Paper or PowerPoint:

How Should Media Ecologists Present Their Ideas?

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At the seventh annual Media Ecology Association convention, the two most common modes of presentation were reading aloud from a paper written for the eye rather than the ear and speaking to bulleted lists on PowerPoint slides. This paper analyzes the biases inherent in these presentation strategies and suggests that they embody very different views about the nature and purpose of the convention, and indeed of the field of media ecology itself.

L IKE most of those who attended the seventh annual Media Ecology Association convention, held at Boston College in June of 2006, I had the opportunity to go to numerous plenary presentations and break-out sessions. The topics addressed were wide-ranging and fascinating, but as a media ecologist, someone who believes that the way ideas are communicated bears as much consideration as the ideas themselves, I was equally interested in observing the diverse modes of presentation in evidence at the MEA convention. Some presenters extemporized upon hand-written notes, some read scholarly papers, and some displayed and spoke to PowerPoint slides (and some, myself included, used a combination of these approaches). To characterize this diversity in terms familiar to media ecologists, we may say that, while all of the convention presentations were oral, they varied in terms of the extent to which they partook of the values and biases of orality, literacy, print, and electric media.

I will begin with a brief consideration of what it means for a convention presenter to choose to read aloud from a paper. I am referring, here, to a scholarly paper: a paper prepared primarily not for oral presentation but for inclusion in the convention proceedings or another peer-reviewed academic publication.[2] Reading aloud from such a paper was the standard mode of presentation at conferences for years and in many cases remains so, particularly when scholars in the humanities convene to share information. A number of important media ecology texts were originally read aloud by their authors. For example, Innis's "A Plea for Time" was first presented at the University of New Brunswick in 1950 and subsequently published as a chapter in *The Bias of Communication* (1951); and Havelock's *Origins of Western Literacy* originated as a series of lectures given at the University of Toronto (Strate, 2006, p. 40).

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[2] Of course, Postman advocated and modeled another approach: reading aloud from a paper written for the ear rather than the eye (Sternberg, 2005). While some presenters at the seventh annual MEA convention did indeed use this mode of presentation, most of the papers that I heard read aloud seemed to have been written for the eye—that is, for publication. Hence my focus here.

However, as a presentation strategy, reading aloud from a paper meant for publication has drawbacks. Certainly, most contemporary how-to guides on presenting at conferences advise that it is not good practice. For example, in his guide for graduate students, Roman Gerodimos (2004) admonishes that "there is nothing less appealing than merely reading out loud a paper at a conference. In fact," he adds, "it is damaging because everyone gets immediately bored and you may appear disrespectful to your audience" (p. 1). Media ecologists will further appreciate the difficulties inherent in attempting to render literate content orally, as though the forms were entirely interchangeable.

Regardless of how well it works as a mode of presentation, the scholarly paper makes some important tacit assertions when used as the basis for an oral presentation. First, as a rhetorical exercise that takes place in a defined discursive space, it lays claim to membership within a particular discipline or field of inquiry. This is achieved primarily through references to other works, in the form of quotations, footnotes, and bibliographic citations, which situate the paper within a specific domain. While these links to the larger body of knowledge more or less disappear when the paper is read aloud, the audience is still aware of them at a subliminal level—after all, they are an important part of what makes a scholarly paper a scholarly paper. The paper as an artifact thus asserts the presenter's familiarity with the works of important predecessors and confers upon him or her the authority to speak on the subject.

Second, the scholarly paper asserts the primacy of literacy, and of the particular habits of mind and ways of communicating to which literacy has given rise. As media ecologists, we are familiar with the story told by Ong, McLuhan, and others about how the advent of writing and print set the individual apart from the tribe and created a new space for analysis and reflection. While spoken language was immersive and immediate, inseparable from lived experience, writing and print created the possibility of attaining an intellectual distance from the life world. Literacy conferred the possibility not only of thinking deeply but of conceiving of alternatives to traditional beliefs and practices. The literate communication of these new ideas took on the sequential qualities of the alphabet and, later, the book. Linear, logical expression became congruent with thought. All of this—the privileging of reflective thought and of the communication of ideas in a linear form—is tacitly asserted by the presenter who chooses to read his or her paper aloud at a conference.

Third, the scholarly paper represents not just a product but a process. It is the culmination of a lengthy period of rumination and writing, fuelled by equal measures of imagination and intellectual rigor. As such, the paper asserts its own non-triviality. We expect it to say something important, to address the kinds of questions that defy easy answers.

Finally, when read aloud in a conference setting, the scholarly paper tacitly suggests something not only about the author's deep engagement with the subject matter, but about the audience's capacity for following the argument. Regardless of Gerodimos' warning about an audience's low tolerance for read-aloud scholarly treatises, the paper asserts that those attending the presentation *are* capable of engaging in the kind of sustained, rigorous intellectual activity necessary to appreciate the complex ideas that it elaborates.

