

**The PowerPoint Presentation and Its Corollaries:  
How Genres Shape Communicative Action in Organizations**

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**Abstract**

In this chapter, we examine how and with what consequences the discursive expectations of the PowerPoint presentation genre shape the ongoing work of organizational actors. We trace the historical development of the business presentation genre over the last century, examine the influence of the PowerPoint software tool, and consider the evolving enactment of the PowerPoint presentation genre in a few organizations. Drawing on this analysis, we highlight the emergence of what we refer to as corollary genres that challenge our conventional understandings of genres as tightly coupled to particular recurrent situations and communicative purposes. Our analysis points to an empirical blurring of genre expectations around conventional discursive practice, suggesting important implications for the nature of workplace communication in contemporary organizations.

In this chapter, we examine how and with what consequences the discursive expectations of a particular genre shape the ongoing work of organizational actors. The genre we focus on has recently become pervasive in multiple spheres of communicative activity (business, education, government, etc.), and is popularly referred to as “the PowerPoint presentation.” Virtually everyone who works in an organization today is familiar with the bullets, formats, templates, and clip art that comprise the visual representations associated with this genre. This chapter explores how the use of this genre influences the communicative practices of organizational members, and in particular how it enables and constrains their discursive choices and actions.

The notion of regulation in communication is a central organizing theme for this volume. The regulation of action always entails a dual influence where activities and outcomes are both facilitated and limited, or in Giddens’ (1984) terminology, both enabled and constrained. Because some uses of the term “regulation” seem to imply too strongly a sense of constraint, we will employ Giddens’ terminology to highlight that constraint and enablement are not alternatives (a dualism), but two sides of the same coin (a duality). Indeed, we will view the PowerPoint presentation, and genres more broadly, as both enabling and constraining human action.

Like all social structures, the PowerPoint presentation genre has been shaped by multiple influences over time, and we will focus our attention on two primary ones. The first is the historical business presentation that emerged as a type of business communication in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the second is the technological capabilities afforded by computer-based business presentation software, the most widely-known of which is the PowerPoint application tool produced by the Microsoft Corporation. In order to understand how the PowerPoint presentation genre has been shaped over time, it is important to distinguish between the PowerPoint tool (the software used to create the presentation visuals), the PowerPoint texts<sup>1</sup> created through use of the tool, and the PowerPoint presentation genre as a whole (where a

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<sup>1</sup> Our use the term “texts” here is intended broadly to include the various visual, graphic, audio, and video elements that may be created with the PowerPoint tool.

person presents to a co-present audience using projected PowerPoint texts as visual aids). While these elements are clearly interdependent, distinguishing them analytically allows us to observe variations in the genre and its use over time. It also allows us to consider the implications of the significant shift in genre norms currently underway as PowerPoint texts are increasingly represented in a broad array of media and used in a variety of different contexts.

In the next section, we establish the theoretical basis for our discussion of genre, and introduce the notion of corollary genres—variants of an established genre that are enacted in parallel with it. Next, we briefly trace the historical roots of the particular genre of interest to us in this chapter: the PowerPoint presentation. After briefly examining the emergence and evolution of the business presentation genre in corporations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we discuss the development and use of the technology—the PowerPoint software tool—that is used to produce the visual aids distinctive to PowerPoint presentations. We then draw empirically on a number of research studies of specific contemporary organizations (advertising agencies, consulting firms, and high-tech companies) to illustrate how use of the PowerPoint presentation genre and its attendant corollaries structure ongoing interaction through shaping actors' discursive expectations. We conclude with implications of our analysis for workplace communication.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

In this chapter, we embed the notion of genre—or socially recognized type of communicative action—within a structurational perspective (Giddens, 1984). This perspective focuses on the recursive relationship between everyday activities and the social structures that are the medium and outcome of those activities (Barley, 1986; Orlikowski, 2000). Central to a structurational perspective is the recognition that social structures do not “exist out there,” but are constituted through the ongoing actions of knowledgeable human agents, actions that are shaped, in turn, by the structures. This recursive relationship is what Giddens refers to as the *duality of structure*. Social structures are thus enacted through recurrent human practices. As

Giddens puts it, “The production of society is a skilled performance, sustained and ‘made to happen’ by human beings” (1976, p. 20).

We draw on this structural perspective to understand genre as a *social structure* that is interpreted and enacted through individuals’ ongoing communicative practices (Miller, 1984; Yates and Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski and Yates, 1994). In an organization, typical genres of communication include memos, letters, meetings, expense forms, and reports. These genres are socially recognized types of communicative actions that over time become organizing structures through being habitually enacted by organizational members to realize particular social purposes in recurrent situations (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). Through such enactment, genres become regularized and institutionalized templates that shape members’ communicative actions. Such ongoing genre use, in turn, reinforces those genres as distinctive and useful organizing structures for the organization.

As organizing structures, genres shape beliefs and actions, and in doing so enable and constrain (but do not determine) how organizational members engage in communication. In many instances, actors draw on established genre norms out of habit, to guide a particular communicative act (e.g., implicitly using a standard report format to document project progress). In other instances, actors may draw on genre norms more deliberately to accomplish their communicative purpose (e.g., explicitly choosing the informal—and undocumented—genre of phone conversations in order to discuss a confidential matter). Whether used implicitly or explicitly, genres powerfully influence the discursive norms of organizational interaction (Yates et al., 1999). In recent work (Yates and Orlikowski, 2002; Yoshioka et al., 2001), we have suggested that these discursive norms may be understood as entailing expectations in the following aspects of communication: purpose, content, form, participants, time, and place. For analytic purposes, we will treat these aspects as distinct; in practice, of course, they are deeply intertwined.

