

# WHY IS POWERPOINT IMPORTANT?

## HUBERT KNOBLAUCH, *POWERPOINT, COMMUNICATION, AND THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY*

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“Little known to a general public even as late as 1990, powerpoint presentations a decade later were ubiquitous as both documents and events [...] in 2006, [Edward] Tufte estimated the numbers at about 35 million presentations per day”. Thus begins the final chapter of Hubert Knoblauch’s recent book, *PowerPoint, Communication, and the Knowledge Society* (2014). The author is a German sociologist, currently working at the Technical University of Berlin. His interests lie in the sociology of culture, sociology of religion, sociology of knowledge, and qualitative research methods. The last two are central to the book, which is partly based on studies carried out by Knoblauch and other scholars within a collaborative research project. *PowerPoint...* is an ambitious – and successful – attempt to combine an empirical analysis of a global phenomenon with a more abstract discussion of a theory of communicative action and communicative genres.

According to the author’s historical notes, after Microsoft Corporation purchased Forethought – the company where PowerPoint had been developed in the mid-1980s – the program was gradually integrated with other Microsoft software, Excel and Word, so that all three applications would look alike and have similar user interfaces. Then Robert Gaskins’ landmark presentation in 1992 reinforced the idea that PowerPoint slides could be displayed to an audience on external screens, not just printed or sent to recipients. This started the global diffusion of the software, which in turn triggered a critically oriented discourse on PowerPoint. With regard to these processes, Knoblauch poses three research questions: “Why are

powerpoint presentations ubiquitous? Why are they morally contended? How are they related to the knowledge society?” (2014: 25).

Answering these questions is the explanatory task of the book. It is explanatory not in the sense of identifying “causal conditions” but explicating “the ways that those aspects of society that can be described as structures can be traced back to aspects of (communicative) actions” (2014: 6). In addition, Knoblauch’s book has an interpretive goal: “to *understand* the meaning of social action, which in our context means to understand what a powerpoint presentation is in the course of the social actions performed” (2014: 5, my italics). Taken together, those two aims constitute the general purpose of the study, which is to “identify empirically the ways the social reality is constructed by way of communicative action” (2014: 5).

Knoblauch’s work has a largely diadic structure, which I will follow in this review. Namely, the argument proceeds from theoretical to empirical matters, as well as from interpretation to explanation. The first three chapters describe the subject matter of the book, present the history of PowerPoint software, and lay the conceptual groundwork for later analysis. The next three chapters – which are significantly longer – discuss the findings of Knoblauch’s research team and integrate them with other studies. All this is followed by a concluding chapter and three methodological appendices which present the method of video analysis, the data used in the book, and the transcription conventions applied.

Some of the theoretical and empirical arguments from the book have previously been published in German by Knoblauch or his collaborators. However, English-language publications from this research team have been relatively scarce, and more importantly, there is no synthesis comparable in size and scope to this one. As to other research on powerpoint presentations, Knoblauch himself offers a succinct overview, discerning three types of studies. The first approach, which employs the perspective of information design, concentrates on the slides as carriers of information. The second type inspects the effects and efficiency of presentations, using questionnaire data. The first branch is often highly normative, and the other – despite the large amount of studies – is generally inconclusive. Both types tend to follow a transmission model of communication, unlike the third approach, which may be called ethnographic, and which is close to Knoblauch’s standpoint.

The author avoids lengthy descriptions of available publications; instead, he incorporates the references into his overall argument. He is also clear about his contributions to – or polemics with – existing scholarship,

be it Edward Tufte's work on the cognitive style allegedly imprinted into PowerPoint slides (2014: 43–44), the aforementioned ethnographic studies (2014: 48–49), or the empirical analyses of audience interaction (2014: 126). Moreover, Knoblauch is opposed to what he sees as oversimplifications in the public discourse on presentations – such as the view that the powerpoint format always creates an asymmetrical relationship between the speaker and the audience, whereas it is actually other elements of the situation (e.g., seating formats) that establish the asymmetry in a certain share of presentations (2014: 164). The polemics are a recurring thread in the book, and they are invariably informative and elegant.

In keeping with the author's own use of the terms, throughout this review I apply the spelling "PowerPoint" solely to the product of the Microsoft company. In order to designate all kinds of presentation software, I employ the variant "powerpoint". It should also be noted that the author's interests are in the powerpoint presentation as event (involving a presenter, an audience, technologies such as projectors or computer screens, and a number of activities performed by different actors) rather than in the presentation as software (which can either exist independently or become part of an event).

