

Powerpointlessness

By Dave Person

All of you have probably experienced something like this at a conference or meeting:

The title of the presentation is intriguing, "Feeding the snot-nosed dimwit: optimum foraging or paradigm shift?" Whoa, a paradigm shift! I have to see this one. The title even has a colon so I am sure it will be something that stimulates my festering intellect. The speaker walks up to the podium and clicks on the first Powerpoint slide. The title looms in bright orange "FEEDING THE DIMWIT.....OPTIMUM SNOT FORAGING.....". The poor embarrassed speaker apologizes saying the text formatting in his version of Windows Powerpoint must not be compatible with the latest version on the conference computer. The little voice in my head, that always seems to speak to me with a heavy New Jersey accent, says "Dis ain't lookin' too good boss. Maybe yooo should leave now huh?" But I am packed in amongst all the others eagerly awaiting the paradigm shift. The speaker proceeds through an interminable sequence of Powerpoint bulleted lists of objectives and hypotheses. Each one animatedly zooms onto the screen when he presses the remote button. My mind asks, "Cool, but what is the paradigm to be shifted?" He drones on for the next 5 minutes about methods. It dawns on me. This is suspiciously like a MASTER'S THESIS!! Master's theses rarely offer paradigm shifts. I've been duped.

The screen goes blank. The little voice in my head says, "Uh oh. He was tawking too long and forgot to toin off the screen sayva function." I nod energetically in response, hoping the person next to me doesn't notice my behavior. Next comes the GIS map. There is always a GIS map, but this one has areas that blink on an off when the speaker points to them. Whoa, way cool. I am now no longer listening because I am wondering if yellow really is the appropriate background for the blinking lime green highlights. I start thinking, has this guy ever read Edward Tufte's book "The Visual Display of Quantitative Information"¹ or his essay "The Cognitive Style of Powerpoint"²? Tufte despises the simplistic linear mode of presentation produced by Powerpoint. It results in endless streams of slides, each containing 2 or 3 short pithy statements in BIG colorful type. So what did he say back on slide 67? Then there are the graphic templates, special effects, and clip art that convey nothing.

Generally, the more graphics, clip art and animation in a program the less real stuff the speaker has to present. In my opinion, a good presentation is like telling a good story that has a logical beginning, middle, and end. A good story doesn't need a lot of fancy graphics or bells and whistles. One of the best presentations that I ever gave had no slides or graphics at all. That was because, being an idiot, I packed my slides in my luggage for a trip to a conference in Mexico. My bag got lost so I had to wing it. I had a good story to tell, I knew the material cold, and I adapted my talk to the conditions. The talk was a success because people actually listened to my words instead of focusing on the slides.

It is now 18 minutes into the 20-minute talk. The speaker finally gets to the results, an astounding slide showing an immensely busy table of 50 models identified by barely interpretable acronyms along with AIC scores and weights. "We tested 10 covariates and compared 125 models including interaction terms.....". Oh my god, we go from information starvation to overwhelming gibberish! I am still trying to figure out the acronym for the second model listed when the speaker says, " And so we conclude that our results show that food selection by snot-nosed dimwits is opportunistic feeding not optimum foraging, at least during our study, at the density of dimwits that we observed, and on Tuesday mornings unless it rained. Nonetheless, due to our small sample we urge caution in extrapolating our conclusions to other dimwits." That's IT? That's the paradigm shift? I suffered through a bad case of Akaike Information Constipation for that? I look at the program and note the next talk is titled "Range expansion of the smelly-bottomed lemming: important implications for conservation of

biodiversity in the Arctic". Humm, another title with a colon. My little voice says "time to go Jefe" and I get up and leave. I crave something with substance so I go back to my room and eat a twinkie.

1. Tufte, E. R. 2001. The visual display of quantitative information. Graphics Press, Cheshire, Connecticut, USA. 197p.
2. Tufte, E. R. 2003. The cognitive style of PowerPoint. Graphics Press, Cheshire, Connecticut, USA. 25p.