Presentation Technology in the Age of Electronic Eloquence: From Visual Aid to Visual Rhetoric

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Attention to presentation technology in the public speaking classroom has grown along with its contemporary use, but instruction generally positions the topic as a subset of visual aids. As contemporary public discourse enters an age of electronic eloquence, instructional focus on verbal communication might limit students’ capacity to effectively participate in an evolving public sphere. Instruction that more fully integrates visual, verbal, and haptic forms of communication might provide a better foundation for effective civic participation in the media age.

Keywords: Public Speaking; Visual Rhetoric; Powerpoint; Eloquence; Visual Aids; Presentation Technology

Arguments for and against the use of presentation software continue as Microsoft’s PowerPoint has come to the desktops of the vast majority of the nation’s public speakers. Within 10 years of its introduction, a quarter of speakers surveyed claimed to use projection equipment for “most” of their presentations, more than 40% claimed to use multimedia on occasion (Hanke, 1999), and 94% of professional speakers depend on it (“Powerpoint: Not the Only Game in Town,” 1998). Of the various software programs available, PowerPoint dominates. Microsoft Office Suite includes PowerPoint as a bundled element, with more than 300 million users (Keller, 2003). Market penetration is estimated at 96% of the suite market (McCracken, 2000), and an estimated 30 million PowerPoint presentations are given every day (Parker, 2001).

As software, laptops, and portable projection equipment have become easily and cheaply available, computer-enhanced presentations have come to represent a
baseline expectation of persuasive communication, especially in business (Ganzel, 2000), but increasingly in legal (Feigenson & Dunn, 2003) and civic venues as well (Parker, 2001). Yet, nearly 20 years after its introduction, PowerPoint remains “poorly understood and highly controversial” (Farkas, 2005). Pundits, educators, entertainers, business leaders and rhetorical theorists acknowledge the impact of the software on contemporary public address, but the nature of the effect remains in dispute.¹

Compelling arguments have been made both for and against the incorporation of presentation software into the college-level public speaking course, which remains the primary source of rhetorical instruction for citizens in the United States. The majority of U.S. universities require or recommend public speaking as a component of the general education requirement (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). On a practical level, universities are pushed to keep up with the professional demands that will be placed on their graduates. When a campus recruiter defines good presentation skills as the ability to use PowerPoint, a failure to include those skills in the general education curriculum is hard to justify to students, parents, and prospective employers. Even though a liberal education offers far more than technical skill with the culture’s communication methods, competent citizens must effectively use the common tools of the discourse community. The fluent use of presentation software is now expected by audiences raised in a media era (Hill, 2000), and the university student expects to graduate with “a head start on the presentation challenges that await . . . in the working world” (Porter, 2001, p. 40).

Some argue that academia has a moral responsibility to incorporate communication technology as it is integrated into the rhetorical culture, providing critical reflection on its impact (McMillan & Hyde, 2000). As the use of visual evidence becomes a permanent characteristic of a media culture, “failure to think clearly about the analysis and the presentation of evidence opens the door for all sorts of political and other mischief to operate in making decisions” (Tufte, 1997, p. 52). From this perspective, it would be an irresponsible curriculum that attempted to teach public address without attention to visual meaning. Finnegan and Kang (2004, p. 379) argue that only by embracing the “fullness” of “multiple dimension, argument fields, and modes of communication” can theorists understand “how images and vision operate in the public sphere,” and the public speaking classroom remains the location where new citizens learn to adapt to the demands of their community’s decision-making process (Clasen & Lee, 2006).

Nevertheless, contemporary speech pedagogy maintains its roots in the traditions of oratorical public address. The business world has complained for at least 30 years that the traditional public speaking curriculum does not teach work-related skills (Hanna, 1978), but little changes in how and what we teach in the basic course (Frobish, 2000; Leff, 1992, p. 115). The inclusion of PowerPoint has been opposed on both pragmatic and ideological grounds.¹ Sometimes the argument seems to be pure conservation of the traditional curriculum, reflecting a continuing confidence that, “The basic public speaking course has changed so little in the past 80 years because public speaking theory has weathered the test of time well” (Hess & Pearson, 1992, p. 19). Some resist change with pride, arguing the importance of teaching
foundational principles first and leaving PowerPoint to specialized courses in business and professional speech. For others, it is a practical issue. Some universities do not have the projection equipment required for media-supported presentations, and others cannot guarantee students easy access to the software and lab facilities needed for preparation. Any desire to introduce students to the software is moot if the resources are unavailable to do so (Downing & Garmon, 2001, 2002).

Many speech instructors remain undecided, asking that any decision be research-based, but data seem to support either side of the question. Proponents of PowerPoint cite studies demonstrating that visual support improves retention, persuasion, learning, or motivation (Carrell & Menzel, 2001; Mantei, 2000; Porter, 2001; Simons, 2000), and multimedia in general enhances instruction (Timmerman & Kruepke, 2006) and instructor credibility (Schrodt & Witt, 2006). Opponents, meanwhile, point to evidence that PowerPoint used in academic lectures does not positively impact student learning (Ahmed, 1998; Blokzijl & Naef, 2004; Creed, 1997; Rankin & Hoaas, 2001; Teaching Learning and Technology Group, 2001).

There is no doubt that good visual design can make information clearer and more interesting, but increased information transfer is not always the aim of public discourse. Rhetorical competence resides in an ability to discover the full range of “available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, trans. 1991, p. 36) in a given situation. Research on information clarity does not account for the more sophisticated issues of what constitutes clarity for a given audience, what kind of information might be deemed interesting, useful, or relevant, or whether clarity or ambiguity is called for at a given moment. Positioning the PowerPoint issue in strictly utilitarian terms misses the larger point that utility is itself a rhetorically constructed measure.

Issues of resource allocation, instructional goals, and the value of a traditional liberal education warrant full consideration, but a full discussion of PowerPoint in the basic course must also consider its potential to demonstrate, teach, and support emerging norms of eloquent public address. Recent theorists have suggested that the heightened visuality of contemporary public address is more than merely the illustration of verbal content and instead represents a fundamental shift in rhetorical culture. Jamieson (1998) has traced the influences of the electronic age and worries that the era has given rise to new styles in speaking, new forms of argument, and new methods of connecting with audiences. Audience expectations have changed, not merely in terms of technical bells and whistles available in the creation of visual aids, but with respect to the culture’s understanding of what it means to deliver an eloquent public address.