I turn now to a similar consideration of the implications of speaking to PowerPoint slides projected on a screen as a primary presentation strategy. Presentation how-to guides tend to advocate the use of PowerPoint (which I am using generically, like Kleenex instead of tissue, to denote slideware) as good practice. Turning once again to Gerodimos (2004), we find the suggestion that using PowerPoint, at the recommended rate of one slide per minute, "will really show respect for your audience and for the event" (p. 2). And for many professional groups,

slideware has indeed become *de rigeur* at conferences. For example, after attending the 1998 conference of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), two members observed that PowerPoint seemed to have become "the new standard for research dissemination" (Hlynka & Mason, 1998, p. 45). When I attended an AECT conference seven years later, I found this conclusion to be amply supported; in fact, at that time another presenter told me that his audience had more or less departed *en masse* when he began to read aloud from a paper. For this group of professionals, PowerPoint is the unquestioned default mode of presentation, a reality which was driven home for me during a breakaway session entitled "Moving Toward a Critical and Humanizing View of Instructional Technologies." When I asked the presenters why, given their topic, they would choose to use slide after slide of bulleted lists, I was met with blank looks: they simply had not considered *not* using PowerPoint.

Nevertheless, PowerPoint has its detractors. One of the harshest indictments is offered by Edward Tufte, whose monograph on *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* (2003) sparked a highly polarized discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of using PowerPoint in presentations. Tufte reels off a number of criticisms, concluding that PowerPoint is inherently "contrary to serious thinking. PP actively facilitates the making of lightweight presentations" (p. 26). Of course, PowerPoint's capabilities allow for the creation of displays that do not contain the hierarchical bulleted lists and cutesy clipart that Tufte condemns. However, the remarkable uniformity of most PowerPoint slides is indicative of the extent to which the program does indeed predispose users to display information in largely predetermined formats.

Both supporters and detractors would probably agree that, like the scholarly paper, a PowerPoint display makes some important tacit assertions when used as the basis for a convention presentation. First, a PowerPoint display asserts the primacy of information over ideas. While ideas are generally too complex and ambiguous for representation in the reductive formats of a PowerPoint slide, it is comparatively easy to pare information down to disconnected fragments appropriate for use in bulleted lists. Therefore, a PowerPoint-based presentation tends to deal with the realm of the factual, things that *are* (such as existing programs and projects) while eschewing consideration of things that might be, the realm of speculative thinking. Because PowerPoint is increasingly used not simply to present but to marshal one's thoughts, even those who begin with ideas are likely to find that, in the very process of "PowerPointing" those ideas, they are somehow transmuted into useful information. For example, the ideas explored in this paper might give way to bulleted lists of best practices for presenting at conferences. Information also has an aura of utility that relates it to action rather than thought. We are not meant to spend long hours contemplating and debating the points on a PowerPoint slide; rather, the information is offered as something we can act upon. Thus, as an "information design" expert, Tufte (2003) criticizes PowerPoint chiefly on the basis of its inability to display information adequately, so that viewers can act appropriately—the reason, Tufte argues, for the loss of the space shuttle Columbia (pp. 7-11).

Second, PowerPoint, with its origins in the business world, asserts that efficiency is a core value of both the presenter and the audience members. A PowerPoint display is the distilled essence of a topic, minus the unnecessary complexity of rhetorical embellishments and verbiage indicating logical connections and flow. Of course, these elements can be present in the spoken narrative that accompanies the display; however, because the presenter is "speaking to" not only the audience but to a display that asserts the importance of communicating information efficiently, they often are not. The tendency to avoid complexity is exacerbated when PowerPoint is used not just to present but to develop presentations. Because the program

compels users, especially those many who eschew use of the awkward "Notes page" feature, to conceptualize their topics from the beginning in terms of efficient bulleted points, there is ever less likelihood of verbal flourish or connective tissue creeping into even the spoken component of the presentation.

Finally, PowerPoint asserts the superior communicative power of technology. In PowerPoint presentations, technological effects and imagery—including elaborate backgrounds, clipart, and screen dissolves—tend to take precedence over verbal content, which becomes ground rather than figure. Savvy audience members attend not to the speaker but to the screen, for they understand that it is not the case that the technological imagery supports the spoken words but that the words exist in order to provide "opportunity for another visual expression" (Ellul, 1985, p. 126). Further, because all eyes are on the screen, it is the technological virtuosity of the PowerPoint display, rather than connections or contributions to a body of knowledge, that itself confers upon the presenter the authority to present.

A number of PowerPoint supporters have countered Tufte's critique by insisting that slideware is, after all, just a tool that can be used well or badly. For example, asked in an online interview to assess Tufte's analysis, educational psychologist Richard Mayer responded that "PowerPoint is a medium that can be used effectively—that is, with effective design methods—or ineffectively, that is with ineffective design methods" (Atkinson, 2004).

McLuhan (1964) dismisses this kind of argument as "the numb stance of the technological idiot" (p. 18). Certainly, we cannot deny the importance of human agency and decision-making—on the contrary, as I have already observed, many canonical media ecology texts emphasize the need for a wise, considered use of technology. However, media ecology is premised upon the fundamental understanding that all modes of communication have certain unique predispositions. PowerPoint is not "just a tool": like any medium, it changes how its users think, what they think about, and what they value. Therefore, we can expect that those individuals who choose to read aloud from a scholarly paper and those who choose to present with PowerPoint slides will be predisposed to think rather differently about the purposes of their presentations, of the MEA convention, and of the field of media ecology as a whole.

