CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTATION AND DEBATE 18
(1997) 36-47

# To Elaborate or Not -- Thinking About Oral Critiques: A Study of Elm Theory at the 1996 National CEDA Tournament

RUSSELL T. CHURCH and MARK JONES

For many years the practice in judging debates was to provide lengthy written critiques which would be distributed to the debaters at the end of the tournament. In these situations debaters would often be uncertain of the judges' reactions. Judges would rarely provide oral critiques and students would not know the decisions or judges' comments until several hours or sometimes several days later. Many judges now provide oral critiques and immediate disclosure of the decision at the end of the debate.

Those who favor disclosure might argue that immediate feedback is the best way for students to learn. They also argue that there is no way to give an adequate critique without revealing who won or lost the debate. Some students argue it is very frustrating to wait for several hours or even several days to know the results. (Smith, 1990)

Those who prefer non-disclosure argue that students focus on the win or loss rather than the process of argumentation when the decision is revealed immediately after the round. In the intense atmosphere exiting immediately after a debate round, it may be unlikely debaters will think about the reasons for the decision. Sometimes debaters will seek alternative explanations when they lose, such as the "judge is biased" or the "critic is incompetent."

Given the paucity of research available, it would be desirable to discover the impact of oral critiques and revealed decisions upon debaters. Furthermore, empirical research in actual debate tournaments would provide information about how debaters respond to oral critiques.

This study posed the research question: What kinds of critiques, if any, encourage debaters to think about their debating in the most productive way? The focus was upon the effect of revealing decisions on the way debaters *think* about the debate. The study evaluated oral critiques and revealed decisions as components in influencing the debaters' own thinking in terms of debaters' "self-talk" or internal dialogues as the more important messages. The assumption is that certain general characteristics of the judge's post round behavior (e.g., no critique, critiques without decision or critique with decision) might trigger certain kinds of internal dialogues in the debaters. The nature of the resulting internal dialogues for the debaters would help make the debates either more or less valuable for them. First, the study examined the general features of the oral critiques used by most debate judges. In particular, the study examined: (1) the presence or absence of an oral critique; and (2) the disclosure or non-disclosure of the decision to the debaters.

*Russell T. Church is Professor of Speech and Theatre and Director of Forensics at Middle Tennessee State University; Mark Jones is Director of Forensics at California Lutheran University.*



Second, the study used Richard Petty and John Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model to evaluate the debaters' self-talk about the round immediately after the debate. We believed that these internal dialogues might reflect how the debaters thought about the judge and the debate round. In particular, this study sought to determine if debaters thought about debate rounds either "elaborately" or "peripherally." Petty and Cacioppo suggest that people will take one of two routes in their thinking and decision-making. The first route involves careful thinking about relevant issues and arguments contained in the persuasive message. Petty and Cacioppo:

> "By elaboration, we mean the extent to which a person carefully thinks about issue-relevant information. In a persuasion context, elaboration refers to the extent which a person scrutinizes the issue-relevant arguments contained in the persuasive communication. When conditions foster people's motivation and ability to engage in issue-relevant thinking, the 'elaboration likelihood' is said to be high. This means that people are likely to attend to the appeal; attempt to access relevant information from both external and internal sources; scrutinize and make inferences about the message arguments in light of any other pertinent information available; draw conclusions about the merits of the arguments for the recommendation based upon their analyses; and consequently derive an overall evaluation of, or attitude toward, the recommendation. This conceptualization suggests that when the elaboration likelihood is high, there should be evidence for the allocation of considerable cognitive resources to the advocacy" (*Communication*, 1986, p. 7).

Petty and Cacioppo claim that the elaborate route results in attitude change that is "relatively permanent, resistant to counter persuasion, and predictive of behavior" (*Communication*, 1986, p. 29).

