Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere

JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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A practical guide to using visuals to enhance oral presentations in an academic context

François Heinderyckx

Abstract

An oral presentation in front of an audience remains the most common way to share ideas, arguments and research results. Recent technological developments offer a range of exciting possibilities to enhance one's oral presentation with visuals. Lately, audiences have grown so used to speakers using visuals aids that it has become almost a requirement. This chapter offers guidance in deciding whether or not a presentation should be accompanied by visual aids before detailing strategies to design effective visuals that will serve and enhance a talk while avoiding to divert the attention of the audience. The chapter also argues against the tyranny of the bulleted lists that have come to dominate visuals as a result of docile submission to poorly designed templates that almost impose these lists as the standard format. Cognitive and technical considerations are discussed. The chapter recommends caution when sharing visuals after a presentation as they usually don't constitute an autonomous narration and could therefore be misunderstood when considered by themselves, without the accompanying talk that it merely illustrates.

Keywords: oral presentation; visuals; visual aids; slide show; bulleted list

1. Introduction

One of the most common ways to share one's scholarly work with peers is still the traditional oral presentation. Even in the age of teleconferencing and digital collaborative platforms, conferences, workshops, lectures, and presentations are still predominantly consisting of one person addressing an audience to convey a number of ideas, facts, and arguments. A range of technologies has become standard equipment in lecture halls and conference centres to facilitate and enhance the act of addressing an audience. Some of these technologies are related to sound: microphones, amplifiers and speakers make it easier for the audience to hear the speaker and allow the use of other sounds as required; wireless microphones allow speakers to enjoy voice amplification even while moving around.

Yet the most significant set of innovations was developed to allow the use of visuals to accompany speeches: slide projectors could display static photographic images on a screen; overhead projectors could project images from transparencies that could be pre-printed or written upon by the speaker during the presentation; movie projectors could show moving images using reels of cellulose film. Then along came digital display technologies: screens, data-projectors and computer-generated graphics. In principle, digital display technology (i.e., a computer and a display device) offers a wide range of possibilities to show still and moving images. However, sophisticated technologies are only as useful as the skills and talent of their users. In the absence of structured teaching of such skills in schools or universities, the experience will range from dazzling all the way down to appalling, from powerful enhancement down to a noisy distraction. This chapter aims to understand how visuals can contribute to the clarity of an oral presentation and to the credibility of the presenter, and how applying a few simple principles can improve this type of communication significantly.

2.   What visuals (if any) can do to an oral presentation

An oral presentation is a performance. Although what a speaker will say should be centre-stage, a number of other factors will be decisive in the impression left by the presentation: eloquence, body language, eye contact, staging, and visuals. Visuals can take many forms: the speaker can write and draw on a blackboard or a whiteboard or a flip chart; or project and draw on transparencies using an overhead projector; or project a film or photographic slides with film or slide projectors. Increasingly however, speakers are expected to project computer-generated images and animations on one or several screens visible to the audience. In recent times, the use of such visuals has become a standard

feature, and the absence of any kind of illustration is too often perceived as a shortcoming, a missed opportunity and a sign of dullness. The urgency to add visuals to oral presentations is reinforced by the aesthetics of contemporary media. On television, if an anchor-person or a politician is shown talking, motionless, behind a desk or a lectern more than a few seconds, moving pictures of something vaguely related to the topic will be shown either in full screen or at least in a split-screen. On the web, sophisticated illustrations are commonplace, whatever the topic. Likewise, when we attend a lecture, we expect to be entertained with eye candy, or at least something to look at other than the speaker, sadly enough.

Although the abundance of tools and technologies used to create and share visuals should be seen as a positive development, it would be a mistake to consider visuals are a requirement. Visuals can be of little value to the audience, and all too easily, they can become a liability or even a nuisance. When preparing an oral presentation, the benefit of using visuals must be carefully assessed. Visuals are typically valuable when discussing topics that are essentially visual (photography, cinema, visual arts), but also topics involving complex results requiring data visualization (graphs, maps or tables), or when the presentation includes long quotes (seeing the text of the quote and the full reference will be appreciated by the audience) or when the complexity of the argument can be made more accessible by visual representations.

