

Module 3 Overview

Ethics and Issues Overview

There is no shortage of writing technologies to pick from in contemporary life. There also seems to be no shortage of ways to organize and think about writing technologies. For instance, we can break these technologies up based on hardware interfaces (e.g. writing on a phone vs writing on a keyboard), we can break them up based on software, we can break them up based on the type of writing it enables (primarily text based or allowing for multimedia?), and we can also break these up by thinking about the medium they're finally delivered on.

On the surface it might seem that choosing between software like PowerPoint and Google Slides is just a simple matter of preference or accessibility (after all, the Office Suite costs money and a Google account is free). Yet, when we dig into technologies a bit deeper and we approach technology with critique and analysis we're bound to find a bit more to it. In this module you'll begin to sharpen these skills. You'll think about the *affordances* of digital writing technologies alongside some ethics of digital writing technology. And, if we do it right - you should leave this module with an abundance of concern about how digital technologies might play more a part than we realize in how we use them. But more on that later. First, we'll read this overview to get a sense of affordance and the issues that arise in production and circulation of digital writing technologies. Of course - we shouldn't avoid accessibility either.

Affordances

Before we begin thinking about some of the issues of digital writing technologies it's useful to consider a digital writing technologies term of "affordance". You've heard it before, I'm sure. Often times when digital writing technology scholars talk about affordance they're discussing the actions made available by the technology. For instance, Google Slides (given the right materials and connections) affords interactivity during presentations. A presenter can share their slides with editing privileges and the people in the audience can add/change/clarify as the presentation is delivered.

Nevertheless, the term of affordance arrives from a mid century Psychology text derived from the visual sense and war pilots. If you get a chance to meander through Gibson's Ecological Approach to Visual Perception give it a go. Here is a fun little excerpt

"an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. ... it is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. ... both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer." (p. 129)

The important difference here is that Gibson conceived of affordance as what is furnished or provided by an environment (for better or worse) in relation to the animal itself. The key difference here is that scholars in digital writing technologies often only focus on what is afforded (for better). Or, to be more specific: what a technology allows us to do. Occasionally,

this has the funny effect of ignoring what is afforded (for worse) or what is afforded us to not do. For example, digital writing technologies afford us the use of backspace or delete and thus afford us, if we're not careful about version control, an inability to see where we've whited-out over errors or cross sections out.

Production

Digital writing technologies allow us to produce "writing" in ways we previous could not have imagined. Imagine Charles Dickens learning about the ease of blogs or Mary Shelley learning about hypertext and multimedia. Yet, because we can produce writing in a myriad of ways is it still useful to call it writing. Consider what Rhodes and Alexander say about multimedia *writing*:

We must, more specifically, resist the universalizing desire to reduce all communication to simply "writing" but instead understand that new media, as a powerful possibility of communication is "content – and context – contingent and irreducibly complex" (p. 23)

There exists a bit of a ontological problem here. When is something not considered writing? And (more importantly) what value do we find in articulating it as something different? For instance, would this class be more useful if it discussed methods of multimedia production? Is technical writing, as a field, at risk of losing value in a society that seemingly values non-print media? Toward this end - I'm always curious in my tech writing courses how many people read the instructions of a new toy or gadget (or the manual when something breaks) and how many people just watch a Youtube video.

What's more - the production of "writing" however you choose to define it is now much more easily dispersed across many writers. In industry this means that you might create a general outline for something before it gets sent out to a designer or coder and then brought back to you (or sent along the chain) for content and testing.

Even if you don't work with a team to produce writing you're still working with some invisible team that you might not think about much. For instance, corrective text / suggested text / and spell check all outsource parts of writing production that used to be manually done. Do you find yourself agreeing with auto-fill text much in your lives? Even without auto-fill we might look a bit deeper and think about times when antecedent genre knowledge directed our writing activities. Or, to say this bluntly, how we're just doing what we think we've seen others do.

