



AN INTRODUCTION TO VISUAL THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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The Changing Media Landscape

For better or worse, the media landscape isn't what it used to be. Yes indeed, times they are a changin'! Over the last fifteen or so years huge advances in the nature of digital technology have spawned a wide array of new media platforms, channels and delivery mechanisms through which you receive (and sometimes deliver) a staggering amount of content. This changing landscape provides you, both as a consumer and producer of media, with many exciting new options to consider when choosing how and from where you get your information. This newfound richness of options comes at a price, though. Exercising the many options you are now confronted with can sometimes be a bit more complicated than operating your television's remote control unit. This is true when you are acting solely as a media consumer but is of equal, if not greater, concern when you find yourself at the other end of the consumption spectrum, as a producer. Since the purpose of this book is ultimately to help future media professionals—like yourself—find their way through this potential morass, we'll focus most of our energy on your role as a producer.

If you're even somewhat up to speed with what today's media landscape looks like, you know that getting your daily measure of media, regardless of type or how it's delivered or even how it's produced, isn't as simple as it used to be. Sure, you can still turn on the tube, change a channel or two, and, just like you used to do, slip into autopilot mode while watching the evening newscast. However, if you want to engage with content of the new media type, then you've got to be willing to become more actively involved. This willingness on your part will reap you two great rewards: "more" and "now."

You arrive at the "more" through the simple fact that new media are ubiquitous. Content is everywhere and is provided to you through

myriad distribution channels. You have at your disposal a wide selection of media content. The World Wide Web alone presents you with a breadth of information that is far greater than even the most robust cable television services can provide. Your willingness to engage with new media as a means of obtaining information undoubtedly exposes you to a wider swath of more and better content.

To get to the “now,” you need only consider another simple truism of virtually all new media: It’s always available. The delivery of new media content isn’t relegated to a specific time of day or day of the week, as is the case with most traditional broadcast media such as television or radio programming. New media aren’t delivered to your home or office each day at a certain time—think newspapers—or each week or month—think magazines. New media are instead instantly available to you at all times of the day or night and they’re constantly updated. When a news story breaks, articles shows up on numerous Web sites only minutes after they’ve been written. As new developments to the story arise, the available content is updated on the fly. The same phenomenon definitely doesn’t happen with traditional print media and rarely does with broadcast media unless, of course, the particular news event is of such stupendous concern that there’s a need—and willingness—to break into regular programming.

Normally, with older forms of media, you’re forced to wait for the next day’s newspaper delivery or the evening news broadcast or your favorite radio show to access the same information that you can get twenty-four hours a day by visiting one of many new media resources.

Yes, media content—and the ways in which you use it and create it—is definitely changing. A large percentage of the content we

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consume has actually already changed quite a bit; the rate of that change is accelerating faster and faster. Technological innovations keep the new media landscape continually in flux. It really doesn’t take all that long for nascent technologies to lose the sheen of their

newness. Fresh platforms, software tools, and hardware devices arrive on the scene with alarming frequency making the job of defining exactly what the media landscape looks like today a difficult task, a moving target at best. Before attempting to do so, it’s important that you first take a closer look at what types of media currently

at your disposal are more or less the same as they've been historically, what's already changed, and what new forms will likely be available in the very near future.

Defining Old Media and New Media

We've reached a point in the developmental trajectory of the media industry that we can refer to media as being either "new media" or "old media" without getting into too much trouble. Old media are what you're accustomed to: television, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc. New media are most often associated with content that's accessible "online," which simply means that the information is available via a virtual network, the Internet being the most obvious. New media also represent a shift in the manner in which you go about digesting your daily allotment of media, and they define new roles that you play as a consumer and as a producer. (Before we delve any deeper, it's important to point out that even though technological advances

have provided many new options, old media are still around and are still of vital importance. They haven't disappeared and likely will not for decades, perhaps not ever.)