Many, like Jamieson, are concerned that the media influence on the public sphere is ultimately a negative one (Postman, 1985; Slayden & Whillock, 1999). Others argue that contemporary pedagogy should address these issues more directly by teaching students to competently and ethically use the emerging visual forms (Frobish, 2000). The question is not simply whether a particular technical method of presentation support is relevant to contemporary public address. If Western rhetoric is indeed undergoing fundamental changes, those responsible for guiding and developing young citizens must locate instructional methods that address those changes. The real
question is whether one ubiquitous technology captures relevant elements of the evolving rhetorical culture.

The most telling aspect of the conversation is that PowerPoint has been almost universally framed as a delivery tool, a subset of visual aids, and a presentation technique that can be added—or not—to an otherwise normal speech. A unit on visual aids has long been a staple of the basic public speaking course, although a relatively small element of the curriculum (Hess & Pearson, 1992). With the increasing visual saturation of popular media, contemporary textbooks have begun to offer expanded attention to media-enhanced delivery. As Lucas (2004, p. 322) notes in the eighth edition of his popular public speaking text, “we live in a visual age” that has conditioned the audience to expect visual images. In the most up-to-date textbooks, PowerPoint is included as a technology option designed to reach the traditional goals of visual aids: adding clarity to informative elements of a message, generating interest on the part of an otherwise bored audience, increasing the memorability of verbal speech content, and enhancing the credibility of the speaker (Lucas, 2004).

Its best uses in contemporary public address suggest that PowerPoint’s primary functions do lie outside the traditional role of visual aids, leading to the possibility that its instructional use might offer a classroom opportunity to explore emerging characteristics of the mediated public sphere. If those who use PowerPoint in an expert way display the elements of electronic eloquence that Jamieson has identified, for instance, it might be that instruction in the use of presentation software would be useful—and perhaps even necessary—to develop students’ ability to responsibly and eloquently negotiate the evolving rhetorical principles of their culture.

The Role of PowerPoint in Electronic Eloquence

Even a casual observer of computer-aided public speaking can notice the software’s potential to mimic contemporary media’s reliance on quick-cut montage, holistic creation of mood, and postmodern pastiche of allusions and visual references to create persuasive discourse. An individual speaker’s ability to emulate the media might seem an insufficient warrant to do so, but as the current editor of Presentations magazine puts it, “the proliferation of computers, televisions, video games and movies…is profoundly affecting the way people think—or don’t think…” thereby changing “people’s perceptions of what a presentation ought to be” (Simons, 1999a, p. 6). Electronic mass media has caused enormous changes in the practice of political speaking on the national stage, and the invention of presentation software for the personal computer has allowed the individual citizen to emulate that practice in the day-to-day affairs of a local community.

The first stage in a pedagogical response is thus to determine what constitutes effective and appropriate use of the available software for those who use it regularly in contemporary discourse. Communication pedagogy reinforces an implicit scene of public discourse (Clasen & Lee, 2006) that foregrounds verbal argument and relegates PowerPoint to the minor role of a visual aid. The aim of this project is to investigate
the rhetorically competent and appropriate use of PowerPoint without presuming the subordinate role of other communication modes to the verbal. Assuming the function of presentation software to be merely illustration and visual clarification of verbally presented information perpetuates the *iconophobia* that limits understanding of the contemporary public sphere (Finnegan & Kang, 2004). Research thus began with the best practices of contemporary public speaking, identifying those aspects of media integration that support the evolving eloquence of an electronically mediated public discourse.

The first step in this project was a survey of articles describing the effective and appropriate use of presentation software gleaned from two years of *Presentations*, a trade journal targeting individuals who are professionally involved with creating or supporting presentations (Cyphert, 2001a,c). With more than a decade since its introduction, presentation technology is no longer a special feature of a few exceptional discourse communities. Granted, the ubiquitous resources available to a contemporary speaker often assume a business or professional context (e.g., Atkinson, 2005; Bajaj, 2005; Jahnke, 2001), but the advice given to scientists (Izzo, 2005), academics (Rozalitis & Baepler, 2004), nonprofits (Finn, 2005), or preachers (Taylor, 2005) reflects adherence to the same emergent principles of narrative, visuality, and self-disclosure.²

The conclusion from the first survey was not that contemporary speakers consistently or even typically exhibit a high degree of eloquence. In fact, a consistent thread of comment is that most speakers do not do a particularly good job of using presentation software. The creators of the products complain that “we can give people the ability . . . and we can simplify the technology, but we can’t make people use it.” Instead, Microsoft calculates that users take advantage of only about 10–20 percent of the software’s technical capability (Simons, 1998, p. 8). Further, the ability to use the technology does not guarantee eloquence; “PowerPoint’s reliability has lulled more than a few presenters and planners into creative complacency, resulting in audiovisual presentations that too often are monotonous, static, even boring” (Carey, 1999, p. 47). Eloquence, in fact, does not depend on the software at all. As one editor put it, “In presentations, as in other designed products, our message doesn’t have to be defined by the tools we use. It’s defined by the clarity of our story, the passion with which we tell it and its relevance to our audience” (Endicott, 1999b, p. 28).

The second stage of this project asks whether the excellent use of PowerPoint reflects the emerging norms of their rhetorical culture. When the advice to speakers is viewed through a theoretical, rhetorical lens, the principles found in the excellent use of presentation software do appear to mirror the principles of contemporary eloquence that Jamieson (1998, p. 66) locates as “an alliance among self-disclosure, conversation, visual dramatization and verbal distillation.”

**Visual Narrative**

The role of narrative as a component of rhetorical discourse is fundamental (Fisher, 1987), but Jamieson demonstrates the powerful impact of dramatic imagery in an
electronic era. The eloquent speaker is increasingly one who can effectively command the “the synoptic visual–verbal statement” (Jamieson, 1998, p. 115) that has replaced the speech as a primary form of public address. Unsurprisingly, contemporary speakers are consistently advised to organize their material as a visual narrative. John Seely Brown, director of Xerox Corp’s Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), calls storytelling the core presentation skill in the digital age, but the effective presenter does not merely tell a story. He or she will “structure an experience” with multimedia storytelling (quoted in Lindstrom, 1998, p. 14).