The second route is the peripheral route, which offers a quick method to accept or reject a message without any active or elaborate thinking about the subject matter. Petty and Cacioppo explain peripheral decision-making in this way: "The other type of persuasion, however, was that which more likely occurred as a result of some simple cue in the persuasion context (e.g., an attractive source) that induced change without necessitating scrutiny of the central merits of the issue-relevant information presented (peripheral route)" (*Communication*, 1986, p. 3). This route is often marked by "cues" which trigger a programmed response. Petty and Cacioppo have used such cues as pleasant smells, attractiveness of the message source, physiological arousal, prestige suggestion, speech rate, or number of arguments (*Advances*, 1986, p. 256; *Communication*, 1986, p. 35).

Petty and Cacioppo assume that individuals often must choose between elaborate and peripheral routing. They write:

> Of course, people are not motivated nor are they able to scrutinize carefully every message that they receive (cf. McGuire's, 1969, "lazy organism"), and it would not be adaptive for them to do so. As Miller, Maruyamam, Beaber, and Valone (1976) noted, "It may be irrational to scrutinize the plethora of counter attitudinal messages received daily. To the extent that one possesses only a limited amount of information processing time and capacity, such scrutiny would disengage the thought processes from exigencies of daily life" (p. 623). Current research in cognitive and social psychology provides strong support for the view that at time people engage in "controlled," "deep," "systematic," and/or "effortless" analyses of stimuli, and at other times the analyses are better characterized as "automatic," "shallow," "heuristic," and/or "mindless" (for further discussion, see Craik, 1979, Eagly & Chaiken, 1984; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Langer, 1978; and Schneider & Schiffrin, 1977). (*Advances*, 1986. p. 128)

Given that such choices between elaborate and peripheral routing were natural and necessary, this research sought to determine what general characteristics of the judges' critiques might lead debaters to take these routes in thinking about their debating.

A number of critics have questioned the clarity of the definitions of the two routes, the theory's viability and its claims of long lasting attitude change attributed to elaborate routing (Allen and Reynolds, 1993; Hamilton, Hunter, and Boster, 1993; Mongeau and Stiff; 1993, O'Keefe, 1990). Critics of ELM theory have argued that it is difficult to operationalize the kinds of arguments which will trigger elaboration and that the claims of a persistent effect cannot be linked to a particular kind of argument in the messages. O'Keefe (1990) has argued that argument quality is assumed when the argument has a persistent effect consistent with ELM theory. Such an approach would make it impossible to ever falsify the theory (Allen and Reynolds; Mongeau and Stiff, 1993).

This study sought to avoid the problems of ELM theory. First, this theory sought a clear conceptual basis was established for the two routes. These routes are defined by two factors: (1) the debaters' commitment or lack of commitment to rational deliberation and (2) the debaters' willingness or lack of willingness to expend cognitive resources on the process. The elaborate route was operationalized by looking at the debaters' willingness to commit to statements that required a significant critical effort. In particular, debaters were asked to make evaluations of the judges in their debate rounds that would require thinking about observed and





inferred characteristics of the judges (e.g., note taking or "flowing," conscientious decision making, objectivity and fairness, knowledge of the topic area). In addition, debaters were questioned about their perceived need for more thinking time about the debate round. We believed the expressed need for more time would reflect a clear sign of the willingness to expend significant cognitive resources.

The peripheral route was based upon the presence or absence of cues suggestive of illogical thinking and rapid, uncommitted decision-making. Robert Cialdini's (1988) study of social influence identified six kinds of these cues: (1) reciprocation (e.g., "You owe me."); (2)consistency (e.g., "We've always done it that way."); (3) social proof (e.g., "Everybody's doing it."); (4)liking (e.g.,"Love me, love my ideas."); (5) authority (e.g., "Just because I say so."); (6)scarcity (e.g.,"Quick, before they're all gone."). This study sought to use Cialdini's cues as models for the kinds of cues that debaters might use to think peripherally. In addition, when debaters expressed little or no need for more time to think about the debate, this was viewed as a probable sign of peripheral thinking.