What is the nature and extent of those differences? As suggested above, reading aloud from a scholarly paper arises from and reinforces a conception of the MEA convention as a forum for the sharing of ideas. Those using this mode of presentation will be predisposed to refer to and value traditional media ecology texts and, like the authors of those texts, to explore from many perspectives the diverse roles that media play in human lives. They will also be inclined, by virtue of the deep thought required to produce a paper, to take positions—to express "a definite view about whether or not a medium contributes to or undermines humane concepts" (Postman, 2000, p. 13), and to regard the convention as an opportunity for dialogue and debate about those views. This will lead them, perhaps, to concur with Postman (2000) that media ecology is a branch of the humanities, a field whose primary purpose is "to further our insights into how we stand as human beings, how we are doing morally in the journey we are taking" (p. 16).

A PowerPoint-based presentation, on the other hand, arises from and reinforces a conception of the convention as a forum for the exchange of new information. Those using this mode of presentation will be predisposed to regard their presentations as a means of disseminating useful factual knowledge about media-related programs and projects. Consequently, PowerPoint biases its users to be less interested in media effects than in media innovations and applications, and less interested in taking a historical and cultural perspective on media development than in prophesying future trends. These perspectives will lead PowerPoint users to regard media

ecology primarily as a field devoted to the exploration of the many uses and manifestations of new media.

So, this said, how *should* media ecologists present their ideas? Like most questions worth asking, my title question defies an easy, definitive answer. Furthermore, as a media ecologist, I have two very different models for formulating my response.

On one hand, I might turn to McLuhan (1964), who insists upon the importance of "withold[ing] all value judgements when studying these media matters" (p. 315), for determinations of good or bad, right or wrong, tend to stand in the way of true understanding. Taking my cue from McLuhan, I might sidestep the necessity of rendering judgement by emphasizing the inherent diversity of the MEA conventions—the variety of topics, perspectives, disciplines, and presentation styles; and I might further expound upon the fact that such diversity is appropriate and the basis of a healthy ecology, whether we are talking about the natural world or the information environment.

Frankly, however, I have long been troubled by McLuhan's stance of presumed neutrality, which he wears like a rather uncomfortable mask—a mask that distracts me from the brilliance of his performance, for I am constantly looking and hoping for moments when the mask slips, allowing the vigilantly suppressed values and attitudes to shine forth. At this point, moreover, I don't think I could lay claim to neutrality, even if I wanted to, since I have made little effort to conceal where I stand on the question of how media ecologists should present their ideas. Indeed, the very phrasing of my title question is a deliberate give-away, since I have asserted that the bias of PowerPoint is to transmute ideas into information.

Therefore, in addressing the question of how media ecologists should present their ideas, I choose instead to model myself after Postman, who, as noted above, regards value judgements as the essence of media ecology, and a moral perspective as what makes the study of media forms relevant and important. Like Postman, "I don't see any point in studying media unless one does so within a moral or ethical context" (2000, p. 11).

Postman suggests that the ethical study of media and their effects should include a consideration of the extent to which a medium contributes to the development of rational thought and gives access to meaningful information—the kind of information that will help us to live better lives. The foregoing analysis should make it quite clear where I stand on these questions vis-à-vis PowerPoint presentations, and why I worry about the increasing encroachment of slideware at MEA conventions. I have seen other associations fall into the PowerPoint rut, have seen rich opportunities for the exchange of ideas become quickly transmuted into mind-numbingly vapid spectacles in which each presenter trots out for display his or her obligatory set of disconnected fragments of information, leaving the audience dazed but no wiser. And it comes to pass just as Ellul (1980), our bleakest visionary, describes: "Naturally, we can say that it is man who decides. But technological growth has manufactured an ideology for him, a morality, and a mystique, which rigorously and exclusively impel his choices toward this growth. Anything is better than not utilizing what is technologically possible" (p. 235).

Anything is better than not utilizing what is technologically possible. Is that not exactly what the presenter at the seventh annual MEA convention was asserting when he was overheard wondering why anyone would choose to read aloud from a paper when there is so much new high-tech media available?

We need to remember why Postman chose the metaphor of ecology when naming this new field: to emphasize the importance of balance. When we talk about ecology, what we are really talking about is the way in which the equilibrium of an environment is affected by the interplay

of elements within it (Postman, 1979, p. 18). At the seventh annual MEA convention, many modes of presentation were used, and a state of equilibrium prevailed, even though the majority of presenters chose to either read aloud from a paper or speak to PowerPoint slides. (Perhaps this dichotomy was the result of an unconscious attempt to maintain such a balance.). If, however, PowerPoint becomes the unquestioned default mode of presentation, then we will slide into a state of imbalance. And we will have succumbed to a PowerPoint bias that will profoundly alter our understanding of who we are and what we do.

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