

REVIEW

***The challenge of
nonlinear reading***

*REGIMES OF VISIBILITY IN MAGAZINES: A MULTIFOCAL ANALYSIS OF
COMMUNICATION AGREEMENTS BY THE PRINT MEDIA RESEARCH GROUP
OF THE PONTIFICAL CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO – PUC*

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Multimedia as a disseminator of knowledge

Academic works in multimedia format are not very common, although the resource of joining text, video and audio has been available for over a decade. I believe there are at least three reasons for this, namely:

1. Operational difficulties and costs: a multimedia is very different from an unadorned academic work. It requires a team, often with numerous members, which comprises technicians from several areas and uses resources that, albeit increasingly accessible, are still not always easily available. Collecting, editing and programming the interface requires many hours of work and complex coordination. From the standpoint of an intellectual production marked by the need for short-term results, carrying out an enterprise of such magnitude is undoubtedly daunting for most researchers.

2. Conservatism of the academic area: the university is accustomed to associating its work with the printed word. eBooks and electronic journals are gradually gaining space and respectability, but the audiovisual medium still seems to be linked to entertainment rather than to knowledge production. Even the instances of regulation and control of the academic institutional model often encounter difficulties in evaluating and validating that which steers away from the conventional format of printed text (to the delight and profit of private publishing companies).

3. Reading habits: every type of support requires learning its “grammar.” Even cinema, with its ability to simulate the real, required the formation of audiences, which gradually became accustomed to the language of the cuts, the plans and the sequences. The “reading” of a

multimedia is always a new experience since, although it uses certain conventions with which any user of computer interfaces is already familiar, it always seeks a more or less particular esthetic achievement.

The implicit risk in multimedia is that learning the form (programming and esthetics) ends up overshadowing or hindering the shared construction of meanings. Much time is spent learning “how the thing works” and, in this interval, the content falls to a secondary cognitive plane. Even the writing of a review (such as this one) makes it imperative to describe certain modes of functioning and to list the available technical resources, as well as to use the resources and aspects involved in browsability, in detriment to the critical analysis of the concepts and the research methodology employed.

However, the fact is that, having overcome these challenges, the result of an academic work in multimedia may be both interesting and challenging. It is another form of proposing the dissemination and circulation of produced knowledge, which is, *per se*, a questioning about knowledge itself and its conventions.

Regimes of visibility in (multi)media

From this stems the feeling of strangeness produced by the work of the Print Media Research Group of PUC/SP: the multimedia entitled *Regimes of visibility in magazines: a multifocal analysis of communication agreements*. The first impression is that the nonlinearity of the work hinders its reading. A longer time for learning and immersion is needed to become acquainted with the interface and to be able to explore it more effectively. Although one perceives the analytical density of the material right from the very beginning, some effort is required in browsing for it to become increasingly transparent and for one to finally discover that which is stated and written.

Coordinated by José Luiz Aidar Prado, the group proposes to study no less than 28 titles of magazines in circulation in Brazil, analyzing the regimes of visibility and the communication agreements that are established between the publications and their readers. “Regimes of visibility” are understood as forms of organizing the construction of meanings, building figures and themes from preconceived productive logics. From the regimes of visibility stem the “communication agreements,” which are conceived as tacit agreements between enunciator and recipient of the enunciation, whose purpose is to enable the common construction of meaning. The object of analysis was the way in which the publications propose specific conceptions concerning the “body” and

“success” in four fields, to wit: a) fashion and beauty; b) health and well-being; c) sexuality and sociability; and d) work and leisure.

The cornerstone concept of the enterprise lies in the repertoire of Discourse Analysis (DA), updated by authors such as Laclau and Mouffe. The conceptual setting is given by the theories of post-modernity, particularly those of a post-Marxist nature, emphasizing the transformations that have occurred in the mode of capitalist production since the mid-20th century.

The wealth of possibilities for nonlinear reading is exploited by the presence of hyperlinks, which connect contents related to each theme, independently of their support. The texts open video windows, the photos lead to texts and everything is interconnected, offering the reader possibilities of new outlines, and hence of new chains of signification. Browsing is certainly not easy and sometimes the interface appears to lead to reading along undesired routes. For those who are used to the linear path of books, the browsing seems as complicated as a latest generation video game. However, an understanding is gradually gained and the paths consolidate into texts that, albeit open, enable the composition of concepts, analyses and ideas.

Simplifications and easy formulas should not be expected. From the conceptual standpoint, the team's work is dense and extensive. A search mechanism (based on predefined Keywords), an index with hyperlinks and a short list of annotations help reconstitute the entire work of conception and reflection, but the material requires considerable reading time by those interested. Even a concern with the offer of definitions of the concepts developed here should not be mistaken for exaggerated didacticism. There is a constant effort of dialogue with the authors cited and the conceptual grid is created from the point of view of the reader interested in interpreting sources rather than in approving them.

The stating of unambiguous truths should also not be expected, nor the assumed singularity that the presence of a single author would ensure. In the multimedia, the mixture of languages is complemented by the mixture of voices. The discourse of researchers (not only from the field of communication) overshadows that of journalists and other professionals directly related to the universe of the production of the magazines, in addition to the special participation of some readers.

There are, therefore, several levels of discourse and several points of view which do not always converge to a whole that proposes to be non-contradictory. The academic work is mixed with journalistic work and is entwined with it to produce a hybrid and inconstant discourse, mainly

from the formal standpoint: although captured on video, the “interviews” resemble academic text in their content. They are not purely “journalistic,” not even when the interviewees are not researchers or professors.

The result can be seen from two angles: at times, the academic discourse seems to comment on the statements of the interviewees “from the market” and at other moments, the reference to the magazines and their professionals seems to “illustrate” what the researchers say. It all depends on the path that is taken and the intentions of the reader.

One should also forget about formal bibliographic references along the lines of the ABNT standard. There are numerous references, but most of them are cited with no formalism whatsoever. Fortunately, the work includes a good bibliography that can serve as a source for delving deeper into the themes that are broached for those who continue to seek to build knowledge based on Gutenberg’s invention.

The result of the multimedia, therefore, is coherent and instigating. The work manages to see Brazilian magazines from a multifocal point of view, without precluding a consistent and relevant theorization. Moreover, it reveals the potential (and the difficulties) of working with the stringency of scientific texts in a format unlike that of books.

Necessary adjustments

From the formal standpoint, I believe that a few adjustments need to be made to improve future works:

a) In this version, the program used for the texts does not allow the copying of excerpts. This is good to prevent plagiarism, but bad for whoever wishes to use the material as a source for new works, since it means retyping everything that is considered interesting.

b) The search mechanism needs to be improved to allow searching in all the texts using Keywords chosen by the user, and not predetermined tags, as is the case in this version.

c) An (enormous) advantage of the digital format is that it allows for online distribution. The hypermedia is currently distributed physically on a DVD, which makes access to the material difficult. Distribution on the Internet (even if it involves downloading, since Internet providers that offer video streaming services are still relatively expensive) would be extremely welcome. The justification of the coordinator is that not all publishers release images for online circulation.

d) The multimedia runs only on proprietary operating systems (Windows and MAC/OS). It is not prepared for any LINUX environment, which is unjustifiable. Bill Gates thanks the users for their preference.

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