If no visuals seem necessary or desirable, then the presentation should be prepared without visuals, or with minimalist visuals, i.e. a title slide (showing the title of the talk, along with the name, affiliation, and contact details of the speaker), and possibly an additional slide showing the structure or the outline of the talk. Such bare visuals as a visual backdrop will be preferable to the desktop of the computer, the last slide of the previous speaker or the blue screen projected by the data-projector in the absence of input.

2.1   What visuals should not be

If visuals seem worthwhile, they should be designed following general guidelines as to what they should and should not be. Visuals are too easily a **diversion**, an invitation to split the audience's attention. This can be caused by an element of *distraction*, which is typically any visual element that is significantly disconnected from what the speaker says at that particular point. A common source of distraction is found in touches of visual humour. While humour is generally welcome in a talk, it should not be conveyed only by a visual that is superimposed on the talk, for it will, like all other sources of distraction, split the attention of the audience. A sure sign of the presence of an element of distraction on visuals is when audience members make comments among them-

selves while pointing at the screen. The divided attention can also result from visuals that are an *addition* to the talk. This happens when the speaker provides significantly more details on the visual than in the talk, almost like footnotes or, in extreme cases, like an annex to the talk. If the audience is interested in those details, a significant amount of attention will be diverted towards the visuals, at the expense of the talk. The visuals can even constitute a *rival* to the speech. This will happen when the speaker mentions, in passing, a notion or a study that will not be developed in the talk (for lack of time), but is somewhat detailed in a slide for those who might be interested. These tentative extensions usually result from difficulties in time-management, i.e. when a speaker wants to squeeze more into the presentation than time allows.

In every one of these cases, the speaker is not supporting, but sabotaging his or her own presentation by offering audience members opportunities, invitations even, to branch out and divert their attention from the words spoken and towards stimuli which, because they are visual, will easily appeal to the senses. Even if the audience resists the temptation and remains focused on the talk, the diversions will at least create discomfort and require additional efforts of concentration.

Visuals that consist in literal transcriptions of the talk should also be avoided, except in specific cases of a deficit in language skills among the audience (and even in this case, it is preferable to show the main points in the language of the audience to help them bridge the gap). Full-text slides will inevitably catch the eye of the audience which will then lose visual contact with the speaker, thus transforming the presentation into a kind of academic karaoke.

2.2 What visuals should be

Effective visuals support the presentation. Whether they summarize, visualize, symbolize or merely illustrate, they must *enhance* the talk by clarifying, magnifying and reinforcing the meaning of the words of the speaker. The enhancement requires a strict synchronization between text and visuals: at any point of the presentation, what is shown must match what is said. Yet, not every part of the speech requires visuals. All too often, presenters laboriously develop visuals so that every idea, argument or paragraph can be matched on the display, resulting in a large proportion of weak visuals, with little or no added value. Instead, speakers should not hesitate to insert blank visuals (a simple uniform black will minimize distraction) to be shown between two segments that require visuals. Each of the visuals-free segments will return attention to the speaker while providing a welcome alternation. When visuals are next used, they will draw all gazes back to the screens with renewed attention and anticipation.

The speech and the visuals must blend into one integrated presentation. Any disjunction between the two or any sources of divergence (see above) will split the performance into two distinct presentations, one visual, the other oral, both of which will run in parallel, competing for attention instead of enhancing each another.

3.   Creating effective visuals

When preparing an oral presentation, the development of the structure, of the arguments, and even of the full text will usually precede any consideration of the accompanying visuals (provided that the use of visuals is deemed worthwhile). One easy way to start the creative process is to first identify the parts of the texts which can be enhanced with visuals, then sketch a simple storyboard showing roughly which succession of visuals might best serve which sections of the speech. It is important to determine which visuals would be static, and which animated. If illustrations are considered, it is best to start collecting the necessary material as soon as possible.