### **/// Communicative action and communicative genres**

The notion of **communicative action** is crucial to Knoblauch's argument. The author pits his definition against the formulation of Jürgen Habermas, the inventor of the term. According to Knoblauch, Habermas has been wrong to neglect non-linguistic forms of bodily communication as well as visualized written codes: diagrams, charts, etc. He has also introduced an artificial divide between communicative actions and instrumental ones, overlooking the fact that any meaning relies on the production of a material carrier and is thus always an intervention into the physical world. Therefore, communicative action is unvaryingly performative, carried out by the body – as in writing letters, uttering sounds, or pressing buttons – and unfolding in space and time. It also involves coordinating the performances of other people's bodies and synchronizing (though not necessarily unifying) the interactants' motives.

Communicative actions may become habitualized, forming routine solutions to problems typically faced by social actors. Those solutions can then become institutionalized by spreading among numerous people, which leads us to the brief definition of **communicative genres** as "in-

stitutions of communicative actions” (2014: 57). Examples of such genres include jokes, tall stories, academic dissertations, photograph exhibitions, live meetings, and even boxing matches. In Knoblauch’s view, communicative genres form “the stable core of communication culture” (2014: 64).

The book offers two ways to impose some order on the diversity of communicative genres. The first way is to classify them according to several criteria: 1. the level of fixedness and formalization (linked to the degree of institutional development); 2. the materiality of objectivations (bodily conduct and performance; sound; language; visual representation); 3. the type of mediatization, the technology applied, and the range of social actors; 4. temporality and length. Knoblauch uses some of these criteria in the empirical chapters – albeit not systematically – to distinguish between various kinds of presentations. The other way is to discern three levels of genre analysis: internal (actions and objectivations), intermediate (performances and interactions), and external (relationship of presentations as events to the social structure). The analysis on the first two levels is mainly interpretive, whereas on the third level it is mostly explanatory.

Knoblauch’s writing in the conceptual section, if not very vivid, is generally clear. However, additional editing would help to make some passages less ambiguous. For instance, the meaning of the term “objectivation” implied by its uses in the text varies from aspects to types, to necessary implications, to optional consequences, to equivalents of communicative actions. Furthermore, the author’s examples of objectivations include not just linguistic signs, icons, or tattoos but also sensual tastes and tactile patterns, and yet there is no explanation of why the last two products of action belong to the same category as the more self-evident examples of sounds, letters, and images.

### **/// Analyzing powerpoint presentations**

The internal and intermediate levels of analysis are based mainly on video recordings and related transcripts of 271 lectures and presentations (in total about 100 hours of audiovisual material), usually supported by technological aids – including 196 presentations with PowerPoint software. Supplemented by slide copies, field protocols, and questionnaires filled by presenters, the recordings come from seminars, meetings, workshops, and conferences held at universities, administrative institutions, private businesses, churches, etc. Most of the material was collected between 2004 and 2006 (Knoblauch admits that some aspects of powerpoint presentations

have likely changed since then). Additional sources include about fifty advice books and ten interviews with members of various organizations, and at one point the author draws on Frederik Pötzsch's study of 653 power-point slides.

Audiovisual data are well suited to the overall purpose of the book, allowing for the study of those aspects of communicative action that would not be accessible in transcripts alone, and thus also for a fuller understanding of what presentations are. A disadvantage of the data – which the author admits, if only in one sentence in an appendix – is that they have mostly been gathered in Berlin and other German cities, even though the presenters come from many European nations as well as several countries on other continents.

One of the most important conclusions Knoblauch draws from the analysis is that it is not slides themselves that constitute the substance of presentations as events. Rather, “it is the synchronization of spoken text with certain visual elements of the slide that is basic for an understanding of the meaning of the presentation” (2014: 86). For this reason, slide content is often paralleled by speakers, who can quote the slides outright, rephrase their content (e.g., saying “England” when the slide shows “Great Britain”), or segment their speech/talk in accordance with the structure of bullet lists. Knoblauch's conclusion goes against many advice books which suggest that presenters should avoid any redundancy, and against the tacit assumption of many researchers that examining slides is enough to uncover the social meaning of presentations.

Key features of presentations as communicative genres are explored further in the analysis of pointing. Moving the body – sometimes moving a single finger, sometimes changing one's entire posture – means establishing a triadic relation among the presenter, the screen or slides (or other technological items), and the audience. This triadic structure underlies various types of situations: presentations can be oriented toward the written text prepared in advance, toward the slides, or toward the presenter. A mixed type is possible too (in fact it appears to be the most frequent one). If a speaker ignores any single component of the triadic relation, the boundaries of the communicative genre are overstepped and the presentation becomes a different event (e.g., neglecting the slides transforms the presentation as a whole into a talk, speech, or lecture). These observations demonstrate the potential that the study of presentations has for the general theory of communicative genres.

