

Competitive Analysis of Presentation Tools

OUR comparisons of various presentation tools in action indicate that PowerPoint is intellectually outperformed by competing tools. For the 10 case studies and 32 control samples, PP flunks the comparative tests, except for beating out *Pravda* in the statistical graphics competition.

Some of these comparisons are for *the same users with the same content*. Matched comparisons control for selection effects, such as the entertaining hypothesis that PP is a stupidity magnet, differentially attracting inept presenters with lightweight content (and thereby making PP look bad). Our evidence helps isolate PP effects, independent of user or content. Such comparisons—*Consumer Reports* style—provide a competitive analysis of presentation tools. In these tests, PP's poor performance cannot be blamed on its users. For example, in the shuttle investigations, given that the presenters are NASA engineers and the content is rocket science, which then is the better presentation method, PP or technical reports?

The scope of our evidence is limited. Nearly all the evidence is drawn from *serious presentations*, with explanations to understand, evidence to evaluate, problems to solve, decisions to make, and, in several examples, lives to save. It is hard to know how many presentations are serious. Perhaps 25% to 75%, depending very much upon the substantive field.

What Are the Causes of Visual Presentations?

AN important but complex issue in evaluating visual presentations, including PowerPoint, is *what are the causes of a presentation?* What are the contributions of content quality, presenter skills, presentation methods, cognitive styles, and prevailing standards of integrity? To begin with, reasonably certain answers are that the causal structure is multivariate, that causes tend to interact and are not independent of one another, and that improvements will result from working on all factors.

George Orwell's classic essay "Politics and the English Language" gets right the interplay between quality of thought and cognitive style of presentation: "The English language becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." Imagine Orwell writing about PP: "PowerPoint becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of PowerPoint makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." The PP cognitive style is familiar to readers of Orwell's remarkable and prescient novel 1984.