- *Purpose* (why): Most notably, a genre provides expectations about its socially recognized purpose(s). For example, the resume genre is typically expected to convey professional (and sometimes personal) information about an individual and, in the context of an employment

application, to promote that individual's abilities in order to secure an interview (DeKay, 2003).

- *Content* (what): A genre also provides expectations about the content of the communication. For example, the resume genre is typically expected to contain specific information about an individual's educational credentials and prior employment experience, including the dates and locations of these accomplishments.
- *Participants* (who/m): A genre carries expectations about the participants involved in the communicative interaction and their roles (e.g., who initiates the genre, and to whom is it addressed). In the case of the resume genre, it is typically generated by the individual described in the document and sent to a set of institutions where the individual is submitting an application.
- *Form* (how): A genre provides expectations about its form, including media, structuring devices, and linguistic elements. For example, the resume genre is typically structured with sections representing different categories for educational background, work experience, and additional interests. It typically uses relatively formal language and relies on sentence fragments in the form of bullet points to highlight key achievements. It may be generated on paper and distributed via the mail, or may remain as a computer file and be sent as an email attachment, or even posted to a website.
- *Time* (when): A genre often entails specific temporal expectations, although these may not be explicitly stated. Resumes, for example, are not always dated, yet because they typically indicate the timing of an individual's accomplishments, they implicitly reflect the temporal boundedness of the information.
- *Place* (where): A genre also provides location expectations, and these too are not always made explicit. For example, resumes must be sent to a specific address, whether physical or electronic, and they will be received and considered in a specific place (typically, the organization at which the individual is seeking a position). They also contain references to the locations where the individual has performed his or her work and educational activities.

When agents enact a genre, their interactions with others are structured by the genre's socially-recognized and sanctioned expectations around key aspects of the communication: purpose, content, participants, form, time, and location. By implication, genres also provide information about those aspects of communication that are not sanctioned or practiced by the organizational community. The expectations reflected in genres thus reveal, for example, who is not empowered to initiate or receive certain genres, when or where certain genres may not be enacted, and what content or form is inappropriate for particular genres. For example, resumes conventionally recount the accomplishment of individuals. They are not typically authored by

groups or teams, and are not effective at conveying information about collective achievements. The expectations associated with resumes thus reinforce an ideology of individualism that prescribes an autobiographical narrative that charts a life in terms of individual successive engagements in sanctioned activities and legitimate institutions. Gaps in this personal timeline are seen as questionable and even suspect. When enacted, genres thus represent forms of symbolic power (Schryer, 2002), serving to both enable and constrain types of interaction and modes of engagement. Genres are indicative of what communities do and do not do (purpose), what they do and do not value (content), what different roles members of the community may or may not play (participants), and the conditions (time, place, form) under which interactions should and should not occur (Yates and Orlikowski, 2002).

As enacted social structures, genres change over time (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). Indeed, as Hanks (1987, quoted in Schryer, 2002, p. 81) notes, genres are improvisations, being “produced in the course of linguistic practice and subject to innovation, manipulation, and change.” Thus, in their everyday communication, actors may vary (deliberately or inadvertently) how they enact a genre, and if such changes become widely-adopted, the shared discursive expectations associated with the genre may be altered—to a greater or lesser extent. Less extensive changes in discursive expectations result in adjustments or modifications to a particular genre that do not transform or replace it. For example, in his study of the historical evolution of the employment resume, DeKay (2003) found that starting in the 1970s the purpose of selling the candidate’s abilities in order to secure a job interview was added to the existing purpose of factually listing a candidate’s qualifications. This additional purpose changed expectations around the content as well as the purpose of the resume genre, but it did not fundamentally alter the form and functioning of the resume genre. More extensive changes in discursive expectations often lead to the emergence of a new genre that is recognizably distinct from the original. For example, Yates (1989) traces the emergence of the memo genre from a series of changes made over time to the established business letter genre for internal

correspondence (e.g., simplified letterhead stationary, adoption of single subject per letter for easier filing, elimination of salutations and closings, etc.).

One particularly interesting genre innovation emerges when actors modify some of the discursive expectations of a particular genre to produce variants that spin off as derivative genres that is, distinct (albeit related) genres that are enacted alongside the original, and that may ultimately evolve into separate genres (e.g., the memo as it evolved from the letter). We term these *corollary genres*, and see their emergence as a broadening of the conventional discursive boundaries associated with particular genres. Genre theory suggests that particular genres are enacted to accomplish particular communicative purposes in response to specific recurrent situations. When texts commonly associated with a specific genre become produced and received in a variety of recurrent situations, the tight coupling of discursive action and situation becomes blurred. The result is greater variability and flexibility in textual production and consumption, and the generation of new possibilities, and challenges, for discursive and cultural change (Lemke, 1995).

As we will show below, the business presentation genre emerged in response to the recurrent requirement to share complex information with multiple people in face-to-face meetings. As the PowerPoint software became widely available, the business presentation genre evolved into the PowerPoint presentation, a genre that is now dominant in contemporary presentations. Initially, the purpose and recurrent situations of the PowerPoint presentation genre resembled those of the historical business presentation—to share complex information with multiple people in face-to-face meetings. However, over time and through different uses, PowerPoint texts have become produced and consumed in a wide variety of contexts with different discursive requirements and social purposes (e.g., Web-based slideshows, printed “decks” distributed in person or by mail, and PDF files sent via email). These additional uses have spawned a number of corollary genres to the PowerPoint presentation genre, generating opportunities and ambiguities that both enable and constrain the discursive practices of organizational actors.



