

# The PowerPoint Society: The Influence of PowerPoint in the U.S. Government and Bureaucracy

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## (ABSTRACT)

The standard method for presenting information in the military and political establishments of the US government is through the projection of data in bullet-style and/or graphical formats onto an illuminated screen, using some sort of first analogue, or now, digital media. Since the late 1990s, the most common and expected form of presentation is via the most commonly pre-installed software of presentation genre: Microsoft PowerPoint. This style of presentation has become the norm of communication, and in doing so, has replaced other methods of discursive and presentation. The art of the brief and in particular, the art of the PowerPoint has become a new standard of what was once group communication through oratory. This paper will attempt to show that PowerPoint slide-ware has reduced communication to mere presentation, negatively influencing the decision-making and critical thinking processes of individuals and organizations, particularly within the military and government. This is accomplished through the visual reception of the briefings themselves, where and when the theatrical nature of the presentation takes precedence over the content. And, in fact, this dramatic twist determines which ideas gain acceptance among audiences. This simple style of presentation is becoming indicative of a visual and leadership style of our era. This is the effect of a PowerPoint method of leadership, now **de rigueur** in the military and demonstrated by the current president and administration. The style of PowerPoint, both at the micro-level in particular presentations, and the macro-level, as demonstrated by people and organizations, ultimately works today as a form of control and discipline. And, in the end, it can become a convenient vehicle for furtherance of a specific ideology and propaganda campaigns.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*Then we learned about “bullets”—little black circles in front of phrases that were supposed to summarize things. There was one after another of these goddamn bullets in our briefing books and on slides*

Richard P. Feynman

In today’s modern bureaucratic, educational, business, and military establishments of the US government and civil sectors, for better or worse, Microsoft PowerPoint has become the standard medium for the presentation of information. Since the mid-1990s, this pre-processed rhetoric of “bullet style” phrases, interspersed with graphs, visual media, and animations projected on a wall, screen, or even presented in hard copy handouts has become the organizational standard or norm. Its grasp now reaches across borders and oceans. In fact, due to the widespread distribution and acceptance of this software package and the fact it has becoming one of the dominant genres of communication in professional settings, it is now the “expected product” or normative form of communication, often even unbeknownst to those taking part in the exercise of its utilization and viewing. It has put to rest and replaced the overhead projectors with their transparencies, which remained ad hoc rhetorical aesthetic exercises. This shift and flimsies of old, has been part of the modern era’s deconstruction of the oratory. PowerPoint’s accessibility and grasp has truly taken this style of presentation to a new level, a level which has compelled this and other research to focus on this software in specific, even while questions of technological influences in discourse remain important and in this case, influencing. While we now have “PowerPoint Rangers” within the military and Pentagon, previous generations did not feel the need to apply such specifically-targeted and cynical underground humor while engaged in the use and application of transparencies, slides or other forms of group presentation genres—there has been a distinct shift, an arguably visible divide in terms of this application and other

forms of technology that warrants specific and serious attention. While many of the factors that I will argue in terms of PowerPoint can be applied to other technologies in specific, and the spread of technology in general, PowerPoint in and of its own has touched more nerves and inspired more analysis than most. Its role as a growing communicative genre replacing others in no small part highlights the role of this actor. PowerPoint's current users span the spectrum from 5<sup>th</sup> grade students to those briefing the American President or the General Assembly of the United Nations. Not only has it become the standard of presentation, in most organizations it is anticipated to be the correct communication when gathering in a more-than-informal environment to discuss any matter of serious business. Without the slides, neither access nor voice is granted—the presenter, the presented, and the structure of communication within bureaucracies, and in particular the military, are shaped by the nature of this communicative exercise. It's difficult to find a room in which information is to be processed that does not have the concept of group “wall reading” in mind when being designed and built.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the influence of PowerPoint in communication, and to explore its effects on the political interactions of organizations, bureaucracies, and individuals in the tradition of critical theory and its application to technology and information as it applies to the social web of bureaucratic organizations. The emphasis will be on its use and influence in the military, as this is the organization which has taken its acceptance, use, and expectation of perfection to the greatest extreme, and therefore can demonstrate most explicitly the characteristics of PowerPoint's influence which can be and are felt as well in the worlds of business and government to that of academia. The military's distinct hierarchy of command and clear vertical stratification lends itself to a competitive briefing culture where every presentation is a performance that encourages endless hours of preparation, focusing as much on style as content. This paper will focus on the effects of this micro-media at several levels: at one level it can be an almost adequate, mediocre, or in many cases a poor method of informing/boring an audience. At another level it can fail the viewers and users as it limits the presentation of data by the nature of this slideware's inherent characteristics, an area quite familiar to those readers of the works of Dr. Edward Tufte, a renowned expert in the area of visual displays of quantitative data. More so, it may be used in the hands of

an experienced technician to present an impressive visual show that trumps style over content. Such a style-over-substance based approach to using PowerPoint successfully (particularly in the military) is possible in a culture which has been infused and in many ways influenced by PowerPoint itself, as the people, buildings, and system have come to expect the process of PowerPoint in an insidious process. This will be discussed in further detail, as this phenomenon exists in the realm of what many critical theorists would consider the “spectacle” in the presentation and consumption of information. In fact PowerPoint is one aspect of the “informational society” which is a “complex new order whose social and political structures are dominated increasingly by the development, elaboration, and expression of formalized discourses and scientific disciplines” (Luke: 1989, 10). It will be argued that this software’s visual format and style has first encouraged, and then continues, to a system of influence based on dramatic presentation and not discursive dialogue. In the larger deconstruction of eloquence, oratory or dialogue in the electronic age it could be argued that PowerPoint is not only one of the causal agents, it is *the* agent of influence simply as it is installed in virtually all personal computing suites – whether they run on PCs or Macs. Beyond this software’s effects, and its (mis)use, it can be further shown that PowerPoint itself becomes a useful tool of furthering specific ideologies, propagandas, and ultimately acts as a form of control. Through a curious process, PowerPoint becomes part of a greater system of control and influence within our decision making halls of government. It encourages theater over substance, simple ideas over complex discourse, and acts as a useful device for those furthering a one-sided agenda, over a broad range and depth of topics. Its bullet style format limits thinking and ideas, which is a boon to leadership styles of simplicity and demagoguery. For example, several analysts have pointed to a PowerPoint-infused culture within NASA that ultimately squashed relevant input from engineers regarding possible Columbia shuttle damage. PowerPoint acted to filter information and dilute the facts, arguably one causal factor in the events leading to the shuttle disaster. (Tufte, 2003, 7-11). I will argue PowerPoint’s influence of simplicity, demagoguery, and control in several ways.

I will begin in chapter two by giving a short background of PowerPoint’s history as it has developed over the past several decades. Its roots lie in the need to communicate

vertically and horizontally within the structure of an organization, starting with boardroom presentations in conference bringing interagency peers together to quickly and efficiently pass information. Transparencies, 35 mm slides, and similar mediums set the groundwork for the explosion of this software with the advent of personal computers and its pre-installed suite of professional software. It became particularly popular within the government and military, and in any occasion where information had to be passed efficiently between sections, and to the layers above. The further PowerPoint became infused in the culture and social fabric of organizations “doing business,” the more entrenched and widespread the dangers associated with the software have become.

There has been a limited but well-known attack on this particular piece of software. Chapter three goes into a discussion of PowerPoint’s cognitive style, dealing with its shortcomings as an oratory device, and how it can be used/abused as genre of communication usurping other genres. Well documented attacks on this software are an effort of some academics, questioning the corporate hegemony of Microsoft as well as the administrations which condone and require the usage of this communicative style of easy-to-use format of bullet-speak. Ultimately, many uncover PowerPoint as poorly used technology of oratory, but little time is actually given to examining its intellectual barrenness and potential for abuse. This section would be incomplete without a strong look at one of the preeminent scholars working in the field of visual representations of information, Dr. Edward Tufte of Yale University. He has produced several books and essays relating to the visual display of quantitative data. More recently, he has been quoted as one of the most outspoken critics of PowerPoint, particularly on his well-received monograph on the “evils” of this software—“The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint” (Tufte, 2003). Tufte’s essay systematically attacks PowerPoint on various levels, focusing on its most famous failures—the previously mentioned NASA debacle to name the most prominent. A final attribute of PowerPoint’s cognitive style is how it panders to society’s short electrically-mediated attention span. Brevity is the software’s main virtue, but this anchors a spectacle of presentation over substance. While quality and format in any presentation have always been important characteristics of delivering information clearly and effectively with style, the “over the top” briefing has become the main vehicle allowing ideas and concepts to be heard and gain acceptance within certain

communities. This is particularly evident within the military establishment, and in particular within the conference rooms of the Pentagon, where PowerPoint and “the brief” have been taken to its more developed level. This study will take a look at various examples from the bureaucratic layers of the US government and military. Of particular note will be the work of Thomas P. M. Barnett, author of the bestselling book on global strategic theory for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, written for the layman, The Pentagon’s New Map. He has developed a well rehearsed and extremely polished PowerPoint briefing into an extremely influential book and now subsequent sequel in the works. His works may have long reaching influences into future foreign policy, particularly as the mid-level officers, most drawn to his views, move into positions informed by this flow of information are ensnarled in “the brief.”

The next section will present several studies of PowerPoint in action. First I will look at Secretary Colin Powell’s presentation to the United Nations, February 2003, where he presents the Bush administration’s case to invade Iraq. It is a rich presentation in PowerPoint, ultimately arguing weak facts, yet this highlights the software’s ability to simplify complex arguments into monolithic truths that must be accepted. In this case PowerPoint was used by those in the State Department with the greatest intentions of solidifying a point, but instead failed due to PowerPoint’s cognitive shortcomings and intellectual bareness. On the other hand, in many cases, the “killer brief,” in its extremely polished and theatric format allows the briefer and his/her ideas to not only be heard by select influential audiences, but to have those ideas more readily and heard over those in more exhaustively researched and carefully prepared written formats. I will focus in this case on the recent works of the previously mentioned Dr. Thomas P.M. Barnett. His book is having an impact on many layers of the government, particularly within the ranks of the military officer corps at large, and in the military-academic establishment. The book is ultimately no more than a product of a well-honed PowerPoint presentation, which in many cases granted access, through its packaged and refined style, to some of the most powerful offices of leadership. Additionally, I will look at PowerPoint as it influences the dynamics of power and administration in the military at lower levels, in particular the running of a the standard Air Force geographic-entity, the “base/unit/air wing” as it uses and is influenced by PowerPoint. Both of these



examples point to the manner in which this method of communicating has ingrained itself as an influential but not obvious entity of control, as it becomes one of the dominant genres of communicating within organizations and groups. Finally, PowerPoint also is indicative of a leadership style found from the lower ranks of the military establishment to the upper echelons of political leadership to include the current administration. It is a leadership style based on bullet statements presented in a colorful format, with little depth or breadth. Our society in general, at this time in history, seems to more and more be exemplifying the interesting traits of PowerPoint. I will use our current presidency as an example of how government and leadership can work at a cognitive level similar to that expected and exemplified by PowerPoint in the structures underneath his command.

In chapter five, I will go from the presentation to a broader view of how PowerPoint mirrors our current society in general, and how it works as a tool which combines the textual and visual in a curious process of illusion and domination, never more evident than demonstrated by this piece of software in action.

At its core, PowerPoint is primarily a visual experience placing responsibility on and defining roles of the subject and the observer. The presentation is the entity that acts as a visual representation of some reality being depicted by the presenter, using the technology of PowerPoint as the main medium in conjunction with other possible aids (e.g. the voice, body language, sound effect) to convey a message. Here are various theories and philosophies on the hegemony of vision, the role of the subject, object, and observer that need to be examined, especially with regard to how these forces influence the information and the informed.

PowerPoint is a crude combination of the visual and textual, and this requires an even more specific look at the literature relating to the analysis on the schism, divide, and boundary between the visual and lingual aspects of understanding—how the different critical theories emphasize the structural, empirical forms of language, and/or ocular-dominance for communication accounts. In effect, this paper will take a critical look at PowerPoint in its role as a more insidious player in society: It's part of a greater shift of society to the spectacle, "a commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure, desire, and everyday life" (Kellner 2005). Whereas Kellner cites Debord to discuss large-scale

spectacles of the modern era, PowerPoint is micro-media, less visibly spectacle-like than a specific event or corporate commercial endeavor, but of the same breed as video games, media, and other forms of “infotainment” (Kellner 2005). This paper will by no means be an exhaustive review of all literature relating to the visual and spectacle, as it is quite extensive, beginning with Plato’s *Cave* from The Republic, but will attempt to combine the review of visual/linguistic/oratory-based literature as it most saliently illustrates the impact of PowerPoint. The ideological and theoretical foundations for theories regarding human’s visual interpretation of the world. Two of particular note are Michel Foucault and Guy Debord, who are known for their focus on the issues of vision in terms of its controlling and spectacle-like aspects. They address not how PowerPoint and its style fail us, but how in fact it succeeds as a form of control and power, at a level that is even transparent to those wielding the power and those subservient to such power. The exercise of group electronically-based “wall reading” is a powerful one, and the execution over and over of this style of presentation is one method which gives it weight of great authority. The exercise itself grants legitimacy and power to the information, and in this lies much of the problems with which must be grappled as we approach good or bad PowerPoint. Actually, PowerPoint’s cognitive format forces presenters into certain modes of rhetorical methodology. It, in turn, privileges an incomplete and sometimes even linear interpretation by the viewer. The language of PowerPoint becomes rhetoric of easy to read bullet statements, convoluted graphs, meaningless animations, clip art, and a myriad of other distractions. PowerPoint takes the world and simplifies to a mere sales pitch. Some would suggest PowerPoint is another symptom of the disease which is the destruction of oratory in our electronic age. According to Kathleen Jamieson, the electronic age has spawned media which have brought us sound bites at the expense of reason (Jamieson, 1988, 13). Although Jamieson’s book, Eloquence in the Electronic Age, was written before the widespread use of PowerPoint, its critique of various electronic media is directly applicable to the use of the application today. PowerPoint’s influence and style work to compliment the continuing infusion of technology into the lives and social fabric of people and organizations.