Source credibility was one of the controversial cues associated with the peripheral route. Several critics have argued that source credibility could be a rational basis and therefore should not be automatically included as a sign of peripheral thinking (Allen and Reynolds, 1993; Hamilton, Hunter and Boster, 1993). We agreed that there could be both rational thinking and irrational thinking about sources. This study specified two kinds of statements about the sources (i.e., judges) under scrutiny in this study. The rational or elaborate processing about judges would be those that required the debaters to make observations and reasoned inferences about the judges (e.g., note taking or "flowing," conscientious decision making, objectivity and fairness, knowledge of the topic area). Commitment to these kinds of judgements would be elaborate. On the other hand, statements about judges based on reputations (i.e., being "widely known") as "excellent" or "incompetent" was viewed as peripheral because this was a "quick" way to accept or reject a judge without significant thinking.

Second, this study avoided the problem of a non-falsifiable result by *not* specifying the result of persistent or non-persistent effect as part of the operational definitions; this study did not seek to investigate the persistence of attitude change. Instead, this study sought to discover the likelihood of elaboration in the period immediately after the debates.

Third, this study did not seek to identify specific ideas in the messages (i.e., the judges' oral critiques), but alternatively sought to look directly at general message characteristics (e.g., critique or no critique, decision disclosed or not disclosed) and directly at the attitudes reflective of the self-talk or internal dialogue of the debaters. Although the persistence of attitude change might be a sought-after effect, we believed that even short-lived elaboration would also be a desirable reaction to a debate and to the evaluation process by the judge.

## METHODS

This study was administered at the National Championship Tournament of the Cross Examination Debate Association held on the campus of California State University at Long Beach during the spring semester of 1996. The National Championship Tournament provided an environment where there would be a high probability that oral critiques would be given, that decisions would be announced, and that winning and losing a debate round would be viewed as a significant event. A survey packet was distributed with the fourth round ballots to all 97 judges. Judges and debaters were asked to complete different questionnaires at the completion of the round and after any oral critique that might be given.

It was assumed that judges and debaters in most rounds at this tournament would expect to have oral critiques and revealed decisions at the end of the debate rounds. Such expectations would create a climate where the norm of giving oral critiques and revealing decisions would probably influence the likely choice of how debaters would think about the round. If a judge fulfilled expectations, debaters would be more likely to take the elaborate route in thinking about the round. However, if a judge deviated from the expected norm, debaters would be more likely to take the peripheral route. In such cases, we believed debaters would not be motivated to invest the resources required for elaborate thinking and would possibly search for cues to dismiss the round from their thinking.

We also believed that the announcement of a winner and a loser would also influence debater choices of routes in thinking about debate rounds. Given the perceived importance of winning rounds, we reasoned that winners would be more likely to think elaborately about the debate rounds than losers.

The judges' surveys consisted of 15 items. Questions 1-3 asked if an oral critique was given, if a winner was announced and who won the round (affirmative/negative)? Question 4 asked about giving oral critiques to determine the customary and usual practices of the judges. Questions 5-7 attempted to tap judges' attitudes toward giving oral critiques, employing a Likert type scale with anchors of (1) strongly agree and (7) strongly disagree. These questions dealt with comfort in giving oral critiques, judges' perceptions of debaters' expectations and comparative educational value of oral as opposed to written critiques.

Questions 8-15 attempted to assess judges' perceptions about debaters' behavior concerning their oral critiques, if given. These questions also used the Likert scaling with the same anchors of strongly agree and disagree. Judges were asked about whether or not debaters asked questions, argued, and "seemed to appreciate" the critique. Judges were also asked about any "regret" in giving the oral critique and the need for more time before the critique.





The debater survey consisted of 19 items. Questions 1-3 asked if an oral critique and decision were given and who won the debate (our team/our opponents/unknown). Questions 4-6 attempted to tap debater attitudes toward critiques using the Likert type scaling with the same anchors of strongly agree or disagree. Questions 7-17 attempted to assess debater attitudes toward the judge, again using the Likert scaling and anchors of strongly agree and strongly disagree.