## **A Brief History of the Business Presentation Genre**

Business presentations with visual aids existed long before personal computers and PowerPoint software. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, firms were much smaller than they are today and semi-formal or formal presentations, especially those with visual aids, were not common. Presentations given at professional and trade association conferences were typically read from manuscripts, and within firms informal discussions were more common than presentations. The first visuals to emerge, graphs and charts based on numerical data, grew out of the systematic management movement's emphasis on recording and comparing data about business operations (Yates, 1989). The first textbook on graphical presentation of data, published in 1914, was Willard C. Brinton's *Graphical Methods for Presenting Facts* (Brinton, 1914; Yates, 1985). While his book focused more on graphs for use in documents or as tools for analyzing data than on visual aids for use in presentations, he also mentioned projecting graphs as lantern slides to accompany a talk. He saw graphs as particularly important tools for communicating with management (Brinton, 1914, p. 2):

In many presentations it is not a question of saving time to the reader but a question of placing the arguments in such form that the results may surely be obtained.

Graphs could be used to present large quantities of data compactly and clearly, or to convince management of a particular conclusion.

In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, managers in the DuPont company used graphs and charts to support presentations (Yates, 1989). Comparative charts were drawn up in preparation for meetings of the managers of multiple plants, serving as the focus for analytic and problem-solving discussions. DuPont's chart room provides a particularly interesting example of the use of graphs as visual aids for presentation. Sometime between 1919 and 1922 a special chart-viewing room was designed for meetings of the firm's Executive Committee (Yates 1985). This room had 350 charts, updated regularly, displaying various aspects of the return on investment data for DuPont's various divisions. As the committee members deliberated,

responsible division managers would be called in to explain any anomalies in the charts (Lessing, 1950; Piper, 1938). While this use of graphs as visual aids was described as “uniquely DuPont” (Lessing, 1950), it was copied by many of its customers who traveled from all over the country to DuPont’s headquarters to learn about it (Krell, 2001).

By the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, presentations with visual aids were more common in business. A compilation of communication practices in industry, for example, lists a range of media that could be used for visual aids, from motion pictures to blackboards (Connelly, 1958). The list includes slide projectors, overhead transparency projectors (perhaps the most immediate predecessor of computer projection), and opaque projectors, all of which project prepared-in-advance images.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a 1972 book on business communication listed a variety of possible visual aids, including slides, flip chart, and the overhead projector with transparencies (Morris, 1972, p. 216). Both treatments emphasized the need for simple and clear visuals that serve as support, not substitute, for the speaker.

By the 1980s, formal business presentations with visual aids were commonly used to communicate information and arguments to an audience co-present in the same physical space as the presenter. As portrayed in textbooks of the era (Robbins, 1985; Munter, 1982), overhead transparencies were the visual aids of choice in most internal business presentations, although those to large external audiences often used 35 mm slides for a more polished effect. In the decade between 1975 and 1985, the number of overhead projectors sold per year in the U.S. more than doubled, from around 50,000 to over 120,000 (Parker, 2001). A speaker could prepare the transparencies of this era—often called slides, by analogy to 35 mm slides (Brooks, 2004)—by hand, but increasingly secretaries or designers prepared them with typed or Letraset text (generally all capital letters), drawings, or graphs, photocopied onto the transparency (see Exhibit

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<sup>2</sup> One source (Parker, 2001, p. 78) claims that overheads did not “fully enter business life until the mid-seventies,” when developments in transparency film made it possible to photocopy directly onto the transparencies. Nevertheless, the presence of the overhead projector in the list of visual aids presented in these earlier texts suggests that this method of presenting visual aids enjoyed at least limited use in business somewhat earlier.

1). Norms were beginning to be generated by instructors, including many exhortations not to let the visual aids upstage the presenter (as they often did in a 35 mm slide show for which the lights were typically turned off) and to make them simple and readable. Both portrait and landscape layouts for visual aids were possible, but with text visuals especially, portrait layout was apparently used more often (e.g., see Munter 1982, pp. 94-97). Bulleted lists with indented subcategories became a common format. Presenters frequently used two techniques for revealing information gradually: covering part of the transparency with paper (a practice that audience members frequently found annoying) and sliding that paper down as needed, and using overlays to add information gradually to an image.

By the late 1980s and into the 1990s, personal computers began to play a significant role in the creation of visual aids. Word processing programs could be used in place of typewriters to create text visuals or labels on graphs in different sizes and fonts (e.g., Munter 1992, pp. 111-112). Spreadsheet programs could create graphs of data (Holcombe and Stein, 1990, p. 82), and early graphics programs were beginning to appear (e.g., Harvard Graphics and PowerPoint itself). When and how to use color in visual aids (especially transparencies) became an important topic in communication textbooks (White, 1996). In the late 1980s, the idea of projecting directly from a computer first emerged, though generally with cautions as to the dangers of depending on such technology (e.g., Donnet, 1988, pp. 55-60). In 1987, PowerPoint 1.0 (for the Macintosh only) was released by Forethought, the small start-up company that developed it. Originally named “Presenter,” the software generated black-and-white text and graphics pages that could be printed and converted into overhead transparencies via a photocopier. Shortly after the 1987 product launch, Microsoft acquired Forethought and by 1993, PowerPoint—now integrated with Word and Excel into Microsoft’s Office Suite—was the dominant presentation software tool on the market (Parker, 2001). The growing availability of laptop computers in the mid 1990s further increased the interest in projecting PowerPoint directly from the computer, thus bypassing paper print-outs and transparencies altogether. During this period, PowerPoint introduced the (in)famous “AutoContent Wizard” to help users create their visual aids. Although this feature was named

facetiously (Parker, 2001), its influence on people's understanding and use of the PowerPoint tool was significant. Gradually these evolving understandings and uses shaped how people enacted the genre itself.