Chapter five will not only cover the basic theoretical concepts involved in the dominance of the visual in a group exercise of “wall reading” of text and image in a

slide-after-slide format, but it will take walk in the steps of several critical theorists in looking at this application's role in a greater system of control and domination. It can help to explain how software is mimicking how we now think and lead. Its application is not merely poor communication and the danger of bad policy polished and hidden in the slide-ware of this program. PowerPoint actually serves a systemic form of control, in the spirit of Foucault's normalizing society. While the presenter and the functionaries of a bureaucracy may see PowerPoint as a one-way tool between them and their superiors, it, in fact, works as a conduct of power to mediate authority from superiors (down to individuals). It forces thinking, via presentation style, to conform to a certain pattern, length, and content flow. It reduces the truth to slides. In meetings and presentations of various components of an organization, slide ware becomes the reality. Much of this goes on unconsciously for those in power in an organization. For those furiously and diligently producing slides, PowerPoint is without question the media to communicate. Therefore, it becomes part of an invisible structure of domination and control. As well stated by David Byrne, artist, musician and co-founder of the famous 1980s band the *Talking Heads*, who has used PowerPoint as a form of art, "The software [PowerPoint], by making certain directions and actions easier and more convenient than others, tells you how to think as it helps you accomplish your task. Not in an obvious way or in an obnoxious way or even in a scheming way" (Byrne, 2003: 3). The insidious nature of this control structure must be analyzed and discussed. Not only does "the briefer" become part of this regime of discipline, but also those being briefed.

PowerPoint quashes dialogue, and rewards presentation over discussion and good communication. It is the one way directed assimilation of simplistic topics with no further theoretical information or con development of ideas. One cannot qualitatively and objectively argue about facts in a reasonably intelligent manner. It is the danger in selling one's ideas as a sales pitch rather than accepting a roundtable of discussion for all sides to be heard, a chance to wrong, and the utility in complex, differing viewpoints.

## Chapter Two

### A Short History of PowerPoint

*"You can't speak with the U.S. military without knowing PowerPoint."*

*- Margaret Hayes, National Defense University*

Forty years ago, a workplace meeting was a discussion with your immediate colleagues. Engineers would meet with other engineers and talk in the language of engineering. A manager might make an appearance—acting as an interpreter, a bridge to the rest of the company—but no one from the marketing or production or sales department would be there. Somebody might have gone to the trouble of cranking out mimeographs—that would be the person with purple fingers.... The guy came up with the jingle first: the neat round spaghetti you can eat with a spoon: And he said, 'Hey! Make spaghetti in the shape of small circles.' In this environment, visual aids were bound to thrive. In 1975, fifty thousand overhead projectors were sold in America (Parker: 2001)

PowerPoint is the latest genre of administrative communication, a natural progression of the overhead flimsy culture infused with technological development. PowerPoint developed from a culture of slides within the business, government, and military organizations, with the latter particularly fond of bullet phrases in documentation, long before the introduction of electronic presentations. PowerPoint developed from a culture where the form of communication both horizontally and vertically within an organization began requiring interaction in different forms—the committee or office meeting changed as more and more meetings were introduced. DuPont can be pointed to as one of the first users with a corporate history of charts and graphs being used in a special chart-viewing room for the purposes of deliberation (Yates, Orlikowski). Their practice was widely copied and what was “uniquely DuPont”—use of graphs as visual aids—became more widespread. By the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, visual aids of some sort were becoming the norm, whether they were blackboards, overheads, or movies (Yates, Orlikowski).

Technology was generating more information, and the meeting was the necessary place to quickly and expeditiously pass information up and down the chain, and in-between functional sections. To facilitate various parts of the organization's tasks of meeting and transferring information, a presentation type format emerged, on the back of

the “overhead projector.” By 1975, fifty thousand overhead projectors were sold in the United States, and that number became more than one hundred twenty thousand by the mid-1980s (Parker, 2001). At the same time, 35 mm slides were playing a role in the display of visual display of information when working in a presentation format, but these were expensive and time consuming to say the least. The overhead allowed the flexibility to quickly create a visual media, either with a felt tip pen or typewrite/word processor acting to employ text. The culture of the overhead projector set the stage for the 1990s explosion in the use of PowerPoint. When Louis Gerstner took the helm of IBM, the culture of PowerPoint was having its foundations set in the world of transparency slide-ware:

At that time, the standard format of any important IBM meeting was a presentation using overhead projectors and graphics that IBMers called “foils” [projected transparencies]. Nick was on his second foil when I stepped to the table and, as politely as I could in front of his team, switched off the projector. After a long moment of awkward silence, I simply said, “Let’s just talk about your business.”

I mention this episode because it had an unintended, but terribly powerful ripple effect. By that afternoon an e-mail about my hitting the Off button on the overhead projector was crisscrossing the world. Talk about consternation! It was as if the President of the United States had banned the use of English at White House meetings (Tufte, 2003: 3)<sup>1</sup>

In 1987 the first generation of PowerPoint was developed—named “Presenter” and designed for Windows 2.0. It ran on any Mac and used a floppy drive (Belleville: slide 3). 1988 ushered in the first Microsoft version of PowerPoint with its acquisition of the original producer, and by 1990 there was a Windows 3.0 compatible version on the market (Belleville, slide 5). Various iterations took the product to PowerPoint 97, and by that time Microsoft had the dominant market share with almost no competition. The proliferation of personal computers preinstalled with the typical Microsoft office suite encouraged and drove this monopolization of this program. Its accessibility has become one of the driving factors behind its liberal use.

The military is the classic example of a bureaucratic organization with a clearly defined vertical hierarchy. Briefings as part of the culture have been evident since the

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Louis C. Gerstner, Jr., *Who Stays Elephants Can’t Dance? Inside IBM’s Historic Turnaround* (2002), p. 43.

earliest days. The earliest presentations were most likely battlefield plans drawn out in the sand to a staff charged with executing the battle. Military organizations are often more vertically stratified by function and rank than their civilian and even governmental counterparts, which lends itself to a culture in which one must prepare formally to brief another up the chain of command. Where performance reports and competition are part of the rating cycle, achieving perfection in both presentation and documentation becomes the norm. It's not surprising a program as accessible as PowerPoint has become an expected method of delivery, particularly in a military which has long used the "bullet paper" format of speaking. There is no doubt that this software is empowering in that respect.

Like an alcoholic who is well aware of his problem but continues to drink, many in the military are not ignorant of its over-use and mis-use. In the spring of 2000, the current Army Chief of Staff at the time, General Hugh Shelton, in reference to PowerPoint presentations within the Army and more specifically in the Pentagon, gave the order to reduce the "bells and whistles" and just get to the point (Jaffe, 2000). Not only in his opinion does it hinder effective communication, the large files were eating up available bandwidth at the Pentagon and throughout the military. The theatrics and large files associated with presentations are the result of an "arms race" competitive mentality that exists in the briefing establishment. This takes place in a culture "in which one mediocre review by a superior can torpedo a career. 'Young officers are worried that they might leave something out of their briefing, and a supervisor might say something about it. So they pack their presentations with every detail that they can think off,'" says Charles Moskos, a military-culture expert at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill" (Jaffe, 2000).

PowerPoint continues to thrive and monopolize the system, although competitors are starting to make headway into Microsoft's market. But these programs are basically offering the same content as PowerPoint, and encourage its use due to the accessibility of personal computers pre-installed with such software. In the culture of high-speed information flows and short deadlines, there often isn't time to create more in-depth, time consuming and well-prepared materials. Additionally, PowerPoint is not only accepted,

it is expected. The nature of our society in effect forces people to naturally gravitate towards this product. History points towards continued and expanded use.

## CHAPTER THREE

### COGNITIVE STYLE OF POWERPOINT

PowerPoint works so poorly and so well at the same time—it can be a horrible medium for the presentation of information, but at the same time in the hands of a skilled user it can be an excellent medium of pitching a sale. The presenter can use simplicity and effects to present a one-sided ideological argument in the form of a sales pitch, in a style which squashes dissent and discourages discussion. At its basic level, these are the problems which PowerPoint can exemplify as it simplifies, skews reality, and in some cases rewards theatrics over substance. The presentation itself becomes the reality, or more important than the actual facts and ideas to be debated. Critical thinking is not rewarded—a quick, one sided show is most presentable. It is this style of presentation which is the accepted norm of communication within government, military, and in many sectors of academia and business.

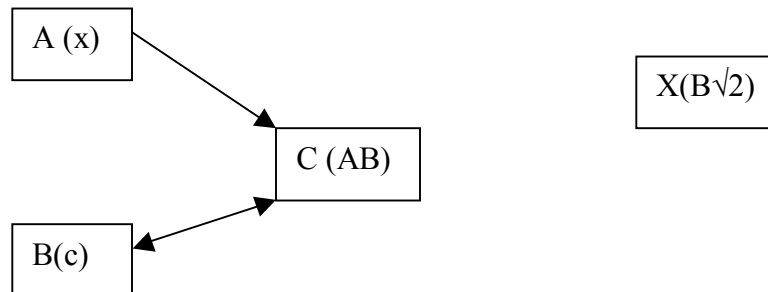
PowerPoint, almost by design, forces the user into specific forms of presentation due to inherent characteristics and design functions. Its format supports relatively little information per slide, its statistical graphics hold marginal content, and in most cases encourages a bullet style presentation of ideas. Although I and others claim that one of the failures of PowerPoint is that it allows only for a low rate of information transfer, on the other the software just can't seem to win: when the slides become saturated with information, they then become unreadable and tend to bog down both the viewer and presenter. According to Dr. Edward Tufte, in his well regarded essay on PowerPoint's cognitive style, the biggest crime which can be leveled against bullet outlines is their tendency and ability to "dilute thought" (Tufte, 2003: 5-6). They are often an aid to disorganized speakers, but in reality encourage a "generic, superficial, simplistic thinking"—in effect bullet statements "make us stupid" (5). The Harvard Business Review echoes this sentiment, stating that bullet statements leave relationships unspecified and leave critical assumptions unstated (Shaw et al, 1998: 42-43). Many problems are a complex set of dynamically interacting variables, which power point



ignores, poorly addresses, and in many cases leaves unexplained. PowerPoint is a mostly linear medium, either by text or graphical display, describing a situation such as the following list of variables where A influences B to present C–

$$A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$$

Instead we may be faced with, for example, the following situation instead, which PowerPoint is challenged in its ability to express:



It should go without saying that this not only applies to the corporate strategies focused on by the Harvard Business Review, but for national policy, military strategy, weapons procurement, or a host of political issues—to include the presence of weapons of mass destruction. Bullet statements tell us what is the speakers’ truth, the reality, but not the how, why, or the critical relationship between items or facts. It presents data as a monolithic truth which must be accepted, linearly or historically stated in basic relationships, when in fact *everything* should be and probably is much more complex in nature. Ian Parker in his 2001 *The New Yorker* article describes the template-like pressure exerted by this software: “even the most easygoing PowerPoint template insists on a heading followed by bullet points, so that the user is shepherded toward a staccato, summarizing frame of mind, of the kind parodied, for example, in a PowerPoint Gettysburg Address posted on the Internet: ‘Dedicate portion of the field—fitting!’” (Parker, online) The parody of which Mr. Parker speaks is now a well-known satire of the PowerPoint style, using the very AutoContent provided by the software package to rework Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, to be found at [www.norvig.com/Gettysburg/](http://www.norvig.com/Gettysburg/). This is obviously the extreme of simplification taken to amusing levels of sarcasm, but what is not so funny is that fact that 1) PowerPoint AutoContent was in fact created as a parody of itself and its users by Microsoft programmers, and 2) it remains at the heart of any

PowerPoint presentation as a basic structural format. PowerPoint channels simple ideas, and limits the flow of information. As Tufte goes on to point out, all slides associated with PowerPoint have much lower rates of information transfer than talk—the typical slide shows 40 words, which is about 8 seconds of reading material (Tufte, 2003: 16). While this may serve as a useful tool to jar the memory or organize a talk, it's wholly inadequate when arguing a complex budget, solving intricate problems, or other non-linear multifaceted issues.

### **Downfall of Poorly Presented PowerPoint**

According to Seth Gordon, author of “Really BAD PowerPoint,” PowerPoint is generally used for three goals, none of which encourages good oratory (Gordon, 2001: para. 2). First of all it is often used as a replacement for a teleprompter, serving as a guide for a presenter to merely parrot bullets. Secondly, Gordon claims PowerPoint works to “provide a written, cover-your-ass record of what was presented” (para. 2). This allows the presenter to avoid writing a formal report, and acts as a poor substitute for a substantive product. PowerPoint may serve to show the tip of the iceberg, when in fact no iceberg may exist beneath. Finally, PowerPoint makes it easier for the audience to remember what the presenter said. In a straightforward way, for the poor presentation, it reinforces what is being heard. Unfortunately, the audiences will most likely tune out the speaker before any learning or retention takes place. Gordon claims the main problem with poorly presented PowerPoint is that it conflicts with the ingredients of what makes a “great presentation.” Presenters using a bland series of bullet statements normally are unable to trigger an emotional response from the audience that will invoke interest in the data presented. The presenter of poor PowerPoint normally loses the audience early in the presentation—this could not be done more quickly than through the parroting of dry bullet statements read directly from a screen or monitor.

There are several on the other side of the argument from Tufte, to include David Byrne, photographer, musician, and artist—who agrees that PowerPoint may indoctrinate speakers to speak and think simply. But on the other hand he argues that it can be a liberating force in presenting information. Byrne claims the limitations are with the user, not the software, and placing blame for the problems of PowerPoint presentations is like blaming a gun for killing when it takes the person pulling the trigger (Konrad, 2003). In

his DVD compilation and accompanying book, Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information, Byrne takes PowerPoint, and turns it into a form of visual art. The problem with this support for PowerPoint's usage is that most information is not of the nature championed by Byrne—it's administrative, informative and agenda-driven as opposed to artistic and free-flowing. While the point is valid that in many cases it's the presenter who needs to accept responsibility for poor presentation technique, it needs to be said that this piece of software is still limiting, subverting, and in many cases encourages an unprepared speaker into certain lanes of discourse—linear, simple, static, and even boring. In the hands of a skilled user, it works to dazzle and offer one-sided presentation/sales pitch of an agenda. There are other advocates of PowerPoint who have web sites, sell products and offer tips to avoid PowerPoint's misuse. Cliff Atkinson is one multimedia expert who runs a website called "Socialablemedia.com" which interviews experts in the field, refers to studies, and offers tips and templates for better PowerPoint usage. These tips are very useful for avoiding the ostensibly "bad" PowerPoint presentation, but ignore the more insidious effects of this software influencing how an organization thinks and operates. Mr. Atkinson has written a book that will be forthcoming in March 2005—Beyond Bullet Points, published by Microsoft Press. Books and advice columns such as these have and continue to address issues related to poor oratory and other "surface" cosmetic PowerPoint issues, mostly ignoring the deeper seated issues addressed by Dr. Tufte and this paper. Mr. Atkinson has also conducted on-line live seminars sponsored by Microsoft, giving tips on working to improve the quality of PowerPoint, focusing the software's ability to convey a "story."