Questions 7-17 also tried to tap into the debaters' peripheral or elaborate processing. These statements were modeled on the kinds of cues identified by Cialdini that might provide evidence of debaters' propensity to think peripherally about the round. For example, a reciprocation cue was worded: "This judge has a close relationship with the coach of the opposing team." Two consistency cues were worded as: "This judge usually votes affirmative (or negative)." Two social proof cues were included: "This judge is widely known to be incompetent" and "This critic is widely known to be an excellent judge."

Other statements attempted to measure the likelihood of debaters to think more elaborately about the round. For example, debaters were asked to comment on the judge's flowing: "This judge took a detailed flow during the round." The debaters also were asked to make evaluations of the judge that required elaborate as opposed to central processing: "This judge seemed to be fair and objective" and "This judge seemed to be a conscientious decision maker" and "This judge seemed to be knowledgeable about the topic." However, we believed question 17 provided the best index to measuring elaborate processing by tapping the debaters' willingness to commit to taking time to think about the rounds: "I need to think about this round before I can reach any conclusions."

TABLE 1
Mean of Each Processing Item by Give Oral Critique ($t$ Values)

| Item | Give Oral | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes | No | $t$ | $P$ |
| conscientious | 6.14 | 4.71 | 4.94 | .0001 |
| votes aff | 3.81 | 4.10 | 1.30 | .19 |
| excellent | 4.74 | 3.89 | 2.64 | .008 |
| incompetent | 2.73 | 3.95 | 3.16 | .002 |
| flowed | 6.05 | 4.69 | 4.62 | .0001 |
| close | 3.23 | 3.23 | .05 | .96 |
| fair/obj | 6.11 | 4.82 | 4.67 | .0001 |
| opponent | 3.80 | 3.90 | .34 | .73 |
| knowledgeable | 5.78 | 4.85 | 3.01 | .003 |
| votes neg | 3.86 | 4.00 | .65 | .51 |
| more time | 3.20 | 3.86 | 1.61 | .10 |

## RESULTS

### Expectations of Oral Critiques

Judges returned 88 out of 97 surveys and debaters returned 266 out of 388 surveys for respective return rates of 91% and 69%. There was a clear "climate of expectations" favoring oral critiques of debates. Judges expressed very strong agreement ($M$=6.209, $SD$=.896) that debaters "usually expect oral critiques from most judges." Debaters also expressed very strong agreement ($M$=6.577, $SD$=.998) that judges "should usually give oral critiques immediately after the debate." Debaters were less confident about actual judge behavior, but nevertheless agreed ($M$=5.377, $SD$=1.022) that "most judges will usually give an oral critique." Both judges and debaters also believed that "oral critiques are more educational than written critiques." However, judges ($M$=5.547, $SD$=1.628) were less certain than debaters ($M$=6.321, $SD$=1.212) of the comparative value. Actual behavior in the fourth round of the National CEDA Tournament reflected the expectations of judges and debaters. Judges announced decisions in 86% of the rounds and in 92% of the rounds judges gave oral critiques.





TABLE 2
Mean of Each Processing Item by Announce ($t$ Values)

| Item | Announce | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes | No | $t$ | $P$ |
| conscientious | 6.14 | 5.13 | 4.42 | .0001 |
| votes aff | 3.79 | 4.06 | 1.44 | .14 |
| excellent | 4.78 | 4.03 | 2.98 | .003 |
| incompetent | 2.68 | 3.75 | 3.50 | .001 |
| flowed | 6.04 | 5.31 | 3.07 | .002 |
| close | 3.27 | 3.00 | .98 | .32 |
| fair/obj | 6.12 | 5.34 | 3.50 | .001 |
| opponent | 3.82 | 3.71 | .44 | .65 |
| knowledgeable | 5.75 | 5.44 | 1.25 | .21 |
| votes neg | 3.85 | 3.93 | .39 | .69 |
| more time | 3.07 | 4.13 | 3.30 | .001 |