By 2001, PowerPoint had captured 95% of the market in presentation graphics, and Microsoft estimated that at least 30 million PowerPoint presentations were made every day (Parker, 2001). By then, computer-generated slideshows had become the dominant visual aid medium in business presentations (Munter and Russell, 2002; Munter, 2003), although drawbacks of this medium were regularly described in texts. Indeed, in the business lexicon, "PowerPoint presentation" had come to refer to a presentation made using a PowerPoint slideshow projected from a computer. Although the PowerPoint software had been used to generate transparencies for over a decade, this usage was not typically encompassed by common understanding of the term.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, "PowerPoint presentations" had become so ubiquitous that a backlash against them appeared, aimed both at the tool itself and how it was perceived to have influenced the business presentation genre. Clear evidence of such a backlash can be found in the growing number of cartoons depicting the (usually ineffective) use of PowerPoint (see Exhibit 2 for an example from Dilbert). A widely circulated early example of the backlash was the so-called "Gettysburg PowerPoint Presentation," which Peter Norvig created using the AutoContent Wizard and posted on the web (Norvig, 1999). It shows how the rich rhetoric of the Gettysburg Address would have been flattened and oversimplified by presenting it in standard PowerPoint format (see Exhibit 3). Other critical articles began appearing with such titles as "Ban It Now! Friends Don't Let Friends Use PowerPoint" (Stewart, 2001), "The Level of Discourse Continues to Slide" (Schwartz, 2003), and "PowerPoint is Evil: Power Corrupts. PowerPoint Corrupts Absolutely" (Tufte, 2003b). This last article is the product of statistician and graphics guru Edward Tufte, perhaps the most vocal critic of PowerPoint presentations. He has self-published a 23-page piece entitled *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* (Tufte, 2003a), in which he argues that PowerPoint "slideware" "reduces the analytical quality of presentations,"

“weaken[s] verbal and spatial reasoning, and almost always corrupt[s] statistical analysis” (p. 3). While demonstrating how strong the opposition to PowerPoint texts has grown as the software has become pervasive, Tufte’s argument is less persuasive because it conflates the use of graphics in written documents such as articles and newspapers with the use of graphics as visual aids in oral presentations, failing to distinguish between fundamentally different genres (the article and the oral presentation) and the recurrent situations in which they are enacted. Moreover, as with all technologies, it is not the technology per se but how it is used that determines outcomes and consequences. We thus turn now to an examination of the PowerPoint Presentation genre as it is enacted in several organizations, showing how its use was shaped by historically evolving norms of business presentations and emergent technologies such as personal computers, laptops, telecommunications, and the PowerPoint software.

### **The Genre of PowerPoint Presentations**

The PowerPoint business presentation as a genre is familiar to most people who have any contact with the business world. Like the report or the memo (also fairly broad genres), it has many specific variants used, for example, in marketing presentations, in product development presentations, in progress reports, in performance results announcements, and so on. In spite of variations, however, it has a set of discursive characteristics that are “stabilized-for-now” (Schryer, 1993) and consequently recognizable to most business audiences. We will discuss these characteristics in terms of the six aspects of communication we developed above. As part of this discussion, we will also examine the emergence of some corollary genres being enacted with PowerPoint texts in many of the firms we have studied.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This section draws in part on ongoing research conducted with Kate Kellogg, Heinrich Schwarz, and Stephanie Woerner.

**Purpose: *Why?***

The PowerPoint presentation is typically used to inform, persuade, or motivate an internal or external organizational audience. Within firms, presentations may be used to propose a plan, explain a new program, or solicit input. For example, we studied a regional facility management group (FacilityEast) of a firm we call Hardware Inc (Woerner et al., 2003). Internal PowerPoint presentations included those made by members of the headquarters facilities division presenting new programs and structures to FacilityEast, and members of FacilityEast presenting progress updates to the headquarters division. At several advertising firms we studied, PowerPoint presentations of proposed advertising campaigns, aimed ultimately at the client, were often presented to internal groups as they were being developed, allowing those working on them to solicit comments from colleagues and make changes before the client presentation (Kellogg et al., 2002). As further examples, Brooks (2004) writes about the use of PowerPoint presentations at a large systems engineering firm, classifying them into three primary types by purpose and content: “technical talks,” intended to inform the audience about a new technology; “get acquainted talks,” in which the speaker presented his or her group to another group in the hopes of generating collaboration; and “project or program reviews,” intended to communicate project/program status and to account for resources used.

Outside of a firm, PowerPoint presentations are often used as ways of communicating with clients (potential or actual). “Pitches”—presentations proposing an approach to a potential client—are designed to secure business. During the Dot-com bust, members of Adweb, an advertising firm specializing in web-based marketing, were spending much of their time developing pitches for new business (Kellogg et al., 2002). Such pitches were critical to the survival of the firm. Even after the business had been contracted, members of the team working on a particular client project frequently presented their work-in-progress to the client in a PowerPoint “preez” (as they were called at Adweb). Such presentations both informed about and advocated their approach, while also soliciting feedback on the ideas as they were being developed.

Corollaries to the PowerPoint presentation genre may have slightly or greatly different purposes. In a recent study, Fonstad (2003) described a common practice in consulting firms called “ghost sliding”:

The ghost sliding process involved creating emergent artifacts (e.g., rough sketches of slides) and iteratively building on, adapting, and receiving feedback on them until they become the final deliverables. Ghost sliding was a process that the consultants practiced extensively to develop presentations of findings for their clients.