Knoblauch's analysis also provides some responses to popular criticism. For instance, the audience is not necessarily passive but can play an active role in powerpoint presentations. This can be seen in initial interactions (e.g., discussions that only stop a moment after the presenter has begun talking), in responses to the speaker's encouragements, in questions asked by audience members, in final applause, and so forth. Another response: technology – from screens and projectors to microphones and loudspeakers – is not a passive element of the presentation either. This is made visible by all kinds of problems and failures (which may threaten to disrupt the very definition of the situation) but technical equipment also participates actively in the presentation when everything is going as planned.

### **/// The popularity and morality of powerpoint**

How do we know that presentations are ubiquitous? To answer this question, Knoblauch tracks the institutionalization of organizational meetings since the late nineteenth century and gathers partial statistical data on the current amount of meetings. These data are taken from international reports of the meetings industry, or the so-called MICE industry (“meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions”). Information on the sales of equipment and software is also presented, and the author notes that the success of presentations would not have been possible without the increase in the global use of computers. Further evidence, collected from numerous studies, includes the expansion of presentations across national societies and social categories, and their spread – which gained traction around the year 2000 – not just in the business world but also across institutional spheres and subsystems: science, education, the military, politics, the legal system, the religious field, and the arts.

All this is only indirectly related to the global diffusion of *powerpoint* presentations. More direct evidence comes from two sources. First, Knoblauch follows the history of the word “presentation”, using encyclopedias, dictionaries, and advice books to show how it became popular and at the same time changed its meaning over the last few decades. Second, he reports on ten interviews with representatives from various companies to reconstruct the formal evolution of presentations as events, and to demonstrate how PowerPoint and other presentation programs came to be commonly used in business.

The argument so far reveals certain gaps. First, the diffusion of presentations in various institutional domains is only analyzed on the ex-

ternal level, and different types of settings have not been compared in the interpretive part of the book. This is somewhat surprising because a lay reader might expect significant differences; it seems insufficient to give merely a brief note that powerpoint “only varies slightly across the most diverse institutional spheres of society”. The concomitant statement that this form of communication “maintains common standards even across the globe” (2014: 206) is also suspicious given the study’s self-admitted regional bias. Second, interviews with actors from non-business institutional spheres would allow for a more comprehensive insight into the history of powerpoint in various domains. A brief description of the limitations of available interview data would be in order here. Those two gaps do not invalidate the general argument but they do detract a little from its value.

Now, why did presentations as events become so common, despite early anticipations that powerpoint software would mostly be used in large companies? Why do people still gather at presentations instead of just exchanging files through the Internet? Knoblauch’s answer is predicated on his interpretive analysis of presentation recordings. He claims that this is a specific instance of why information needs to be embedded in localized situations. Powerpoint slides may be getting increasingly standardized but performing presenters are able to contextualize them in social interaction.

Furthermore, powerpoint presentations have become “one of the ways to frame what counts as ‘knowledge’ in the kind of society that we call knowledge society” (2014: 204). In this they operate together with other communicative genres devoted to the communication of knowledge: audits, interviews, consultancies and coaching, small conferences and seminars, as well as conversational teachings, seminar discussions, lectures, talks, and recently also “science slams”. Knowledge society is not influenced solely by scientific communication; it is also shaped by (and itself shapes) certain forms of primary education, those of popular entertainment, and – as in the case of powerpoint – business genres. Powerpoint slides are partly related to earlier scientific events (small conferences, seminars) but their business roots are still strong. I will return to the problem of knowledge society (which appears to be particularly significant, as signaled by the title) in the concluding part of this review.

Remarks on business have their place in the overall argument of the book. In the author’s view, “[p]owerpoint is the result of a marriage between the emerging computer technologies and business”; “Since computer developers had been in such close contact with business [in the formative stage of computing] [...] their solution to the problems encountered in

the business world became fused so that their computers also were literally linked to the business world (as figuring in meetings)” (2014: 192). What is more, the dissemination of powerpoint beyond the boundaries of business may be seen as an expansion of “the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ [...] with its new forms of projectlike organization and requirements for coordination and exchange of knowledge by communication” (2014: 194). However, Knoblauch does not elaborate on this last point; he merely refers the reader to Luc Boltanski’s and Ève Chiapello’s 1999 book *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. This is slightly disappointing, and perhaps stems from the author’s apparent intent to avoid critical undertones.