3.1   Choice of formats and tools

On the basis of the storyboard or any other rough sketch of which visuals are being contemplated, a format and a platform will have to be selected. The choice must take into account which technologies and skills are available. As much as possible, technologies should be selected to best serve the project. This might require the acquisition of new technologies and new skills, within reason, obviously. If we limit ourselves to computer-generated visuals, there are a number of options. **Mind-maps** are quite efficient at showing structures that can be unfolded gradually, thus guiding the audience through a complex description or argument. Yet, such visuals will be better received by those who are used to mind-maps; others might find them distracting or even confusing. Another possibility lies in technologies creating sophisticated transitions that are variations of zoom in or out and rotation to present a succession of visuals that are all embedded in one large vectorized image. The likes of **Prezi** are popular because they produce spectacular animations and intriguing effects of embedding and tree structures. The use of such formats should be strictly limited to visualizations where the representation as a unified structure, within which the audience will navigate as the argument unfolds, is meaningful. In other words, if the result is just a succession of frames with dazzling transitions combining rotations and strong zoom effects, the visuals will create a distraction (and possibly induce bouts of nausea). In some cases, the presentation

will just require an excerpt from audio-visual material. In that case, it is best to have that extract ready as a stand-alone computer file (to avoid having to browse media to the right segment). If the extract is required alongside other visual material, it is recommended to embed it in the main presentation so as to avoid a discontinuity within the presentation (and the inevitable technical glitches that come with switching from one to the other). Certain presentations will require the use of a browser to navigate the web. This requires access to the internet, which must be checked in advance. Should internet unexpectedly not be available, it is best to prepare a few screen shots of the web sites that were to be shown for minimum rendering.

3.2 The curse of the bulleted list

The most common technology used to prepare and show visuals during a presentation is that of computer-generated slide shows. Generally referred to by the genericised trademark "PowerPoint" or "PPT" (in reference to the software that pioneered the genre and the suffix of the files it produces), the slide shows can be designed using a number of programmes (PowerPoint, OpenOffice/LibreOffice Impress, Keynote, to name a few). The sophistication of these programmes has evolved over time, but the possibilities they offer are still remarkably limited. Because these programmes are relatively simple to use, they are very popular as they allow very quick production of a set of simple visuals. The widespread use of these programmes to create quick-and-dirty visuals has fed a culture of poorly designed visuals.

Because these programmes emphasize ease of use, they strongly encourage users to work on the basis of pre-defined templates. Although these templates are convenient when they combine tasteful choices of fonts, colours, and background, they force users into a very limited set of layouts that tend to be accepted as the only possibilities. One of these layouts has become a signature feature of visuals developed using the programmes: the bulleted list. This standard feature of the most popular slide show presentation programmes from their earliest versions has imposed, as the default layout of slides, a centred title followed by a list of words or short sentences each preceded by a bullet. When required, the bulleted list can feature more than one level of bullets.

The title-and-bulleted-list format has become the unchallenged standard format to present, visually, just about any kind of project, argument, or analysis. The consequences of the bulleted-list conformism are daunting. The format is so deeply ingrained that people don't realize that not everything should be reduced or bent into a bulleted list which will all too often distort the argument. Bullet lists should, in principle, be used only to display enumerations, i.e. to list items that constitute a series: variables, parameters, causes, steps, names,

companies, dates, etc. The bullet list is not suitable to summarize what would be the successive paragraphs of the text of the talk or anything that would be understood as an enumeration while it is not.

What is more, bulleted lists are a particularly poor form of visualization. It often looks more like a set of poorly designed cheat sheets than like actual visual aids. The cause of the persistent poor quality of most visuals lies in the lack of skills. At best, users have followed training sessions or tutorials that, unfortunately, tend to focus exclusively on how to use one particular software package and all its fancy features, leaving aside even the most basic notions of visualization, aesthetics, semiotics or sense-making. Education is techno-logically centred, with a strong emphasis on software operation and features. As a result, creating visual aids is seen as a process that starts from the tools, from the programme that one uses and was trained for. Given that these tools encourage a limited range of options within their default templates, the ten-dency to use only these options is self-reinforced. Showing bulleted lists as a backdrop of one's oral presentation, though very inefficient —often even counter-productive— has become standard. While preparing an oral presenta-tion, people ask themselves "How can I make my talk into a PowerPoint?" i.e. in most cases, obediently filling a template of bulleted lists. The creativity is so constrained that it is difficult to produce anything but very common, unsophis-ticated visuals that will rarely achieve the full potential of visual enhancement.

