

POWERPOINT AND THE EPISTEMIC CULTURE OF STRATEGY MAKING

Interview by **Karen Christensen**

You have said that PowerPoint is part of the 'epistemic culture' of strategy making. How would you define an 'epistemic culture'?



'Epistemic' refers to knowledge, and what I'm trying to achieve with my research is to show that strategy-making involves a distinct *knowledge-production system*, in the same way that scientific research involves a distinct knowledge-production system. In this way, strategic knowledge is like scientific knowledge – it is something that gets produced by organizations and by people. The epistemic culture is basically the culture within which that knowledge gets produced. There are practices in every organization around how to produce knowledge: you might hold meetings, collect data, perform analyses, or create PowerPoint documents. The epistemic culture defines not only how knowledge is generated, but how it gets 'certified' – how we decide whether something is 'true' and actionable or not. People tend to think that we are quite rational and analytical when we make decisions, but what I am finding is that there are actually cultural norms involved in what a particular organization thinks of as 'a good strategic analysis'. I'm trying to get people to step back from the strategic analysis itself to acknowledge that there is a culture in place that produces that knowledge.

You have noted that an organization's 'epistemic machinery' doesn't just represent the culture but also works to *reinforce* it. Please explain.

Epistemic machinery consists of the objects or tools that we use in knowledge production practices. As such it includes everything from Excel spreadsheets to PowerPoint documents to the whiteboards used in meetings. These 'artifacts' are the machinery that support a particular epistemic culture. But you can't know an organization's epistemic culture simply by looking at the physical artifacts within it. That's the typical way artifacts are treated in cultural and anthropological studies, but what I'm saying is that such artifacts are more than symbolic representations of a culture: they are actually part of the machinery, part of the process that we use to generate knowledge. How these artifacts are engaged in daily practices is what makes the difference between epistemic cultures.

You have noted that **Cartography - the drawing of maps - is a key aspect of strategy making**. How so?

Cartography is essentially about dividing things up – establishing territories, deciding *what's in* and *what's out*. In order to draw a map of any sort, you have to take a stand *for* some things and *not for* other things. Likewise, when creating a strategy, at some point you have to decide that the market is going to look



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like X and not like Y, and that this person's interpretation of the data is wrong and another interpretation is correct. Given all the various possible interpretations, at some point we have to 'draw some lines' in order to move forward. My point is that drawing these lines also means that some people win and some don't, because their interpretations or preferences may be outside of the boundaries that are being drawn. We don't often think about these things when we're engaged in making strategy, but we really should.

What are 'discursive practices,' and what role do they play in strategy making?

Discursive practices include the use and sharing of knowledge through words, whether spoken or written. Of course, most of strategy making is about communication: getting information, processing it and communicating it to others in some way, and as a result, discursive practices are extremely salient to strategy making.

The predominant discursive practice in today's organization is PowerPoint presentations. What can viewers of these presentations do to deal with the realities of Cartography that you just discussed?


The most important thing is to be aware that when you are watching a PowerPoint presentation – or any presentation for that matter – that the author or presenter can't talk about everything, so everything they *do* talk about has been selected. At a minimum, you should be asking yourself 'What are they *not* saying?' It is important to 'notice the silences' – to notice what is *not* being said, which is often as important as what *is* being said. In addition, you might see a bullet point at the bottom of Page 17 of a presentation that says, 'Other options include X, Y and Z'; if this is the first mention of 'other options' – and it's buried on page 17 – you might want to ask, 'Can we talk a bit more about those options on slide 17?' You have to almost become an analyst of the document itself, not just of the information being presented.

You studied a prominent telecom manufacturer's use of PowerPoint in strategy making and found that a lack of expertise with this software can de-legitimize an individual and her efforts. How so?

If you have a viewpoint to get across, but you don't have the ability to create a PowerPoint document that supports it, you're in trouble. In the company I studied, one guy had just been promoted to manager and he took over a project mid-stream. He had several recommendations that he wanted to make, but he basically had no idea how to put together a PowerPoint deck in the accepted format, how to include other people in the process of creating the document – or even how to present it. As a result, he didn't get to the outcome he wanted, and he recognized that PowerPoint was a big part of that. By the way, I'm not arguing for people to spend hours and hours perfecting PowerPoint slides using all the available flashy features – that is truly a waste of time.

You have said that rather than being seen as 'fixed roadmaps for action,' PowerPoint presentations should be viewed as 'mutable mobiles.' Please explain.

I argue that PowerPoint is unique because it is material (it allows for concrete representations of ideas), mutable (it is an imperfect representation of those ideas and therefore changeable), modular (the elements are easy to move or remove) and digital (and can be transmitted easily in multiple ways, including e-mail). This means that PowerPoint documents can get passed around and change as they go. As such, they become part of the process of knowledge generation rather than simply an output of it. They can even be used as a way to produce new insights, because the knowledge production can actually happen right within the document. In the organization that I studied (and in my own personal experience) I have found that often a document is just sent around with a message like, 'Here's the document that I'm going to present at tomorrow's meeting, FYI'; but it can do so much more: people can put a document together and send it around, and then have a conference call to



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discuss the ideas in it; others can give input, saying 'I like this but let me insert this slide and let me change that other thing, and then they can pass it back around. More and more, PowerPoint is becoming a way to structure ideas.

Sun Microsystems CEO Scott McNealy has said that if companies banned PowerPoint, "they would see their earnings skyrocket, because employees would stand around going, "What do I do? Guess I've got to go to work." Given your research, what would you say to him?

As with everything in life, technology is only meaningful based on how it is used. We can't think of any technology as some fixed thing: 'PowerPoint's good' or 'PowerPoint's bad'; rather, as I've discussed, it can be used in very collaborative ways. Of course it is true that it's easy to get seduced into, 'Oh that font is just the wrong colour, let me change that', or 'Let me change that font.' You can spend endless hours perfecting your slides. If people get seduced into that – if there's something about the culture that says that, 'Visually-dazzling PowerPoint presentations are something we value here', it can become a huge waste of time. I think that's the aspect that Scott McNealy wanted to get rid of.

On the other hand, it is obvious to me that especially in today's world, this technology can also be engaged in very meaningful ways. So few teams that work together are co-located, that if you don't have a way to document your knowledge, share it, edit it and revise it, you're not going to be very effective. PowerPoint is particularly useful for such distributed work. So in my view, McNealy is both right and wrong.

You admit that in some ways, your findings live up to the criticisms levied against PowerPoint, but that the criticized aspects of it aren't necessarily 'bad'. How so?

What I have found is that there are two basic buckets of practices related to PowerPoint, both of which we have discussed: the Cartography bucket and the collaboration bucket. Collaboration, of course, is incredibly useful – it's the way we share ideas and come up with new ones, and the ability to pass

PowerPoint documents back and forth facilitates that. And as I've indicated, the Cartography element isn't all bad, because slicing things up and making decisions about what's in and what's out is actually a crucial part of strategy making; you can't *not* do that.

At the same time, we need to be sensitive to the power dynamics inherent in all of this: who is being silenced and whose voice is being heard? It is true that PowerPoint can simplify by creating bullet points out of very complex concepts; but at the same time, when you're making strategic choices, you have to hone in on a set of critical issues. So again, I would say that the criticisms are both true and false. Any practitioner should just be aware that the technology is not itself a force for good or evil: if used correctly, PowerPoint can become a terrific way to build collaborative insights and move the organization towards strategic choices on important issues. On the other hand, it can also be a huge waste of time and a dangerous simplifier and all of those other things. The technology isn't the problem: it's how it is used. **R**

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