Aaron Swartz

POWERPOINT REMIX[1]

In my own speeches I try to avoid the boring PowerPoints with the bullets. I either put up pictures of really hot actors (by which I mean, hot-looking: Jennifer Aniston, Brad Pitt, etc.), or puppies, or jokes, and I think I have the whole bullet thing isolated to one slide with three bullet points. Of course, when I'm so busy telling jokes and showing pictures of hot actors it's hard to find time to get to the bullets.

In 2003 Edward R. Tufte, famous for his brilliant and beautiful books on the visual display of information, decided he had had just about enough PowerPoint for a lifetime, and launched a campaign to rid the world of this scourge. "Alas," Tufte wrote, "slideware often reduces the analytical quality of presentations. In particular, the popular PowerPoint templates (ready-made designs) usually weaken verbal and spatial reasoning, and almost always corrupt statistical analysis." His excellent essay, "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint," makes the case in just 28 concise pages.

Aaron has a summary. – Ed

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1. Aaron Swartz, "PowerPoint Remix," http://www.aaronsw.com, May 23, 2003.
    See http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/000931.

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Edward R. Tufte's "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint"[2]
Presented in the Form of a PowerPoint Presentation

Overview

- PowerPoint is standard…
- …but bad.
- Why?

Cognitive Style

- Is presenter-oriented
- Audience and content suffer
    - Low resolution
    - Deeply hierarchical
    - Preoccupied with form

Low Resolution

- Nearly content-free
- Only slightly better than 1982 Pravda propaganda

Dilutes Thought

- Bullets make us stupid
    - Too generic
    - Omit relationships
    - Omit assumptions
    - Omit subjects, verbs

[Interlude: analysis of Columbia disaster PowerPoint][3]

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2. See http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/books_pp.
3. See http://www.edwardtufte.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg?msg_id=0000Rs&topic_id=
   1&topic=Ask%20E%2eT%2e.

Deeply Hierarchical

- Often six levels deep
- Feynman only needed 2

Why?

- Based on software corporation itself
    - Big bureaucracy
    - Programming computers
        - Deeply hierarchical
    - Marketing
        - Misdirecting
        - Sloganeering
        - Exaggerating

Why? (cont'd)

- What could be worse?
    - Stalin?
- Pushy
    - Bullets are to be followed
- Based on great leader on pedestal

What else?

- Better: good teaching
    - Explanation, reasoning, etc.
    - Credible authority

PowerPoint in schools

- Disturbing!
- Must find replacement
    - Good: teaching kids to smoke
    - Better: close school, go to Exploratorium
    - Best: write illustrated essay

[Interlude: performance of the Gettysburg PowerPoint][4]

[Interlude: what if we presented cancer survival rates in PowerPoint?]

Stylesheets

- Corporate logowear
    - Gives name of corporate dept.
    - Not actual people (too embarrassed? – *A.S.*)
- Emulates reading primers for 6-year-olds
- Poor typography is key
- Break things up to prevent comparisons
- Useless tables

World Domination

- Printed PowerPoints: 50 slides = 1 page of Physician's Desk Reference
- Online PowerPoints: 20% of density of popular websites
- Worse signal-to-noise ratio known

Sequentially

- Bullet-point striptease
- Dissolves like random jump-cuts
- Handouts would let audience control order and pace

What to do?

- Immediate worldwide product recall
- It's like an out-of-control prescription drug

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4. See http://www.norvig.com/Gettysburg.

Improving Presentations

- Get better content
- Provide handouts
- Don't have pointless ones

Final Thoughts – *A.S.*

- Good essay
- Buy lots of copies
- Hand out to annoying PowerPoint presenters