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Article:

Special Issue: Social media and visual communication

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Social media are a significant part of contemporary communication. It is estimated that, by the end of 2016, over 2 billion people worldwide will be using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, to communicate, interact, and undertake a range of formal and informal activities and practices (Mccarthy et al., 2014). It is therefore vital that we understand social media platforms and their usage.

With a shared interest in the social significance of visual communication in social media (and beyond), the five articles in this special issue contribute to a small body of empirical research on visual meaning making resources in the context of social media environments, including blogs, Tumblr and Instagram. Existing work on social media within the field of multimodal studies includes genre analysis of Facebook publishing (Eisenlauer, 2010) and text compositional practices on Facebook (Bezemer and Kress, 2014), children's blogging (Abas, 2011), the aesthetic meaning potential of web design (Adami, 2015), the expression of style in Tumblr and Pinterest (Jewitt and Henriksen, 2017, forthcoming) and identity work through repurposing resources (Leppänen et al., 2013), as well as trans-media production across different social media (Adami, 2014). Work focused more specifically on image includes Seko's (2013) multimodal analysis of self-injury photographs on Flikr, Aiello and Woodhouse's (2016) multimodal critical discourse analysis of gendered identity in stock photography and Manovich's (2016a) latest work on style in Instagram photos.

The articles in this special issue point to the different ways in which visual and multimodal resources are configured on particular social media platforms, differences that shape how social media are taken up and used. Collectively the articles show how social media permeates our daily communication across different scales of attention,

from the expression of individual identities, to news and crime, governmentality and experiences of urban space.

Zappavigna explores interpersonal meaning in social media photographs using the representation of motherhood in Instagram images as a case study. Her article investigates the visual choices that are made in these images to construe relationships between the represented participants, the photographer and the ambient social media viewer. Vaisman explores the use of blogs with attention to the expressive ideological potential of their visual elements. Through an analysis of blog design themes and blog sidebar 'badges' produced by Jewish-Israeli girls – Israel's largest blogging community – the article argues that blogs can be thought of as a 'digital body' or an avatar of the blogger. Using feminist theory, the article examines design elements as resources of identity performance to explore the extent to which distinctive subcultural styles that are often presented as adversarial (re)produce hegemonic Western models of girlhood. Gursimsek is concerned with a new form of multimodal communication – the animated GIFs (graphics interchange formats) strongly associated with the social media blogging platform Tumblr. The article uses a social semiotic approach to explore how fans of television productions design, produce and share such content to express themselves and engage with the objects of their interest. These digital expressions, which exist in the form of graphics, text, videos and often a mix of some of these modes, seem to enable participatory conversations by the audience communities that continue over a period of time. Topinka's article on the Boston Marathon bombing examines the online and mobile circulation of a photograph of the immediate aftermath of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings taken by David Green, a Boston Marathon runner, which captured an image of one of the bombers running from the scene. He argues that the everyday practices of mobile photography support and visually mediate the practices of urban governmentality in complex ways. Finally, Hoelzl opens up the focus to explore mobile, locative and wireless media and how these have reconfigured our experience of the image as well as our experience of urban space. Undertaking critical revision of one of the first accounts of this new experience of the city, Lev Manovich's 'Poetics of

Augmented Space' (2006), and drawing on Adrian Mackenzie's concept of 'wirelessness' (2011), the author defines the urban as a data-space where physical and digital data, bodies and signals commute and connect via mobile devices and wireless networks. In this urban data-space, the screen, as our local access point to the networks, coincides with the image as the visual part of multitudinous data exchanges. The article argues that in this 'Brave New City', where we are permanently assisted/monitored by a plethora of digital devices, software agents and sensors, the role of the image is no longer to screen the world but to screen our data.

We can trace four themes across the articles in this special issue that are pertinent to visual communication and social media: emerging genres and practices; identity construction; everyday public/private vernacular practices; and transmedia circulation, appropriation and control. Each of these themes is briefly discussed below: (1) *Emerging genres and practices*: Social media platforms, along with their apps and other easy-to-use software tools, make available the creation and sharing of multimodal artefacts to an unprecedented number of people. This provides a creative space for multimodal text production including the emergence of new genres, that is, new configurations of typified communicative forms that fulfil specific and diversified social functions. We can see evidence of this in Vaisman's analysis of pre-teen bloggers' (re-)use of badges, sort of visual avatars, functioning not only as a form of embodiment and self-expression of identity, but also for the construction of a sense of shared belonging within a sub-culture specific community. We can also see it in Zappavigna's analysis of representations of motherhood in Instagram, which evidences new formal photographic patterns that are used for public self-display of the everyday private and mundane in ways that contribute to enhancing a sense of real-time and instant sharing, as well as foregrounding the relationship between photographer and viewer, inviting identification and again sharing private and intimate spaces and experiences. Sharing is differently articulated in the emerging genre of GIFs, as demonstrated in Gursimsek's analysis of GIF design and use on the social media platform Tumblr. GIFs involve the selection of screenshots of media TV products, assembled with overlaid writing and made available

to the Tumblr community to be re-signified for specific communicative uses (such as commenting), and are often disentangled from the meanings that the selected images had in their original media context. Without explicitly focusing on genre, Topinka's and Hoelzl's articles hint at new textual forms serving different functions – a mobile photograph taken to witness a tragic event to be shared with friends can then function as a mug shot to identify a suspect, ultimately becoming a news media item to show the actor of terror. Even more so, our connectivity while we move throughout the world can become data, in various forms/genres, and serve control purposes. In this latter sense, the tracking affordances of apps and devices are increasingly generating new genres and signs, such as the 'read ticks' on Whatsapp, or the activity notifications on Facebook, which we produce automatically through our actions and which we use as data to interpret others' activities.

