

## Pointed Political Debate, Minus All the Shouting

By ELIZABETH JENSEN

POLARIZING political talk, overwrought in the extreme, is making for big headlines these days, so it is somewhat counterintuitive (or maybe just smart counterprogramming) that a program based on civilized, formal debate has chosen this moment to try to raise its profile.

The producers of the program of debates, begun three years ago and bearing the ungainly name of Intelligence Squared U.S., are teaming with a national magazine and a cable television network to expand their audience.

A new branding campaign, with ads of bright red and blue on a black background, carries the simple tag line “Think twice.” The ads have been appearing in Newsweek, and online in a small campaign that began last week on Observer.com, NYTimes.com and on some social media networks. A revamped Web site, [intelligencesquaredus.org](http://intelligencesquaredus.org), made its debut on Thursday.

“We wanted our brand to stand for: you can talk about a heated topic and look at it from two perspectives, instead of just looking at it with blinders on,” said Dana Wolfe, the executive producer of the debates.



IQ2US, as it sometimes calls itself, is a nonprofit initiative of the Rosenkranz Foundation, and its debates have been carried on NPR since they began in 2006. Working with its two new media partners, Newsweek magazine and Bloomberg Television, it will be greatly expanding exposure for the debates.

The ads were created by the Treehouse Collective, an agency made up of moonlighting agency executives. “We needed to make it a little more cosmopolitan and appeal to a slightly younger crowd,” so the black was added to the red, white and blue, said the founder of Treehouse, who asked to remain anonymous so as not to jeopardize his full-time job. Treehouse, he said, also came up with the tag line “so people understand what it is they do.”

As in Britain, where the program originated, the centerpiece of Intelligence Squared U.S. is live “Oxford style” debates. They are to be held this year at the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts at New York University, on topics like the United States policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan and whether President Obama’s economic policies are working.

The premise, said Robert Rosenkranz, the foundation's founder, is to present an evening where the audience "is not exposed to pure punditry and sound bites, where they can hear the flesh of an argument in an interesting venue with a good moderator and make their own decisions."

The debates, five each in the fall and spring, pit teams held to strict rules of engagement for nearly two hours. John Donvan of ABC News moderates, and the audience, which can ask questions, votes before and after. But it is the side which changes the most opinions that wins, not the one with the most votes. The audiences appear open to persuasion: in March 2007, when the premise was "Global warming is not a crisis," 30 percent of the audience agreed going in and 46 percent agreed after it was over.

Debaters last season included Karl Rove, former adviser to President George W. Bush; the historian Niall Ferguson; and the painter Chuck Close. Former Vice President Dick Cheney was in the audience at the May 12 discussion of diplomacy with Iran, where his daughter Liz was a panelist.

For its first three years, the series grew on its own, starting out in a 300-seat auditorium; it moved to a 450-seat space last autumn. Ms. Wolfe said that with the move on Monday to the much larger site at N.Y.U., "we felt now was the right time to raise our profile." Seats are \$45 and include a cocktail reception.

Among this autumn's topics: "Buy American/Hire American policies will fail," and "Good riddance to mainstream media."

The taped versions distributed by NPR were carried by 185 stations last spring, and the podcasts "do exceptionally well, too," said Eric Nuzum, NPR director of programming and acquisitions.

"When you first hear it, it sounds very formal; then as you listen to it, it's actually quite interesting," Mr. Nuzum said. "With all the opinion and debate in America today, having a space like that is actually precious and nice, where ideas can really be shared and people sit and listen."

Now the distribution is about to get much wider. Newsweek plans to devote a two-page editorial spread to each debate, and is running ads to encourage attendance and promote its involvement. Newsweek editors may participate as debaters, said Angela Leaney, Newsweek's chief marketing officer.

"It's all about better solutions that can come to problems and knotty issues if you debate them out," she said. "We actually think it's an important mission." Ms. Leaney said that Newsweek and the series reach similar audiences and focus on similar issues. She declined to discuss the business arrangement.

Bloomberg, which is revamping its evening programming, said it was not paying to use the debates but would cover the costs to produce hourlong edited versions of each one.

David Rhodes, who oversees Bloomberg Television U.S., said that in the week of each debate, the edited version would be broadcast on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at 9 p.m. Eastern, between rebroadcasts of “Charlie Rose,” the PBS talk program to which the network recently acquired rights.

“We thought it was the kind of smart and insightful programming that we want to have on here,” Mr. Rhodes said, adding that his network regularly covered issues like the debate over “Buy American” policies.

Peter Cook, who will introduce the edited versions of the debates for Bloomberg, said, “It was Edward R. Murrow who said the box can shed light as well as heat, and I still firmly believe that.”