This process is similar to the internal presentation of (and solicitation of comments on) material ultimately aimed at an external client or customer at the advertising firm, but it took the process a step farther. Here, the purpose was to help the consultant discover the findings and evidence needed in the final presentation. We have also found that in many consulting firms, the written report that traditionally served as a final “deliverable” to the client (sometimes in conjunction with an oral presentation) has been replaced with a PowerPoint “deck,” or stack of paper printouts of PowerPoint slides. The consultant sits at a table with the client (typically represented by a small group of individuals) and walks them through the deck orally. At the end of this informal presentation (rather than the more formal, stand-up presentation with PowerPoint projection characteristic of the PowerPoint presentation genre), the consultant leaves the deck (rather than a written report) as the primary deliverable. This informal presentation practice and the PowerPoint deck challenge aspects of both the PowerPoint presentation and the business report genres. In particular, the deck of PowerPoint slides is expected to serve two different purposes: first, to function as a visual aid supporting an oral (informal) presentation; and second, to perform as a stand-alone deliverable (in many cases the only deliverable) reporting the results and conclusions of a project. PowerPoint texts created with this dual purpose typically have too much content to be effective presentation aids (which should support, not overshadow, the speaker, according to the genre norms of the business presentation) and too little content and context (and too few references and appendixes) to fulfill expectations for the report genre.

Use of this corollary genre generates considerable ambiguity around the appropriate form to use to accomplish the new purpose. The deck is typically easier to create but less detailed and nuanced than a report. It is easier for the audience to absorb during the presentation, but lacks the contextual details helpful for later use or for use by audiences not present at the original presentation. One senior manager at Adweb noted that the brevity constraints of PowerPoint texts offer some advantages over reports:

I've always been appalled at the number of large documents that we'll give clients in an instance where PowerPoint would be a better delivery mechanism backed up by the large document. . . . You can't hand the senior executive a 200-page document.

In this case, the manager saw value in PowerPoint texts serving as a sort of executive summary that complemented a more extensive accompanying report. Where the PowerPoint texts substitute for the report, the consequences are often less constructive. For example, the report of the board that investigated the Columbia shuttle accident decries the pervasive use of PowerPoint slides within NASA (2003, p. 191):

During its investigation, the board was surprised to receive similar presentation slides from NASA officials in place of technical reports. The board views the endemic use of PowerPoint briefing slides instead of technical papers as an illustration of the problematic methods of technical communication at NASA.

The emerging multiple purposes of PowerPoint texts reveals the artful ways in which people are able to adapt and improvise their use of organizing structures. But even as the resultant corollary genres enable new communicative practices, we also see that the decoupling of texts from their original purpose is—at least initially—unsettling, generating tensions and ambiguities in expectations and use.

### **Content: *What?***

Even though the specific content of PowerPoint presentations varies by purpose and situation, the genre entails expectations of content type. Thus, a PowerPoint presentation on a particular topic is typically expected to include some (but not too many) details about that topic. The quantity of information delivered in an oral PowerPoint presentation is usually less than that



of a written report. This tendency towards concise content may be both enabling and constraining. For example, a senior Adweb manager saw PowerPoint presentations as focusing attention on the critical issues:

I think [PowerPoint] forces people to try to decide what they think is important and to dare to be wrong.

Others report finding the content of PowerPoint presentations to be too abbreviated, resulting in loss of meaning, as a technical manager at Adweb noted:

I don't usually use Powerpoint. [The client liaison team] may ask us to send them an email with a few bullet points for a Powerpoint preez. They don't want anything fancy, just a few points. ... But sometimes things get so reduced to bullet points that both [they] and the client don't understand what we really mean.

In contexts where PowerPoint decks are generated as primary deliverables from some activity and then passed on to people unfamiliar with the activity, the content may be experienced as overwhelming. In her study of a web-based systems development firm, Levina (2001) reports that members joining an existing project team were “brought up to speed” in a “knowledge dump” meeting where they were walked through a paper deck of the final PowerPoint deliverable from the planning phase of the project. Members described their experiences of this meeting as “death by PowerPoint,” and subsequently referred to this large PowerPoint deck as the “Slide Graveyard.”

Another set of content expectations has to do with the structure of the presentation, which has, on the most basic level, an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. This basic structure is common in many genres, and certainly was characteristic of presentations with visual aids long before the PowerPoint presentation came along. The typical introduction includes a slide containing a preview of the talk's structure (and sometimes, its content). Experts frequently recommended such a slide before the PowerPoint tool became available, and this expectation is now embedded in the AutoContent Wizard, which includes a slide for “Topics of Discussion” under the generic presentation. In our empirical studies, we find that agenda slides abound but are not universal. For example, at Adweb, presentations always had an agenda slide to preview the

structure of the following presentation, though such agendas were sometimes but not always present in Hardware, Inc.'s presentations. The body of the presentation can follow any of a number of structures depending on purpose and context. Adweb pitches for creating interactive web sites, for example, always covered the proposal's creative concept and technology requirements, as well as the proposed project's timeline and deliverables. PowerPoint slideshows are typically projected in a fixed order, making it more difficult for the speaker to easily rearrange the slides during the presentation. This fact marks an important distinction between the PowerPoint presentation and presentations made using overhead transparencies. PowerPoint critic Tufte refers to this as the tool's "relentless sequentiality, one damn slide after another" (Tufte, 2003b, p. 118). Finally, the conclusion of a generic presentation as embedded in the AutoContent Wizard is a slide focusing on Next Steps, and we found a final slide focusing on the future common in many of the presentations we saw. This typical structure enables easier creation and comprehension of PowerPoint presentations, but the strong sequentiality also constrains the presenter's ability to respond flexibly to the local audience's interests and issues.

The firms we studied followed a common practice of reusing content from previous presentations in creating new PowerPoint texts. For example, at Adweb, the developers of new presentations typically began by copying content from earlier presentations. This practice enabled more efficient creation of new presentations, while also facilitating some continuity with prior concepts and approaches. It also had constraining consequences, in particular, creating difficulties for the graphic designers (known as "Creatives") in the firm, who were responsible for aesthetic design. As one Creative member commented:

I've been trying to convert the Powerpoint preez that Joe [a project member who is not a Creative] has been using into a form that we can work with. I want the original artwork because if you cut and paste from someone else's preez you inherit all of their inconsistencies and you waste a lot of time.

