Does PowerPoint make us stupid?

Rock star David Byrne turns PowerPoint into art

SAN FRANCISCO, California (AP) --David Byrne, an accomplished composer, photographer and lead singer of Talking Heads, has evolved -- some would say devolved -- into an unlikely artistic medium: PowerPoint.

Best known for vocals in "Psycho Killer" and "Burning Down the House," Byrne originally intended to spoof the ubiquitous software as a dumbed-down form of expression between communication-addled business executives.

But after spending several hours designing a mock slide show, Byrne became intrigued. He decided to experiment with PowerPoint as an artistic medium -- and ponder whether it shapes how we talk and think.

In his book and DVD compilation, "Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information," Byrne twists PowerPoint from a marketing tool into a multimedia canvas, pontificating that the software's charts, graphs, bullet points and arrows have changed communication styles.

"I just got carried away and started making stuff," Byrne said. "It communicates within certain limited parameters really well and very easily. The genius of it is that it was designed for any idiot to use. I learned it in a few hours, and that's the idea."

The 96-page compilation, which debuted in September for $80, is best described as a coffee table book for nerds. The initial printing run of 1,500 copies sold out by mid-December.

The book includes mostly lucid musings on how PowerPoint has ushered in "the end of reason," with pictures of bar charts gone hideously astray, fields of curved arrows that point at nothing, disturbing close-ups of wax hands and eyebrows, and a photo of Dolly the cloned sheep enclosed by punctuation brackets.

The 20-minute DVD, encased in the navy blue hardback cover, features the same abstractions in motion. Byrne wrote most of the music.

Byrne, 51, who was born in Scotland but has spent most of his adulthood in New York, said the compilation wasn't meant as a "serious statement about anything."

But by fixating on PowerPoint, Byrne -- idolized by millions as a rock star for intellectuals -- has stoked a fierce debate.

Visual artists say Microsoft Corp.'s popular "slideware" -- which makes it easy to incorporate animated graphics and other entertainment into presentations -- lulls people into accepting pablum over ideas. Foes say PowerPoint's ubiquity perverts everything from elementary school reports to NASA's scientific theses into sales pitches with bullet points and stock art.

One of the Internet's inventors, Vint Cerf, gets laughs from audiences by quipping, "Power corrupts and PowerPoint corrupts absolutely."

Cerf, now an MCI executive and chairman of the Internet's key oversight body, doesn't shun PowerPoint completely, but said avoiding it "actually improves communication because people have to listen rather than being distracted by fancy PowerPoint charts."

Edward R. Tufte, a Yale University professor and author of graphic design book "Envisioning Information," is perhaps the most vocal PowerPoint hater. He believes PowerPoint's emphasis on format over content commercializes and trivializes subjects.

In a Wired magazine editorial in September titled "PowerPoint Is Evil," Tufte compared PowerPoint presentations to a school play: "very loud, very slow, and very simple."

Peter Norvig, 46, engineering director at Google Inc., is generally credited with creating the first PowerPoint parody in 1999, when he published an online slideshow of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The spoof, which by Norvig's estimate has been viewed by at

least 500,000 people, includes bullet points such as "unfinished work (great tasks)," "new birth of freedom" and "government not perish."

Norvig, who recently ordered a copy of Byrne's compilation for himself, said Byrne is wading in treacherous waters.

"People are asking whether, ultimately, PowerPoint makes us all stupid, or does it help us streamline our thoughts?" said Norvig, who first saw Talking Heads in the late '70s. "My belief is that PowerPoint doesn't kill meetings. People kill meetings. But using PowerPoint is like having a loaded AK-47 on the table: You can do very bad things with it."

Microsoft spokesman Simon Marks wouldn't comment on whether PowerPoint has debased society but said in an e-mail, "PowerPoint continues to evolve to make it easier for customers to present their information in the style that best suits the content and the audience."

Byrne, a Tufte admirer who attended the Rhode Island School of Design, writes that PowerPoint's "subtle sets of biases" indoctrinate users to speak -- and think -- simply.

But the overall tone of this compilation is somewhat like a sales pitch -- whimsical and upbeat. Byrne is unapologetic about liking PowerPoint.

"Software constraints are only confining if you use them for what they're intended to be used for," Byrne said in a phone interview. "PowerPoint may not be of any use for you in a presentation, but it may liberate you in another way, an artistic way. Who knows."

The gulf between Byrne's and Tufte's outlooks troubles fans.
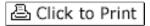
Jimmy Guterman, 41, a writer whose Boston-area office includes posters of Tufte and Byrne, said he feels like the child of divorce.

"Quite frankly, I have to side with Tufte on this one," Guterman said. "Byrne thinks it's funny that this tool exists, and he wants to play with it. Tufte is going for the jugular. But they both in different ways understand that PowerPoint is a broken tool."

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