



PDF of this article // 

print this article // 

The Narrative Will Never Die: Q&A with Mario Garcia

By Cliff Atkinson

*Trained as a journalist, **Mario Garcia** has devoted more than 30 years to redesigning publications, and has personally collaborated with over 450 news organizations, including The Wall Street Journal and The Philadelphia Inquirer. Mario founded the Graphics & Design program at the **Poynter Institute for Media Studies**, and teaches writing, editing and design as basic principles for effective communication of ideas. What does the field of journalism have to offer the field of PowerPoint presentations? According to Mario, at least the idea that a story is a story.*

Cliff Atkinson: *Mario, what is your general impression of the state of PowerPoint presentations today?*

Mario Garcia: They seem to be getting more attractive, better focused and appealing all the time. People are experimenting more with type use, colors and visuals.

CA: *How would you generally evaluate PowerPoint presentations in terms of basic design criteria, including hierarchy, composition and effective use of text and image?*

MG: It all depends on the person using it. You still see a lot of very static, chart-filled, boring shows; and then you see more multimedia presentations, with sound, short film clips, and a variety of surprises throughout. I am trying to do that in my own presentations, which are now all PowerPoint.

CA: *The corporate standard for communications has shifted to bullet points, at least when it comes to presentations. The reasoning is that people want information in shorter and more digestible pieces. Why don't journalists simply present a bulleted list instead of writing out a narrative story?*

MG: Well, the audience is in a hurry, but their thirst is for substantive information. A story is a story. And narratives do tell interesting stories. The bullet point box is good to offer encyclopedic information. But a story needs to be told. The narrative will never die. The combination of the two strategies will be the way to go, and good editors will know what is a bullet box and what is a narrative.

CA: *The new corporate mantra in organizational communications is the word "story." Why do you think this is emerging as a new trend?*

MG: Because storytelling is at the heart of all we do. A good story sells today as it did 150 years ago. But how we tell it is the interesting new phenomenon. What to tell in short or long formats, that is the question.

CA: *Although the concept of "story" is becoming popular, its definition remains nebulous. Hollywood uses the word to describe works of fiction, while journalists use the same word to describe works of non-fiction. What is the difference between a Hollywood work of fiction, and a journalistic work of non-fiction? What do they have in common?*

MG: Little, if you ask me; Hollywood stories have happy endings; in journalism we tell stories with all types of endings; and no movie ends with a list of highlights of what the story line was about. The audience is more patient with a movie than with information from website, newspaper or magazine. It is a matter of expectation.

CA: *How does someone learn how to write and present a good story? Is it an innate skill, or can anyone learn how to do it?*

MG: Obviously, writing techniques can be learned, and there are many institutions to do so. One of

the best to learn journalistic writing is **Poynter Institute for Media Studies** in Florida; however, like all creative endeavors, excellent writing is, I believe, a talent that must be cultivated.

CA: *Virtually every PowerPoint slide features a category heading at the top, such as Outlook, Our Mission, Objectives and Lessons Learned. What is the difference between this type of heading and a journalistic headline?*

MG: Not much difference. You need to navigate the user. The more specific the label the better. I always use labels for the different parts of my presentation.

CA: *If someone wanted to start writing headlines at the top of their PowerPoint slides, what could they learn from the art (and science) of writing journalistic headlines?*

MG: They would learn much; make them fun, direct, focused.

CA: *A headline is always constrained by limited space in a publication, just as it would be at the top of a PowerPoint slide. What is the value of accepting a constraint when writing a headline?*

MG: Say what you have to say as succinctly as possible. Less is more!

CA: *If a business communicator wanted to quickly learn some of the basics of journalism, what book or other resources would you recommend?*

MG: There is not a single book or source: I'd say study *The Wall Street Journal*, it is a textbook of how to navigate the user, and how to write headlines that summarize stories and entertain at the same time. And, of course, I'd direct them to my own book, **Pure Design!**

Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant who helps organizations solve problems related to PowerPoint. Visit his website at www.sociablemedia.com, read more articles and interviews [here](#), or email him [here](#).

© 2005 Cliff Atkinson

sociable media®