Much of the problem with the style of PowerPoint is the fact it has replaced dialogue with immediate co-workers and supervisors with an earnest sales pitch run by bullet statements, graphics, fluff, and other distracting and fare:

In the glow of a PowerPoint show, the world is condensed, simplified, smoothed over---yet bright and hyperreal—like the cityscape background in a PlayStation motor race. PowerPoint is strangely adept at disguising the fragile foundations of a proposal, the emptiness of a business plan; usually, the audience is respectfully still (only venture capitalists dare to dictate the pace of someone else's slide show), and, with the visual distraction of a dancing pie chart, a speaker can quickly move past the laughable flaw in his argument. If anyone notices, it's too late—the narrative presses on. (Parker, 2001)

PowerPoint is the second generation of overhead projector slides—a bad situation has merely become even worse due to ease of use. It's easy to use this software, so people do, not realizing the possible problems which may be encountered. As David Byrne aptly notes regarding the use of PowerPoint, “There are plenty of opportunities for positive feedback: people respond to the professionalism of your presentations, your ideas appear clear and well-presented, and as a result the tasks and meetings yield good responses (Byrne, 2004: 4). Yet what at first glance appears to be a more professional presentation usually reveals cracks below the surface, and in some cases on the surface of the presentation itself. PowerPoint simplifies the reality, forces content into bullet-style simplistic formats inadequate for arguing complex issues, allowing for a glossing over of the subject matter with less-than-adequate explanations. The visual nature of the device supports a style of presentation on both the part of the presenter and viewer which allows for the brief to quickly move on—conveniently spending little time for an in-depth probing of those slides (i.e. issues) that may not stand up well to further scrutiny. PowerPoint focuses on the desired outcome at the expense of communication, ignoring the beneficial struggles of discourse to arrive at the best solution. Formats of the presentation, the sequence of ideas, and the cognitive approach are all dictated by the limitations of the presentation format, not the ideas to be explained (Tufte, 2003: 4-5). Worst of all, the hands of the briefer are often tied since PowerPoint is the expected medium through which he or she is obligated to “speak.”

Again, PowerPoint normally fails the user on several levels—the amateur briefer is left parroting bullet slides and putting his audience to sleep. The more adept briefer cheats himself, the viewers, and the organization as a whole by ignoring real dialogue on the problem at hand. As was previously mentioned, in the hands of a true master, PowerPoint can be an effective tool with which to dazzle an audience and gain respect for ideas—not on the merit of the ideas themselves, but for the importance placed on the art and quality of the brief in many organizations. Thomas Barnett of the Naval War College has recently been named as one of the “best and the brightest” by Esquire magazine, been taped and interviewed on CSPAN more than once, and has held in the top-lists of various journals and papers for books on foreign affairs with his recently published The Pentagon's New Map. On 14 December 2004 this book was finally reviewed by the

*Washington Post*, in an Op-ed column by David Ignatius. Ignatius came to learn of this book neither from the publisher nor the author, but on his trips reporting through the Middle East and in the military, as he was struck by its influential presence:

Barnett's ideas have been taken up by other military commands that must reckon with disorder in the Gap, including those responsible for the Pacific and Latin America. The Air Force has asked him to brief every new roster of one-star generals, and the Navy has him lecture each year at the Naval War College. And Barnett was the featured speaker last week at a meeting of the Pentagon's high-level technology group, the Highlands Forum. With so many officers buying books, "The Pentagon's New Map" has managed to sell more than 50,000 copies (Ignatius, 2004).

Barnett is the first to admit that his book and its relative success is a result of an extremely polished and frequently delivered briefing given to the top layers of the military and business world, to include foreign entities. The visual nature of his brief appeals so well to the cognitive aspects desired by the typical bureaucratic audience in conjunction with a well-rehearsed and well-spoken dialogue, that it could be about any subject with any tilt and his presentation would have received entrée within the offices of powerful players of the Pentagon. Analysts have ego, and Barnett is no exception. PowerPoint, manipulated by the right hands will help to further an agenda which can be just as easily discussed without slides. This example will be discussed further in the next section concerning case studies.

PowerPoint isn't all misleading fragments of information, as described by Tufte and his analysis of NASA's slide ware exercises before and after shuttle disasters (Tufte, 2003: 11). It can have an overall misleading effect, with disastrous results. In the case of NASA, PowerPoint acted to lull the viewers into believing someone had handled problem "X," even though it was still an outstanding issue in the minds of many engineers, who had no real way to make their views known, other than feeding into the entities that would ultimately filter their views through slides to the leadership. The NASA slides were able to confuse and obfuscate to the point of hiding these critical issues. But PowerPoint can do more than just merely confuse or dilute. The slide ware application can be a convenient piece of software to skew the reality of the situation to one's one agenda, and then dazzle the audience with a sales pitch urging them to

passively agree as the inviting graphs, bullet lists, and other graphics artfully put together lull the viewer into a complacent role of agreement.

According to Dr. Tufte, PowerPoint itself is a metaphor for the bureaucracies within which it is used. In fact, to go further, it's an insidious form of control and indicative of a style of leadership which has become the norm of the current age. Later in the paper I will argue how PowerPoint itself works in a larger scheme and framework of control and discipline, even at times invisible to those reaping apparent utility from this apparent relationship of control.

Many dedicated users of PowerPoint dispute Tufte and others' harsh critiques of the oft-maligned software, normally taking a form of "PowerPoint is only a tool"-type defense. Usually these defenses blame the user for the poor nature of PowerPoint as it skews data, weakens verbal reasoning and puts the crowd to sleep through a less-than-stellar approach to presenting information (bullet lists). What these defenses rarely address are the deeper and more insidious features of PowerPoint—how in the hands of a skilled user it becomes a dangerous tool, and its normative influences within bureaucracies. The fact that these influences remain invisible to the majority merely strengthens the argument to be made in chapter five, where I discuss the Foucault-like normalizing aspects of this software. Tufte spends a large section of his critique on PowerPoint using Boeing engineer-generated PowerPoint slides presented to the NASA Columbia Mission Management Team, in regards to possible debris damage (Tufte: 2003, 7-10). Tufte's critique on the elements of the slides focuses on its "imprecise use of language, messy, nontransparent use of bullet hierarchies" (Tufte: 2003, pp. 7-10) and imprisoned data. In a response to Tufte's critiques, Barbara Shwom and Karl Keller rebut these types of criticisms aimed at the program—in the case of the Columbia-incident related slides, they squarely blame the engineers for not "understanding fundamental rhetorical principles" (Shwom, Keller: online). The authors focus on what are typical defenses of PowerPoint—looking for ways to re-work poor presentations in terms of format within the capabilities of PowerPoint's limitations. While they address the cosmetic concerns of PowerPoint, and admittedly present better ways of integrating information into the program, they fail to address one of the more salient points brought forth by Dr. Tufte: "information architectures mimic the hierarchical structure of the

bureaucracy producing those architectures” (Tufte, 2003: 7-10). The influence of PowerPoint goes beyond its limitations in the actual use of bullet statements or format, in the hands of one individual in the organization. It’s become the expected tool of communication in the modern bureaucratic setting, promoting a style of discourse that by its nature hides the facts, dominates the viewer, and yes, in some cases bores the audience to tears. Reworking the format of the information on the slides themselves may allow for a more genuine teaching/communication tool, but doesn’t affect the corporate expectations of what is to be given and received in this normally one-way dialogue, and in many cases the user is slavishly committed to using the software, and then unwittingly influenced by its format style. The integrity of the content is of the highest importance, but the visual-only, low density medium of PowerPoint allowed NASA to ignore key facts in the Columbia incident. Yes, a better presentation would have perhaps allowed for a better flow of information, even using PowerPoint; but it was the nature of this software that set the stage, and continues to facilitate these types of inadequate representations of the truth to be presented. Ultimately what these and other critics (defenders) do not adequately address are the social structures of a bureaucratic organization impacted through certain genre of communicative forms. In this case PowerPoint has become one of the most influential genres of our era.

John Seely Brown, former chief scientist for Xerox, and director of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, in a recent interview chimes in with his views on the use of PowerPoint as a communicative genre:

PowerPoint slides are very, very bad, as currently used, to tell good stories, and they’re very bad in terms of laying out a complex argument. Complex arguments are often non-linear. The beauty of the well-structured office memo is that you can start to see different pieces of the argument and how they come together. You may want to go back and review some of the assumptions that went into that line of the argument. Often an argument has 3 or 4 lines that come together – it’s called *proof by case* in mathematics. Very few interesting mathematical proofs are ever linear arguments (Atkinson, online).

PowerPoint “flattens” the argument or discussion into a more linear proof, one that must simplify the abstract in order to adhere to the format.

The “Genre” is a term used by Jo Anne Yates and Wanda Orlikowski of MIT, in their paper: *The PowerPoint Presentation and its Corollaries: How Genres Shape Communicative Actions in Organization*. According to these two management scholars, genres of communication within a social structure or organization often adhere to certain norms due to the following qualifiers: purpose, content, participants, form (how), time, and place (Yates, Orlikowski: 5). Certain settings, times, purposes, etc lend themselves to one genre of communication over another (e.g. conversation, email, memo, or PowerPoint) depending on these previously listed factors. Additionally, the corollary effect points out that the genres reflexively and insidiously have a life of their own and start spinning off into and influence the content of other genres (Yates, Orlikowski: 5). Much of what has been discussed as the influence of Power Point is attributable to this genre of communication becoming more prevalent in areas previously inhabited by other genres due to bureaucratic tendencies of organizations to lean toward this style of communication. This is attributable to a slow but insidious effect of the nature of communicative exercises within organizations and the impact of technology afforded by micro-medias such as PowerPoint. In many ways the “how” of PowerPoint influences its users into certain modes of thought, presentation, and genres—as the authors point out, taking from Edward Mark, Air Force historian, in a quote from *Slate.com*:

Almost all Air Force documents today, for example, are presented as PowerPoint briefings. They are almost never printed and rarely stored. When they are saved, they are often unaccompanied by any text. As a result, in many cases, the briefings are incomprehensible (Yates, Orlikowski: 25).

The frustration of the historian is understandable. Power Point in many ways has replaced many of the other genres of communication, not only to be recognized at the time of intended impact, but upon later reference. In many cases its understandable how Power Point can appear to be a worthless medium of communication after the fact, as one makes an attempt to interpret and understand bullet statement, graphics and the like—the lack of information density and even context as described by Tufte becomes glaringly obvious. As genres of communication are co-opted by PowerPoint, its style becomes a more influential part of the bureaucratic and social structure of an organization. This combination of usurping other genres, a specific and hierarchical format, works to set the



stage for a controlling aspect of this software that has insidiously and effectively become part of many organizations of government.

The Air Force has merged the accessibility of technology with its love of the “Bullet Background Paper” and taken it to its logical conclusion. According to AFM 33-337, “The Tongue and Quill,” there are several key attributes to an “effective” bullet statement: (underlines are part of the text used to help create the mnemonic “CABS”)

Concise relates to your “bottom line” Think like you’re writing a telegram and every word costs.

Accurate means stating the facts honestly...especially when writing performance reports, nominations, etc!

Brief speaks for itself.

Specific leaves no room for doubt... it’s definite, to the point and clear. If not, it may be clear as mud to someone else and you won’t be nearby to answer any questions! (AFH 33-337: 163)

The handbook goes on to break down the bullet phrase methodology in even more depth: “If you’re one of those analytical-thinkers, here’s a quick mathematical memory technique to use!”

**single idea bullets = CABS +1 (single idea or thought)**

**accomplishment-impact bullets = CABS + 2 (accomplishment and impact)**

(AFH 33-337: 163-164).

That’s just one example of how the military has taken the bullet statement to levels not seen in most other organizations, and based many of its genres of communication on its basic premise. PowerPoint is no exception.

The bullet paper format of the Air Force easily translates to a software application that by its inherent design is geared towards presenting text in this very way. This combined with the military’s briefing/meeting orientated nature, situation in a culture of technological perfection breeds an environment ripe for PowerPoint to thrive and be used in every imaginable way involving the transmission of information.

While case studies will follow in the following chapter, the next two military-produced slides help to show some of the typical cognitive shortcomings expressed by

Tufte and others in the use of convoluted PowerPoint—particularly as these slides become references and historical documents, not merely aids in facilitating a briefing.

Classification (U)



## *The Concept Framework*

### ***To enhance Joint Force capabilities, efforts must:***

- **Ensure Joint Concepts drive development of materiel and non-materiel solutions (DOTMLPF)**
  - **Looking toward the mid-term (2012-2015):**
    - **Apply experimentation efforts (JFCOM & Services) and Defense Planning Scenarios to identify capabilities required by Joint Forces**
    - **Leverage experimentation for near term programmatic**
  - **Expanding “bridges” with interagency and multinational partners that inform:**
    - **Experimentation efforts**
    - **Programmatic**

8

Classification (U) 2

The above slide comes from a brief by the Joint Staff, J7 Operational Plans and Joint Force Development Directorate, Joint Vision and Transformation Division. Obviously it's difficult to critique this slide without understanding it in the context of the briefing with which it was given. But one can immediately understand the concern of the historian or other concerned individual when attempting to reference documents and the struggle to interpret information based only upon a Power Point presentation encoded in bullet phraseology. In many cases, this is the only historical record of an argument or presentation, so one is left to deciphering. The slide itself exhibits four levels of hierarchy, exhibited by indent, size, and depth of description. Nothing is particularly illuminating when reading the bullet phraseology. Plain English is avoided, bullet-speak

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<sup>2</sup> Slide originally from the Defense Technical Information Center's site for the Joint Chief of Staff's Joint Doctrine Division at <http://dtic.mil/jcs/core/>-- accessed 25 Jan 2005. This link is no longer valid at the time of publication, as this division has moved to <http://www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/> and this specific briefing no longer exists on-line. This is a dynamic, ever-updating directorate of the Joint Staff. If the reader is interested in seeing a large number of PowerPoint briefings, ready for presentation to the highest levels of the Pentagon, this is the site to access. As of spring 2005, it is current and updated with cutting edge joint transformation data, mostly in .ppt format. The information density is overwhelming on its many briefing slides throughout the site---the time and detail put into graphics and formatting is staggering.

used freely. The style is used to jog the presenter’s memory, but in fact the one briefing will be compelled to be guided by the mostly lacking text. It’s hard to decipher whether the sub-elements are all equal in significance or not. How do “experimentation programs” stack up against “programmatics?” It’s almost impossible to tell, but PowerPoint implies they are nearly equal in scope, importance, and possibly to be applied at the same period of time—deciphering this with the skills of “Bulletology” to be gained through the reading of Tufte’s critical analyses of NASA slides. To a certain degree this slide serves the user in presenting a program that will now take complex sounding jargon and apply it to the issue at hand. PowerPoint is a useful tool for presenting buzzwords and phrases of complexity, to “assure” that the problem is being addressed by “experts” in the most professional and adept manner. That leads us to take a look at another slide from this presentation –

Classification (U)



## *Joint Concept Development Status*

- **JOpsC**
  - Staffed w/ Services / CoComs
  - OSD(P) on board (Dr. Lamb)
- **JOCs**
  - MCO: Ongoing experimentation effort
  - Stability Ops: Early draft; some experimentation
  - Homeland Security: Early draft; some experimentation; requirement for bridge to JFCOM
  - Strategic Deterrence: Early draft; requirement for bridge to JFCOM; no input to JCDE yet
- **Functional**
  - Early drafts
  - FCB Lead
  - FCB retain responsibility
- **RED TEAM Review Of All Concepts Under Way**

<sup>3</sup> Slide originally from the Defense Technical Information Center’s site for the Joint Chief of Staff’s Joint Doctrine Division at <http://dtic.mil/jcs/core/>-- accessed 25 Jan 2005. This link is no longer valid at the time of publication, as this division has moved to <http://www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/> and this specific briefing no longer exists on-line. This is a dynamic, ever-updating directorate of the Joint Staff. If the reader is interested in seeing a large number of PowerPoint briefings, ready for presentation to the highest levels of the Pentagon, this is the site to access. As of spring 2005, it is current and updated with cutting edge joint transformation data, mostly in .ppt format. The information density is overwhelming on its many briefing slides throughout the site---the time and detail put into graphics and formatting is staggering.