The best presenters use the full range of personal and presentational resources “to tell a good story” (Endicott, 1999c, p. 29), and a focus on narrative is seen as a cure for ineffective speaking. The presenter is urged to reduce the display of text or numerical data (Wilder, 1999d), and to develop storytelling skills instead (Endicott, 1999c; Ganzel, 1999; Wilder, 1999a), with a presumption that stories are best told with images. “Words are a fine way of communicating aloud,” says one editor, “but … images, especially topic-relevant, media-rich ones, bring messages to life” (Endicott, 2000a, p. 29).

For the eloquent user of presentation software, narrative format is not merely an organizational treatment of text, but a conceptual framework for the entire speech preparation process. Speakers are urged to prepare with an eye toward the integration of presentation elements. One consultant recommends that speakers use the software’s outline feature to organize their thoughts, noting, “when you design only one slide at a time, your focus is like tunnel vision,” but the software allows speechwriters “to see the big picture and small picture simultaneously” (“You have,” 1999, p. A10). Preparing the presentation in terms of narrative storyboards rather than argumentative outlines, the eloquent contemporary speaker moves “beyond bullet points” and creates a narrative experience that fully engages the audience (Atkinson, 2005, p. xv).

Memorable Image

Images are the distinguishing feature of public communication in the electronic era, and Jamieson (1998, p. 90) likens their eloquent use to the orator’s “memorable statement that capsulizes the speech and serves as the hook on which we hang it in memory.” Certainly, advice on the creation and use of visual images dominates the discussion of contemporary best practices in public speaking. The discussion begins with a presumption that images are integral to the speaker’s purposes. Images are not conceptualized as an addition to an otherwise complete verbal presentation, but as an ordinary and expected aspect of public performance. Images are only one component, however, in the sensory range of a high-end professional presentation, which includes text, data representations, color, animation, graphical design elements, demonstrations, handouts, and sound. Speakers are counseled that, “the more senses you connect with during a presentation, the more your audience will remember” (Endicott, 1999c, p. 28), and a general characteristic of contemporary
best practices is the collapse of verbal and visual elements into an integrated multimedia performance.

Clearly, photographic and graphical images are important to contemporary speakers, but the ways in which they are used challenge the common separation of verbal and nonverbal communication. Expert users seldom focus on the visual display of information as a primary end and warn against any kind of visual display that is not fully integrated into the overall purpose of the presentation (Fine, 1998; Heimes, 1997; Wilder, 1999e). Not only does contemporary practice argue against the relegation of the visual as an aid to verbal argument, but it suggests a need to broaden and deepen our understanding of visual performance beyond attention to the speaker’s appearance, demeanor, and delivery.

The contemporary mingling of the visual and verbal is not simply less attention being given verbal elements as a consequence of increased attention to the visual. Rather, users allow visual elements to perform a number of functions previously accomplished with words, highlighting an interrelationship of invention and organization in contemporary public discourse. Speakers use graphic design to create previews, menus, running heads, color-coding, and graphic guides that replace verbal signposting. A section heading, background design, graphic, or color provides a visual transition from point to point or serves as a continuous on-screen reminder of the section or point the speaker is discussing (Heimes, 1997; Wilder, 1999c, 2000a).

Speakers are encouraged to think, moreover, in terms of the overall organizational scheme and to use visuals to provide a full conceptual map for the audience, not merely as signposts along a verbal path. A set of menu slides, for example, can be used to influence which parts of a presentation an audience remembers and also allows the speaker to visually connect different parts of a presentation to a central core of ideas. Says one expert user, “At the end of every branch, you return to the menu slide so the audience sees the main and supporting points several times. They will see more clearly the connections between the points than if they were presented linearly” (Schatz, 1997, p. 34). Successful speakers must also consider the cognitive effects of graphic consistency, perceptual cues, graphic design, and the emotional impact of image and color (Endicott, 1999a; Hanke, 1998; Heimes, 1997; Schatz, 1997; “You have,” 1999).

Many of the specific guidelines offered to contemporary speakers aim toward a unified visual display rather than a typographic version of the verbal flow (Fine, 1998; Schatz, 1997; Wilder, 1998, 2000a,b). Delivery and organization must be carefully integrated as a speaker accounts for the audience’s cognitive processing on multiple fronts (Hanke, 1998; Heimes, 1997; Schatz, 1997, p. 35; “You have,” 1999), and transitions must be planned in terms of visual as well as aural cognitive processing. Image, color, graphics, and motion can have powerful effects on an audience, and the eloquent speaker does not use them arbitrarily (Wilder, 1998). Used skillfully, PowerPoint allows a speaker to orchestrate “a sophisticated communication experience in which spoken words and visuals blend together into a seamless integrated media experience that helps everyone to understand ideas and make decisions more effectively” (Atkinson, 2005, p. 10).
Personal Conversation

A somewhat paradoxical characteristic of public address in an era of mass media has been the move toward an eloquence of the interpersonal. The shift has been described in terms of a feminine style that incorporates the concrete language, personal tone, and anecdotal evidence associated with women’s discourse (Campbell, 1989), an invitational rhetoric that values reciprocity over an assertive persuasive stance (Foss & Griffin, 1995), the self-confidently extemporaneous conversational manner of contemporary public address (Lucas, 2004), and the intimate interactivity of an authentically oral–aural discourse (Haynes, 1988). Jamieson’s (1998, p. 84) analysis emphasizes the impact of media, noting that “television invites a personal, self-disclosing style that draws public discourse out of a private self and comfortably reduces the complex world to dramatic narratives.”

Regardless of the cause, it seems that in this rhetorical era, audiences believe that “casual, conversational remarks reveal where formal public address conceals” (Jamieson, 1998, p. 179). For PowerPoint users, the goal is typically expressed in terms of creating a personal connection with an audience, creating a visual presence that is clear, comfortable, and effective for everyone in the room. The speaker’s approachable demeanor and attractive visuals are enhanced by technologies that are touted for opening up a new range of interactive possibilities (Endicott, 1998; Schatz, 1997).

A baseline function of the software is the visual presentation of identity. A professional presentation begins with customized templates, background designs, colors and images that establish a recognizable look (Endicott, 1999b) and, whenever possible, some visual rapport with an audience (Wilder, 1999b; “You have,” 1999). The creation of a unique visual identity is only the first step, however, and effective self-presentation also includes techniques to maintain rapport with an audience despite the huge visual impact of the projection screen. Speakers are urged to explicitly direct audience attention toward the screen when displaying something that speaker and audience will perceive together, but to take steps to remain the focus of attention otherwise. A speaker might move around or use gestures, stand in the light and away from the computer, use a remote mouse or pointer, position equipment to avoid turning away from the audience (Torok, 1999; “You have,” 1999), or blank out the screen entirely.

