Prophets of zoom

Computing: New “deep zooming” software not only amazes—it offers a new way to display and navigate through large amounts of information

Jun 2nd 2012 | from the print edition

ON JANUARY 16th 2003, 82 seconds after the space shuttle Columbia lifted off, a piece of foam insulation weighing less than a kilogram broke off its fuel tank and hit the left wing. Bosses at America’s space agency, NASA, were largely reassured by a subsequent presentation delivered by the “debris assessment” team. They did not request that a military spy satellite photograph the wing, in orbit, before re-entry. But its thermal protection was, in fact, badly damaged. As it re-entered the atmosphere 13 days later, the shuttle, and its crew of seven, burned up.

In a report eight months later, the Columbia Accident Investigation Board cast considerable blame on the debris-assessment team’s presentation to higher-ups during the shuttle’s flight, prepared using PowerPoint software. Information had been poorly condensed onto 28 slides. On one cluttered slide the words “significant” and “significantly” were used five times with a range of meanings from “detectable in a perhaps irrelevant calibration case study” to “an amount of damage so that everyone dies”, noted Edward Tufte, a consultant to the investigators. It was easy to see how managers could have viewed the slides without grasping the level of danger, the board concluded.

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when moving, say, through a dense grove of trees. Today’s zooming software operates on a different scale, but as touch-screen devices proliferate, zooming has become a popular way to manipulate maps and photos—so perhaps it will catch on in other areas, too.

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