The bold statement at the end, in red, highlights the fact that “continuing work” is underway on the project. The use of color and emphasis should not be necessary, but aids the user in deflecting questions away from the previous points which may open themselves up to vulnerability. By boldly pronouncing (in RED!) that a review is ongoing, any critique of the information is obviously being addressed and more easily deflected. This is just one example of the special languages which develop through the systematic use of PowerPoint within organizations, and how it can be used to avoid delving deeply into issues.

PowerPoint is seemingly here to stay within the structure of our organizations, and its effects are felt throughout its vertical and horizontal dimensions. In many ways PowerPoint is merely an indication of the post modern technologically dependent society within which we now live. Information passes at lightening speed, and all must be ready to react and at the same time spin the information to their advantage. The utility of a piece of software like PowerPoint in many ways reflects the society in which we live and work, and in many cases the leadership and organizational style of the bureaucracies within which we work. The current President’s style of leadership in many ways reflects this hypereal, simplistic style of leadership and communication.

Has there been any hard research on the assimilation of PowerPoint in the minds of viewers? In effect, does it really matter? It’s difficult to find research. According to Tad Simons in his review of Multimedia/PowerPoint Survey on Presentations.com, he claims one of the most commonly quoted studies was done by 3M in 1986, using the media of 35mm slides and overhead transparencies (Simons, par. 2). Simons decries the dearth of such research, and was influential in allowing for the more recent work done by Dr. Hayward Andres and Dr. Candace Peterson in 1999, funded by Presentations Magazine.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of their study was to discover the differences, if any, in the effectiveness of presentations using different visual media formats. Their study supported the contention that multimedia is not only more persuasive, but in the minds of the viewer ads credibility to not only the briefer but the content of the brief (Simons: 8).

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<sup>4</sup> Presentations Magazine hired these two faculty members from Portland State University. Dr. Andres is an assistant professor specializing in the impact of information and technology on individuals and organizations. Dr. Peterson teaches courses in the strategic use of technology in business.

In Multimedia Learning, by Richard A. Mayer, professor of psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, he describes some research-based principles for the design of multimedia instructional messages and analyzes learning styles (Atkinson, online). The bottom line of his research seems to imply that there are many variables involved in cognitive absorption of information---but once again we are left at the level of Tufte's arguments, and whether PowerPoint transmits data adequately. Sometimes it does, many times it doesn't—but what this doesn't address is the fact that PowerPoint can adversely affect those briefing in ways they do not imagine. The structure of the code and the expectations of the presentation are merely accepted norms, as we will look at in chapter five—here is a hint, as well-stated by Dr. Tim Luke in his 1989 Screens of Power (I have used bold to highlight the key phrase in this quote, which says much):

Our everyday experience in the various mediascapes made accessible to us by informationalization “naturalizes the odd and appalling. Offers them as common sense, in Gramsci's way of putting it. Domination filters through a thousand capillaries of transmission, a million habitual meanings. **Most of the time it doesn't feel like domination, but like getting on with business**”  
(Luke, 1989: 12).

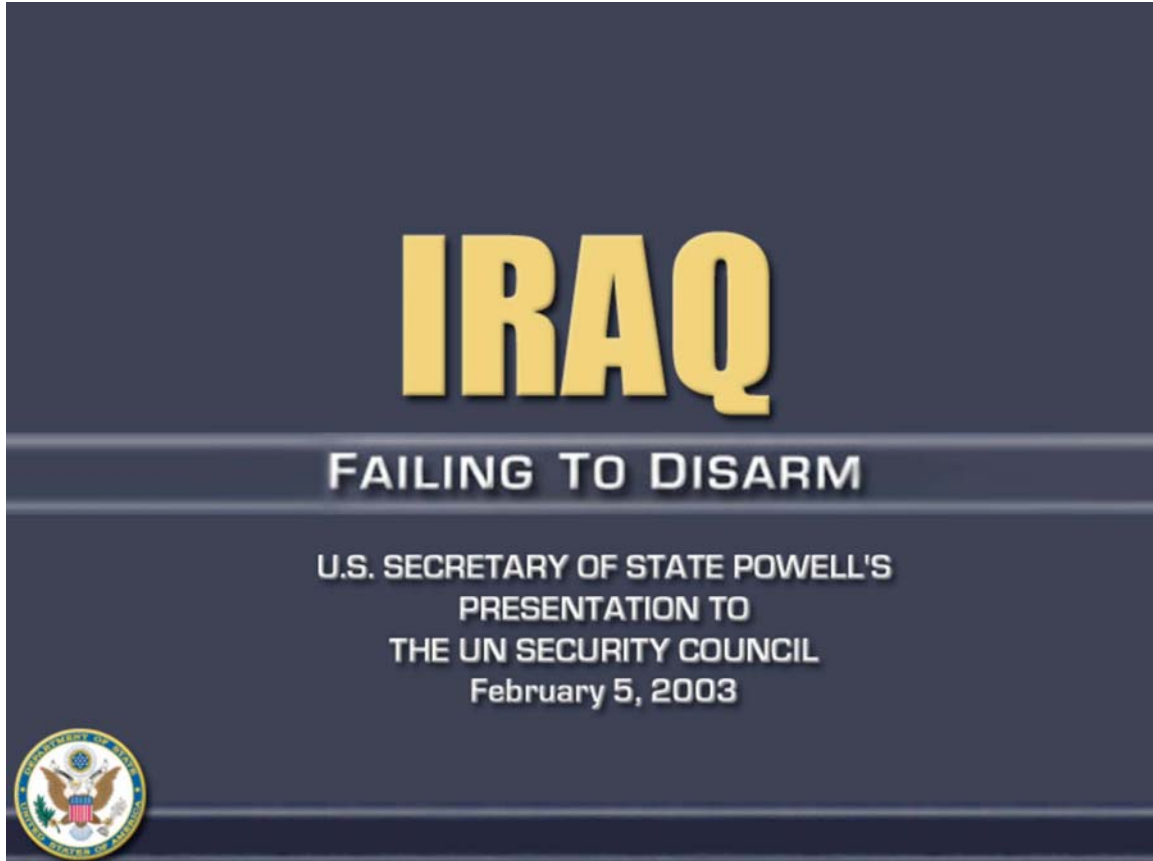
There is no doubt, that in this day and age, when one is tasked with presenting, PowerPoint is all about “getting on with business.”

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### CASE STUDIES

In this section I will present several examples of how PowerPoint is used/misused in its application: as a poor substitute for more developed methods of critical analysis, as a tool rewarding theater over substance, as a device of control and domination within the bureaucracy, and finally indicative of a greater style of leadership within society and government.

Colin Powell's address to the United Nations on 5 February 2003 has become an almost classic case of an attempt to provide evidence of non-existent facts. Using poorly obtained and analyzed intelligence, Powell was charged with presenting the case of invading Iraq to the United Nations on premises which now have proved (mostly) baseless. The use of PowerPoint in Powell's presentation is noteworthy in its application as a medium which takes a desired reality to present as fact. The arrangement of graphics and bullet statements vis-à-vis a heartfelt presentation in the context of a misrepresented reality remains as a significant warning on the use and interpretation of PowerPoint. While the slide ware did its best to support the argument at hand, it was ultimately the intellectually-thin nature of these slides which did little to convince anyone in the UN either way after the day's presentation—it was not significant enough in its intellectual depth and rigor to change minds, which is not surprising given the fact there was no foundation for any real conviction. Additionally, this presentation format will be contrasted against the well-remembered and esteemed actions of Adli Stephenson in his address and questioning in the UN in 1962. His confrontation of the Russian representative and credible presentation of evidence is still a benchmark event in the U.N. Collin Powell's presentation will mostly live in infamy due to its inaccuracy, and never was in danger of achieving greatness, partially due to its lack of rigor, in no small part due to the inclusion of PowerPoint.



Slide one is standard PowerPoint introductory fare. Someone, far below Secretary Powell's level, has created a template which may or may not be the State Department standard. In fact it appears that Powell's original presentation was modified for later dissemination with the standard template. Many organizations have come to demand a standard template which normally includes the organization's crest, a neutral background, and in some cases a "motivational" or "organizational quote." While this in itself may seem rather harmless, this type of requirement for conformity is merely the first step towards quashing creativity, demanding adherence to certain norms, and following a linear, uncreative framework for presentation. The title of the presentation is ostensibly about Iraq, but Powell is already spinning the issue in terms of a sales pitch by titling the

brief “Failing to Disarm.” The real crux of the brief was in actuality “reasons to invade and disarm Iraq by force” or perhaps “these are the reasons we are going to tell the world we are going to invade Iraq.” Secretary Powell, by using this title, is already making the leap to a conclusion which will alienate a large portion of the audience that disagrees with the United States’ stance, and create a barrier to accepting further information at face value.

## IRAQ FAILING TO DISARM

### Iraq Is Hiding Evidence

Conversation between two Iraqi military officers, November 26, 2002

*Col: we have this modified vehicle.....*

*Gen: I'm worried you all have something left.*

*Col: We evacuated everything. We don't have anything left.*

Iraqi trucks removing materials from sites to be inspected



U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE POWELL'S PRESENTATION TO THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

Slide two represents the entry into typical PowerPoint presentation format. It's interesting to note that the Secretary did not use a typical military/government style of providing an “introduction slide” with bullets representing the topics which will be discussed. At this level, it would be inappropriate for someone of Sec. Powell’s stature, and his audience, to submit to the usual repertoire of lower level briefer. This indicates



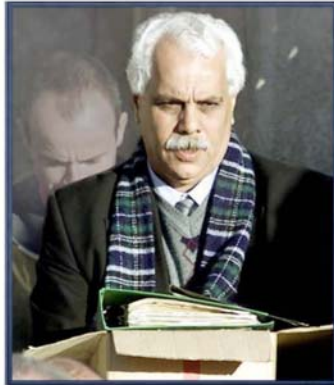
that the briefer is not concerned with the presentation of information as much as for creating an effective advertisement or sales pitch. This is similar to the way in which email is utilized within a bureaucratic organization. As one moves up the “food chain,” details such as capitalization, large signature blocks, and the like are normally forgone for the minimalist approach with the subtext implying that these accoutrements are beneath someone of his/her level. In the same line of reasoning, it would be beneath someone of Powell’s level to have a briefing which conformed to a typical preview/review format. Essentially, he is going to tell you the facts, without a preview of points and review at the end, typical of lower end briefs.

The goal in Powell’s case is to present one set of circumstantial evidence after another in succession, without lingering, in order to create an atmosphere of guilt without lingering long on the facts of each piece. These are the forte of PowerPoint, but at the same time its intellectual weakness that ultimately causes it to fail. In the case of this first slide it says little, just as the associated tape implied. A somewhat thin piece of audio evidence—an extract—is combined with a mostly unrelated photo of a building. The photo by itself offers no definitive evidence. Arrows are added to imply “activity.” Even though nothing is known about the material being moved, if any, by the fact of a coming inspection in association with audio evidence, PowerPoint works to compel the audience to make the conceptual link, as weak as it is. The PowerPoint helps to create a reality which in fact has turned out to be non-existent. Those who believed that Iraq was hiding a plethora of WMD were only had their beliefs solidified by this slide—those on the other side of the fence were in no danger of having their minds changed given this weak and superficial piece of evidence.

## Iraq Is Muzzling Its Scientists

Individuals with access report documents are being hidden in private homes and cars

Documents found in the home of an Iraqi scientist



Saddam has:

- Arrested scientists
- Forced scientists to sign documents acknowledging that divulging information is punishable by death
- Even issued a false death certificate for one scientist.



U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE POWELL'S PRESENTATION TO THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

This slide uses a photo which apparently sets an unstated visual confirmation of the bullet points being supported. A picture of an individual with a stack of book encourages the viewer to understand that these are documents containing plans for WMD. The ominous set of folders and brown boxes being taken from the “scientist’s house” acts as a strong visual used by PowerPoint to support the idea, not backed by extensive evidence, that a great preponderance of illegal WMD-related plans are being hidden throughout the country in private homes. If we can’t find them, it’s not proof they aren’t there—they are in houses and homes, waiting to be found and extracted. The bullet statements used in this typical PowerPoint format say little, and support the statement with even less. The small text on the left, “Documents found in the home of Iraqi scientist” also says nothing, but implies much. What kind of documents? How many? Where are the others? There is little further information to be had.

