

Anti-PowerPoint revolutionaries unite

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 through 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 pro-



mpts 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.