Further back we might look toward the ubiquitous nature of What You See Is What You Get text editors and desktop publishing software. We've quickly gone in directions where page lengths are approximations use in all sorts of places. No use in digger too much further but: suffice to say - writing technologies have altered the course of how we write. Don't just take my word for it though - Kress, an expert on histories of writing technology had this much to say about it:

The written sentence as we still know it is as much an effect of the affordances of that technology in interaction with the users and the environment of us as it is an effect of the resources which had been brought from the past to writing for print. (p. 83).

Circulation

Alongside the production of writing - technologies have altered our circulations of writing. There must have been a fateful day where email (or other electronic written communication) outpaced the fax and the post. Increasingly, email itself is being overtaken by other methods of communication. Teams no longer drop brief emails but instead leave notes on Project Management apps like Trello or messages on company software or, increasingly common, Slack boards. These changes have long lasting impacts on the very nature of the work we do. For instance, look to the incident of Facebook fudging the numbers about what content spreads best on social media and the implications that made for printed media.

Accessibility

Digital writing technologies allow for a much smoother incorporation of some accessibilities - namely alt-text and screen readers. Yet, the imperative of digital writing specialists has, generally, been to use bigger and more impressive technologies that also demand more broadband and more powerful computers. Your guess is as good as mine as to why people favor the spectacle of some "new" technologies. But it's worth asking early and often: what sort of ethical obligation do technical writers have to accessibilities? Are new technologies (which increasingly replace older technologies and practice) to be held to the same accessible standards immediately? You can look to *Robles vs Dominos* to get a sense for how this might play out in the next several years.

Proposal

- Due Sep 13, 2021 by 11:59pm
- Points 5
- Submitting a file upload
- File Types pdf

In this assignment you'll identify a skills gap that you currently have with a writing technology and you'll propose a tutorial (of your own making) that teaches others how to perform this specific function. In other words, you'll learn how to do a function in a writing technology (for instance, creating themed slide templates in google slides) and then you'll write a tutorial for others to follow along.

Part of this assignment is going beyond your own comfort zone. You'll have until October 14th to turn in the tutorial - that's a month. So you should take advantage of this time and propose something that you think will be useful for your career after this class.

Your final tutorial will be an instructional design course made with Adobe XD. If *instructional design* and/or Adobe XD are new to you do not worry! I'll give you lots of advice on creating these.

Before beginning this proposal head over to [Technology Know-How survey](#) and identify your current familiarity and expertise with the listed technologies.

This is a graded discussion: 10 points possible

Due Sep 20, 2021

[Chris Scheidler](#)

Reading Response Discussion 1

[Chris Scheidler \(He/Him\)](#)

Return here on September 14th to read a collection of your classmate's responses and then to respond to their ideas.

Poly(new)media

Read the following excerpts and respond to some of the discussion questions below - feel free to raise other concerns that you feel are being left out.

Author Excerpts

A)Polymedia, in simple terms, involves defining how each individual medium interacts with one another and how they impact social relationships. Furthermore, polymedia addresses the environmental and emotional consequences of using different kinds of media. The topic was founded to address the new way that technological mediums affect how people communicate and harbor relationships. Prior discussions about media were typically less complex overall because it was less widespread and there were fewer forms of technological communication. As a result, the social impacts of media are much more dynamic than they were when letters and short phone calls were the main option for long-distance communication. [T]he main idea is that computers and culture continually influence each other. While it was once thought that humans are the sole ones that manipulate their culture, computers and technology have a great amount of power in influencing the ways we choose to communicate with others. Computers are no longer just tools that are manipulated as a means to an end. This idea of computers affecting our relationships could be an additional element of polymedia.

B) Over the course of the past two or three decades, people's capacity to communicate has increased at levels never before imagined. The constant shifts in communication media has led to sort of tension between emerging technologies and the way that they affect us individually and culturally. Madianou and Miller (2012) conceptualized a new way of looking at our relationship to media. Their theory of polymedia seeks to understand how, in an increasingly digital world, people of all backgrounds use the myriad media outlets to maintain communication even from afar. In the global south, numerous digital platforms allow tech-literate individuals to maintain

contact with family and friends who are living abroad. To a working class westerner, the use of digital communication is often taken for granted, but the subjects in Madianou's ethnographic survey are very aware of how they use their technologies. This awareness leads us to understand more intimately how basic communication media has evolved our forms of communication