## Iraq Is Hiding Dangerous Weapons

After inspectors revealed his earlier biological program, Saddam built biological weapons factories on wheels

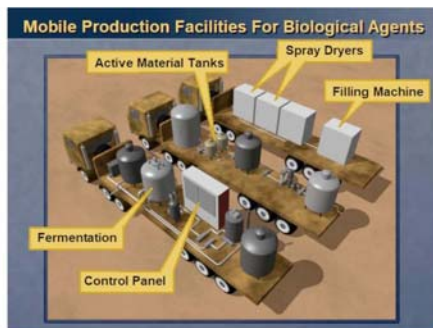
Instructions relayed to an officer in the field, January 2003

A: Capt. Ibrahim?

B: I am with you, sir.

A: Remove.. the expression... **nerve agents...** whenever it comes up.. in the wireless instructions.

B: Consider it done, sir.



U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE POWELL'S PRESENTATION TO THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

In high contrast to obvious U-2 photos of missile sites and in Cuba in 1962, this particular slide depicts the need to use graphics and visuals to create evidence not readily available. Where are the actual mobile production facilities? Instead we have a fabricated visual of trucks, perfectly aligned and displayed as the nerve production asset available to and used by Iraq. These graphics are apparently taken from descriptions of “eye witnesses.”<sup>5</sup> Further, it’s not obvious how this relates to a few short intercepted lines of phone conversation, presented in text on the right side of the slide, but the slide goes on to imply that the two items are directly connected. This is when in fact there have been no trucks found, and was possibly none before or during this period. Those already sold on Iraq’s guilt in WMD production become only more certain of his/her beliefs, while those on the undecided or skeptical side of the issue are even less

<sup>5</sup> Powell, accompanying speech to the UN, C-SPAN.org, 5 Feb 2003

convinced after such thin evidence, little helped by PowerPoint. In his presentation, Powell uses these drawings to support his contention that the vehicles exist, and that they are easily hidden, mobile, and numerous (C-SPAN, Feb 2003). At the time of this writing, no such trucks were ever found.

## **IRAQ** FAILING TO DISARM

### **Iraq Still Seeks Nuclear Weapons**

Iraq ordered aluminum tubes from 11 countries with specifications much higher than needed for rockets

Through a complex network of front companies, Iraq has been ordering magnets, balancing machines and other equipment, along with the tubes, used to enrich uranium



U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE POWELL'S PRESENTATION TO THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

This slide was controversial within certain groups even before its presentation. Few in the know considered these tubes as related in any way to enriching uranium. According to news sources now:

Experts at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the scientists who enriched uranium for American bombs, advised that the tubes were all wrong for a bomb program. At about the same time, Thielmann's office was working on another explanation. It turned out the tubes' dimensions perfectly matched an Iraqi conventional rocket.

"The aluminum was exactly, I think, what the Iraqis wanted for artillery," recalls Thielmann, who says he sent that word up to the Secretary of State months before (CBS.com).

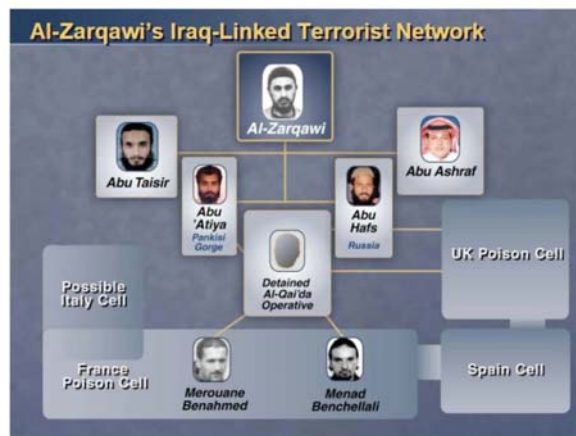
In this case, typical of PowerPoint's style, a large jump is made from a photo of tubes to direct evidence of an active Iraqi uranium enrichment program. By adding a multitude of

other purchases, which to the layman may or may not be complicate in nuclear weapon research, Powell offers pseudo-evidence for his point. The data-limited format of PowerPoint only helps the briefer to present a contention, support it quickly with visual and bullet quotes, and then move on before the limited evidence backing the contention can be exposed. Upon further reflection the limited info presented by this slide and in the corresponding discussion by Powell only underlines the weakness of this argument. The slide itself shows little and says little, but obviously works to fill the space of the slide and in the world of PowerPoint, this space is the reality. Further evidence has now supported the contention of the individual quoted above; that there were many from the intelligence community who thought these tubes had no real application to WMD research, creation, or employment.

**IRAQ** FAILING TO DISARM

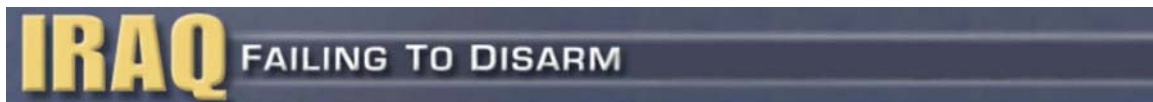
## Iraq Is Harboring Terrorists, Including Al Qaida

A senior Al Qaida associate and collaborator, Al Zarqawi, established a network of poison cells centered on Iraq



U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE POWELL'S PRESENTATION TO THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

There was never any real evidence of any Iraqi-Al Qaida link within the Iraqi government, and that remains true even to this day. But the point of this paper is not to debate the invasion of Iraq. It's to look at the weak nature and or subversive nature of PowerPoint reflected by the arguments it attempts to support. In the case of this slide, a nice, neat wire diagram of faces, names, and connections by its nature creates a reality of "terrorist networks" and highly researched cells embedded into the Iraqi infrastructure. The quality of the graphic implies truth. The faces of the terrorists work to strengthen the truth-quotient of the slide. If we have an organization clearly defined with faces and names, then it logically follows that the less detailed basic premise of the slide must at least be true, i.e. Iraqi support to terror cells. In effect, a highly graphical diagram acts as a sales pitch to plead for wafer thin evidence.



## **Iraq Has Refused To Disarm Peacefully**

- Iraq's actions to hide and cover up evidence constitute a deliberate campaign to prevent any meaningful inspection work.
- We believe Iraq is in material breach of UN Security Council Resolution 1441.
- Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are a real and present danger to the people of Iraq, its neighbors and the world.
- Terrorist groups could use these horrible weapons anywhere in the world.



U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE POWELL'S PRESENTATION TO THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

Here is depicted a normal litany of PowerPoint bullet statements, four neatly arranged in order. The top line is a convoluted statement—what is to disarm peacefully? “Peacefully” is mainly used as effect without real qualification—typical of how

PowerPoint works best. The bullet statements themselves plead for belief without corresponding evidence. Powell attempts to do so during the presentation, but once again the jumps of logic do not follow without taking the presenter at more than face value. The last bullet statement is meant to imply that all viewers at the UN and around the world are at risk of the “horrible weapons,” which once again is debatable in its contention given the small amount of evidence on previous slides. Obviously Powell is attempting to make a strong case, but the bullet statements do little to further the explanation to a convicting level---the bullet statements, like the accompanying verbal text, say little and support little in the way of evidence, but attempt to set the atmosphere as one of “guilt”.

These are select slides from the brief---the full set of slides can be seen in the appendix. The slides and the corresponding presentation given by Secretary Powell are in stark contrast to the dramatic events of 25 October 1962, when Adili Stephenson addressed the UN concerning the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. His use of dialogue, questioning, and direct photographic evidence supported known and verified facts. Secretary Stephenson presented detailed photos taken by U-2 reconnaissance planes, of specific weapons systems at specific times and at specifically described locations. There was no conjecture or false assumptions in this case. Rhetoric, argument, and confrontation was key to presenting points without the hype---there was no need for overhead flimsies to guide the discussion and present evidence---the visual evidence and argument spoke for itself.

According to the September 2000 Educational Technology Journal, in the execution of a presentation we “hope to see a carefully constructed argument tied to convincing examples. We also expect to see the counter arguments and alternative theories laid to rest or discredited by offering of facts or evidence or arguments that show their inadequacies” (FNO: para 2). The Secretary’s presentation fails in this respect, and PowerPoint allows the speaker to present only the tip of a non-existent “iceberg.”

### **PowerPoint as theater—style trumps ideas**

The Pentagon’s New Map (PNG), a recently published and now influential book by Thomas Barnett is a compliment to and in effect the book version of one of the most

polished and professional PowerPoint briefs produced today. According to Greg Jaffe of the Wall Street Journal:

At the urging of his Pentagon bosses, Mr. Barnett overhauled (his) concept to address more directly the post-9/11 world. The result is a three-hour PowerPoint presentation that more resembles performance art than a Pentagon briefing. It's making Mr. Barnett, 41 years old, a key figure in the debate currently raging about what the modern military should look like. Senior military officials say his decidedly controversial ideas are influencing the way the Pentagon views its enemies, vulnerabilities and future structure....

"This blueprint for America's defense force comes wrapped in a presentation devised by Mr. Barnett that samples the 'ching ching' sound effect from the television series Law & Order, borrows lines from The Sopranos and features the voice of movie character Austin Powers calling out 'Oh yeah, baby!' to punctuate a key idea...

"Tom polarizes people with his brief. They either love it or they hate it,' says retired Navy Capt. Bradd Hayes, a professor at the Naval War College, where Mr. Barnett also teaches" (Jaffe, 2004).

Barnett's ideas are reaching throughout the military, government, and private sector. In the most recent review of the book on 14 Dec 2004, in the Washington Post, David Ignatius points out his observations on its influence:

His concepts have spread so fast among the military brass that when I was in Bahrain two weeks ago, I heard a Barnett-style briefing from the commander of U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf, Vice Adm. David Nichols. He outlined a strategy of encouraging countries in the Middle East to move toward "connected" economies, orderly "rule sets" and democratic political reform (Ignatius, 2004).

Barnett, at the relatively young age of 41, is an advocate of technology and uses it fully in the advancement of his ideas and correspondingly his career. He maintains and updates a daily blog, <http://www.thomaspmbarnett.com>, with analysis of his every review, presentation, and uses it as a sounding board for ideas. He's comfortable with technology, and his use of PowerPoint is no exception.

In PNG, Barnett reveals the importance of the brief, and by connection, that of PowerPoint within the walls of the Pentagon.

The brief is the dominant form of idea transmission in the world of the Pentagon, far more than in any other part of the government and far more than in the business world.



Inside the Pentagon, the “killer brief” is everything, and so an amazing amount of effort goes into the construction of slides...the killer brief can do wonders for one’s career (65).

He goes on to point out the necessary competitive exercise taking place in a PowerPoint-oratory environment, built in a norm of expectations:

Every battle I have won in my career began with a brief that outperformed the ideas presented by competitors. Inside the Pentagon, that is how bureaucratic wars are essentially waged—one briefing room at a time...As an analyst, you want nothing more than to produce the killer brief and run it up the chain, because, frankly, that is just about the only way you ever get into the offices of the senior-most officials. A killer article will not do it, because the official can simply peruse a summary prepared by his staff. Only the killer brief will get you that most valued of Washington commodities—face time with a senior government official. Get your ideas to the right senior official (members of Congress can be especially good conduits), and you might find your ideas being briefed to the Secretary of Defense or the Secretary of State, or passed along to the President himself. If your timing is right, you can change U.S. policy or help to redefine its expression. In short, the right brief can change history (65).

In other words, the right PowerPoint application can change history. The military operates in a culture which expects and rewards theater to a certain degree. The ideas themselves have obvious importance, but they must be run through a gauntlet of part-time PowerPoint theater critics in order to gain entrée into the offices of power. It begs the question: how many great ideas are out there which are not backed by great speakers who have mastered the art of PowerPoint? It’s apparent that Barnett’s ideas are already having an impact—he’s been featured on C-SPAN, numerous papers such as the *Wall Street Journal*, and will present again on C-SPAN in the near future in one of his numerous speaking engagements before those in the military and/or political communities. His book is becoming common reading for many policy makers, and has made the top-30 on amazon.com—all due to the “killer brief.” There is no doubt that the brief which became the book is one of the most polished, articulate, and impressive presentations of the political-military variety—if I could imbed salient portions of the DVD sold on CSPAN which covers his brief in almost three hours into this paper I would. As more and more politicians, military leaders, and others parrot Barnett’s terms such as “rule sets,” “the gap-the core,” and “system-level perturbations” it should be

remembered that this is the culmination of a piece of PowerPoint which has worked its way through the chain of command, organically being redefined within the limitations of the Microsoft application itself. In the truest sense of the cyborg—the technologically influenced being/system, policy cannot be separated from this greater process of the “killer brief,” inherent qualities of “power point” and the slavish nature which both briefer and the briefed require such a format of electronic perfection. While this paper focuses on PowerPoint, its hard to surgically remove this program from the greater system of the bureaucratic machine which not only is influenced by the art and style of PowerPoint, but feeds back into the requirement for PowerPoint itself in a continuing cycle. It’s no surprise that within the Pentagon, where Barnett’s brief first gained traction, the brief, or PowerPoint exercise, has become the standard since in the daily realities of the military it often defines the reality, working to delineate information, behavior, and agendas up and down the chain of command. Finally, in a telling quote from his on-line blog, Barnett alludes to the fact that the sequel he is writing for PNG is harder for the original. One reason: “This time is harder, and now I know why. Last night on phone Mark asks how I like writing a book without any slides to guide me. Smart ass, he, but a really telling question. Made me realize a lot of my angst. Smarty-pants editors are like that” (Barnett, 4 Feb 2005).

A final danger of the highly refined “killer brief” is that the associated work and baggage tied to the content takes on a life of its own. One former military leader reflected on the fact that his staff would often use old information in their briefs since it looked more “finished” and “professional” (Woodbridge, 2004). Expectations from above and the system itself drive this compulsion to PowerPoint perfection, even at the cost of content—the brief has trumped the idea.

### **PowerPoint at work in the bureaucracy**

There is no doubt that PowerPoint is the expected medium of communication within the standard military organization. As officers are groomed for higher jobs, they learn early to use and speak through PowerPoint, and the standards are so exacting that many an hour has been spent toiling of serious decisions such as font size and color scheme. Organizational templates are the norm, and bullet points are the textual medium through which one speaks. Slide ware may present the status of an Air Wing’s daily

readiness posture, proposals for a next year's budget, or a future outlook or schedule of events. The brief is given such a level of importance that the slides themselves achieve the function of re-representing reality, and the reality of the slide becomes the topic of discussion, presentation, discussion. If an error is made on a slide, more often than not the topic of discussion switches to a focus on the slide. It becomes an exercise in critiquing the brief, not the information held within. The viewers have been so conditioned in this exercise, even when they attempt to move on from an obvious error or PowerPoint "faux pas," it's almost impossible or at the least can take great effort in these bureaucrats trained and groomed in the exercise of visual electronic perfection. Convolved graphs, diagrams, and other slide ware specific items rarely add to the presentation, and bullet statements merely detract from the effectiveness of the speaker as he or she is lured into parroting what is to be read. The overall visual nature of the presentation, in its TV-like effect, keeps the view focused on the visual, and recipients of information are often either distracted by annoyances or lured into misrepresented graphics, bullet statements, and the like. PowerPoint encourages a one-way dissemination of information, even during situations where two-way, give and take dialogue would be of use—in the sense of the theater aspect, more often than not the junior officer is engaged in an exercise in slide ware preparation and presentation as opposed to focusing on the issue at hand. Perfection in slide ware and presentation is expected to the detriment of dynamic thinking, information (not PowerPoint)-dominant discussions.