As we saw in many contexts, once the PowerPoint content had been created, it often acquired a second life after (or in place of) its use as a visual aid to support an oral presentation. In this

derivative reuse of content, we see the dual influences of the past, simultaneously facilitating efficiency and continuity while also restricting creativity and innovation.

**Form: *How?***

Expectations of form in PowerPoint presentations center around both the presentation as a whole and the PowerPoint text itself. The standard form of such presentations involves a single person standing before a group of people, talking and using the PowerPoint slideshow to project visual aids onto a screen. For example, at Adweb, a common presentation was “the pitch preez” where members of the firm presented their proposal for work to prospective clients. In practice, however, presentations are not always delivered in this mode. In our studies, we often found that the presenter sat at a table with a small group of people and walked them through a “deck,” composed of paper copies of the slides. In some cases, decks were simply distributed to individuals, without even a walk-through or discussion. One advertising firm we studied depended almost exclusively on such decks, in-house and with clients, relying on them as one of the firm’s primary project deliverables.

Other variations in form included sending the PowerPoint file electronically to another site and talking through the slides over an audio or video channel (e.g., telephone or video conference) as both parties viewed the slides. In this case, the audience is co-present temporally but not physically with the presenter, and the presenter typically had limited control over the pace with which the audience saw the slides. When a collaborative tool such as NetMeeting was used, the speaker could control the display of the PowerPoint slides more tightly. Such a practice was common in Hardware Inc., where each location participating in the conference could see the slides (either projected onto a large screen or, if only one or two people were present at that location, on a computer screen), but only as the presenter metered out the slides one by one. Another common variation was placing a PowerPoint file on a web site for people to view at different times. In this final example of a corollary genre, the slides themselves have to carry more of the substance of the presentation, and thus need considerably more content than they would have if

they were intended for projection by a speaker who would orally provide additional details and nuance about content and context.

Many expectations of the form of PowerPoint presentations center around the visual aids themselves. The PowerPoint software tool both enables presenters to create certain types of visual effects but constrains them in their ability to go beyond what is offered by the tool. The tool offers an array of templates, allowing presenters to pick from a variety of background patterns, fonts, and colors. The templates offered are quite elaborate, but many are too intricate and distracting to fit the guidelines of contemporary experts in this area. While colors within templates can be changed, such change takes time and is somewhat difficult to do. Furthermore, creating unique templates is more difficult than using those provided by the software, and presenters tend to be discouraged from doing so very often. At Hardware Inc., for example, a small set of standard slide templates had been developed for use in most internal presentations. In general, internal presentations in most of the firms we saw were less likely to use elaborate and unusual formats than external presentations which were designed to catch the eye of a customer or client.

Beyond the templates provided by the PowerPoint software, other form expectations are also embedded in the tool. For example, when the creator of a PowerPoint file opens a new slide, he or she is given twelve options from which to choose, including a title slide, a bulleted list (the most common form used for most of the slides we saw), a graph, a table, and a blank slide into which clip art, photographs, or other images could be inserted or drawn. The tool both draws on previous norms (e.g., for bullet points rather than complete sentences) and institutionalizes them by providing them as a simple-to-use, built-in feature. A variety of transitional devices (sounds as well as visual effects) are offered for creating slideshows. “Builds,” in which bulleted list items appear one at a time, are also a much-used feature of PowerPoint slideshows, adding to the “relentless sequentiality” Tufte sees in such presentations. Similarly, the auto shapes and clip art allow users to create slides with more visual appeal. On the one hand, using some visual elements rather than all text fits prescriptions that pre-date PowerPoint and can make the slides

more interesting. Moreover, builds, if used strategically, can avoid the dilemma that made earlier presenters slide paper down overhead transparencies, revealing them a line at a time. But all of these features are often used mindlessly and inappropriately, irritating and distracting the audience. Tufte (2003a and 2003b) notes, among other complaints, that the three-dimensional effects often used in graphs distort relationships, while the sounds and transitions quickly become annoying to those who see many such presentations. For designers at Adweb, where such PowerPoint presentations were used for almost all communication with the client, and as the basis for internal collaboration, the Creatives disliked the constraining aspects of the tool, as evident in these quotes from two members:

I'm not a big fan of PowerPoint. I hate it that we use such a primitive program. It [is] such a low-end presentation mechanism for a Creative deliverable. ... It doesn't differentiate us.

You know, the problem with these programs is that they are built for novices. And for people who know how to do design, they don't let you do what you want to. It's really frustrating... Now we never get to use the handcrafting [custom design of fonts and letter spacing] that I learned in school. Now everything is done with programs and it takes the art and true design out of it.

For these design professionals, the constraining qualities of PowerPoint were more salient than the enabling ones. They found it difficult to exercise the skills and techniques that they believed gave them a distinctive identity and afforded value to the firm. Not surprisingly they both resisted and resented the use of PowerPoint on Adweb projects. In spite of this opposition, however, project managers continued to use PowerPoint extensively. Because they wished to achieve a consistent look-and-feel to both internal and client presentations, they also insisted that everyone in the firm use PowerPoint and its built-in features.

### **Participants: *Who/m?***

In its most typical form, the PowerPoint presentation is assumed to be given by a single individual, usually standing at the front of a room, and directed towards a physically present audience of more than two or three people. Thus the roles in the typical presentation are

clear—one speaker controlling the pace and visual aids, and several co-present listeners who may, depending on cultural norms, ask questions of and interact with the presenter. Brooks (2004) analyzes the enactment of PowerPoint presentations as a rite in the systems engineering firm she studied, and sees the audience as participating in “synchronized collective action directed towards a common symbolic focus of attention”—in this case the projected PowerPoint slideshow itself.