C) Polymedia was a really interesting read to me because I had never thought about technology being used by people to portray different emotions or messages simply because they were using some other social media platform or type of technology. This relates back to determinism to me because human emotions and values are influencing how technology is being used and not the other way around. As a person that has access to several different kinds of technology and social media platforms, I can see this theory evident in my every day life. There are certain people who I talk to only over snapchat or twitter, and then there are also people who I almost exclusively text and never call. Technology didn't determine for me which I valued to use in certain communications, I determined that myself based on what was available to me. Twitter is handy for interacting with people who share the same sense of humor that I do without alerting my family to my preferences and having them worry about me. My email is almost exclusively used for academic and professional purposes because I can type a more detailed account of what I want to say rather than the usually short and informal texts I am prone to Sending.

D)Regarding these preconditions, it is important to look at societal changes that have happened since the article was published in 2012. Almost a decade later, we live in an age where smartphones can be purchased for a wide range of prices. If a user just needs a device to use email, social media, and live video conferencing, then it is absolutely possible to obtain a device like this without a large financial commitment. Data plans to have an internet connection on the go also range in cost. It is no longer necessary to have an expensive broadband connection in one's home in order to communicate online. Many places even have free WiFi for customers to use. With these factors in mind, the affordability of communicating through polymedia is more reasonable than it once was. These advancements were already underway in 2012, but we now live in a digital age where it is outside of the norm to not have a smartphone. As for literacy, the upcoming generation is using online communications in their daily life. Particularly with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, students have been pushed to use virtual meetings and learn using the internet. With that being said, there are still those who struggle to embrace the polymedia ways of communication. For example, my paternal grandparents do not have a smartphone, and using a computer has been a very unfamiliar experience for them. My grandmother has recently made some advancements in her technological skills, but she will likely never reach a savvy understanding of technology in her lifetime. I believe that there are many people in a similar position to this. However, as the world becomes more and more digital, I believe it may reach a point where one cannot get by without a certain degree of technical knowledge.

E) Our growth has led to communication accessibility never before seen. Though it must be said that this accessibility does not necessarily breach into the real world. Technology availability such as computers, smartphones, even wifi or landline connections remains worryingly low in rural and/or low-income areas/populations, especially across the Rust Belt and Appalachia territories. While these advances are wonderful, I would argue that they mean little in the grand scheme of things if their accessibility is withheld from our population's significant (if not the largest) sector. If the poor and/or rural are always a step behind the middle populous regarding

communication and technology, then what good is this communication? By its very advancement, it has rendered itself (in my opinion) obsolete. Still, it's impossible to be entirely pessimistic about these advances, for while there is always a risk for misuse and greed, there is also the possibility for great good. Wikipedia, for instance, is a wonderful example of new media and is the closest we've come to a catalog of all human knowledge, with over three billion words amongst its millions of articles. It is also a great example of cultural change concerning new media. For a very long time, Wikipedia was considered a poor source of information due to its open-source format (everyone can edit almost everything). However, that availability has allowed for collaboration across the boundaries of land and sea. Thus, while some still consider Wikipedia a poor source, a natural language and culture have been born within its content creators, a strict system of rules and consequences. From that system, a community has bloomed.