According to the official Air Force manual on official communications, Air Force Handbook 33-337, "The Tongue and Quill," there are five reasons for meetings: "to give info, to solve problems, to plan, to brainstorm and to motivate" (AFH 33-337, 1997: 105). The manual then proceeds to give recommendations which may encourage the use of PowerPoint, but does not recommend this genre to the exclusion of all other forms of communication. Unfortunately, this is becoming the case as the technologically accessible PowerPoint has joined the military's love with the bullet background paper in an unholy alliance now taken to absurd extremes. In the specific case of one Air Wing, the emphasis on daily operational slides to be presented to the wing commander created an additional meeting one hour prior to review the slides which were to be shown at the

meeting one level up the chain. PowerPoint became a contributing factor in turning the “1500 meeting” from a discussion of the days events into a highly charged, performance oriented event where the slides on the wall do the thinking, talking, and representation of the truth while commanders around the table scramble to explain the reality behind the slide ware in their defense. This has become the norm within any presentation of information within the military, government, and many levels of bureaucracy. The expected genre of communication is the PowerPoint presentation. When given to a superior at several levels above, it comes with expectations of perfection, precision, and adhering to a specific format. The daily grind of producing these slides and attempting to represent the reality of the dynamic situation that may occur in a daily flying organization becomes an overriding concern of many. The ceremony that accompanies the slide ware only intensifies its theatric effect, to the detriment of dialogue and the actual facts at the heart of the presentation. It normally occurs in the hallowed briefing room of the “headquarters” where the executive officer/assistant compiles and brings up the briefing slides on to a large, nearly wall-sized screen. In some cases a double screen to allow viewing from all angles. In front of the large screen is the main meeting table, similar to many boardrooms around the world, surrounded by comfortable leather chairs with the main chair of command sitting at the head of the table, facing the oversized screens. Lining the walls around the main table are chairs which are reserved for those lower in the echelon of the bureaucracy, ready to back up their commanders with any unexpected questions which may arise, and also there to possibly take notes, or just observe the proceedings. God help the presenter who brings forth a slide maligned with a misspelling or other error within this shrine of PowerPoint. The presentation in the case of this daily “1500 meeting” is the conglomeration of various inputs from various entities on base, ostensibly for the purposes of informing the Wing Commander on operational flying events, but also putting the various lower echelon commanders “on trial” for the events, deviations, and other activities. There is at one time no “presenter” and at the same time multiple “presenters” as anyone in the room may be implicated to answer to the slide in question, produce more information on a slide that becomes an item of concern. He or she will be charged to perform and produce further information, provide explanation, or refer the question to others more able to answer. The slides themselves, as

they pass through the various levels of the bureaucracy in preparation for this meeting, are open to error and interpretation as real time data is passed to other formats and eventually to the database produced onto the PowerPoint slide. The PowerPoint, through the voice and authority of the presiding commander, becomes an entity of control, discipline, authority, and reality. If information is incorrectly passed onto a slide, then this grievous error is almost as great as a misstep concerning the actual facts themselves. An inadequate explanation interpreting the “reality” of the slide ware is unacceptable, and causes ripples down through each organization. Because of the face-losing nature of a poor PowerPoint experience, and the associated negative repercussions (a lowering of the individual’s standing in the eyes of the commander), the PowerPoint presentation has become of such a high interest item that other meeting and auxiliary functions have been produced to prepare for the briefing. For the “1500 meeting”, in this organization we are using as an example, one of the Groups (units) which, on a daily basis, is implicated at the wing, now uses a lower level “1400 meeting” in order to prepare for the “1500 meeting.” This exercise, at the lower levels of the bureaucratic chain (i.e. squadron) requires preparations to begin well before noon for the purposes of slide presentations that will be vetted through the “1400 meeting” in preparation for the “1500 meeting”. This occurs at the same time that the same manpower is required to continue the actual and real operations of day-to-day flying operations, aircraft operations, orders filed, crews briefed, administrative and personal errands executed, all while in contrast to the elusive and time-consuming ghost PowerPoint world which must be created to mimic the reality of what has, is, and will occur. This culture of Power Point pervades to the lowest levels and of course climbs to the highest levels of government. In contrast to a simple roundtable discussion of give-and-take discourse on the daily events, there is instead a performance, mimicking the style of PowerPoint played out on the bureaucratic stage; while it sounds like a page from the writings of Joseph Heller in Catch 22, it is instead an unfortunate reality.

### **The PowerPoint Presidency**

The nature of PowerPoint is in many ways due to technological advances that have now permeated society. As previously discussed, PowerPoint is a medium which encourages one-sided presentations encouraging little discussion and adherence to

agenda. It is bullet style, in a simplistic representation of reality to be understood. It is not a format of in-depth discussion, dialogue, and complex weaving of ideas.

PowerPoint's style is interestingly similar to the style of presidency exhibited by our current leader in the White House. Is society and leadership in general now part of a greater style which is exhibited in not only PowerPoint, but in many aspects of society due to the influx of technological speed and accessibility? This section poses this question, and attempts to point out supporting evidence to such a situation.

As described by former Secretary of the Treasury, Paul O'Neill in his book written with Ron Suskind:

“There was never any rigorous talk about this sweeping idea that seemed to be driving all the specific actions,” O'Neill said, echoing the comments of several other participants in NSC discussions (86).

The meeting had seemed scripted. Rumsfeld had said little, Cheney nothing at all, through both men had long entertained the idea of overthrowing Saddam. Rice orchestrated, and Tenet had a presentation ready. Powell seemed surprised that we were abandoning the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and making Iraq the focal point (87).

Now, as O'Neill jotted notes about to add fiber to the policy process in this White House, and about how to persuade Cheney to take the lead, he reflected on how different the tentative, quip-ready Bush was from the secure, magnanimous Ford. “I realized, thinking back, that Ford didn't need me to answer that question—it was just a way to get me noticed and say something nice about me to the press. Hell, he knew the ins and outs of the damn budget better than any of us...” “this president was so utterly different from those men” (168).

The current president is known for his short, bullet-like statements when speaking in public, while sticking to simple, straightforward ideas. According to O'Neill and others from within the administration, there is little in the way of dialogue and more along the lines of adherence to an ideology—typified by the current neoconservative administration. Like a PowerPoint presentation, Bush's style is to present a narrative, or realities, not leaving it open as a target long for discussion or debate. In an interview with Diane Sawyer on ABC, when asked about what it would take to convince the President that there “were no weapons of mass destruction,” the President “replied with his mantra, ‘America is a safer country’ (Clarke, 2004: 266). Almost as if there were a large slide for dealing with Iraqi questions—just repeat bullet one, “America is safer.”

Like PowerPoint, the object is to create a story, and represent that story in a simple format, without lingering too long on any one point. To do so is to invite scrutiny and perhaps reveal the concept for the nakedness of its intellectual quality. PowerPoint complements well with a simple, black-and-white view of the world—the administration and the president have been critiqued as doing the same. According to David Gergen, President Bush can be described as: “a big-picture fellow who learned in business school and in Austin to focus on only two or three goals at a time and pursue them fiercely, seeing other issues as distractions” (Gergen, 2003). What could be more symbolic of this style of leadership and administration than the landing of the President on the USS Lincoln in flight gear, where he declared the end to combat operations in Iraq? With the bullet style slogan “Mission Accomplished” adhered to the walls of the aircraft carrier behind him, Bush used the visual to the extreme, arriving as the victorious war-president, reliving his past days as a National Guard fighter pilot, even managing to obtain some “stick time” before his dramatic arrival. It was an illusion of triumph and victory even as the occupation of Iraq was beginning to take its toll on the troops as they switched from what they were good at—winning a short war—to what they were not so good at—winning the extended peace. Similar to misleading fluff, slide ware animations and graphics, the spectacle created by the president was representative of the postmodern condition of the society of the spectacle and reliance on contrived illusions to create realities more real than reality itself. What is interesting about the pervading style of PowerPoint as it mimics and is mimicked in our daily, bullet list-like lives and dialogues, is the fact that it is not realized at many levels what a pervasive effect this style may have on content. Similar to Foucault’s society of control and discipline, our organizations use and are used by PowerPoint’s style to conform, inform, and lead in a certain style that is self-generating.

Michael Baron of the Heritage Institute has likened the styles of Bush and Clinton with metaphors of physics. In this metaphor, Clinton could be described as the “wave theory” of particles, while on the other hand Bush would be better described under a “quantum theory” (Baron, online).

Bush, it seems to me, in contrast, is more like the quantum theory of light. For long periods of time, he does not seem to be speaking or, so far as the public can tell, doing something on an issue. Then, suddenly, you have a pulse of energy. He comes forward at

a particular time in a particular setting where he's likely to get the most attention, and he comes forward with new ways of framing issues, new ways of explaining where we are in history, what his policies are, and why they are likely to be successful, or why he thinks they should be successful (Baron, online)

In effect, he frames issues in distinct, clear, distinguishable parts, similar to the bullet point which exemplifies the speaking style of PowerPoint. As opposed to a Clinton who loathed describing entities in terms of monolithic “good” and “evil” Bush is seemingly wired to quickly analyze and categorize. Like a PowerPoint presentation which gives short, bullet like statements of information, the President can quickly lay down the reality of the politics with which he deals into simple, linear, compact phrases of description. Bush is not particularly articulate, and does a poor job speaking “off the cuff.” He is better suited to reading prepared statements from a teleprompter. He speaks like a man searching for words, or in many cases like a man using a poorly rehearsed PowerPoint presentation.

While the previous comparisons are an attempt at drawing comparisons between Bush’s style and PowerPoint, in actuality little analysis is necessary. Even Fox news can’t miss Bush’s penchant for the use of bullet statements and backdrops utilized in a bullet-style format.

The backdrops serve to repeat the message Bush wants to deliver. For example, "Jobs Growth Opportunity" was the wallpaper at a recent speech on the economy, and the words "Access, Affordability, Quality" floated behind Bush as he spoke about health care (D’Angelo, 2003).

Listening to the January 2003 State of the Union address, one could almost imagine the President reading from PowerPoint slides in his presentation. According to one analyst of the speech, there was little flow, no integration of disparate elements, and no real clear discussion of how we will get from one point to the other (modernprometheus.com, online) Policy becomes a to-do list of outcomes, without any real clear analysis of how we get there and what comes of these choices. The war in Iraq seems to be a clear example of this:

- Win the war by disposing the regime
- Be welcomed by liberating Iraqis
- Set up new democracy



- Hand over control and let Iraq stand as a beginning to sweeping changes in the Middle East

The reality is that the first was accomplishable, the rest not so clearly thought out as has been shown by the U.S. inability to win the peace. With a quantum view of the world, issues, problems, and solutions, the murky post-war Iraq has completely taken the administration by surprise. Some look at President Bush's leadership style as decisive, tough, and not inclined to second guessing decisions. But others view these traits as describing a leader who is "intellectually lazy and dependent on ideology and sloganeering instead of realism and clear thinking" (Allen, 2004). A description very similar to one made of PowerPoint by its many critics of its intellectual style. Fred I. Greenstein, a Princeton University political scientist and authority on presidential leadership styles, also agrees with this analysis of the President's style: "Bush's clarity of purpose reduces the tendency in government to let matters drift, but too often 'results in a vision that may be simplistic or insufficiently examined or something that undermines itself'" (Allen, 2004). The simplicity of Bush's style is like the simplicity of PowerPoint's general format, which ultimately works to undermine itself. It utterly lacks the intellectual depth to convince, and leaves the facts presented almost empty of content or complexity—of the complexity that exists is hidden behind a shield of bullet-style simplicity.

As has been previously discussed within this paper, PowerPoint, due to its style, format, visual nature, and infusion into society, is a particularly useful tool for pushing an ideological agenda while spinning the underlying structure of support or leaving that network of support hidden. By a quick, forthright, and visually-based but verbally simplified presentation of the information, an idea and position can be presented without deep and complex discussion. This would typify many moves of the administration in terms of justifying the war in Iraq as it bounced from the many numerous reasons for action over the months proceeding and following the war.

One Pentagon civil servant specializing in Middle East policy described to me how, a few months after 9/11, he was chastised by a superior, a political appointee, for delivering a negative assessment of a proposed policy in a briefing memo to the Secretary of Defense. The civil servant changed his assessment as instructed but still included a list of potential pros and cons. But that wasn't good enough either. The senior official told him, "It's still

not acceptable. Take out all the discussion of the cons and basically write there's no reason why we shouldn't [do this]. 'I just thought this was intellectually dishonest' (Marshall, 2003)

These kinds of scenarios highlight the simplified, one-sided nature of an ideology at work. PowerPoint can be and is an effective tool in the administration of such bureaucratic processes.

In a linguistic comparison between George Bush and John Kerry in the recent election, some telling things are shown by the way Bush speaks. Bush rarely allows complexity to “cloud his remarks,” and even if he wished to infuse his speaking with such complexities, his syntax “would not allow it” (Nunberg, online). Bush will often begin statements with “see” or “you see” when communicating or speaking. According to linguist Geoff Nunberg, these terms are most commonly used when the speaker is intending to let the listener in on something he knows—kind of a secret about the truth being shared (Nunberg, online).

He packages a truism as if it is “inside information,” and this in effect tells the listener that in fact there are people out there who “don't get it.” To his supporters, this style exudes self-confidence, while to his detractors it shows a certain amount of smugness or simplicity. In effect, the nuances of Bush's speaking patterns and habits are similar to a set format of simplicity exhibited by Power Point in the presentation of an ideology. It's nearly one in the same at work.



