How to present your work at conferences

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A lesson as an example...
Motivating Question: How can you most effectively use 10-15 minutes to present your work?

• Importance: Talks are given disproportionate weight by professions
• These are extreme constraints:
  – Not enough time to really describe your work
  – Most of the audience will not have read it
  – Most conferences stink, most papers stink, most panels stink, and most discussant stink (but you can see your friends)
  – The audience is sparse, bored, and not there for you
• Your goal: Give an excellent talk
  – Communicate most important points about your work
  – Tease the larger project
  – Be an effective presenter
If you can only remember one thing today:
The more you try to do, the less you will do well

• Rule #1: 7 slides, including the title.
  – You will ignore my advice. I’m factoring that it.

• Rule #2: Do not start with your paper and edit it down
  – Instead, identify the one thing you want the audience to remember, and build the rest of the talk around that point
  – Practical advice: Sketch out slides on paper. Storyboard it.

• Rule #3: Think like an audience member
  – “I wonder when the bar opens?” “Why am I here?”
  – Write a talk that makes people know the payoff is coming, tells them why they should care, and deliver it
    • Remember the warning about length? You have to have time to deliver
Which content? The important stuff (Duh!)

• What is important will be context specific
  – Your discipline and area of research will guide what is necessary
  – This is not the same as what is important when you submit a paper for review
• Example: American Politics, my own work
  – Question, link to literature, research design/data, results
  – Is partisan bias real? Survey data show polarization, conduct experiment where pay people for correct responses, find that it substantially reduces polarization, suggests polarization is affective rather than sincere
• Reminder: You can tease things you don’t do in the talk
How can you become comfortable presenting?

• Slides
  – Good slides are like an outline. They provide structure for you, and they guide the listener
  – Warning: Too many slides, or slides disconnected from narrative of talk, do not serve this purpose

• How do I practice presenting?
  – At the extreme, start with every word written, practice, winnow to outline, retain outline as backup
    • Please don’t read your talk if you can avoid it
  – Record yourself giving the talk. Repeat with friends/etc.
  – Practice dealing with time constraints

• But I’m afraid!
  – Answer: We evolved in a world of extreme threats, with wolves/etc.
  – Implication: We all are, it never goes away, and you just get used to it
  – The more simple your talk, the easier it is to give well
  – Remember to eat/drink, sleep, and breath
What about the discussant and audience?

- **Discussants/Chairs:**
  - Send them the paper with ample time, slides too.
    - Don’t assume they will download from the conference website
  - Thank them, don’t get into arguments
  - Ask for clarification about time to present. Follow the rules

- **Audience:**
  - Fast food rule of talking to toddlers: Repeat the question, then answer.
    - You get points for showing you understood
  - Offer to send them the paper if the answer is addressed in it
  - Be brief. This isn’t a filibuster.
  - You can always duck by saying “I appreciate the feedback, I’d like to hear what other people have to say and then we can talk after the session.”
  - Don’t reflect hostility. Be gracious.
  - 1 out of every 20 comments is useful, rarely more
Concluding: Let people know you are done, and remind them what they have learned

• A talk is a difficult task, but one you can master
• Say less to communicate more
• Build your talk around the core things you want to share
• Practice and good design improve talks
• Be gracious in dealing with discussants and the audience
• This is slide #7 (including the title). Goodbye.