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## Trends & Issues

### Edward Tufte doesn't hate PowerPoint, he hates the culture that spawned it *The Podium*

By Tad Simons

At the very least, Edward Tufte's incendiary essay, "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint" (addressed in depth in our cover story, "Does PowerPoint make you stupid?") has opened up a previously dormant dialogue about PowerPoint's influence on the world of ideas. But, as I mention in the story, separating what Tufte *means* from what he *says* has become an exercise of necessity in many presentation circles.

What Tufte, the world's foremost authority on information design, says is PowerPoint is so "stupid" and "evil" that no "serious person" should use it. These are harsh words. Tufte provides lots of reasons for why he thinks PowerPoint is so awful, but in my opinion he fails to identify the true object of his wrath, which has nothing whatsoever to do with PowerPoint.

#### The path of evil

*Evil* is a loaded word, of course – one that gets tossed around as casually as a baseball in these days of terror and revenge. But I believe Tufte uses the word *evil* in the sense writer Hannah Arendt meant it when she coined the phrase, "the banality of evil." In this sense, evil does not

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have horns or breathe fire or call explosive attention to itself; it is a force that slowly and almost imperceptibly erodes our standards, clouds our judgment, lulls us into submission and, before we realize it, has led us down a regrettable path from which there is no return.

Tufte rails against PowerPoint for encouraging fragmented thinking (via bullet points and linear slides), destroying logical connections, disrupting reason and divorcing data from its broader, more meaningful contexts. PowerPoint is stupid, in Tufte's view, because it does not lead people to do intelligent things with their information; it coerces them to box their thoughts in tidy, simplistic packages and administer them with heaping spoonfuls of graphic sugar. By the end of the show, the poison has already taken effect.

### **Sharp as a bullet**

Tufte's gripes about PowerPoint sound an awful lot like 1960s criticisms of television's corrupting effect on the mind, and before that, the stupefying nature of vaudeville. This isn't to suggest that Tufte is wrong, just to clarify that our culture has been engaged in an extended conversation about the impact of technology on human thought and communication, of which the debate over PowerPoint is only a small but significant part.

If anything, PowerPoint is the culmination of a decades-long trend in all types of media used to distill complex information into ever more easily digested pieces, making it all but impossible to communicate any kind of complex or nuanced message. Sound bites, campaign slogans, ad copy and bullet points are all part of this evolution toward content-free language. And, for better or worse, this trend has been exploited most profitably in the worlds of business, politics and media – worlds in which, not coincidentally, PowerPoint is extremely popular.

To be sure, most business in this world is



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conducted under the unspoken (and sometimes spoken) belief that people who get to the point fast are "smart," and people who don't – people whose thoughts are layered and complex and take time to unpack – are tedious to listen to and therefore irrelevant. In business folklore, guts and instinct are more respected than intelligence. And this simpleton streak, it can be argued, is simply an extension of the anti-intellectualism that has always existed in American society – a society that disproportionately glorifies physical achievement and beauty over intellectual, knowledge-based achievement every time.

### **A cultural mirror**

Where stupidity and evil come into play is when this preference for logical shortcuts and easy solutions crowds out reason and leads to the assumption that ideas incapable of being bullet-pointed aren't worth considering, or even sharing. Tufte's true beef is not with PowerPoint, it is with the entire larger culture outside of academia: the culture that favors get-to-the-point practicality over ivory-tower idealism; the culture that prefers action over dialogue and fists over philosophy; the culture that doesn't trust people who speak in complete sentences; the culture that says don't think about it, "just do it"; the culture that, hate it or not, seems all too willing to deceive itself in the name of freedom, democracy and the American way.

Although PowerPoint may help this culture speak to itself, it is not the cause of the conversation; it is only a reflection of the culture that created it, a mere product of its times.

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