

Tufte, PowerPoint and Web Content

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When Edward Tufte speaks, I listen. I just got through reading [PowerPoint is Evil](#) and he makes some very solid points about a topic that has bothered me for quite awhile.

Tufte says:

PowerPoint is a competent slide manager and projector. But rather than supplementing a presentation, it has become a substitute for it. Such misuse ignores the most important rule of speaking: Respect your audience.

That's what it boils down too isn't it? Knowing you audience and giving them what they want and need. With Web content we often are told that less is more and that bulleted lists and short paragraphs are the key to successful Web content. These things are true, as long as you don't substitute presentation for good content. Some things warrant a bulleted list. Some do not. Some things need longer explanations. Some do not.

Good content is as long or short as it needs to be.

Writing for the Web is hard. It takes lots of thought and effort to get your message across while still keeping it brief. A general guideline when editing for the Web is to take your draft and cut it in half. This works well only if you know which half to cut. It's a good guideline, but more important than the guideline is understanding what your readers want and giving them that.

I don't see any danger of "PowerPointing" the Web, but it's something to be aware of as more and more content gets moved online.

Filed under [Web General](#)

Comments

Personally, I find Tufte's continual excoriation of PowerPoint tiresome and dogmatic. It's just a tool, man.

But anyway, you might want to read Nick Usborne's articles on [long vs. short copy](#). He gives some good reasons for using long copy (while echoing your point about "understanding what your readers want").

(And thanks for re-instating the old RSS feed.)

Posted by: [Gene](#) on August 27, 2003 02:55 PM

Gene -- It's not "just a tool, man". You could say that about heroin. But every tool is a tool ****for**** something, and the whole point is that PowerPoint is a tool for an evil thing. Powerpoint is to business communication what commercial entertainment is to art: a way to sell the viewer, by giving him an effortless experience that never challenges him ("Keep it short!!") and lulls him into thinking he's understood something without requiring any effort on his part.

And the b_____ are in my son's school. This year his entire sixth-grade "library" course is devoted to learning computer tools, including powerpoint. And no, he can't write an essay properly yet.

Posted by: Jim on September 6, 2003 09:17 AM

Start - miglia comments

Tool? As McLuhan said: "Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot".

I've found myself wondering what it is exactly that makes PPT evil. Certainly it is dangerous: a graphic communications tool in the hands of people poorly trained in graphical communication is a bad thing. As Tufte points out, hierarchical outlines can be used to lend a spurious authority to banal or misleading statements and imply non-existent chains of inference and conclusion. But this, I think, is not enough to make PPT truly evil. For a long time I wondered what I was missing, until I came across this:

Leverage your existing presentations so you don't have to start from scratch. You can import just about any file type into Keynote - including PowerPoint, PDF and AppleWorks presentations - and then enhance with themes. You can paste data from Excel documents into your Keynote charts and tables. Keynote lets you export presentations to PowerPoint, QuickTime or PDF.

here: <http://www.apple.com/keynote/> ... and I realised that Chomsky had answered the question over a generation ago.

PPT, surely, has as its antecedents the blackboard, the flip chart and the ohp. Even used amateurishly, all of these media are effectively deployed in communication. Thinking back to my schooldays, I was always worried about teachers who flourished OHPs rather than wrote on the board, for some obscure reason, but they never struck the terror into me that a session of PPTs can. Why is this? And why did ohps make me more nervous than blackboards?

In the 1970s Chomsky noted that television was destroying political discourse. He realised that, in fact, discourse was stopping, as television demanded immediacy, and is not well suited to the delivery of lectures, encouraging a style of discourse now known as the "soundbite". At first, "soundbites" were the distillation of more complex arguments - and this was the point of Chomsky's objection: that complex political debate was being "dumbed down" into a soundbite for television's consumption.

This was the effect of television itself--as McLuhan spotted, the medium is the message--

but the political classes soon got with the medium and rather than "dumb down" the argument to get to the soundbite, dropped the argument entirely to produce just the soundbite. By the 1980s, politics had become merely soundbite packaging: Consider, since when did "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime" actually substitute for a policy on criminal justice?

