout his entire piece, or the duo pair that purposefully touched in their conclusion.

At this point, I would like to point out the fact that I am challenging the “unwritten” rules of journal and conference writing. Hopefully, you have noticed the jokes and jabs that I have inserted into this work, ultimately creating an After Dinner Paper about the After Dinner Speech. Even if this paper is never published the fact that I crossed the “line” may challenge the readers and proponents of my paper to do the same in other unique ways.

When we create standards and criteria, we are not so naïve to think that the ideas we put onto paper now will be the end all, be all of changes to this event. Forensics encourages challenge and changes in its very nature. Forensics means to take a close look at something. We frequently find that when we get close, we find that there is something wrong or insufficient. Rules can be an engine for creativity and innovation and if they weren’t in place, we wouldn’t live in the world that we do now. Really beautiful things often obtain that aesthetic by getting a face-lift every ten years.

Conclusion

In our trip down memory lane, I identified the history of After Dinner Speaking, the several areas of controversy that remain in this event, and some ways we can channel the challenges for change in this event. While these changes will take time, it is important to carry on the discussion I have started here amongst students, coaches, directors, and anyone else involved in the forensics community. Feel free to elaborate, shift, shape, and even criticize the pedagogical goals and assumptions, definitions, and criteria I have offered you here. I do not claim to be the final producer of knowledge on this topic, but instead a catalyst for change.

If you somehow are involved with forensics but do not like to communicate or start conversations, then please, when you are judging this event, start the conversation with yourself. A little intrapersonal communication never hurt anyone and could be useful to the ballots of the students you are watching. Making yourself conscious of what you consider the goals of this activity to be will better aid your reason for decision and fight confusion amongst ADS participants. Conversations like this keep this event and the activity as a whole healthy. It's like the old saying goes: a convo a day keeps the 4-25's away. So, in the words of one of Britain's most famous after dinner speakers: May the After Dinner Speech live long and prosper.

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