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Anti-PowerPoint revolutionaries unite

By Lucy Kellaway

Last week I saw two women getting into a cab outside an office in central London. Both were in high heels and smart suits and were struggling with a flip chart, its pages flapping in the wind. The quaint sight of the large pad on aluminium legs filled me with longing for the days when people giving presentations wrote things down with felt pens on big sheets of paper.

I might have forgotten this scene, were it not for the fact that the very next day I was sent an invitation to join a brand new political party in Switzerland, the Anti PowerPoint party. "Finally do something!" its slogan says.

Actually I've been quietly doing something for years: I've been declining to learn how to use the ubiquitous piece of software. As a presenter, I'm a PowerPoint virgin, though as an audience member I've been gang raped by PowerPoint slides more times than I can count.

And what have I got from the experience? It is hard to say because my default reaction has been to blank it. I can't remember one single slide that I've ever been shown. And as I must have been shown hundreds of thousands of them altogether, a hit rate of zero seems rather on the low side. This doesn't mean I've never sat through a good PowerPoint presentation. But when I have, it has been because the person speaking managed to get a message across despite the distracting visual clamour going on behind them.

The Anti PowerPoint party has attempted to calculate the economic damage of gawping at all these slides and has concluded that Europe wastes €110bn a year from people sitting though dull presentations.

I suspect the true figure is even worse, as this ignores the secondary effects. PowerPoint must be the least enjoyable way of wasting time there is; a heavy slideshow can leave one feeling grumpy and passive and in no frame of mind for proper work.

Worse, it lowers the quality of discussion and leads to bad decisions. PowerPoint performs the miracle of making things simultaneously too simple and too complicated. It reduces subtle ideas to bullet points, while it encourages you to pad out a presentation with irrelevant data because cutting and pasting is far too easy.

The APPP is hoping to fight PowerPoint through peaceful means; it wants lots of journalists to write articles just like this one. Even if lots do, I hold out little hope of success. The seminal, devastating article on the subject, PowerPoint is Evil, was written by Edward Tufte in 2003 and published in Wired. And what has happened since then? Nothing, except that PowerPoint has gone on getting bigger.

Re-reading that article, I think Tufte was a bit soft on his target. He said PowerPoint presentations were "like a school play – very loud, very slow, and very simple". In fact they are far worse than that: school plays tend to be amateurishly charming and there is generally someone on the stage who you love.

Persuading everyone to stop using PowerPoint is going to be much harder than persuading them, say, to reuse plastic bags or get the loft insulated. People cling to it for three powerful reasons. First, because everyone else does. Second, because it is much easier than writing a

proper speech, where you have to think carefully about what you are saying ahead of time. Third, and most important, PowerPoint assuages speakers' nerves – standing in a room with low lights, dumbly following prompts on a screen is not all that frightening.

To have any chance of success the APPP needs a terrorist faction, which would advocate cutting the wire in the middle of the table that connects the laptop to the projector. Or it could help people tamper with slides, inserting at random ones that said: "HERE IS ANOTHER DULL SLIDE" or showed a picture of people fast asleep.

Better still would be to campaign for an outright ban. In a world without the crutch of PowerPoint, presentations would be fewer in number – people would be put off by nerves and by the hard slog of preparation – and shorter. It might even mean that audiences listened. The human voice, especially when connected to a brain that has done some thinking, and a body that has done some rehearsing, can be a wonderful, memorable thing.

Ten days ago I went to a show in London called *True Stories Told Live* in which six people stood up and held forth without visual "aids". The subjects weren't promising – one spoke for 10 minutes about a cup of tea. But I can repeat his story to you now, which is much more than I could do about a PowerPoint presentation I saw the following day about women on boards, about which I remember only one thing: bone-crushing tedium.

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PowerPoint can pack a punch – in the hands of a wizard

From Mr Michael Baldwin.

Sir, In her article "Anti-PowerPoint revolutionaries unite" (July 18), Lucy Kellaway did a masterful job of capturing the depth and breadth of the global epidemic that has become PowerPoint. Unfortunately, she came to the wrong conclusion regarding a solution.

No one organisation (or force of nature for that matter) could eradicate PowerPoint from the world we live in, any more than we could eliminate e-mail or cell phones. PowerPoint is a powerful tool that can unequivocally enhance the impact of any presentation. As with any other powerful tool, people need to be trained how to use it. Even Harry Potter had to learn how to harness the power of his wand.

In 1987, Microsoft paid $27m for PowerPoint, because it recognised immediately how it would enhance the impact of presentations. Since then, unfortunately, the tool has been abused and misused, leaving us with no good models to emulate, just a lot of "bone-crushing tedium".

But advocating the elimination of guns because people keep pointing them backwards, and shooting themselves, isn't the answer. The answer is to train them how to use the gun properly.

In print cartoons, there is a dynamic relationship between the image and the caption that makes them – the good ones – both inseparable and unforgettable. With proper training, presenters can employ this same dynamic to produce memorable and convincing presentations.

Michael Baldwin,

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