



Speaking at Length

John Cairns, Jr.

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Speaking at length

He cannot speak well that cannot hold his tongue.

Thomas Fuller, 1732, *Gnomologia*

During the last several years, I have become increasingly reluctant to speak at symposia with multiple speakers. Accepting an invitation to present makes me party to an informal contract to supply the symposium sponsor with a talk of a specified length to be delivered at a particular time. In turn, the sponsoring organization is obligated to allow the speaker to give the audience his or her views. It is up to the symposium moderator, by keeping the program on schedule, to see that these obligations are met. Yet few meetings follow their schedules.

At the meeting that prompted me to write this article, the invitation clearly stated that each of four speakers would have 30 minutes for presentation and 5–10 minutes for questions. One and a half hours after the first speaker started, he was still droning. By the time he finished, the fourth speaker should have been at the podium. When I (the third speaker) finally came to the podium, the fourth speaker and I had approximately the time allotted to a single speaker to divide between us. I offered not to give my talk, so the last speaker could make his presentation as planned. Alternatively, I could have given my full talk and left the other speaker no time whatsoever, thereby forcing him to speak to an emptying room. Instead we decided to shorten drastically both our talks and allow the meeting to finish on schedule. Neither one of us gave our best presentation; slides had to be skipped, continuity was destroyed, and crucial points may have been omitted.

The need to shorten talks to com-

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pensate for long discourses of earlier speakers has happened to me frequently, and it appears to be becoming increasingly common. Speakers may be so disorganized or enthralled with their own words that they lose track of time. Or they may be faculty members who regularly give 50-minute lectures and thus are conditioned to a time period longer than that allotted. Because there are simple and inexpensive means to time a talk, I conclude that many speakers who run on too long are contemptuous of the other speakers.

What about the professional integrity of moderators? Surely the moderators are capable of reading a clock and can remember the contents of the speaker invitations. Do the moderators really believe that extra time taken by early speakers will somehow be made up by the others? Are the moderators more fearful of interrupting the first speaker than of antagonizing those later in the program?

I am also puzzled by the audience tolerance. Presumably, attendees have allotted only a certain amount of time for the meeting. Frequent glances at watches suggest the listeners know speakers are overriding the schedule, but the audience does nothing. Perhaps as a society, we (both speakers and listeners) are reluctant to treat rudeness by displaying that behavior ourselves. Maybe meetings should be replaced with videotapes of speakers. There are buttons on the VCR to

silence someone whose time is up. Unfortunately, comparable buttons are not available for audiences of live speakers to use.

Yet there are simple strategies that can keep speakers on schedule. I carry a small digital count-down device that I activate as soon as I set foot on the podium. I place it under the microphone so both the audience and I can hear the alarm bell if the allotted time expires.

I observed an elaborate audience-saver while attending a meeting of electrical engineers. On the podium there were three green lights, three yellow lights, and three red lights. As I neared the end of my allotted time, the green lights began to disappear. I finished my talk when the first yellow light went out. But I was later told that if I had talked until the third red light dimmed, two American flags would have popped out of the podium and a tape of the "Star Spangled Banner" would have played.

I am developing a similar audience-saver schematic (available on request, no patent pending). I hope a company somewhere will market a device that entertains audiences and gives them an opportunity to stand and stretch cramped muscles whenever a speaker goes into overtime.

In addition to technological solutions, behavior changes are required. Until all speakers acquire some semblance of courtesy and moderators attain sufficient courage to restrain speakers who intrude on the time of others, rudeness and weakness will determine what scientific information is conveyed to the audience.

As W. S. Gilbert would write into *The Mikado* if he were to attend a scientific meeting today:

As some day it may happen that a victim must be found,
I've got a little list, I've got a little list
Of society offenders who might be underground,

by John Cairns Jr.

And who never would be missed,
 who never would be missed!
 There's the academic speaker with
 his¹ second carousel,
 Whose bored and tired audience
 would rather be in hell,
 Freely using time of others who have
 traveled from afar,
 To consider him a professional is
 laughable, bizarre!
 And session moderators, who don't
 on allotted time insist—
 They'd none of them be missed—
 they'd none of them be missed! □

¹I have yet to encounter a flagrantly rude female speaker. Doubtless the opportunity will arise as equality is achieved in academe.

John Cairns Jr., is a university distinguished professor, Department of Biology, and director of the University Center for Environmental and Hazardous Materials Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA 24061. © 1989 American Institute of Biological Sciences.

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