### Critiques, Decisions and Elaborate and Peripheral Thinking

Some results seemed to confirm that when judges gave oral critiques and announced decisions, debaters tended to think more elaborately than peripherally. $T$-tests revealed highly significant differences between judges who gave oral critiques and judges who did not. Debaters viewed judges who gave oral comments much more favorably than those who did not. Debaters viewed judges who did give oral critiques as more likely to be a "conscientious decision maker" ($t$=4.94, $p$<.000), more likely to have taken "a detailed flow" ($t$=4.62, $p$<.000), more likely to be "fair and objective" ($t$=4.67, $p$<.000) and more likely to be "knowledgeable about the topic" ($t$=3.016, $p$<.01). These kinds of favorable evaluations seemed to reflect tendencies toward elaborate processing about the debate. On the other hand, debaters also viewed these judges in terms of peripheral cues. Judges who gave critiques were perceived as much more likely to be "widely known" as "excellent" ($t$=2.98,$p$<.01) and much less likely to be "widely known" as "incompetent" ($t$=-3.164,$p$<.01).

T-tests also revealed highly significant results on judges who announced decisions as opposed to those who did not. Debaters viewed judges who announced winners much more favorably than those judges who did not disclose. The judges who revealed their decisions were much more likely to be seen as "conscientious" ($t$=4.42, $p$<.000), as having "flowed" more detail

($t$=3.74, $p$<.01) and as "fair and objective" ($t$=3.50, $p$<.000). These favorable evaluations also seemed to reflect a tendency toward elaborate thinking. However, other results indicated that debaters did think peripherally about judges who announced decisions. Such judges were more likely to be rated as "widely known as excellent ($t$=2.98, $p$<.01) and much less likely to be rated as "widely known as incompetent" ($t$=-3.50, $p$<.000).

As explained above, we believed that the willingness to commit to take time was likely to be a strong indicator of elaborate thinking. There was no significant finding on the $t$-test between this item and the use of oral critiques. However, there was a significant result for the condition of announcement versus no announcement. When judges announced decisions, debaters were much less likely to express the need for more time to think about the round ($t$=-3.30, $p$<.01).

A series of 2 (critique/no critique) X 2 (disclosure/no disclosure) ANOVAS on each of the processing items revealed no significant interaction effects. However, examination of the means indicated that judges who critiqued and disclosed winners were rated highest and judges who gave no oral critiques and no disclosures were rated lowest.

TABLE 3
Mean Responses of Debate Winners by Each Processing Item ($f$ values)

| | Debate Winners | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Item | Us | Them | Neither | $f$ | $P$ |
| conscientious | 6.55 | 5.70 | 5.02 | 28.74 | .0001* |
| votes aff | 3.82 | 3.76 | 4.16 | 2.17 | .11 |
| excellent | 5.01 | 4.54 | 3.88 | 10.51 | .0001* |
| incompetent | 2.35 | 3.06 | 3.85 | 13.79 | .0001* |
| flowed | 6.18 | 5.97 | 5.02 | 11.37 | .0001** |
| close | 3.08 | 3.46 | 3.18 | 1.71 | .18 |
| fair/obj | 6.52 | 5.70 | 5.12 | 25.69 | .0001* |
| opponent | 3.55 | 4.09 | 3.82 | 4.89 | .01*** |
| knowledgeable | 5.83 | 5.73 | 5.23 | 2.76 | .06 |
| votes neg | 3.80 | 3.91 | 4.03 | .87 | .42 |
| more time | 2.95 | 3.26 | 4.12 | 6.32 | .002** |

*All groups are significantly different.
**Neither and them and neither and us are significantly different.
***Them and us are significantly different.