In the contemporary public speaking environment, graphic design is more than mere aesthetic style; the creation of graphic interfaces has become more complex than the production of clear, simple visual displays of information. Projection technology emphasizes the degree to which personal rapport with an audience is a performative construction, including integrated visual and aural elements that had been separated in the classical partition of delivery from ethos. In contemporary best practice, the presentation is designed to support rather than compete with the speaker, but the aim is to support the person of the speaker rather than the verbal content of the speaker’s text (Hanke, 1998; Heimes, 1997; Schatz, 1997). The bells and whistles of presentation software are often overused by novices in an attempt to entertain or
impress an audience; the expert user recognizes that animation is not a guarantor of connection with the audience. “Carelessly used motion and sound can sometimes falsely suggest interactivity” and should be used sparingly to focus attention rather than dilute it (Schatz, 1997, p. 35). Similarly, transitions between slides tend to break the flow of the speaker’s interaction with the audience (Schatz, 1997, p. 35).

Expert users also identify the interactive power of PowerPoint’s dynamic features. Branches, hidden slides, action buttons, links to inter- or intranet sources, on-site digital photography, and keyboard control of the presentation order allow complete responsiveness to an audience with visual as well as verbal content adjustments. Slides can be shown in any order, allowing a speaker to offer evidence or examples exactly when the moment is right. Questions can be answered or points clarified at the moment the audience requests the information. Planned points can be deleted or new points introduced without posing a distraction to the audience (Schatz, 1997). For many professionals, the interactivity inherent in an experience of shared perception is a more salient factor in the presentation than the delivery of prepared content to an audience. The technically expert professional does not typically create a slide show for each speech event, but selects and organizes new and previously prepared visual materials for use with the immediate audience. The ability to organize, store, locate, share, and revise visual materials formed the original advantage of the PowerPoint software (Antebi, 1987; Collins, 1989; Endicott, 2000b), and the ability of a spokesperson to incorporate real-time data into a presentation remains a key feature for dispersed organizations (Simons, 1999b). The mindset of the presenter is less to write a speech for an audience than to gather the material an audience will want to discuss.

For a practicing professional, self-disclosure and dialogue with an audience are not abstract concepts, but concrete problems to solve. Speaking the language of the audience requires using “a format that feels familiar and comfortable to those seated before you” (“You have,” 1999). The size of both audience and venue must be considered (“You have,” 1999), along with the audience’s media expectations (Endicott, 1999a; “You have,” 1999). Graphic design must be matched to equipment capabilities of both the immediate and secondary audiences (Britz, 1999; Endicott, 1999a; Wilder, 1999e; “You have,” 1999), and the details of visual perception and color psychology are part of the speaker’s responsibility. A speaker’s competence in the visual display of information is not limited to achieving information clarity. An important effect of PowerPoint, in practical terms, has been to expand the visual aid into a tool of rapport, ethos, and dialogic relationship. Presentation software offers multiple ways for speakers to demonstrate that they are in tune with the priorities and concerns of their audiences (Phillips, 1994).

As they are brought into the realm of speaker responsibility, these elements of credibility and relationship undergo a subtle but important shift from cause to consequence of speaker intent. The eloquent contemporary speaker cannot merely respond to an audience's data expectations and ability to understand an argument, or the marginal acoustics of a venue. They are charged with creating a media environment that will establish data expectations, mold an audience's ability to comprehend the argument, and facilitate the perceptual process.
Of course, for the unsophisticated user, software-supported public speaking poses danger. Untrained speakers use the projection equipment as a teleprompter, project the speech outline as bullet points, or dim the lights as though they were showing 35-mm slides. Technical difficulties and apprehension can create additional barriers between audience and speaker. Novice speakers are thus urged to be ready to speak without the hardware or have a backup system if the presentation absolutely requires it (Torok, 1999), and the most eloquent are ready to take the audience “behind the presentation curtain,” maintaining the connection with the audience by turning technical disaster into an interactive opportunity (Endicott, 1998, p. 29). However, the potential technical mishap is not an environmental variable to be minimized with PowerPoint training, practice, or avoidance; it represents a new but important risk of communication in the contemporary public sphere. Even the technical hazards of presentation hardware can be embraced as a way to demonstrate and develop a speaker’s “existential immediacy” (Haynes, 1990, p. 93).

Implications for Instruction in Public Address

So what is the communication educator’s role in developing electronic eloquence? If eloquence is defined as an artful or inspirational use of language that somehow lifts an audience beyond the mundane consideration of ideas or information, then the typical contemporary public speaker is not overly concerned with eloquence. That might be the goal of a motivational speaker or aspiring political leader, but, based on the advice given to contemporary speakers, the average citizen simply wants to explain some data or convince an audience of its validity. This is perhaps exactly as we should expect. The average Greek citizen was not an eloquent orator; nor has been the average preacher or politician throughout the history of Western public address. The average business speaker in the days before PowerPoint was not expected to be eloquent, and neither will be the everyday user of PowerPoint.

Nevertheless, rhetorical pedagogy concerns itself with identifying and presenting the highest forms of eloquence, asking students to admire and emulate the best, even if they cannot yet duplicate the discourse (Burton, 2004; Cicero, trans. 1970). The young citizen might not exhibit the eloquence that comes with mastery and maturity, but he or she must be able to recognize the characteristics of excellence. The challenge now is to translate evolving principles of eloquence into a pragmatic curriculum of desirable presentation techniques.

At the cusp of rhetorical eras, the roles of critic and pedagogue can be at odds (Black, 1980; Cyphert, 2001b; Ehninger, 1968). Even as critics expose the presumptions and biases of their rhetorical culture, the community’s teachers are training citizens to conform to those same normative values. The ultimate sustainability of a public sphere requires continuous balancing of efforts to maintain the disciplining power of a discourse formation (Foucault, 1973), along with the perpetual critique of the sources of that power (McKerrow, 1989). Its teachers must guard against a new technology’s failure to meet existing rhetorical standards, while its critics must
account for the promise of a technology to allow eloquent communication within an evolving rhetorical paradigm.