When corollaries to the PowerPoint presentation genre are enacted, these roles may shift somewhat. One shift occurs when the audience is no longer in the same location. For example, members of the face-to-face audience may have more interactions with the speaker than those at a distant site. When two locations are sharing a screen through NetMeeting (as often occurred at Hardware Inc.), control can, with the permission of the person with the slides, be transferred back and forth. Thus the presenter may sometimes give over control to the audience, blurring the roles of speaker and listener. Individuals viewing a set of PowerPoint texts in slideshow mode, but without a live presenter, control the pace of the presentation themselves, thus playing a more active role than the more typical audience, although they are constrained by not being able to obtain clarifications and elaborations while viewing the slides.

The creation of PowerPoint presentations may also involve different people, as anyone with access to the PowerPoint tool may create slides (unlike in the past, when transparencies were typically created by intermediaries such as designers or secretaries). While a presenter may create the presentation alone, such sole authorship was rare in our studies. Collaborative authorship was more common, with two different modes being evident. In the first *distributed mode*, multiple internal parties contributed different sections of the presentations. At Adweb and other advertising companies we studied, the authorial control was distributed across multiple people, and the PowerPoint file (stored centrally on the firm’s network) served as the vehicle for collaboration in preparing the presentation. Sometimes, as in the consulting company studied by Fonstad (2003), clients were involved in the process to produce the collaborative presentation:

Ghost Sliding was an iterative process where quick, rough representations of each slide were drawn up and discussed with the client to develop consensus on what statements were going to be included in the presentation and what data needed to be collected to support those statements. After each discussion, more data were collected and more detail and specificity added to the slides. Then, after a significant number of changes had been made to the presentation-in-progress, the next version was discussed with the clients.

The second *centralized mode* of presentation preparation tended to follow hierarchical lines, with the presentations being created by junior people, secretaries, or even a specialized design staff (though the popularity of PowerPoint has made such organizational arrangements less common) and then worked over, extended, and edited by the more senior individuals. The consulting company in Fonstad's (2003) study used this mode of creating PowerPoint texts, where an office assistant would receive (via fax) handwritten drafts of slides from consultants working at client sites, translate these into presentation visuals on her computer, and then return the PowerPoint texts to the consultants as an email attachment.

### **Space and Time: *Where and When?***

We will look at space and time together, since these expectations are typically tightly coupled. The standard PowerPoint presentation occurs within a single room where the speaker and the entire audience are assembled at the same time, achieving temporal and spatial alignment or symmetry (Zerubavel, 1981). Brooks (2004) describes the extreme symmetry she observed in PowerPoint presentations at her site as synchronized collective action. The presenter talks and the audience listens in real time, simultaneously watching the slides as they are projected on a screen. Using PowerPoint projection also allows the presenter to make changes in the slides up to or even during the presentation, enabling the use of more up-to-date visuals.

Although the "standard" PowerPoint presentation occurs in one time and one place, one of the key features of the PowerPoint tool is the ease with which electronic files of the PowerPoint texts can be sent to other locations or saved for other times. These PowerPoint texts are often shipped to another location so a distant audience can view them on their computers or

another projection screen while hearing the voice of the speaker. In several companies we have studied, presentations using PowerPoint slides were delivered over telephone conferences, so that the key, often external audience (e.g., the client for Adweb or the local office representative for a regional meeting in Hardware, Inc.), saw the slides and heard the voice, but never saw the speaker. In conjunction with telephone conferences, participants often accessed PowerPoint texts through collaborative tools such as NetMeeting or WebEx, which enabled people at different locations to share a screen controlled by the presenter. However, when these systems failed to work properly (e.g., due to software, hardware, or telecommunications errors), the constraining aspects of distributed presentations became very apparent. We saw this happen a few times at Hardware Inc., and as a member of the FacilityEast group pointed out:

I mean, as great as NetMeeting is, occasionally, it's our worst enemy because [if] you rely on it so much and it's not working for you, it pretty much almost shuts down the entire meeting.

In some of the corollary genres we encountered, there were shifts in both temporal and spatial expectations away from the PowerPoint presentation genre. For example, PowerPoint texts were often printed out as decks, one slide to a page, or in the "handout" form suggested by the tool (with 2-6 slides per page), and provided as hard copies to be taken away after the talk (as well as looked at during it). As noted above, these decks or "take-aways" often replaced reports as deliverables, and could be viewed at a different time and place by the audience members or by their colleagues, when the context, details, and nuance provided orally by the speaker were absent. When the creator of the PowerPoint texts could no longer count on being present to interpret and amplify them, he or she often put many more words and images on each slide than could realistically be absorbed by the viewer watching the presentation in real time. Thus creating the same PowerPoint texts for use as part of both the PowerPoint presentation as well as the corollary "deck-as-deliverable" genre created the dual problems of information overload and loss of meaning referred to earlier.



Another corollary genre we saw frequently at Hardware Inc.—the on-line slideshow available on the Web and viewed by one person at a time—is typically even more distributed temporally and spatially, making it more difficult for viewers to achieve a common understanding. While all the viewers could see the same PowerPoint slides, their temporal and spatial separation precluded a collective dialogue about the slides’ meanings and implications. Even when the slides contained more text than was functional for a real-time presentation, they frequently did not have enough content and context to address the inevitable ambiguities and reservations that arose, leading to different understandings by different viewers and, because of the lack of synchronicity, allowing no opportunity for discussion that might have resolved the confusion.

### **Implications for Workplace Communication**

In this chapter, we have drawn on genre theory and our empirical research to suggest that the PowerPoint presentation is emerging as a powerful and complex communicative structure that both reflects and shapes organizational practices, while also enabling and constraining a range of social outcomes. By focusing on how its multiple discursive expectations are enacted in use, and how these change with the emergence of corollary genres within and across multiple media, we can begin to understand this genre’s dynamic influences on and consequences for organizational life.