**Winners and Losers**

A series of One-Way ANOVAS on each of the processing items detected significant differences among debaters who won, debaters who lost and debaters who received no disclosure. Winners were more likely to think elaborately in terms of several specific issues. Winners were significantly more likely to have rated judges ($m$=6.55) as conscientious ($f$=28.74, $p$<.000) and more likely to have viewed those judges as flowing in more detail ($f$=11.37, $p$<.000) and more likely to have viewed those judges as fair and objective ($f$=24.69, $p$<.000) than either losing debaters ($m$=5.70) or those debaters in rounds with no disclosure ($m$=5.02). These winning debaters also showed some rejection of peripheral thinking on some items. These debaters rated their judges as less likely to vote for teams like their opponents ($f$=4.89, $p$<.01) and less likely to be widely known as incompetent ($f$=13.79, $p$<.000). However, the winning debaters did evidence some peripheral thinking in rating their judges as more likely to be widely known as excellent ($f$=10.51, $p$<.000).

Winners, losers and those debaters who had no disclosure also showed differences in terms of an expressed need for more time to think about the debate. As indicated above, we believed the expression of the need for more time was an indicator of the willingness to commit to elaborate processing. Debaters in non-disclosure rounds were significantly more likely to express the need for more time than were losers ($f$=3.162, $p$<.05)and winners ($f$=6.32). There was no significant difference between winners and losers, though winners needed less time to think about the round than did losers.

## DISCUSSION

This study revealed that debaters often react to an oral critique with a mixture of elaborate and peripheral thinking. This is a finding that sheds light on a significant criticism of ELM theory. Stiff, for example, argues that it is possible for a person to be influenced by both the content of the argument and the characteristics of the communicator at the same time. This supposition implied that Petty and Cacioppo's routings seem to present a forced choice and that there needs to be a more flexible concept of the way listeners's think about debates. Petty and Cacioppo respond that ELM theory does not exclude the possibility of simultaneous elaborate and peripheral processing, but claim there was no evidence indicating it happens. This study would lend support both to Stiff's critique and would provide the evidence that Petty and Cacioppo say does not exist.

However, this study may not have tested elaborate and peripheral thinking for two reasons. One, this study did not examine specific ideas in the judges's critiques. ELM theory attempts to posit a relationship between message content and listener response. Petty and

Cacioppo suggest that a focus on rational message content promotes rational thinking -- in other words, elaborate thinking. We are not sure that a field study dealing with a large number of judges and debaters would be able to do this.

Second, there was no way to discover if debaters were actually thinking about the content of the critique or the characteristics of the communicator. As indicated above, only two items dealt with the content of the critique (i.e., oral critique or no oral critique, decision revealed or no decision revealed). Moreover, characteristics of the communicators, such as source credibility, could be a relevant and rational way to process a message. We believed that the credibility of the judge could be an indicator of either elaborate or peripheral thinking. If the debater focused upon the behavior of the judge during the round (e.g., flowing in detail), this might be an indicator of elaborate processing on the part of the debater. On the other hand, if the debater focused on the prior reputation of the judge (e.g., "widely known as . . . "), then this might be an indicator of peripheral thinking. Our reason for drawing this distinction between these two kinds of source credibility was that the in-round behavior seemed to be more related to the basis of a good critique than the out of round perception.

Despite these problems, we believe the study provided at least one index to elaborate thinking and three indices of peripheral thinking. The index to elaborate thinking was the expressed need or willingness of debaters to commit to more time to think about a round to debate. As noted above, when judges did not announce decisions, debaters were much more likely to commit to more time to think about the rounds. If this is an indicator of elaborate thinking, this might be the basis for an argument for not announcing decisions in rounds.

The results of this study suggest that the three major influences were the variables of oral critique or no oral critique, announced or unannounced decision and whether or not the debaters won or lost. These results were not surprising given the climate of expectations and the emphasis upon competition at the National CEDA Tournament.

While we believe this study produced much useful data, we are not fully convinced it provided the best test of ELM theory. Future studies might look at the specific ideas in the oral critiques of judges and test connections to debaters' elaborate or peripheral routing. We also believe that other theoretical perspectives might be productively employed in studying debaters reactions to oral critiques. For example, social judgment theory might be used to examine how judges might make critiques which avoid debaters' latitudes of rejection.

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