3.3   To design ad hoc visuals instead of filling up templates

The proper way to proceed is the exact opposite. Visuals should be what the speaker wants them to be. Visuals must be conceived on the basis of what the speaker would like to show at different points in the speech, not as a template to be filled as best as possible. The tools must serve the presenter's creativity, not impede it. Choices should be made with one central aim in mind: visuals should *enhance* the talk. Visuals must then be imagined with a very open mind, not in terms of whatever the computer programme of choice does most easily, but in terms of what the speaker wants to show the audience during the pres-entation.

The question must be "How can visuals help me get my point across?" and not "How can I make that into a PowerPoint?" The approach must be "What do I want to show or display?" and "How can I best achieve that?", not "How can I fill that template?" and "What words can I put in that bullet-point list?". Each slide is a blank canvas where one must decide to set-up a layout that best serves the message.

Only once the wanted visuals have been conceptualized should the speaker seek the most appropriate way to produce those visuals. If working with standard presentation software, it is best to start from a blank presentation and build up the desired visuals gradually, importing pictures, inserting text, drawing shapes as required; not obediently filling a template as imposed. Software should serve a speaker's ambitions, not dictate the terms and appearance of a template-constrained, inevitably dumbed-down presentation.

4.   Guidelines for efficient visuals

Once the idea that visuals can be something other than a bulleted list is accepted, the range of possibilities is only limited by creativity and imagination (and a bit of astuteness as required). Every part of the talk that has been identified as requiring visual aids must be treated individually. We could call them *scenes*. Each scene will require a specific set of visuals. The set can be just one static slide, or it can be a succession of steps within one slide, or it can be a succession of slides. It is important to dose the amount of visuals in connection with the corresponding part of the talk so as to ensure that the two blend into an integrated presentation.

The layout of each slide must be designed with a very open mind ("What do I want to show on the screen?"), yet a few principles should be considered. These principles relate to cognitive and technical considerations.

4.1   Cognitive considerations

Every oral presentation we witness must contribute to our understanding of what works and what doesn't. When it comes to visuals, what doesn't work is quite obvious, and yet all too common, even among experienced speakers. Often, the speakers themselves come to realize their mistakes as they speak and bluntly rub it in when apologizing for the fact that "you can't read the small text" or "you cannot clearly see this graph because the colours don't show well."

The audience has cognitive capacities that are known to the speaker because they are his or her own. With just a bit of experience, it is quite simple to avoid exceeding the cognitive comfort zone of the audience. The number of slides should be kept to a minimum, dazzling an audience with a quick succession of visuals will only create confusion. What is shown on each slide must be comfortably legible, even if the screen is much smaller than expected; text that is too small, colour combinations that are insufficiently contrasted must be avoided. What is shown on each slide must be effortlessly understood; cryptic messages or unnecessarily complex visuals should be avoided. Slides must not

be overloaded; if a lot of content must be fitted, it is best to use a succession of slides rather than try to squeeze it all on what becomes a microfilm-type of visual. Animations and fancy transitions must be used scarcely, only if they add or enhance meaning; the line-by-line animations are often a nuisance—with the "slide-in" variation being a climax in annoyance—, even to the speaker who might have to wait until all is in place on the slide before continuing, not to mention fancy transitions that are essentially a source of distraction and mockery. Visual noise and interference must be muted and eliminated; most templates include logos and background images that simply parasite the visuals in ways that impede their perception by the audience by reducing the signal-to-noise ratio. Each visual can be completely different from the others, yet some stylistic consistency should run across the whole presentation; everyone should develop their own style, and that style should be at least vaguely recognizable.

In keeping with the central aim to enhance the talk (not disturb it or compete with it), visuals must favour meaning, clarity, and concision. Visuals all too easily create stress and irritation in the audience, when they should be soothing and enlightening. One slide should not illustrate more than one idea or one group of ideas (there is no point in piling up ideas on a single slide simply because there is room left—unlike paper, there is no cost-per-slide when projecting visuals). It is also good practice to display, as a last slide, a summary of the main argument of the presentation. This is particularly important if the presentation is followed by a discussion. A summary (and possibly contact details of the speaker) will be much more appropriate than the "Thank you for your attention!" or "Questions?" that usually, and seemingly by mere conformism, conclude most presentations.