Tufte (2003a, 2003b), Norvig (1999), and others have noted some consequences of the constraints that the PowerPoint tool imposes on presenters, including the limited, fragmented, and flattened content appearing in bulleted form. Indeed, we see consequences for the audience (and sometimes even for the presenter) that include limited comprehension, information overload (“death by PowerPoint”), lack of reflection, idea fragmentation, and reductionism. At the same time, our empirical studies also demonstrate that the tool enables as well as constrains. In particular, we saw that it facilitates distributed co-authoring of content, as well as collaborative development of ideas iteratively over time. It also encourages discursive focus and brevity, thus forcing “people to try to decide what they think is important and to dare to be wrong.” Similarly,

the strong linearity of most PowerPoint presentations is shaped by the sequentiality of slides and the difficulty of viewing them in any other order. This factor may contribute to a tendency to defer questions to the end of the presentation rather than to jump to another slide to respond to a question in the middle, thus reducing the speaker's responsiveness to the audience. Still, this sequentiality promotes a strong narrative line, aiding the "repurposing" of the PowerPoint texts into decks-as-deliverables and stand-alone slideshows on the Web.

The "repurposing" of the PowerPoint texts in corollary genres has its own set of consequences for communication in organizations. Using a particular component of the presentation genre—the PowerPoint texts—in a variety of recurrent situations, many of which have very different discursive requirements and social purposes, poses many communicative challenges. Printing out PowerPoint texts as decks or handouts poses difficulties for readability (sometimes text that shows up well in projection mode is impossible to read in black and white print) and eliminates the role of transitions and special effects. While this constrains some uses of the PowerPoint tool, it also helps curb some of the worst excesses of the PowerPoint slideshows as enacted with computer projection. The bigger problems occur, however, when the PowerPoint texts are "repurposed" for use in a setting where temporal and spatial symmetry are no longer present (e.g., the deck-as-deliverable, the Web-based "presentation," etc.). Because they anticipate secondary uses (without knowing their specifics), those who create decks typically crowd them with more content than is necessary or effective for a visual aid accompanying a live presenter, creating information overload for the live audience. Still, such stand-alone "presentations" (as they are still typically called, even though no presenter accompanies the visual aids) lack the more detailed context and nuanced content of a live presentation or of a written report, and thus contribute to communicative ambiguity and loss of meaning. This problem is likely to increase as the PowerPoint texts are used at a greater temporal or spatial remove from the original presentation. In a commentary for *Slate Magazine*, Kaplan (2003) quotes Edward Mark, a historian for the US Air Force, as observing:

Almost all Air Force documents today, for example, are presented as PowerPoint briefings. They are almost never printed and rarely stored. When they are saved, they are often unaccompanied by any text. As a result, in many cases, the briefings are incomprehensible.

As electronic or paper renditions of PowerPoint texts become the only record of major activities, comprehension is reduced and organizational memory deteriorates. Levina's (2001) "Slide Graveyard" is, at the same time, both too much information and too little for new organization members. Just as expectations around the visual aids have been shaped by the use of multiple expressive media available in the PowerPoint texts—text, charts, images, animation, audio, and video—expectations may also change as PowerPoint texts are transmitted and viewed in different transmission media—computer-projection, overhead transparency, paper copy, and electronic file. Moreover, expectations around the live presenter change as that presenter is co-present, or is mediated by videoconference or telephone. And when the presenter is absent altogether, as seems to be increasingly the case in corollary genres such as the on-line slideshow for individual viewing or the take-away deck-as-deliverable, the genre expectations become increasingly uncertain. Until clearer expectations arise around these corollary genres, we can expect continued genre ambiguity, communicative difficulty, and discursive experimentation.

We have suggested here that corollary genres emerge from micro-level improvisations that shift some of the genre expectations associated with a particular genre, but do not (yet) transform it. Such shifts—to borrow from another context—"inflect the prose of everyday life without rewriting it"(Pollan, 2002, p. 142). Seen as inflections in conventional discursive practice, the concept of corollary genres helps us to articulate the process through which knowledgeable human agents begin to modify and experiment with aspects of their established communicative genres. As derivatives of established genres, corollary genres begin to decouple texts from the particular recurrent situation around which they emerged, thus enabling (and constraining) new forms of discursive expression. In enacting such shifts of conventional discursive practice, human agents produce a variety of tensions and ambiguities, challenging their communicative effectiveness. But in doing so, they also generate possibilities for social change.

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**Exhibit 1: Typical transparency created using a typewriter**

(Overhead for use in the classroom by John Van Maanen (based on materials appearing in Schein, 1969))

"STURDY BATTLER"

(ACCEPT TOUGH, DENY TENDER)

THE BEST WORLD IS ONE OF COMPETITION, CONFLICT,  
ASSERTIVENESS, POWER

FUNCTIONS IN GROUP TO TAKE CHARGE, INITIATIVE,  
PRESS FOR RESULTS, DISCIPLINE, STRUCTURE

EVALUATES OTHERS IN TERMS OF WHO IS WINNING OR  
LOSING, WHO HAS POWER

INFLUENCES BY WILL POWER, ORDERS AND COMMANDS,  
DOMINATION, THREAT, CHALLENGE

FEARS LOSS OF POWER, BECOMING SOFT OR SENTIMENTAL,  
BECOMING DEPENDENT

UNDER STRESS MOVES FAST AND TAKES LEADERSHIP  
(OVERACTIVE AND EXPLOITATIVE)



**Exhibit 2: Cartoon about PowerPoint (source: *Scott Adams*, 2003)**



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Exhibit 3: Agenda slide of the “Gettysburg PowerPoint Presentation” (source: Peter Norvig)

11/19/1863

## Agenda

- Met on battlefield (great)
- Dedicate portion of field - fitting!
- Unfinished work (great tasks)

home back next