(2) *Identity construction*: As we express our identities through the clothes we wear or the furniture of our rooms, so too we express our identities through visuals shared online. Zappavigna's analysis of Instagram photos of motherhood and Vaisman's study of pre-teen bloggers' visual productions both show the function of these visual texts as self-expression and identity construction. The latter work highlights the extent to which expressions of individuality are imbued with globally-driven stereotypes (indeed as happens with clothes and furniture). This raises questions about the relation between creativity in forms of production and (often unconscious) re-production of broader naturalized social dynamics of taste, aesthetics and identity values. As Torinka's analysis shows, identity construction is dynamic and can change in viewers' perceptions of the very same image over time, through contextual transformations and through layering of information and media discourses. Again, this raises questions about power and agency: while we have renewed agency in constructing and projecting our identities through online visuals, at the same time we do not have control over the dynamics of identity (re)construction that will invest our visuals once they have started to circulate.

(3) *Everyday public/private vernacular practices*: Communication through online visuals is an everyday mundane practice making public publishing the everyday activity of

private individuals. All the articles in this special issue explore this shift and the spaces and relationships between public and private, offline and online. Zappavigna's preteens blog from the privacy of their own rooms, while connecting with others and displaying their identity publicly online. Private spheres are not only shared publicly, as in the case of Vaisman's photos of motherhood, but they are sourced as data by public bodies, as Hoelzl argues in the case of CCTVs. With the entrance of social media into our lives (and of our lives into social media), vernacular practices of text design are more and more manifest and, apparently, influent, crossing private and public spheres, the everyday and the 'historical' through the production of a single artifact, as Topinka shows through his analysis of the changes in meaning and significance of one photo in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing.

(4) *Transmedia circulation, appropriation and control*: Digital technologies afford text creation through 'copy-and-paste' across media; as a result, visual artefacts are easily assembled, bricolaged, edited, manipulated and reused, from one media to another. This transmedia assembling is evidenced in Gursimek's article on GIFs. Visual artefacts are also re-signified by being re-contextualized, as in Vaisman's blogs and in Topinka's photograph of the Boston Marathon bombing. Their forms are appropriated and transformed, together with their meanings. Ownership is brought into question and, through circulation and appropriation, what ownership and authorship mean in social media becomes more and more uncertain. Taken together, the articles in this issue show that appropriation functions in both directions: while we appropriate others' productions through creative re-use, our productions lend themselves to being appropriated. Hoelzl argues that through our production (and overall connectivity) we can be appropriated by (more powerful) others.

There is considerable interest in researching social media and a growing body of research on the characteristics of social media users, their attitudes, behaviour and practices. However, empirical research on social media 'contents' produced and shared online has typically focused on language (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014). The multimodal character of social media

communication has been generally neglected and methods for researching it are limited and under-developed. This special issue contributes to scholarly enquiry into social media use by expanding the analysis beyond language to the visual and the multimodal.

Images are a large part of the artefacts produced and shared online, although when images are included in academic inquiry, they tend to be either described only in terms of relative frequency (in relation to writing, for example) or in terms of content (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Kenix, 2009; Kerbel and Bloom, 2005; Siles, 2012). More recently, uploaded and shared images have been the subject of Big Data analysis, through the mining of metadata, including tags, time and place of posting (e.g. Hochman and Manovich, 2013), and automated content analysis, using computer vision and object recognition software (Yazdani and Manovich, 2015). Such studies are useful in that they are able to detect significant patterns and trends of image use, which increase our understanding of the 'who', 'where' and 'what' of social media. However, as their authors confirm (Hochman, 2014; Manovich, 2016b), quantitative automated methods of analysis cannot and indeed do not set out to account for the 'how' and 'why' of social media. Further, when employed qualitatively, while content analysis can evidence represented themes and topics, subjects, objects and events, it cannot account for expressive, interpersonal, stylistic and overall social meanings, which in images are chiefly produced through resources such as colour, lighting, camera angle, frame, placement, or pictorial detail. Collectively, the articles in this special issue draw on a range of qualitative methods to provide a nuanced account for the specific meanings and functions associated with images and related visual practices. The articles draw on concepts and methods from discourse analysis, governmentality, social semiotics, multimodality and ethnography to explore specific social media platforms and in doing so they move beyond a purely quantitative and content focused analysis

Theoretically and methodologically varied, the articles in this issue trace a cline in the social significance of social media visual practices and functions. This spans from individuals' creativity and identity representation, to participation in community-specific communicative practices through sharing, appropriating and reusing (global and media)

visual tropes and products, up to (often unconscious) participation to control and being monitored, through digital and visual embodiment, which turns our lives and actions into trackable data in the physical world. In other terms, along with providing a fine-grained account of visual representations, this special issue starts to tackle and problematize the complex issue of power embedded in the material, technological and social affordances of shared digital visual representations. Collectively, the articles point to two conflicting and intrinsically connected directions concerning 'empowerment' and social media: on the one hand, social media as heralding enhanced possibilities of becoming subjects and public actors (rather than mere audience, consumers or recipients); and, on the other hand, enhanced possibilities of being subjected to control, through the very same representational practices that enhance our possibilities of creation and self-expression. It is in this sense that the special issue contributes to a nuanced understanding of the parallel risks and potentials involved in the pervasiveness of social media as inextricably part of our contemporary realities.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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