The third and final step in this project is thus to explore the instructional implications of contemporary presentation technology. First, can instruction in PowerPoint’s best practices effectively introduce emergent norms of public address into the public address classroom? Second, and perhaps more significantly, does harm result when PowerPoint is obliged to conform to the literate norms of the West’s traditional rhetoric? The definitive answers to these questions must presumably wait until a body of pedagogical technique has been developed, but some tentative conclusions might be drawn from a comparison of two speech preparations on problems in U.S. pork production (Figures 1 and 2).

From Outline to Storyboard

Suppose a student were asked to create a visual storyboard as the first step in creating the speech, introducing narrative as the primary structure of oral performance (Atkinson, 2005). For purposes of comparison, consider the different results from that of a traditional speech preparation process that teaches, “the first step in the composition phase is to write an outline that will serve as the skeleton for your speech.” While both outline and storyboard are tools for organizing the content of a presentation, they emphasize different concepts and functions. Even if the resulting performances are quite similar, the student will have been asked to think about very different things.

The comparison of an outline (Figure 1) to support the thesis, “problems with large-scale pork production are being worked on,” and a storyboard (Figure 2) to plan the same speech illustrates the different issues a student must resolve. First, the creation of an outline requires the categorization of ideas at several levels, with an initial choice from “five common outline patterns” on the basis of which “best fits” the speaker’s thesis and purpose. The ideas and evidence are then sorted within the outline so that they clarify and support the speaker’s intentions. In contrast, the initial step of creating a narrative requires that a student name a scene or situation, identify the point of view or hero of the story, present a crisis or conflict that will become the point of the story, and create a storyline that will be considered coherent and plausible by the audience (Fisher, 1987).

The real change in moving from outline to storyboard is not the narrowing of organizational options to a single chronological order. In fact, a narrative might be presented with flashbacks or flash forwards, multiple characters’ perspectives, or other devices that alter its chronology. The more significant difference is one of perspective. Traditional organizational choices do not merely privilege the speaker’s instrumental purpose; they also imply that order is a decontextualized function of the topic itself rather than a performative negotiation between speaker and listener. As a practical matter, it is possible to evaluate the logic, coherence, and appropriateness of a selected order to the topic independently of its intended audience or performance venue. A story’s coherence, on the other hand, can only be evaluated within a
cultural, community, or audience context. The speaker’s decision here to take the perspective of the hog producer rather than that of the neighbors of a confinement facility cannot be evaluated on some objective basis. It must be recognized as a subjective choice of perspective, open to discussion but not to objective judgment.

Figure 1.

Ollie’s Speaking Outline (Excerpt)

Introduction: (Attention Getter) Did you know, according to an informal poll conducted by David Letterman, 27% of Americans think that bacon comes from cows!? That tells you how little folks really know about hog production, and (State Thesis) I want each member of my audience to understand that problems with large-scale pork production are being worked on.

(Establish Credibility) Last summer, my family drove all the way to Iowa to visit my grandparents. At some points during the drive, we just couldn’t believe how bad the corn fields smelled. How can something that tastes so good smell so bad? When we arrived, my grandmother told me it was not the corn that stunk, it was the wind coming across the large-scale hog farms, those huge, long, and low buildings in the distance. I knew nothing about where bacon came from before she told me about this, and when I went to the library to research this speech I learned a lot about how our food is produced. (Relate Topic to Audience) Most people from NJ think bacon comes from the Shop-Rite, and so did I, but now I think it’s important that we all understand the policies and procedures behind food production, because they can affect our health, the environment, and the national economy. (Preview Main Points) First I’ll go over the problems that occur with large-scale hog farming, then the various solutions that are being developed to solve those problems.

Transition: First let’s look at the three big problems, slurry pool odors, environmental impact and animal health.

Body:

(1) Problems

(a) Slurry Pools—According to the FFA
(i) Average waste output of single hog = Y lb/day
(ii) Large-scale farms have between 1000 and 3000 hogs at a given site, so 2000(Y) lb/day
[photo of hog farm]
(iii) Dilution and Pooling procedures
(iv) EPA groundwater contamination estimate says X
(v) Story about pool wall break—Progressive Farmer July 10, 2002
(vi) Large Scale Farm neighbor, Sally Thurman, says: “Well, like anything else, you get used to the smell, but it will be very difficult to sell my house and my family does not like to come visit any more.” Quoted in St. Louis Dispatch, August 9, 2001

Transition: The second big concern about hog production is its environmental impact.

(a) Environmental Impact. . .

Conclusion:

(1) (Signal) In conclusion (Restate Thesis), problems with large-scale pork production are being worked on. Slurry pools are disappearing, environmental policies are becoming sounder, and animal care is improving. It pays to know where your food comes from, but (Strong Closure) you can eat your bacon with a clear conscious.
subject-free passive voice of her thesis statement, much less think about these issues from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. The student producing a storyboard (henceforth referred to as Stony) necessarily begins with a description of a situation and distinctive perspectives of the story’s characters. The information might be comparable to that included in Ollie’s introduction, but the relationships among information, stakeholders, speaker, and audience are different. In Ollie’s version, the information for the introduction is selected after the speech outline was completed, presented to “make them want to hear” what she has to say. In Stony’s version, the scene is set as the first step in the narration, and the ultimate believability of the story depends on complete integrity among the scene, its characters, and the information that supports their various perspectives.

The narrative genre further demands that the speaker specify whether this is a story about hogs, hog-farmers, communities that need to decide whether to allow hog confinement facilities, or those who eat bacon. In reality, Ollie made that same choice when she decided whether this was a chronological story of a hog’s processing, a topical speech about types of hog farming, a set of problems with solutions, or a geographical study of U.S. bacon consumption, but the inherent subjectivity of the performance is obscured by the instrumental focus inherent in building an outline.

Narrative conflict and coherence similarly force the hand of the storyboard creator. Identification of conflict demands a concession that conflict is an inherent element of
human existence and, within the narrative framework, the only impetus for authentic learning, collaboration, or reconciliation. The narrative performance’s essential element is to express “how and why life changes” (McKee, 2003, p. 52), and “cooperation is induced, not by propositional reasoning, but through the phenomenal generation of new experience to be intimately shared by the participants in rhetorical interaction” (Haynes, 1990, pp. 93–94).

