POLITICS

Swiss 'Party' Campaigns Against PowerPoint

By Nigel Kendall

What is it about PowerPoint that it engenders such hostility? It has been described as "loathsome, vicious and immoral," blamed for baffling generals; and now there is even a self-styled "political party" to campaign against it.

Switzerland's new "Anti PowerPoint Party" (APPP) claims that PowerPoint sucks the creativity, spontaneity and audience interest out of any given topic. "If you do a PowerPoint presentation and it goes well, in 95 out of 100 cases if you do it without PowerPoint, the version without PowerPoint will beat it," said Matthias Poehm, the president of the APPP, in a not very exciting video presentation.

He has a lot of unverifiable statistics to back him up. By assuming that across Europe, 11% of the 296 million employees are being subjected to twice-weekly PowerPoint presentations, Mr. Poehm calculates that lost productivity due to PowerPoint amounts to !110 billion per annum.

In the interests of economic recovery, therefore, APPP stands proudly on the front line demanding a return to flipcharts and felt-tipped pens. We approached Microsoft for a reaction. Inger Paus, lead spokeswoman for Western Europe said, "We don't provide a comment on this. Background: This is a guerilla marketing approach to promote a book and likely

Photo: APPP

consulting services as well." Joining up does earn you a discount on Mr. Poehm's book. Mr. Poehm is by no means the first person to attempt to draw the world's attention to the shortcomings of PowerPoint.

In a 2008 thesis, academic Yiannis Gabriel concluded: "The conveniences afforded by PowerPoint were viewed as having a downside… In line with a widely held Western anxiety, technology becomes the slave-turned-master imposing its tyranny on everything it touches.

My contention is that many users of this technology have realized that this tyranny is not unavoidable and that … when used in a creative … way, it can provide learning and teaching experience in line with the visual sensitivities and skills of our times." And technology commentator Michael Bywater once described PowerPoint as "the most loathsome, vicious and immoral piece of software ever produced."

More recently, in an article for Wired last year, Noah Shachtman openly wondered what effect PowerPoint was having on the war in Afghanistan.

Alternatives to PowerPoint, such as Apple's Keynote, the open-source Impress (part of the OpenOffice suite) and the online Prezi do exist, but between them account for less than 25% of the global market for presentation software.

Besides it's not the software that's the problem. It's what people do with it. As the Talking Heads singer turned all-round artist David Byrne noted when he began to create art using PowerPoint: "It started off as a joke (this software is a symbol of corporate salesmanship, or lack thereof) but then the work took on a life of its own as I realized I could create pieces that were moving, despite the limitations of the 'medium.'"

Perhaps a special advisory role awaits him in Switzerland.