4.2 Technical considerations

No matter how sophisticated the technologies available to prepare visuals, their limitations (and the limited skills of their users) must be taken into consideration. The most common computer programmes used to prepare visual aids are ever more sophisticated, yet they are surprisingly limited when it comes to anything out-of-the-box, i.e. going beyond the classic ways imposed by the templates (bulleted lists, etc.). Animations (i.e. useful, meaningful animations) are surprisingly difficult to implement. Yet, with a bit of imagination and perseverance, the existing features can be gamed and bent to produce the intended effect. The result can be impressively efficient at enhancing the talk, but the time required to develop such sophisticated visuals might be considerable, as is the risk that the actual presentation might not deliver as expected if, for example, the computer used in the conference room has a different version of

the software that doesn't support some or all of the required features. As a fold back solution, should there be a real issue with software compatibility, it is also good practice to bring the visuals in the form of a PDF file (all programmes used to prepare the visuals offer the possibility to "export" or "save as" in this universal format). Displaying the PDF (in full screen mode) will limit the visuals to static slides, with no transitions or animations, but it will at least provide a robust set of slides that will bring a fair level of enhancement to the talk.

One key technical reality to take into consideration is related to display technology. The screens that we use on our personal computers, laptops and tablets rely on extremely effective technologies providing excellent comfort and rendering of colours. The equipment used to display visuals in conference rooms and lecture halls relies on very differing, and much less effective technologies. In particular, data projectors are very problematic. The image they produce is projected on a white screen, so that even a very powerful projector can only do so much. The main weakness of the projection technology is the lack of contrast of the resulting image. It is very simple to understand why: on a computer screen, dark or black portions of an image are produced by blocking the light on the corresponding spots of the screen. Blacks are more or less […] black. Data projectors, by comparison, can only reduce or block any projection on the corresponding portions of the screen, but because that screen is naturally white, blacks are actually non-illuminated whites. Current technology cannot project blackness. To fully understand the difference, simply compare the appearance of a computer screen when it is turned off with the appearance of a white screen in a conference room while the data projector is turned off. This is as black as it will get. Taking this difference into account is crucial when preparing visuals. They will never look like they look on the computer used to prepare them. They will necessarily be lighter and, most importantly less contrasted. As a result, when preparing visuals, it is essential to ensure ample contrast (particularly between text and background) so that it will still be contrasted enough when projected. One efficient method to ensure contrast is to select colours for text and background that, defined using the RGB scales (a value between 0 and 255 for red, green, and blue), differ as much as possible, especially on the green and red attributes[1]. Some combinations must be avoided altogether because they create visual discomfort (orange and blue, red and green, red and blue).

5.   Sharing visuals

One of the most common questions at the end of a dense presentation is "Can we have a copy of your slides?" and the speakers usually gladly comply. Yet, in most cases, they should politely decline. The best visuals are designed to

illustrate and enhance the speech that they accompany. As such, they do not constitute an autonomous narration but only visual cues that are part of a larger narration that encompasses the words spoken, the non-verbal communication of the speaker (intonations and body language) and the broader context of the presentation. So if the visuals are circulated on their own, isolated from the other constituents of the presentation, there is a significant risk that they will be misunderstood, misinterpreted and that the speaker might be misquoted.

It doesn't mean that visuals cannot be shared. They can if they are designed (or reworked) so as to be an autonomous text, a self-supporting narration. A similar argument seems more obvious when it comes to movies: would anyone share a movie without its soundtrack? No, unless it is a silent movie, i.e. a movie designed to convey its meaning without a soundtrack. When it comes to a speech, the best way to share material is to produce a document integrating both the text of the speech and the visuals (inserted in the right places). It does require some additional work, but if the text has already been written up, just inserting the visuals will easily produce a very rich document that will be highly appreciated by those who found the speech inspiring, and even for those who missed it.

Note

1   The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has developed a method to evaluate contrast based on RGB attributes and a combined calculation of colour brightness and colour difference (see: http://www.w3.org/TR/AERT#color-contrast). A number of user-friendly tools can be found online by searching "colour contrast calculator" on any search engine.

Biography

François Heinderyckx (PhD) is professor at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) where he teaches media sociology and political communication. He is also a Chang Jiang Scholar Professor at Communication University of China (CUC, 2014-2018). He is the past-president of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA, 2005-2012) and of the International Communication Association (ICA, 2013-2014). His research interests include journalism, news media, media audiences, election campaigns, and media literacy.

Contact: francois.heinderyckx@ulb.ac.be