Ollie can describe the political and cultural differences inherent in solving hog production problems without ever acknowledging that value choices are being negotiated. Perhaps most important for the eventual outcome of the performance, Stony must anticipate the degree to which his story will ring true with the intended audience, while Ollie, in reality, need only please her speech instructor. When a speech is outlined with perfect logic but rejected by an audience, it is the audience that is presumed to be naïve or misinformed. When a story is incoherent or unbelievable to an audience, it is the storyteller who did not appropriately spin the tale.

From Visual Aid to Integrated Image

Once the basic outline is completed, Ollie’s next step will be to “select the supporting materials that will most effectively describe each point and subpoint.” The student might be advised that “visual aids are also an excellent form of support,” but they, along with a “liberal mix of examples, statistics, and testimony,” flesh out an argument that has already been articulated verbally. Stony’s storyboard, on the other hand, is created with software that displays the visual gestalt of the performance simultaneously with the creation of the speaker’s notes. The process guides the novice speaker toward an integration of visual and verbal as a fundamental step in the preparation process.

The collapse of verbal and visual modes of communication creates the practical collapse of invention and organization. The storyboard becomes the framework of the full performative experience, displaying not only articulated ideas as part of the speech preparation process, but also emotional cues, cognitive links, and the visual warrants that trigger an audience’s assessment of believability. Further, these elements are displayed on a computer desktop that allows the user complete freedom of arrangement. A continuous, holistic redesign of the performance—encompassing visual, verbal, and aural elements—can be accomplished by dragging and dropping slides until their order tells the desired story.

If Ollie is asked to integrate visuality into her presentation, the obvious solution is to include illustrations or graphs as evidentiary subpoints on her outline. While the creative student might think to integrate that visual image into her speech in an advantageous way, it is equally possible that a student might pass a small snapshot of a confinement facility through the audience after making the point verbally. Stony, on the other hand, is implicitly guided toward visuals by the narrative form. A setting and characters are most easily described with pictures, and the story’s villains and heroes will nearly always lend themselves to a visual introduction. In this example,
putting a face on agricultural education might be a challenge, but even the presentation of a representative logo moves an abstract concept toward concrete identity and memorability.

Further, when asked to provide an organizing scheme to his presentation, Stony will be doing so with an inherently visual tool kit—color, graphics, animations, and interactive links—that lead naturally toward integration. Here, Stony decides that the parallelism of three hog production problems and their solutions ought to be highlighted. The single step of adding cognitive guideposts visually presents the overall organizational scheme and also serves as a conceptual guide as he develops the speech’s arguments.

Stony’s organizing process is further differentiated by its nonlinear character. Ollie will necessarily position her information, visual and verbal, within the linear constraints of an outline. Stony, starting with a blank screen, is in a position to create a cognitive map that organizes the information in whatever way most effectively clarifies relationships inherent in the data. The process requires that the speaker think carefully and creatively about those relationships, resulting in clearer and more complete understanding of those conceptual connections as well as more efficient communication of the ideas to the audience.

As with the organizational structure, the integration of visual evidence with the verbal components of the speech will be difficult to evaluate independently of its performance. This might incur some resistance from speech instructors on a practical level, but more significantly, it further illustrates the degree to which current instructional methods privilege the abstractly verbal over the performative integration of rhetorical elements. When the visual evidence can be judged as just one of several forms of proof, like an illustration included in a written document, the fullness of the vid-oral speech performance is not being considered at all. When it has become clear to both student and instructor that the performance necessarily integrates all communicative elements, pedagogical focus has shifted to the complete rhetorical event.

From Delivery to Conversation

Business practitioners universally agree that a speaker should be the focus of a presentation (Gunn & Gullickson, 2005; McManus, 2004; Watkins, 2005). However, the issue is not understood as a choice between conversation and projected images; the eloquent contemporary speaker is expected to become expert enough with the technology to use the medium interactively (Spaeth, 2001), with overriding goals of dialogue and engagement with the audience (Lindstrom, 1998). Academic critics often cite the worst examples of software-supported delivery—speaking in the dark, showing soporific slides of dense text or numbers, projecting the speech outline as a series of bullet points, reading from the computer screen, or worse, turning away from the audience and reading from the projected image—but these are clearly unacceptable in a professional context as well. As Ollie and Stony move from speech preparation to delivery, this comparison suggests that their differing orientations will
lead to dissimilar modes of delivery as well and offers an explanation for some of the horrors of PowerPoint.

In the traditional model, a speech outline is completed before attention turns to delivery of the product. Ollie will have the speech written before she ever turns her attention to its delivery. Conceptually, Ollie’s speech exists independently of the audience, which functions as a target for her communication. It is conceptually and physically possible to read the manuscript to her audience, and even with a perfectly prepared outline, stage fright or insufficient practice could render her performance a failure. When the use of an unfamiliar technology is added to Ollie’s task, the resulting disaster can make an instructor wish that Ollie had not attempted anything more complicated than passing a photo through the audience to fulfill her visual aid requirement.

If we consider Ollie’s learning curve, however, a speech that exemplifies the worst of PowerPoint exhibits a certain logic. The creation of an outline as a speech preparation step is an instructional method rooted in an understanding of speechmaking as “a sort of oral essaying” in which a speaker offers “a predetermined (i.e., written) body of ideas ordered as though the audience would eventually be reading the result” (Haynes, 1990, p. 92). Ollie’s first responsibility has been to the verbal content of her speech, which was born as words printed on a sheet of paper. Ollie’s research presumably began in a search for written arguments and evidence prepared by various stakeholders in hog production, which she then synthesized into a coherent outline to present an objective summary of the issues. If those words make conceptual and grammatical sense in relation to each other, she has written a good speech, regardless of its delivery to a live audience.

For the novice speaker, reading the script is the obvious next level of difficulty on a long road toward practiced eloquence. It is not the technology that focuses attention on the outline; it is the use of the outline as an instructional method that focuses on “the construction of fixed texts that deter if not preclude” adaptation to audience feedback or even the material relationship developing with a real audience (Haynes, 1990, p. 92). Those on-screen bullet points are a logical interim step for a novice speaker who is learning to master the art of speaking from an outline.

Stony, on the other hand, is creating a holistic performance from the start. Beginning with the scene, characters, and conflict of a believable tale requires that his storytelling relationship with the audience take the primary role. A beginning storyteller—the child who reports on the movie he saw—will fail to give the relevant details in presenting the scene and characters or take too long to get to the point of the conflict or its resolution. A novice might bore the audience by telling or showing too much as he learns the genre, but reading the story’s plot points to the audience would not be an interim step in Stony’s development process.