F) The Madianou & Miller paper reminded me of some actual—informal—ethnographic observations I made myself (and I promise they have relevance). I spent time on a church mission in Albania in the years of 2010 and 2011. It was (and still is) a developing country, and at that time, cell phones were beginning to become accessible to almost all sections of society. Middle-class people would each have their own phone, and even low-income families would usually have at least one phone to use. Almost everyone, however, used prepaid plans and would need to buy a SIM card loaded with minutes and text credits every few weeks. Interestingly, a new way of communication happened because of this limitation: it was commonly-understood phone etiquette that if someone called your phone, under no circumstances should you answer the call on the first ring. This is because whoever initiates a connected call is charged for the minutes used. If you got a call from a lower-income friend that was just a single ring and then they hung up, it meant “call me when you can”. This was a free way to send a message, as the call was never connected. If you got a call from a friend that lasted beyond two rings, it was then appropriate to answer, because that meant it was urgent enough that the lower-income friend was willing to incur charges to his SIM card. The main factors of new media could be summed up as changeable or transferrable, something that old media definitely isn't. Before polymedia took hold, media such as letters or recordings were static after being created. One person sent information in one large ‘packet’ that had to be responded to in likewise a large ‘packet’. However, the computerization characteristic of new media enabled media to be created and shared in real-time packets that could be changed according to the reaction of the other party. Also, the many new types of media created by the computerization of new media enabled a multitude of different media for communication and thus enabled people to choose what media they used to communicate depending on how they felt, how much they wanted to reveal, etc. Without new media, the choice of long-range communication media would be very limited, and thus certain etiquette and expectations would be attached to these few media with no recourse for communication that had aspirations outside the social bounds of the available media.

Discussion questions

1. What competing understandings of polymedia do you glean from your the responses here?
2. What sort of problems do we think something like polymedia might help us address?
3. To what extent do we see technology and society growing together? What do we make of this?
4. This is a class about writing technologies - how does something like polymedia complicate the use value of our proficiency with digital writing technologies? What do we make of the issues of accessibility or cultural norms, as in Author F's ethnographic observations?

Script (outline)

- Due Sep 26, 2021 by 11:59pm
- Points 5
- Submitting a website url or a file upload
- Available after Sep 19, 2021 at 12am

Introduction

In this assignment you'll create an outline based on your proposal. You may have created outlines for other assignments before but this one will be a bit different. We're not just looking for a draft of what you'll write but we're looking for details of how your tutorial will be interactive and help guide the person learning the skill. In other words, think of the word "script" not only as a collection and series of the words you'll write but also a serial collection of the activities and functions your learner will perform in the process of following the tutorial.

WATCH this for more information: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-Sm_0QiPQDo97b3H1V8mzGC9qihO5oXR/view?usp=sharing (Links to an external site.)

What is due

A typed description of each slide alongside an outline of how the slides should act and feel. You're more than welcome to start putting this in Adobe XD or Slides. But expect to have the following elements

- A description of the slide
- A description of the content on the screen
- An explanation of interactive elements / simultaneous actions expected by the user
- A visual mock-up of the slide

(here is an example I did on the fly... you can certainly do better than this:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/171kCYoDlaEP21t2lm_w8UBHLzSTVYbgrXfmuVo2Ck6k/edit?usp=sharing (Links to an external site.))

Where this all goes

Eventually, you're going to create a working prototype in Adobe XD of your tutorial. You might link to video's or other media of you doing the activities but its probably best to get your learner involved. Here is a really rough version of a few slides in a tech tutorial (very very rough and likely to not work well on mobile: <https://xd.adobe.com/view/2ec50c30-656d-4975-ba56-69c12fd9ee3f-7b96/?fullscreen>) (Links to an external site.) Again - this is just a simple mock-up that I put together on the fly, your final versions will be so much better than this.

Necessary components for a complete proposal

- An in depth description of the advanced feature you'll tutorial
- An explanation of why this feature is used
- Who your audience is for your tutorial (obviously it's me and classmates but it might also be someone in your major or in your discipline[after all, Writing Professors like me don't use a whole lot of advanced google sheets])

Grading Criteria:

Your proposal will be graded credit / half-credit / full-credit. Half-credit assignments will be encouraged to revise for full credit.

Examples of "advanced features"

Below are some examples of advanced features you might create your tutorial for - this isn't an exhaustive list and if you have a favorite advanced technique that you've been yearning to learn feel free to go with that.

- Animation and Interactive design in Adobe InDesign
- Animation in Adobe Illustrator
- Macros or Scripts in Adobe, Google, or Microsoft
- Creating your own font for Adobe products
- Setting up bleed and slug for InDesign (this is pretty basic but often ignored in our digital world)
- Creating effective styles in Word/Docs
- Creating useful Master Sheets in InDesign
- Merging Illustrator + Adobe Dimension
- Effective use of Microsoft redline (Google Compare)
- Creating a linked Table of Contents in Word or Docs