6

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Visual Interpretation and Dominance of PowerPoint

*It is one thing...to apprehend directly an image as image, and another thing to shape ideas regarding the nature of images in general.*

Jean-Paul Sarte, *Imagination* (1962)

PowerPoint serves as a genre of communication relying primarily upon the visual as a medium for transmitting information. Within PowerPoint images and words clumsily fall together to act in the role of signifiers. In the use of PowerPoint we are relying on the display, the presenter, and the viewer, and consequentially it dominates through its use of the visual in the presentation of evidence. The dominance of vision in the use of PowerPoint both plays to its weaknesses and strengths. The snapshot style of slide-ware presented in a limited medium defined by the resolution of the program, its physical size when presented, shape, and sequential nature force the presenter and viewer into certain modes of communication. More specifically, we are looking at a one-way, simplified, bullet-style pitching of information low on substance. Its style of presentation

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<sup>6</sup> Mouse pad, with satirical logo of “PowerPoint Ranger” tab eminently feature on the top. This is an example of how PowerPoint has created a level of cynicism heretofore not seen in the military regarding a “tool” to be used in presentations. On sale at <http://www.topsarge.com/resource/ppranger.htm>, for \$12.99.

leads the viewer into a passive one-way acceptance of the interpretation of reality in question. On the other hand, its visceral appeal based on its simply visual nature in an “infotainment” style encourages a theatrical performance for the motivated briefer wishing to wow the audience with a highly refined brief. In effect, the style of the presentation is on par or perhaps even superior to substance. Substance of the reality at hand is often the victim of PowerPoint. Dr Tufte, in his pre-PowerPoint directed essay *Visual and Statistical Thinking: Displays of Evidence for Making Decisions*, points out the fact that in the presentation of information, we cannot forget the basic integrity that must underlie the process:

An essential analytic task in making decisions based on evidence is to understand how things work—mechanisms, trade-offs, process and dynamics, cause and effect. That is, intervention-thinking and policy-thinking demand causality-thinking.

Making decisions based on evidence requires the appropriate display of that evidence. Good displays of data help to reveal knowledge relevant to understanding mechanism, process and dynamics, cause and effect. That is, displays of statistical data should directly serve the analytic task at hand (1997: 3).

Jean Baudrillard discusses the role of the technological media in its application as communicative form—of particular relevance to PowerPoint. According to Baudrillard, the message is “structured by the code and determined by the context” (Baudrillard, 1981: 178). He goes on to explain that we work within a system of TRANSMITTER – MESSAGE – RECEIVER, where the structure is objective and scientific, an “abstraction from lived experience and reality: that is, the ideological categories that express a certain type of social relation, namely, in which one speaks and the other doesn’t, where one has the choice of the code, and the other only liberty to acquiesce or abstain” (178-179). PowerPoint is the transmitter, which affects the message and finally is determined within the receiver—the receiver who has only one choice of code, and must acquiesce. This is in contrast to a roundtable discussion, or a simple speaker-audience interaction with limited props.

PowerPoint in a way, when properly used, can be an effective tool in creating what Roland Barthes described as mythology—mass media messages that deal with power and ideologies (Luke: 1989, 23). In this case a mythology created at the micro-media level, over and over again. PowerPoint can create an illusion and art, representing

social power, and in a way reifying the objects of study into useful ideological tools. The “illusionary visions” become political, and once the image becomes public, shown on the wall, or handed out in note form, it then becomes the reality of the moment. Once in place, once presented, whether truth or fiction, this is the instantaneous reality, now dramatically represented and legitimized in a professional looking format in choreographed setting. If the information is false or to be disputed, those disputing the issue at hand are at an immediate disadvantage as the illusion has been set in place, and the associated legitimacy cast. In many cases this is without controversy—a picture of a map showing driving directions, or perhaps testing scores of five individuals—but once the message becomes more complex and summarized, as most presentations invariably do, these issues become problematic.

The technology of PowerPoint allows for a combination of the textual and visual to be played out in a two-dimensional medium in front of a group of people for a defined purpose of presenting information. The philosopher Wittgenstein argued that “thinking” was a process of signs, both verbal and pictorial, leading the observer to contemplate from picture to pictogram to phonetic sign (Mitchell, 1986: 26-28). The visuals of PowerPoint depict an idea, and in some cases present themselves as a hieroglyph or pictogram in operation—in effect our transmitter of information. An incomplete bullet phrase represents at the least a sentence, and in many cases a paragraph or more of content to be delivered or understood. It is at once a textual delivery through language, and at the same time an incomplete phrase acting to represent and replace a more developed concept. At its core, this is the nature of PowerPoint—rather simplistic, filled with limited images, presented in slide format, expressing complex concepts in bullet format supplemented by pictorial or graphical imagery. The idea, the form, the image becomes an ideal of the matter at hand, attempting to create the reality in the mind of the viewer.

It almost goes without saying that vision is one of our most influential and dominant senses, used to interpret and understand the world around us. In Plato’s well-known *Allegory of the Cave*, the philosopher presents us with a notional group of people, forever condemned to a cave, staring at a wall of shadows which is their reality. This is until one of the prisoners is freed, and sees not only the fire which allows the representation of his

captors' shadows; he sees the light and the world beyond the cave (Plato, online). The presentation of shadows on the wall of the cave, illuminated by the unseen fires and unseen captors, is our PowerPoint upon the wall or screen. It is an illusion of the reality of the problem at hand to be grasped and with which to be grappled—its simplistic form, such as those shadows controlled by the captors, allow for a controlling of the reality. Our brains are wired to connect and absorb these simplistic visuals. Much literature in the same manner has discussed the reality of our nature expressed through the visual senses.

PowerPoint is much like the one of the first scientific-based attempts at a visual reinterpretation of reality: the camera obscura. The camera obscura was the first device, beyond artistic drawings and paintings, to take the visual and represent it again in another format, using light, angles acting upon a surface. To some philosophers of the time, the camera obscura was one of several steps towards achieving a true truth in representation (Crary, 1992: 26). Progressing from the traditional visual arts, the camera used actual objects and light with the properties of optical physics, in effect it was a stepping stone toward the media of photography and film. Others, however, argue that the camera obscura (and of course like technologies of visual media) was and is an apparatus of ideological control and social power—as is being argued in some ways with PowerPoint. The object of reproduction is carefully chosen, the angles measured, and the image methodically reproduced for the consumption of the observer, all carefully choreographed. Empirically speaking, the camera obscura was nothing more than the reproduction of an image within a dark, enclosed interior via a small hole focusing the light and hence image of an object. From this, the media of photography using films were born, via the invention and application of sensitive papers upon which such optical reinterpretations of light were focused. As apparently benign as this device might have appeared to be, it spawned a slew of intellectual reasoning and analysis, to include scholars such as Marx, Bergson, Freud and others weighing in, interpreting the camera as an object of illusion, concealment, and ultimately a device which works to mystify or warp the truth. On the other hand, for others, such as Locke, it was a re-creation of the empirical truth, a proof of the world beyond just what our eyes could merely represent—the type of thinking that would in many ways mirror current defenders of PowerPoint and

similar micro-media: i.e. don't kill the messenger, or if you do, at the least don't blame the piece of paper on which he delivers the message. What can be said about the camera obscura can be said about PowerPoint and its visual predecessors in its creation and application—"simultaneously and inseparably a machinic assemblage and an assemblage of enunciation,' an object which something is said and at the same time an object that is used. It is a site at which a discursive formation intersects with material practices" (Crary, 1992: 31). PowerPoint acts as a social, political, and inter-personal force far more than as a technological device with which to empower the speaker. For Locke, the camera was the model to see the world in its objective, material sense, in opposition to idealist notions of the world generated in the mind (Mitchell, 1986: 160). Critics on the other side of the fence, and in specific Marx, were inclined to see this technology as another false representative product spawned by the bourgeois revolution. An argument Marx would perhaps say of any of numerous technologies produced in such a manner. This strain of argument will point out that many technological advances, by their nature, will and have been developed through bourgeois consumer demands encouraged by an elitist corporate system. PowerPoint, developed, produced, installed by one of the largest cooperate entities, and utilized by government and military agencies based on the same ethos of the primacy of power, money, influence, and capitalist ideology---it creates its own customer base, and has spread in its use around the world. Not only in the U.S. do we have to watch someone painfully struggle with their laptop, precariously connected to audio visual equipment, where the program has frozen or is involved in some other sort of error (I'm not sure why this won't play)—the glitches are almost guaranteed ---we have successfully globalized the world with such opportunities.

Technological development is part of a grander sociological study—what gets developed and what doesn't become the "latest and greatest" goes far beyond the basic life sciences, engineering disciplines, and cutting edge computer science design. This issue is part of a grander social struggle—one only has to refer to the works of authors such as Bruno Latour, shown in his work Science in Action, to see how a product such as PowerPoint is not a natural phenomenon of science, destined to be discovered and used by all—far from it. The development and acceptance of PowerPoint as a norm of communicative genre is part of a grander series of sociological events which are not

readily apparent. While this aspect of PowerPoint goes beyond the scope of this paper, it's fair to say that PowerPoint's historical development is part of a larger cycle of corporate, government, bureaucratic, and individual conflicts and resolutions over the years.

In many ways, PowerPoint invites the tendency of man to accept the illusion and aesthetics of the present and the supremacy accorded to sight in this tendency. Perhaps even represented better by the beliefs of Descartes, who supported the contention that “illusion in all its forms, be it reflection, *trompe l'oeil*, or artifice, threatens by its deceptive character to impeded the search for truth” (Shapiro, 1993:162). Descartes was fascinated by the use of the *trompe l'oeil*, or illusion in works of the visual. Descartes saw visual illusion as a tool to manipulate and reduce the world to a false reality (Shapiro: 162). The “the illusion” remains an overarching theme in regard to the visual, understanding, and by extension life and political activity. PowerPoint presents a limited venue to the visual, to be crafted with certain ocular-centric boundaries of manipulation—it offers an opportunity to craft illusion and hide the reality of the world. Auditory and textual accessories merely complement the overarching visual effect of the software, presenting an idea, world or concept of a world that John Dewey would say is “already given, diminishing our sense that we can and do make a difference...” (Houlgate, 1993:88). Critics of the dominance of vision, such as Dewey and Heidegger, all point to the obsession with the viewer's relation to the object in as a primary form of their perception (Houlgate, 1993: 89). These and other philosophers harshly criticize the failings of a system which knowing is dependent on “the seeing.” This seeing helps blind the viewer to the dynamic nature of the reality a hand, a reality or problem that is open to much interpretation and argument—limited in effect by PowerPoint's style of presentation. This can be an intentional or merely institutionalized and unrealized effect.

To critique the visual nature of PowerPoint in many ways is difficult due to the need to accept the concept of the very diverse observer. According to Jonathon Crary, an “observer” is one who one who “sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations” (Crary, 1992: 16). The observer approaches the visual display with preconceived norms, prejudices, expectations, and standards for interpreting visual information. Bottom line: the audience is also a factor in



presenting information, and many have become conditioned to expect PowerPoint, in an increasingly wide spectrum of situations. A certain situation that may previously have been held as a two-way discussion may now be a one-way presentation of slide-ware or printouts of those slides. PowerPoint has succeeded to influence the “viewers,” in many cases, over a long and insidious process, to expect this genre of slide-ware, replacing other genres of communication.

### **Control Regime/Normalizing System of PowerPoint in**

Perhaps the least obvious but most pathological aspect of PowerPoint is that it supports a form of control, authority, discipline and administration, often transparent to the users or those within its organization—even from the highest levels. Not only are those designing and giving briefs a recipient of such control measures dictated by the unique format of PowerPoint, even those who receive such briefs on a regular basis are to some degree, and on a different level, disciplined and educated to a specific form that would even be unawares to them. The type of control exhibited by this software is similar to what is explained by Foucault and Debord---two intellectuals who have focused on the insidious role of societal devices and others in their ability to create norms of behavior and discipline which are in effect invisibly but effectively applied. To Debord, the “spectacle” could be defined as the social relationship between people and images (Debord: 12). He describes the interpretation of the world as a series of images and illusions, which have co-opted reality in importance. In effect, it is the triumph of illusion over essence. The Spectacle is “both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something *added* to the real world—not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society’s real unreality...In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system” (Debord: 13). PowerPoint, in the society of the spectacle, allows any side of the argument, discussion, presentation, to co-opt reality and create an illusion of the truth, and in effect the one sided display, by its very limited linear format, re-works the reality of the situation into a simple line-by-line interpretation. PowerPoint is a piece of the greater spectacle in that it furthers the systemic control and normative behavior of individuals within a bureaucratic system. It’s the expected genre

of communication, taking the place of more rhetorical forms of dialogue. PowerPoint is without a doubt one of the leading forms of communication within the military and offices of leadership within the Pentagon. In fact it is *the* expected form of communication—nothing else is accepted or tolerated. For example, during training for mid-level officers at the Air Force’s Squadron Officer School, during the course of the program, each student is expected to present three separate speeches using PowerPoint. A certain format is graded, time standards expected, and even details as far as number of “main points” is required. Almost every military organization conducts reviews of programs, plans, and operations using PowerPoint. To deny that this is not influential is to deny the effects of indoctrination and how that may or may not fit into a greater regime of organizational norms.

Those receiving the briefings in many cases are just as ensnared in the expectation to view PowerPoint as those giving the brief are expected to “use” PowerPoint. PowerPoint and the style of communication becomes a systematic feature of the organization, as entrenched as the structures in which the men and work operate. These norms and expectations of behavior are not normally written in ink, but become as expected and embedded within a culture as other details as banal as lunch protocol, work hours, and dress/appearance standards. Debord describes the inclusion and complicity of the “mass media” in the reach of the spectacle—the interaction of administration of society depending on instant communication, and more specifically “one way communication.” In fact, it could be said that the micro-medias such as PowerPoint are also part of this regime of control and manipulation. In a world where the cyborgization (Haraway, 2004)<sup>7</sup> of society has defined a norm or regime of the expectation of instant information, to all at once, and perfection in administrative minutia, PowerPoint is merely another useful piece in the collective pieces of micro-media which work to facilitate the instant transfer of information in compact, simplistic formats of presentation.

The PowerPoint slides become the brief’s version or part in the system of control or representation at the “meeting” or “briefing.” The reality of the situation which is

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<sup>7</sup> Credit to Donna Haraway for her conceptualization of the “cyborg” in “The Cyborg Manifesto.” No doubt PowerPoint becomes part of the greater cyborg-ness of mankind and technology working in society.

being briefed exists at some level of understanding or interpretation. The new reality of the situation which becomes briefed depends on the quality of the medium (PowerPoint—which as has been explained is suspect in its ability), the agenda of the briefer, and the interpretation of the viewer. Regardless of all these factors, in many cases the PowerPoint slides themselves becomes the new reality and point of contention during a meeting or a briefing. It distracts the briefer and the briefed from the real issues at hand—the size of the font style being used or a misspelling should not come to trump the actual dialogue of the issue at hand—but in many cases it does. More importantly, the image retained on the slide becomes the issue of debate more than the reality of the situation which may lie behind the intent of information has importance. As was described in the case studies chapter, the typical functional piece of the military bureaucracy has become so normalized to the effects of PowerPoint, that no second thought is given to its use. It's part of a normalized routine of “getting on with business” (Luke, 1989: 12). It has slowly and insidiously replaced other genres of communication, and become part of the organizational fabric, at one level unbeknownst to the players, and at another level fully known to everyone, to the point where the overuse of PowerPoint is a running joke. No longer does one have to “order” the use of PowerPoint; the system itself demands it, and those within the system, unquestioningly expect its use.