The final issue is that of the public and academic discourse on powerpoint – triggered by the increasing diffusion of presentations around the year 2000 but usually focused on software. Knoblauch reads this discourse as mostly critical, and sometimes explicitly normative. A particularly significant figure in this discourse is the computer scientist Edward Tufte, whose critique has been summarized as follows: “First, the technicalities of [...] PowerPoint appear to be deficient; second, these restrictions lead to the deficient ‘cognitive style’ of the information; affecting, third, the presenter, the audience, and their cognition”. This alleged deficiency is characterized by “rapid temporal sequencing of thin information [...] foreshortening of evidence and thought [...] [and] a breaking up of narratives and data into slides and minimal fragments” (2014: 41). In a 2003 booklet, Tufte even stated: “PowerPoint is evil. Power corrupts. PowerPoint corrupts absolutely”. Other critical statements come from Marxist and Foucauldian academics, and from many outlets in the public press.

Knoblauch’s examples represent the period between 2001 and 2008, so it is difficult to say how valid they are in 2016. But they are undoubtedly useful as sources regarding the common views on powerpoint presentations in the years of their rapid proliferation. In that period “critics seemed to react to this expansion of a genre into communicative cultures that had not been accustomed either to informational structures or to the forms of ‘knowledge’ communication represented by PowerPoint” (2014: 194). However misguided the criticism might sometimes be, it seems that the expansion of powerpoint presentations from the business world into other institutional domains – and the related assertion of the hegemony of Microsoft Company – has not been accepted easily. Again, though, the author does not elaborate on this issue.

In this section I have not been distinguishing between the work of Knoblauch’s team and other publications. It should be reiterated, then, that

the empirical part of the book is not based solely on original research. In fact, it is commendable how the author integrates the work of his team with other studies, combining both into a rich analysis of the three levels of powerpoint presentations. Thanks to that integration, interested readers will also find in the book a valuable source of information about many publications in the German language.

### **/// Powerpoint and the knowledge (and information) society**

The term “knowledge society” as applied so far has been a simplification, but perhaps a justifiable one, as I have followed Knoblauch’s own example: “The reference to a knowledge society in the title of the book is an abbreviation for ‘information and knowledge society’” (2014: 10). The author explains that the notion of an information society is related to the assumption of technological determinism, whereas the idea of a knowledge society underscores the role of human actors. The latter concept has been superseding the former, implying many of its aspects, but to some extent the two terms can still be distinguished. For example, the stabilization of powerpoint presentation as a communicative genre has been grounded in conditions provided both by information society (the prevalence of information technologies, related to presentations as documents) and by knowledge society (the institutionalization of meetings, related to presentations as events).

The relationship between powerpoint presentations and information and knowledge society is presented in somewhat incongruous ways. The first variant is that “Power[P]oint became inserted into society as a communicative form [...] and it is through this form that society [...] was transformed into a ‘knowledge society’ or ‘information society’” (2014: 8). The second version is that “powerpoint is one product of the social construction of information and knowledge society” (2014: 10). The third take is that information and knowledge society is “both constituting and being constituted by powerpoint” (2014: 15). And then a claim similar to the first is made: “The thesis of this book is that powerpoint presentations are a communicative genre contributing to the construction of the knowledge society” (2014: 20). In the end, all these formulations are relevant, as the book attempts to explain several things: the social genesis of powerpoint; the processes that enabled both the development of powerpoint and the development of information and knowledge society; and the reciprocal constitution of powerpoint and said societal formation.

The information and knowledge society “is characterized by the ever increasing ubiquity of many forms of the communication of ‘knowledge’ and by their growing relevance or legitimation” (2014: 207). The example of powerpoint presentations demonstrates that those forms do not need to be developed at schools and universities. Knoblauch writes that knowledge cannot be reduced to scientific knowledge, and “it was one of the goals of this study to show that the ‘knowledge society’ is not only, and probably not even predominantly, coined by scientific forms of communication” (2014: 208). This seems to be a significant point for the discussions of information and knowledge society.

On the whole, this is a significant work which examines the globally important phenomenon of PowerPoint – and powerpoint – in a context that is highly meaningful for sociological theory. The study is not just about the software and related performances but also about the contemporary development of information and knowledge society, which has been a major social and cultural change across the globe. The analysis is also pertinent to the classic questions concerning human action that have captivated the greatest sociological thinkers. It is not by accident that the book begins with a motto from Georg Simmel: “If society is conceived of interactions among individuals, the description of the forms of this interaction is the task of the science of society in the strictest and most essential sense”.

The book does have its weaker points. But the overall quality and significance make it a valuable piece of sociological scholarship.

#### Bibliography:

/// Knoblauch H. 2014. *PowerPoint, Communication, and the Knowledge Society*, Cambridge University Press.