

The Level of Discourse Continues to Slide

By JOHN SCHWARTZ

Is there anything so deadening to the soul as a PowerPoint presentation?

Critics have complained about the computerized slide shows, produced with the ubiquitous software from Microsoft, since the technology was first introduced 10 years ago. Last week, The New Yorker magazine included a cartoon showing a job interview in hell: "I need someone well versed in the art of torture," the interviewer says. "Do you know PowerPoint?"

Once upon a time, a party host could send dread through the room by saying, "Let me show you the slides from our trip!" Now, that dread has spread to every corner of the culture, with schoolchildren using the program to write book reports, and corporate managers blinking mindlessly at PowerPoint charts and bullet lists projected onto giant screens as a disembodied voice reads

- every
- word
- on
- every
- slide.

When the bullets are flying, no one is safe.

But there is a new crescendo of criticism that goes beyond the objection to PowerPoint's tendency to turn any information into a dull recitation of look-alike factoids. Based on nearly a decade of experience with the software and its effects, detractors argue that PowerPoint-muffled messages have real consequences, perhaps even of life or death.

Before the fatal end of the shuttle Columbia's mission last January, with the craft still orbiting the earth, NASA engineers used a PowerPoint presentation to describe their investigation into whether a piece of foam that struck the shuttle's wing during launching had caused serious damage. Edward Tufte, a Yale professor who is an influential expert on the presentation of visual information, published a critique of that presentation on the World Wide Web last March. A key slide, he said, was "a PowerPoint festival of bureaucratic hyper-rationalism."

Among other problems, Mr. Tufte said, a crucial piece of information — that the chunk of foam was hundreds of times larger than anything that had ever been tested — was relegated to the last point on the slide, squeezed into insignificance on a frame that suggested damage to the wing was minor.

The independent board that investigated the Columbia disaster devoted an entire page of its final report last month to Mr. Tufte's analysis. The board wrote that "it is easy to understand how a senior manager might read this PowerPoint slide and not realize that it addresses a life-threatening situation."

In fact, the board said: "During its investigation, the board was surprised to receive similar presentation slides from NASA officials in place of technical reports. The board views the endemic use of PowerPoint briefing slides instead of technical papers as an illustration of the problematic methods of technical

communication at NASA."

The board echoed a message that Mr. Tufte and other critics have been trying to disseminate for years. "I would refer to it as a virus, rather than a narrative form," said Jamie McKenzie, an educational consultant. "It's done more damage to the culture."

These are strong words for a program that traces its pedagogical heritage to the blackboard or overhead projector. But the relentless and, some critics would say, lazy use of the program as a replacement for real discourse — as with the NASA case — continues to inspire attacks.

It has also become so much a part of our culture that, like Kleenex and Xerox, PowerPoint has become a generic term for any bullet-ridden presentation.

Dan Leach, Microsoft's chief product manager for the Office software, which includes PowerPoint, said that the package had 400 million users around the world, and that his customers loved PowerPoint. When early versions of Office for small business did not include PowerPoint, customers protested, he said, and new versions include it.

"We're proud of it," he said, pointing out that the product is simply a tool — "a blank for you to fill in" with ideas and information.

"I feel like the guy who makes canvas and the No. 2 green viridian paint," Mr. Leach said. "I'm being asked to comment on the art show."

His point is shared by plenty of people who say the criticism of PowerPoint is misdirected. "The tool doesn't tell you how to write," said Bill Atkinson, the creator of HyperCard, an earlier program considered by many to be the precursor to PowerPoint. "It just helps you express yourself," he said. "The more tools people have to choose from the better off we are."

It's likely, then, that PowerPoint is here to stay — everywhere. And not always for the worse. At the wedding reception of Lina Tilman and Anders Corr last year in New Haven, guests made two PowerPoint presentations. They were everything that slide shows usually are not: wry and heartfelt works that used the tired conventions of the form to poke fun at the world of presentations and celebrate the marriage.

NASA apparently still lacks a similar sense of irony. Earlier this month, the space agency held a three-day workshop in Houston to give reporters a firsthand view of its return-to-flight plans. Included in the handouts were dozens of PowerPoint slides.