Stony’s research begins with the collection of stakeholder perceptions, defined in terms of their place in the scene, characterization, and orientation toward the narrative conflict. Further, Stony manipulates their written arguments as just some of the elements in the visual field. His invention task is not complete until he has selected the various interactive features that constitute choreography of a
performative dance with his audience. Virtually all of the technical choices he makes as part of his preparation, from the color palette, to the selection of clear and meaningful photos, to the arrangement of hidden slides and hyperlinks, are based on his audiences’ physical ability to see, hear, or interact. Some of those outcomes—showing a hidden slide, for instance—might literally fail to exist except as they are delivered to the audience as interactive choices during the speech performance. Stony’s design choices do not end when his storyboard is complete; his performance is an ongoing negotiation of the environmental demands of the speech event.

Stony’s performance, built on an assumption of connection with an audience, will require attention to a final issue that Ollie’s will have precluded with an outline of good reasons suitable for a universal audience of rational listeners (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Ollie’s success will not depend on the idiosyncratic character of the audience at hand. She will be encouraged to make eye contact and smile at her listeners, of course, and perhaps she will even be asked to solicit questions and comments at the end of her speech. These are ubiquitous but disembodied marks of good delivery, signals of credibility devoid of any inherent connection to the present audience. The speech is separate from the performance of the speech, and both can be conceptualized and judged independently of the character or qualifications of the individuals who hear it.

In contrast, Stony’s attempt to create a moment of shared perception requires an engaged audience that is willing and able to share in the negotiation of meaning. An element of his performance includes attention to the verbal, physical, or tacit cues that will drive his tactical use of the interactive tools at his disposal. Stony’s assignment requires the instructor to consider the audience’s role in asking for various additional elements or clarifications, and perhaps even to address the classroom audience’s ability to engage in an interactive exchange with a speaker. Questions of power, access, and resistance are not often raised in the public speaking classroom (Clasen & Lee, 2006), but authentic performance inevitably raises the issue of the speaker–audience relationship and demands attention to the sources of an audiences’ willingness to engage.

PowerPoint in the Classroom

Presumably, neither Ollie nor Stony will become masterful speakers in their first public speaking courses, but they will be on paths to learn very different kinds of eloquence. Ollie, with good instruction and time spent of sufficient practice, will learn the rhetorical norms of the Western tradition, analyzing and integrating verbal arguments and presenting them clearly to an assembled audience. Stony, with comparable instruction and effort, will learn to weave a story from multiple perspectives, according to contemporary principles of narrative, visuality, and self-disclosure and to integrate ideas, visual images, and personal position in an episode of shared perception. The question of which is a more desirable form of eloquence is perhaps best left to the critics and philosophers. If, however, a contemporary citizen
must be prepared for a rhetorical sphere of narrative, image, and dialogue, the potential of PowerPoint as an instructional tool seems apparent.

The more difficult issue is the seeming incompatibility of the linear and narrative forms, at least at the level of basic classroom instruction. Introducing PowerPoint as an addition to the traditional speech preparation process does not merely discount the importance of narrative or visuality to contemporary rhetoric; the incongruence of rhetorical forms seems to preclude performative success in either. The many criticisms of PowerPoint stem from abuses of its technical features. Edward Tufte (2003), for example, has attacked the cognitive style of PowerPoint, charging that its design templates and wizards encourage a vacuous recital of reductive bullet points, while the projected display format minimizes the amount of textual or numeric information that can be communicated.

These structuring features of the software were designed to streamline the creation of an outline, but novice speakers in particular are quickly overwhelmed by the power of a generic form. PowerPoint “helps you make a case, but it also makes its own case: about how to organize information, how much information to organize, how to look at the world” (Parker, 2001, p. 76). The software “lifts the floor” (Clifford Nass, quoted in Parker, 2001, p. 82) so audiences can understand the point being made by a speaker who “mumbles, forgets, or is otherwise grossly incompetent” (Norvig, 2005, ¶2), but those same tools threaten to turn the unwary novice into “a pod person” (Byrne, 2003, p. 2) who lacks either the incentive or the ability to think critically or creatively about the speech content. Detractors similarly point to cheesy clip art, distracting animations, and gratuitous bells and whistles as evidence that PowerPoint’s design features “actually reduce the likelihood” that communication will occur because they “put the container in the way of the content” (Allen, 2001, ¶6).

Expert users will quickly concede the lapses of naïve or lazy users (Shwom & Keller, 2003) and readily admit that placing a graphic communication tool in the hands of people who are untrained in graphic communication can lead to unfortunate consequences. Further, they demonstrate how PowerPoint can be used to effectively guide an audience through the explicitly linear, hierarchical logic of the West’s traditionally literate rhetorical forms (Farkas, 2005), even creating the information-rich graphics that Tufte admires (Shwom & Keller, 2003). As it demonstrates how the software can function within traditional argumentative genres, however, their analysis invites a reader to wonder why a contemporary speaker would want to use PowerPoint in such a way.

The highly visual tools of PowerPoint overwhelm and trivialize the organizational strengths of literate analysis (Farkas, 2005). The carefully structured and articulated claim reduced to bullet points is inane. Categorization, linearity, and explicit exposition of the argument form, when made visible to the audience, lose their rhetorical power. Verbal tools that created order and cognitive complexity for an aural audience appear reductive and simplistic to an audience able to apply its formidable powers of visual perception. The software can be used to provide the hierarchical cues given through verbal signposting or replace the information-rich handout, but either is perceived as a poor substitute for the original.
Meanwhile, it seems that our “electronic-media-dominated undergraduates” are not well served by “an analytical focus” (Haynes, 1990, p. 90). Coming into their first classroom without any rhetorical training, they do not naturally create visually rich, interactive, multimedia presentations, and even though PowerPoint’s use is growing in the primary and secondary grades (Keller, 2003), students seem to have no innate sense of the software as a media tool. Introducing them first to the linear, inherently literate outline as a rhetorical foundation seems to impair students’ development in the principles of narrative and visuality and self-disclosure.

