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A Snapshot in Time: “Vu-Graphs” March 27

“Vu-graph” is one of those terms that was once ubiquitous among the hallways of NSA, but is now a distant memory. A “vu-graph,” or more precisely, a “viewgraph,” was a static transparent presentation slide, about the size of an 8 ½ by 11 inch piece of paper, that was viewable through the use of an overhead projector. The presenter would stand next to the projector with a stack of viewgraphs and lay one down at a time to discuss its relevant points. When the presentation with that viewgraph was complete, the presenter removed it, and laid down the next, being ever careful not to accidentally knock the entire stack onto the floor, disassembling the order. Other names for this format included “viewfoil” and “transparency.” This display method for text, photos, charts, maps, or other visual aids was commonly used throughout military, government, and educational organizations between the 1950s and 1990s.

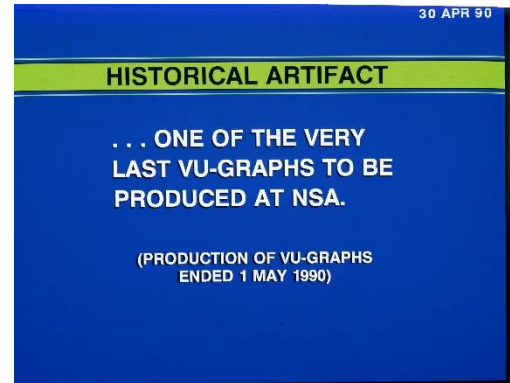


Image of a vu-graph from 30 April 1990. The text on the "vu-graph" states, "... one of the very last vu-graphs to be produced at NSA. Production of vu-graphs ended on 1 May 1990."

For decades at NSA/CSS, viewgraphs were the backbone of briefings and training sessions. In the 1960s, NSA Regulation 10-17 “NSA Briefing Aids” stipulated that, “the use of visual aids in the course of briefings and reports is encouraged where the aids contribute to understanding and facility of presentation” and “common sense and good taste should apply.”

Visual aids were just as important then as they are now. Effective visual aids could engage an audience and help them understand complex concepts and retain important information. Conversely, bad visual aids could distract or, worse yet, turn the audience off from the briefer’s message. In 1976, DIRNSA Lt. Gen. Lew Allen expressed concern about the legibility of briefing aids. He mandated that any briefing aids shown to him must conform to a minimum letter size and be made through the Reprographics Department to ensure a professional design.

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By the 1990s, newer technology, such as computer projection systems and software applications like Microsoft PowerPoint, began replacing the tried and true medium. The new technology afforded enhanced efficiency both in the development of slides (revisions could be made on the fly with the click of a keyboard button) and the presentation of the slides (presenters could advance the slide with a simple click rather than physically picking up the transparency from the projector and laying down another).

These days, every once in a while, someone will discover a forgotten viewgraph deep within a safe drawer or, more commonly, in the NSA/CSS Archives. Recently, a CCH historian ran across this viewgraph in a collection of photos preserved in the NSA/CSS Archives. Stating that “vu-graph” production ceased on May 1, 1990, it is a literal snapshot in time of this once commonplace business tool.

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