Death by bullet points

Ivan Trundle

Manager, publishing
and communications
ivan.trundle@alia.org.au

In a previous life — long, long ago — I spent a lot of time making presentations to large groups of people. If computerised slide software had been around then, it would have proved to be a godsend, without a doubt.

Back in the 1980s, the best that we could manage was the (then) ubiquitous Kodak Carousel, loaded to the hilt with slides, and with a suitable soundtrack as accompanying background to assist the presenter. Some of the fancier presentations used two slide projectors side-by-side, with an operator to dissolve one shot into the next. In time, this process was automated with mixers and other new-fangled electronic devices that could time the events, match the voice-over and soundtrack, and even blend more than two projectors at once. However, the presenter still ruled the roost.

An interesting change took place as my presentations became more sophisticated (or 'professional'): the focus moved from the presenter (me) to the presentation (created by me). This might seem obvious to those that make presentations on a daily basis, but there was also a subtle side-effect: the audience became less engaged as the presentation went more 'up-market'.

But let's wind the clock forward...

Microsoft PowerPoint now rules the world of presentation software — Google delivers 6 470 000 results for the term 'PowerPoint'. Everyone uses it, everyone is accustomed to the templates, everyone absorbs the relentless sequentiality, the condensed thoughts and ideas displayed in text, the underlying ubiquity of 'death by bullet points'. In the old days, the information content of a presentation came directly from the speaker, supported by ancillary information either presented in charts, or via photographs, or via diagrams (or the odd soundtrack). Good presentations were made better by the oratory power of the speaker, and his or her ability to inform and entertain a large mass of people. The spotlight (metaphorical or not) was always on the speaker.

Things have moved on. The spotlight now shifts to the presentation software: the speaker sits in the shadows, the software offers all of the singing and dancing, all of the content. Typically, at conferences, a speaker now speaks to a PowerPoint presentation, and the substance is all wrapped up in condensed (and trivialised) bullet points for ease of digestion. To make things worse, speakers often parrot what is written into the bullet points, creating a monotonous and redundant presentation.

It gets worse, though: we now have speakers at conferences who, instead of writing papers, now offer PowerPoint presentations as the legacy of their efforts. Websites that archive conference proceedings (such as ALIAnet) must now cope with content that is decidedly 'web-unfriendly'. Not only are PowerPoint presentations written in a proprietary format owned by a single vendor (and thus requiring the vendor's product to open it), but the content itself fails to satisfy most criteria for archiving and later retrieval.

Apart from the technological lunacy of placing PowerPoint presentations on websites, there is a more significant issue at stake: what about the audience? Think back to what a presentation is meant to do: inform, educate, entertain — and supplement the speaker's efforts. Generally broadcast to a large audience, usually on a big screen, and in a dimmed room, the experience for the masses is to create an all-enveloping experience. A good presentation informs. A great presentation excites. Both offer opportunity for dialogue, two-way conversation, and an end-point of mutual understanding and comprehension. In an ideal world, the audience depart from the event with supplementary information for later reading and elucidation.

Website presentations, especially PowerPoint presentations, offer very little of this experience. Devoid of context, and a speaker, web-based presentations often miss the point entirely. The dozen bullet points take on a stark reality of their own when viewed from a web browser, on a small screen. Here at ALIA, we are often asked by conference organisers about our 'policy' on storing PowerPoint presentations on the ALIAnet website. What *is* our policy?

Where possible, we convert all material for publication on ALIAnet into content that is available in a suitable format for searching, compliant with standards, and accessible. We prefer to convert PowerPoint presentations into presentable web-based material. Unfortunately, the transition from bullet points to screens of text is stark, to say the least: it is not unusual for thirty or more slides to be reduced to a page of text (and not particularly enlightening text, either). The results are not always pretty, but the content is complete. Presentations that come with supplementary material (or even a genuine paper) on the other hand, fare much better.

We do not object to PowerPoint presentations — we just prefer them to be used as intended. All of the tools that Microsoft have offered so far to convert presentations into html-encoded material fail to convey the original content in a way that not only makes sense, but is compliant with known web-based standards. The most difficult aspect is the simple fact that a presentation intended for a large, mass audience is not the same as that delivered in an almost existential way to web audiences.

Whilst philosophers argue about the trivialisation of great thoughts when reduced to bullet points, there is no argument that bullet points on a small screen convey little information. However, it is an inescapable phenomenon. We will one day learn to live with death by bullet points. ∎

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