One factor might be the ubiquitous pedagogical distinction between text and image, with subordination of the visual as an aid to the verbal. Students come to academia from an electronic environment where the primacy of visual image has changed the function of words, which now serve to “contextualize pictures and specify desirable or practical courses of ensuing action” (Jamieson, 1998, p. 126). A classroom assignment that focuses exclusively on words could be mystifying to a child raised in an environment of secondary orality. Without building on an appropriate basis in the student’s own rhetorical experience, its utility as an instructional method is questionable. Similarly, the traditional distinctions among personal, informative, and persuasive genres seem arbitrary in a media age. There is an inherent irony in teaching a unit on informative speaking when “writing is generally a superior medium for that task” (Haynes, 1990, p. 92), and such an exercise cannot be expected to enlighten a novice rhetor whose naïve understanding of persuasive communication is grounded in a media-enhanced integration of image and narrative.

In purely practical terms, using the outline as a starting point positions the PowerPoint software as a “content development tool” (Williams, 2004, p. 92) rather than as a medium of communication. Users are led to ask such questions as, “How many slides should I have?” rather than, “How many minutes do I have to develop a relationship with my audience?” Simply translating oratorical heuristics (e.g., 2 minutes of speech per manuscript page) into slide preparation rules (e.g., no more than one slide every 2 minutes and no more than five words per line) does not lead the student to ask the more relevant questions of electronic eloquence, “How many images do I need to tell the story?” or “What is the rhythm I hope to create in my performance?”

This is not to say that every speech instructor must make an immediate choice between traditional and contemporary rhetorical forms, but the importance of narrative has been generally accepted since Fisher’s (1987) seminal work without any corresponding transformation in the basic public speaking course. Invitational (Foss & Foss, 2003) and configural (Kearny & Plax, 1999) alternatives to the linear essay-text speech model are increasingly included in public speaking textbooks (Jaffe, 2002), but narrative and culturally adaptive organizational patterns generally remain options or embellishments that supplement the ubiquitous plain speech format that continues to typify academic speech instruction (Sproule, 2002).

Perhaps the more immediate task is simply to mitigate the damage that has already been done. The typical student has probably seen a multitude of poorly designed and ineptly delivered presentations by the time he or she arrives in the public speaking
classroom. “The best designed PowerPoint presentations succeed spectacularly, but the likelihood of creating or viewing one is fairly low” because the best use of the software is exceedingly time-consuming (Finn, 2005). At a minimum, students need to see examples of excellently used PowerPoint (Magidson, 2003), perhaps with an explanation that everyday examples they have seen at church, in the classroom, or on the job should not be imitated.

A second rather obvious consideration is that students who would develop competence with the medium require the same kind of coaching and practice workshops that support development of verbal eloquence (Williams, 2004). While hardware investment remains an issue for some departments (Downing & Garmon, 2002; Eadie, 1999), the bundling of PowerPoint with the Microsoft Office Suite makes the software easily available in computer labs on most campuses and relatively inexpensive for students to purchase (Office Student and Teacher Edition 2003, 2006). Some instructors have approached the PowerPoint dilemma as a training issue (Downing & Garmon, 2001), but free tutorials, advice and examples of professional design are ubiquitous on the web. In the contemporary media environment, visual elements are easily found, easily examined, and easily emulated.

Additional exposure to poorly designed and poorly performed multimedia presentations in the classroom will exacerbate already identified problems of misuse. Especially in the classroom where the students ought to be introduced to models of excellence, it is critical they learn to distinguish ineptitude from eloquence. When students are allowed to project their outline on screen as bullet points or provide decontextualized images as illustrations of verbal arguments, they are not merely failing to emulate electronic eloquence. They are being allowed to use communication technologies to reduce traditional argument to inanity, and their peers will inevitably assume that these techniques are models of effective and appropriate public discourse.

This project does not aim to argue for or against either the linear traditions of Western rhetoric or the emergent norms of an electronic era. Clearly, contemporary best practices with respect to presentation software reflect rhetorical norms that have been identified with a postliterate, electronically mediated rhetorical culture. We might anticipate continuing critical, theoretical, and philosophical arguments as the public sphere evolves to accommodate—or successfully reject—the discursive norms that come with technological change. It is crucial, however, that in the meantime our instructional methods do not result in our students’ failure to learn the norms and competent performance of either rhetorical era.

Notes
[1] Disciplinary discussions have taken place on CRTNET NEWS #5573, #5579, #5584, #5590, #5596, #5600, #5604, #5608, #5612, #5618, #5634, archived at http://lists.psu.edu/archives/index.html, a Townhall Debate, “Resolved: that PowerPoint is an abomination and should not be taught in the basic communication classes,” at the National Communication Association annual convention at Seattle, November, 2000, and at a panel
and round table sponsored by the NCA’s Visual Communication Commission in November 2001. Since 2002, PowerPoint has been most commonly referenced on CRTNET as a teaching responsibility in position announcements, suggesting that the use of PowerPoint is now assumed. The only discussion of PowerPoint at the 2005 NCA convention came as part of a short course on its successful integration into the public speaking curriculum (Coopman, 2005), and in 2006 PowerPoint had become a topic of the Great Ideas For Teaching Speech (GIFTS) series (Burns, 2006).

[2] This research is limited to the use of PowerPoint to support a speaker’s oral delivery to a present audience. The software can also be used to create stand-alone displays, which are often used for web- or kiosk-delivered training or promotional messages. While such uses might demonstrate significant rhetorical effectiveness, they appear to function outside the realm of public address. In general, PowerPoints designed to support presentations are the least effective when used as stand-alone communications (Farkas, 2005) and several high-profile instances of organizations banning the software have occurred in response to the practice of electronically transmitting large PowerPoint files to those not in attendance at a presentation (Jaffe, 2000; McNealy, 1997).

[3] Assignment instructions and outline sample, adapted as Figure 1, were generously provided by Jon Radwan, Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Seton Hall University.

[4] An issue not addressed in this project is the degree to which speech instructors’ level of expertise with the contemporary technology impacts instructional effectiveness. Contemporary students expect any competent instructor to use appropriate amounts of technology in the classroom and assume their instructors to be competent (Schrodt & Witt, 2006). The generally incompetent use of PowerPoint in academic classrooms might thus be taken by students as the exemplar of media-supported public address. The situation is exacerbated when an instructor of public speaking who is not proficient in the use of presentation software nevertheless attempts to teach students to use the technology.

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Received   May 11, 2006
Accepted   December 14, 2006