In the analysis of modern society by Foucault, “vision has become supervision (Levin, 1993: 21),” and the same can be said about PowerPoint where the visual experience and software becomes a piece of supervision in its own regard. In Discipline and Punish Foucault uses surveillance to describe a hierarchical observation, both physical and institutionalized—most typically found to be used effectively within bureaucratic organizations. Physically we may point to the design of military barracks, hospitals, schools, and the like when describing the facilitation and design of surveillance. More structurally and insidiously, and not so physically apparent, society as a whole could be said to have been systematically set into the modes of surveillance and normative behavior through hierarchical expectations. The PowerPoint presentation has become part of this greater exercise of power. “The ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth” is basically at the heart of this system of control and surveillance (Foucault: 87). The exercise in the use of

PowerPoint, from start to finish, is essentially controlled and manipulated in the culture of the hierarchical surveillance. In the format of PowerPoint, everything becomes a “case” open for scrutiny, and the slides and presentation itself become items of scrutiny and debate in their own right, perhaps more than the information at the core of the brief. In a political environment where the ideology or desired outcome has already been decided before hand, PowerPoint becomes a device less suited toward open discussion of topics and a one-sided version of the “truth.” The PowerPoint presentation is rewarded for those who feed its normalizing attributes, and all those who now expect to see this software in use have certain normalized requirements of format, style, length, and the like. It has become another “judge” of normality, present everywhere and nowhere. As Foucault put so well:

We are the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the socialworker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements. The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power (Foucault: 304).

PowerPoint has become part of our normalizing social fabric, and while in many cases this is benign, in others it can influence policy (as with Barnett), or even be culpable in a disaster (the Shuttle). Regardless of one’s views, it’s a worthwhile exercise to attempt to understand how far this program guides one as they navigate to world of interpersonal and professional communications.



8

## CHAPTER EIGHT CONCLUSION

PowerPoint does serve a useful purpose in empowering those looking to effectively, professionally, and efficiently produce a product to present information. But it can and has had an insidious effect on communication in our postmodern electronic age. PowerPoint is a tool which appeals to our visual, and has become entrenched with certain cognitive aspects and styles. This style can lead to boring and bad presentations as well as presentations that hide the truth, reward style over substance, and even work into a framework of discipline and control within bureaucratic structures and even society. Due to the power of the visual, in relation to the textual, PowerPoint serves as a useful vehicle for manipulating reality into the briefer's desired illusion. Its limited capacity for information aids in avoiding in-depth analysis and discussion of contentions. Its linear format avoids complex multivariate analyses. As shown by David Byrnes accompanying DVD to his Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information, and by Thomas Barnett in his dynamic PNM brief, it can offer an amazing visual theater to the savvy user, all at the fingertips of one with access to a computer and an idea. What is worrisome is the fact that this simplistic, linear format is the media of choice for creating the "killer brief" which is necessary to promote ideas within the Pentagon and perhaps other organizations. It emphasizes the content of the slide over the reality, and in some ways works to reshape our reality through its interpretation.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nbc-links.com/powerpoint.html>. Satire based on military patches and insignia. This would represent a soldier who has achieved 1000 hours in PowerPoint preparation, to be worn on the shoulder of uniform, typical to the US Army style of unit insignia to be worn on the shoulder of service and utility uniforms. Accessed on line 3 Feb 2005.

Power Point pervades the status quo of the bureaucratic genres of communication. Throughout society, business, work, and life, there are always standards and norms of communication for various settings. In the past decades, the presentation itself has become the normalizing feature of the passing of information both horizontally and vertically through an organization. Power Point has not only become the norm of inter-department communication, it has slowly been co-opting other forms and roles of communication. This could be said of how email in many cases has replaced the phone, or in many cases, face-to-face communication. A person may use PowerPoint to think and work through ideas, and in fact hand out hardcopies when meeting with one or two other colleagues. All while the author of such information is inhibited by the style of PowerPoint and its corresponding limitations. In effect, limitations of the genre which he or she is compelled to use. Its simple linear format, lacking in verbal density and encouraging a limited chronological description of problems is sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle in its controlling effects. Those horizontally and vertically in the hierarchy of the organization encourage the long-winded, perhaps mind-numbing, but occasionally entertaining use of graphics, slides, visuals, and bullet statements. As well put by a retired Navy Captain, in his experiences with PowerPoint:

Because briefing is the center of gravity, it has become vital for senior officers to develop subordinates who are skilled in this peculiar art of war. Because “the mission is the brief,” the most valued attribute a staff officer can be blessed with is to be a “PowerPoint Ranger.” The labels “innovative,” “analytical” and “strategic thinker” are not used with the same sense of awe (Woodridge: 2004)

Power Point cannot be blamed for everything. It's only one piece in the overall puzzle of communication, technology, and micro-medias used to interact within the political and corporate structures. Beyond its current influence, it's important to ask where PowerPoint is going. Will there be a final revolt by users around the world, or is Power Point an addictive drug which will be here in one form or another for the foreseeable future? According to John Seely Brown, of Xerox, Power Point will most likely evolve, and we can only hope it will evolve into a better product:

You're going to see PowerPoint evolve as people discover the ability to enact sub-genres. It is also the opportunity to make these things much richer in terms of their media, to use

a sequence of images with a very small amount of text. I was recently at a board presentation at a company that always used the old PowerPoint slides, or didn't use slides at all. A subgroup experimented with using images that told the story. They had images with very, very simple titles on them, and they had very interesting, well-thought through text that they spoke, and improvised. So suddenly these images were the backdrop that set the context.

When I say my slides are *evocative* objects, they're meant to be the background. I will take the same set of background slides and improvise completely different stories around them. But just like you know in normal text, there's an artwork in terms of having the graphics support the text.

A lot of people just throw in random graphics like clipart. That's part of the idiom that drives people crazy – no one has tailored the graphics to help support the argument. Few people understand how to have the text and the graphics really interact right. In the design of a magazine, there should be a tremendous amount of care to have the graphics support a scaffolding that helps support the text (Atkinson, 2004: interview online).

PowerPoint is here to stay for the moment, only to surely be replaced by the next technological wonder. We can only hope that the next generation of presentation-ware will offer more in terms of the tradition of oratory and rhetoric. Most likely it will merely advance the characteristics of Power Point to a greater degree. Our best route is to understand this program, its style, effect, influence, and utility and from henceforth look at it with a critical eye. How we can use it, how it is used by others, and how it's expected as a form of communication, or genre appropriate for certain settings.

Many of the advocates of PowerPoint ultimately argue a defense of the utility of the technology, but stop there—they agree that it is poorly used, but this is a superficial topic. Rarely do these defenses of Power Point touch upon the greater issues of control exhibited by a form of software that in itself has a life of its own within an organization. There is no doubt that Dr. Barnett uses Power Point effectively—it's an entertaining and informative brief, that is not by any stretch of the imagination dull, uninspired, or merely linear. What many of Power Point's defenders miss in this case is the software's bureaucratic infusion into the society within which it operates. The over the top "killer" brief, facilitated by Power Point's unique nature, forces those with valid information to spend endless hours crafting an extremely polished presentation in order to be heard. This is in fact one of the negative factors of today's technological advancement. It allows

the amateur-presenter a more visually-polished product, giving inspiration to strive for visual perfection which is allowed by today's personal computer technology. Today, even the most mundane administrative paperwork is expected to achieve perfection—gone are the days of white-out. This obsession with perfection--because it is possible, creates an atmosphere where the work or crafting of documents, presentations and the like is never finished. Instead of a diminishing work load, in some cases this PowerPoint-like technology draws the work out to further extremes, no matter how banal the information to be processed. The system requires an army of PowerPoint experts, just as adept in this software as the ideas they are presumably attempting to present. As technology and society continue to develop and progress it is important for us to realize that PowerPoint is merely another “black box<sup>9</sup>” now readily accepted in the government and bureaucracy, and installed on almost all computers. It is the expected genre of communication in an increasingly wide array of settings, and while many question its proper use, few realize the controlling nature it has for us structurally within the social fabric. These technologies such as PowerPoint perhaps point to a larger social phenomenon of the spectacle, and infusion of technology to reify our relationships to transactions. In this complicated, information dominated era, PowerPoint in some way mirrors a dumbing down and summary-like style of how lives are being lived, people being governed, and communications being executed. The spectacle works well with this readily available piece of software, as it also works well in a style of leadership. It is critical that those within the government and bureaucracy understand the tools they are using when communicating and receiving information that applies to decisions of the highest importance.

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<sup>9</sup> Black box concept attributable to Bruno Latour, [Science in Action](#).

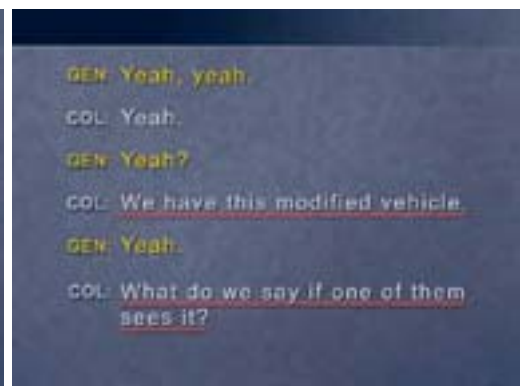
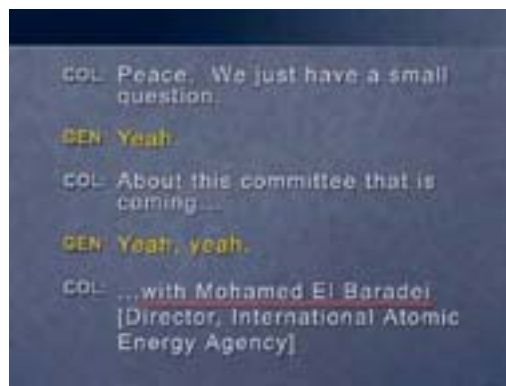


## Appendix A

Full download of slides from Secretary Powell's address to the United Nations, 5 February, 2003. Accessed from State Department website, open source. [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).

### Denial and Deception; Part 1

Secretary Powell addressed the United Nations Security Council on February 5, presenting evidence of Iraq's continued defiance of UNSC Resolution 1441 and previous resolutions.



GEN: You didn't get a modified...  
You don't have a modified...

COL: By God, I have one.

GEN: Which? From the workshop...?

COL: From the al-Kindi Company.

GEN: What?

COL: From al-Kindi.

GEN: Yeah, yeah. I'll come to you in the morning. I have some comments. I'm worried you all have something left.

COL: We evacuated everything. We don't have anything left.

GEN: I will come to you tomorrow.

COL: Okay.

HQ: Sir...

Field: Yes.

HQ: There is a directive of the [Republican] Guard Chief of Staff at the conference today...

Field: Yes.

HQ: They are inspecting the ammunition you have

Field: Yes.

HQ: ...for the possibility there are forbidden ammo

Field: Yes?

HQ: For the possibility there is by chance, forbidden ammo.

Field: Yes.

HQ: And we sent you a message to inspect the scrap areas and the abandoned areas.

Field: Yes.

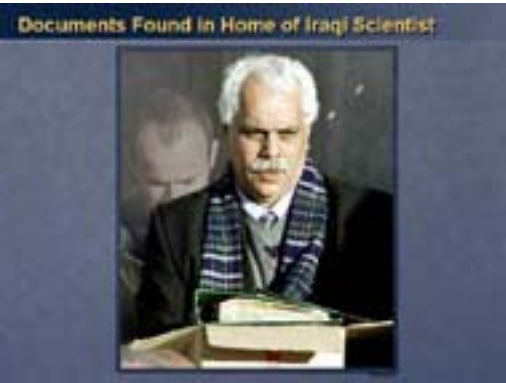
HQ: After you have carried out what is contained in the message, ... destroy the message.

Field: Yes.

HQ: Because I don't want anyone to see this message.

Field: Okay okay.

# Denial and Deception; Part 2



**Security Council Resolution 1441**

4. Decides that false statements or omissions in the declarations submitted by Iraq pursuant to this resolution and failure by Iraq at any time to comply with, and cooperate fully in the implementation of, this resolution shall constitute a further material breach of Iraq's obligations and will be reported to the Council for assessment in accordance with paragraphs 11 and 12 below;

Released on February 5, 2003

# Biological Weapons



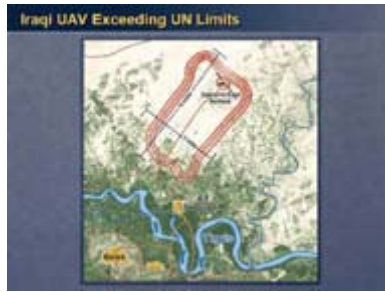
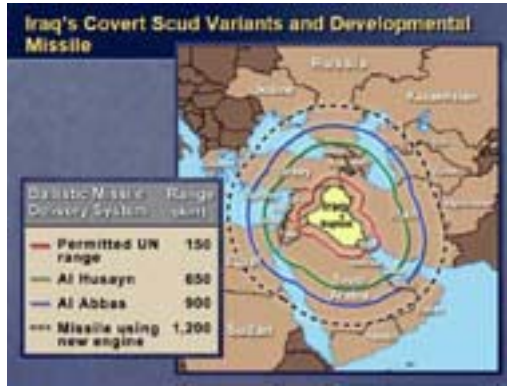
# Chemical Weapons



COL: Captain Ibrahim?  
CAPT: I am with you, Sir.  
COL: Remove.  
CAPT: Remove. [Repeats instructions]  
COL: The expression.  
CAPT: The expression.  
COL: "Nerve agents."

CAPT: "Nerve agents."  
COL: Wherever it comes up.  
CAPT: Wherever it comes up.  
COL: In the wireless instructions.  
CAPT: In the instructions.  
COL: Wireless.  
CAPT: Wireless.

# Delivery Systems



# Terrorism



## Nuclear Systems



## End of Slide Presentation





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