SCIENCE FICTION STORY THAT I READ MORE YEARS AGO THAN I CARE TO MENTION HAD AN INTERESTING PREMISE. A RACE OF SEMI-HUMAN CREATURES ARE SHORT AND HAPPY WHEN CHILDREN BUT TALL AND SAD WHEN ADULTS. SO FAR, THIS IS NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM OUR PERCEPTION OF REAL LIFE. THESE CREATURES, HOWEVER, ARE VERY TALL AND VERY SAD WHEN ADULTS AND, EVEN STRANGER, THEY GROW FROM SHORT TO TALL DURING ONE BRIEF RAINY SEASON DURING WHICH ADOLESCENTS ARE TIED TO TREES UPSIDE DOWN USING ROPE ATTACHED TO THEIR WRISTS AND ANKLES. AS WAS USUAL IN THE SCI FI OF THE TIME, THE HERO IS A “REAL” HUMAN WHOSE GOALS ARE NOBLE. (I THINK OF THIS AS THE PROTO-STAR TREK ERA.) HE DECIDES TO HIDE ONE OF THE HAPPY YOUNGSTERS AND SO SAVE THE KID FROM THE INEVITABLE RAPID INCREASE IN BOTH HEIGHT AND SADNESS. UNHAPPILY, THE CHILD LETS BOTH HANDS AND BOTH FEET TOUCH THE GROUND DURING THE FLOOD AND INSTANTLY TURNS INTO A PLANT, BECOMING, IN FACT, A SHRUB.

I THINK I REMEMBER HOW THE AUTHOR SIGNALIZED THIS DRAMATIC CHANGE: “ALL THOUGHT CEASED!” THIS PHRASE USUALLY FLOATS INTO MY MIND AFTER I SEE THE FIRST OR SECOND SLIDE OF A POWERPOINT PRESENTATION. UNFORTUNATELY, HOWEVER, I CAN’T QUITE GROW ROOTS AND STOP THINKING; I MIGHT WANT TO LEARN ABOUT THE PRESENTATION’S ACTUAL CONTENT. SO I EXPERIENCE SOMETHING INFINITELY WORSE THAN BECOMING A SHRUB—I GET REALLY BORED.


ALTHOUGH POWERPOINT IS VERY FAR FROM BEING THE KIND OF TOOL OF CHOICE FOR PREPARING AND PRESENTING SCIENTIFIC TALKS AND, ALTHOUGH WORKING AROUND THE AD HOC CONSTRAINTS IT IMPOSES ON ITS MASS MARKET CAN BE PRETTY DIFFICULT, THE SOFTWARE’S SHORTCOMINGS ARE NOT, I THINK, THE REAL PROBLEM. MY OPINION IS THAT WE ARE THE PROBLEM. MANY TALKS ON COMPUTATIONAL SCIENCE, INCLUDING EVEN (EGAD!) SOME OF MY OWN, ARE JUST Plain BAD. AS A COMMUNITY, WE TAKE GREAT CARE TO MAKE SURE THAT OUR RESULTS ARE CORRECT, USEFUL, AND ORIGINAL AND, WHEN WRITING, WE EVEN TRY VERY HARD TO BE CLEAR. BUT ALL TOO OFTEN, WHEN SPEAKING, WE ASSUME THAT IF THE FACTS ARE BULLETS ON A SLIDE AND WE RECITE ALL THE BULLETS, THEN WE’VE DONE OUR JOB.

BEING INVITED TO GIVE A TALK IS CONSIDERED A VERY GOOD THING, SOMETHING TO INCLUDE IN A CV; IT’S PROBABLY ONE OF THE BEST METHODS AVAILABLE TO ACQUAINT PEOPLE WITH OUR WORK. UNLIKE THE INVISIBLE TARGET OF A WRITTEN PRESENTATION, A LIVE AUDIENCE IS PHYSICALLY PRESENT AND READY AND WILLING TO LISTEN. MOST OF US ARE CAPABLE OF COMPOSING AND DELIVERING A GOOD TALK, BUT, TO REPEAT MY POINT, WE OFTEN DON’T DO IT. I SUSPECT THAT WHILE THE FACT OF HAVING GIVEN A TALK IS WORTH ADVERTISING, ACTUALLY GIVING IT IS NOT CONSIDERED TO BE AN IMPORTANT ACTIVITY.

THIS BAD TALK STYLE HAS A LONG HISTORY IN OUR PROFESSION. I CAN REMEMBER LISTENING TO TALKS IN WHICH AN OVERHEAD PROJECTION WAS USED TO DISPLAY LISTS OF NUMBERS PRINTED IN TYPewriter-SIZED FONT TO ILLUSTRATE, SAY, CONVERGENCE OF AN ITERATION. I ONCE HEARD A SPEAKER MUMBLE TO AN AUDIENCE THAT HAD DEGENERATED INTO A SET OF SNORING BODIES: “THE ONLY REASON I’M NOT SLEEPING TOO IS THAT I’M STANDING UP.” TODAY’S MUCH MORE ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY ONLY INCREASES OUR OPPORTUNITIES TO DRIFT OFF AND Lapse INTO A MONOTONE TO THE POINT THAT WE, THE PRESENTERS, ARE SOMETIMES EVEN LESS ENGAGED THAN THE AUDIENCE.

NATURALLY, THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS TO THE TRADITION. ALMOST
all of us do a better job when writing on a whiteboard than when pushing a key to get to the next viewgraph, simply because writing requires us to pay attention and do something. Some computational scientists consistently deliver talks with great style and panache, even when using PowerPoint. They do this, I believe, by treating both the talk and its delivery as an important, challenging, and potentially rewarding activity. They go so far as to rehearse the talk and revise the slides several times. They might even work to get rid of bad habits, such as jingling coins in their pockets while speaking or dropping their voices into a mumble just as they reach their main point.

I’m not quite suggesting that we all take lessons in public speaking and effective use of display graphics, but I’m also not denying that it might be a good idea. First-rate speakers help the profession because their enthusiasm attracts others to the subject, and they convince listeners that the topics are worth pursuing. Think of good talks as yet another part of the struggle to support research.