Although politics has always been about sloganeering--wrapping a complex idea into a memorable phrase like "votes for women", "peace in our time", "liberty, equality, fraternity"--there used to be complex political ideas behind the slogans. Nowadays, political parties don't have policies as such, they instead craft soundbites to appeal to target swing voter groups. The party that does this best gets elected.

There are no longer any big ideas in politics not because all the big idea battles have been won, but because there are not anymore big ideas at all - and PPT has helped this happen to the presentation of complex information.

In the past, the notes on the blackboard represented a summation. The teacher wasn't writing all there was to know on the subject - that existed in books, papers, pictures, documents, films, and other archives. The teacher merely presented a synthetic overview of the corpus relevant to the lesson at hand.

The teacher was able to do this (if they were a good teacher) because they had some mastery of that corpus. The notes on the board were ephemeral, epiphenomena of the narrative the teacher's master caused him/her to weave around the source material. On reflection, this is why I got nervous about OHPs.

OHPs were more difficult to produce, and were produced in advance of the lesson. The teacher became preoccupied with the presentation of the OHPs, making sure they were laid out clearly and legible from the back of the class, as they would be unable to effect significant changes on the fly. They would have to prejudge very accurately the length of their talk, and the level of engagement of their audience. They would, in short, have come to see the production of the OHPs as the end in itself, rather than the summative mastery of the subject matter.

PPTs, too, has become an end in itself. PPTs don't summarise more complex corpora, they are the sole embodiment of a piece of thinking, information or ideas. They are lavishly prepared: my anecdotal impression is that for every hour a PPT is worked on, 40 minutes are on looknfeel, and 20 minutes are on content.

As more and more visual tools are loaded into presentation software, as with Keynote, more and more time is spent on the looknfeel. This is what makes PPT evil: it is the primary medium for the expression of ideas in business, and, increasingly, education.

PPT is no longer an ephemeral medium, but a medium of record - so what we record is executive summaries and bullet-points. Not only are complex ideas no longer explored --if they won't fit on a slide, there's no place for them--but people are becoming increasingly ignorant of complex ideas: All thought has become slogans.

Is there hope? Very little, I fear. But I say this - delete your PPT slides after presenting them. Promise yourself that you will always treat them as ephemeral, that your primary sources will be elsewhere, in greater depth, and with more detail, and you may yet be saved.

Posted by: [miglia](#) on October 1, 2003 12:53 AM

I am pleased to see others taking note of what I have been screaming for years. I previously taught public speaking and constantly had to admonish my students because their AIDS had become their only form of communication. I would like to add that "eye contact" is elementary in the communication process and ppt eliminates this.

Posted by: [L.A.Ward](#) on October 9, 2003 12:08 PM

And...

It's not just a tool, it's a medium, man. Only people using the same medium can work together. If you and I are not using the same medium I can give you a read-only version of what I've created, but to create anything together we have to use the same medium.

In and among businesses, individuals, schools, people work together. Working together, people need a common medium. In 1990, PowerPoint was arguably the best medium for slide presentations and along with skillful marketing, people embraced it. We bought it hook, line, and sinker. It was good to have a medium that everyone could work together in.

Things, for whatever reason, deteriorated rapidly. Each upgrade was worse than the last. But everyone had invested in the software, and had invested their time creating things with it which would be unusable if they changed media. Now, more than a decade has gone by. It would be easy to design a better program, but what good would it do? Our intellectual property is trapped in this medium. Switching media is not an option.

Our only hope was government intervention. The government had a fuzzy notion there was something wrong, but missed the opportunity. The browser was the only non-monopolistic product Microsoft had. HTML is a generic medium that anybody can create a program to read and write.

Example 1: If you control gasoline and cars need gasoline to run, car owners must either use your product or not drive. Example 2: If you control Powerpoint and businesses need Powerpoint to communicate to audiences, businesses must either use your product or not communicate to audiences. The monopolist of example one says, "get a horse." The monopolist of example 2 says, "translate to PDF." Standard Oil. Standard software.

I dream of a world in which my children don't have to use Powerpoint.

Posted by: [John](#) on November 6, 2003 04:21 PM