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PowerPoint: Killer App?

By Ruth Marcus

Tuesday, August 30, 2005; A17

Did PowerPoint make the space shuttle crash? Could it doom another mission? Preposterous as this may sound, the ubiquitous Microsoft "presentation software" has twice been singled out for special criticism by task forces reviewing the space shuttle disaster.

Perhaps I've sat through too many PowerPoint presentations lately, but I think the trouble with these critics is that they don't go far enough: The software may be as much of a mind-numbing menace to those of us who intend to remain earthbound as it is to astronauts.

PowerPoint's failings have been outlined most vividly by Yale political scientist Edward Tufte, a specialist in the visual display of information. In a 2003 *Wired* magazine article headlined "PowerPoint Is Evil" and a less dramatically titled pamphlet, "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint," Tufte argued that the program encourages "faux-analytical" thinking that favors the slickly produced "sales pitch" over the sober exchange of information.

Exhibit A in Tufte's analysis is a PowerPoint slide presented to NASA senior managers in January 2003, while the space shuttle Columbia was in the air and the agency was weighing the risk posed by tile damage on the shuttle wings. Key information was so buried and condensed in the rigid PowerPoint format as to be useless.

"It is easy to understand how a senior manager might read this PowerPoint slide and not realize that it addresses a life-threatening situation," the Columbia Accident Investigation Board concluded, citing Tufte's work. The board devoted a full page of its 2003 report to the issue, criticizing a space agency culture in which, it said, "the endemic use of PowerPoint" substituted for rigorous technical analysis.

But NASA -- like the rest of corporate and bureaucratic America -- seems powerless to resist PowerPoint. Just this month a minority report by the latest shuttle safety task force echoed the earlier concerns: Often, the group said, when it asked for data it ended up with PowerPoints -- without supporting documentation.

These critiques are, pardon the phrase, on point, but I suspect that the insidious influence of PowerPoint goes beyond the way it frustrates scientific analysis. The deeper problem with the PowerPointing of America -- the PowerPointing of the planet, actually -- is that the program tends to flatten the most complex, subtle, even beautiful, ideas into tedious, bullet-pointed bureaucratese.

I experienced a particularly dreary example of this under a starry Hawaiian sky this year, listening to a talk on astronomy. It was the perfect moment for magical images of distant stars and newly discovered planets. Yet, instead of using technology to transport, the lecturer plodded point-by-point through cookie-cutter slides.

The soul-sapping essence of PowerPoint was captured perfectly in a spoof of the Gettysburg Address by computer whiz Peter Norvig of Google. It featured Abe Lincoln fumbling with his computer ("Just a second while I get this connection to work. Do I press this button here? Function-F7?") and collapsing his speech into six slides, complete with a bar chart depicting four score and seven years.

For example, Slide 4:

"Review of Key Objectives & Critical Success Factors

- What makes nation unique
 - Conceived in liberty
 - Men are equal
- Shared vision
 - New birth of freedom
 - Gov't of/by/for the people."

If NASA managers didn't recognize the safety problem, perhaps it's because they were dazed from having to endure too many presentations like this -- the inevitable computer balkiness, the robotic recitation of bullet points, the truncated language of a marketing pitch. Hence the New Yorker cartoon in which the devil, seated at his desk in Hell, interviews a potential assistant: "I need someone well versed in the art of torture - do you know PowerPoint?"

Like all forms of torture, though, PowerPoint degrades its practitioners as well as its victims. Yes, boring slides were plentiful in the pre-PowerPoint era -- remember the overhead projector? Yes, it can help the intellectually inept organize their thoughts. But the seductive availability of PowerPoint and the built-in drive to reduce all subjects to a series of short-handed bullet points eliminates nuances and enables, even encourages, the absence of serious thinking. Really, why think at all when the auto-content wizard can do it for you?

The most disturbing development in the world of PowerPoint is its migration to the schools -- like sex and drugs, at earlier and earlier ages. Now we have second-graders being tutored in PowerPoint. No matter that students who compose at the keyboard already spend more energy perfecting their fonts than polishing their sentences -- PowerPoint dispenses with the need to write any sentences at all. Perhaps the politicians who are so worked up about the ill effects of violent video games should turn their attention to PowerPoint instead.

In the meantime, Tufte, who's now doing consulting work for NASA, has a modest proposal for its new administrator: Ban the use of PowerPoint. Sounds good to me. After all, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to see the perils of PowerPoint.

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