In the not too distant past, most media—both print and electronic forms—were delivered to you primarily in a definitively chronological format. You read newspapers, magazines, and books. You watched television, listened to the radio, and went to the movies. Most media of this type were designed—and often still are—to be consumed in a linear fashion, from beginning to end. Though it's not that hard to break the inherent structure of most linear media by simple actions such as flipping through a magazine from back to front or starting a DVD up in the middle of the film, the obvious fact is that the creators of this type of content intend to present information within a logical chronological structure. Yes, you clearly have the ability to break the chronological order of most old media content, but that's not what producers intend for you to do.

Today, though you still receive a significant portion of information from old media channels, it's also possible to keep up with the news, view educational programs, watch sit-coms, and listen to music by tapping into new platforms and delivery mechanisms that, in

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addition to providing a wide array of raw information, provide you with opportunities to interact directly with provided content. New media afford you the opportunity to engage with content in novel ways, ones you simply didn't have access to in the past. You can read a blog and leave comments in response to the writing, comments that are instantly accessible to all readers; you can play video games, either against another individual or against the computer itself; you can research virtually any topic using a Wiki and can contribute information to this type of Web-based resource about subjects in which you are knowledgeable; you can download podcasts to mobile devices and listen to them wherever and whenever you choose.

Given these examples and many others like them, it's not hard to see that recent technological advancements have changed

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the media world. These changes give you—consumer, user, or producer—many new possibilities to explore. The fact of the matter is that you now live in a world where direct interaction with the media that you encounter is not

only possible but is increasingly the norm. Intelligent, sophisticated and—perhaps surprisingly—often easy-to-use technology is part of your daily life. No matter where people are or what they are doing, the vast majority carry devices that are continuously connected. Take for example the simple cell phone. These mobile devices have evolved from existing simply as phones into miniature, portable computers (think iPhone!). And speaking of computers, whether at home or the office, you're more likely to use portable laptops instead of plunking down in front of one of their bulkier cousins, those desktop real estate-hogging workstations, commonly used by most of us not so long ago. It's not just size and portability that differentiate the majority of computers in use today from their recent ancestors. Most computers that are used today are linked together—as well as to servers, printers, and other digital devices—via wireless networks rather than wired connections. And it's not just that mobile devices and wireless connections keep you hyper-connected, you're also likely to be connecting with, working via, and collaborating through virtual devices that you have no physical relationship with at all. You're just as likely today to backup your important digital data online as you are to a dedicated device that is physically attached to your computer. You're able to collaboratively create detailed text documents, spreadsheets, or visual presenta-

tions using “cloud” apps that run in a browser window rather than through software applications that are installed on the hard disk of your computer.

As noted earlier, the times they are a changin’! We’ve actually made great leaps from the earlier days of the digital media revolution where issues of convergence were of principal concern. That was the early era of the digital revolution when the shift from old media to new media was more painfully apparent. During those days, media producers were largely concerned with thinking about ways that new technology would allow them to distribute content of multiple types via multiple channels at the same time. The Web afforded content producers the ability to offer a wide variety of media forms—print, photography, video, animation, graphics, etc.—in one package and deliver it to the intended audience on a variety of platforms, the World Wide Web at the time was the most obvious.

That’s pretty much what happened. As the Internet rose to become a dominant player within the plethora of media options available, producers found ways to leverage the technology toward delivering more content. A headline story appearing in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* might be relegated to two, maybe three photos at most, but the Web-based version of the same story might contain fifteen to twenty. Information graphics were no longer fixed in static formats but could be animated or presented in the form of a step-by-step slide show of the relevant data.

Today, we’ve moved past the point where convergence is the dominant concern. Convergence is more or less assumed at this point; it’s simply part of the medium. Consumers now find themselves immersed in a more mature and sophisticated media landscape. Relevant technologies, and their uses, have matured. Of course, digital is still the name of the game, but the possibilities have multiplied; the potential for interactivity is greater than ever before. Users have become the great contributors of much of the Web’s content in stark contrast to the role of simple consumer that most were relegated to not long ago. The popular YouTube Web portal alone illustrates this point. Social media platforms and blogs provide audiences with the means to stay connected and to contribute content. Data-driven content management systems, the backbone on which many of the most information-rich Web sites are now built,

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allow content authors a way to distribute information without needing to understand the technical intricacies of Web development. “Web 2.0,” a term that generally refers to Web-based applications and platforms, makes it easy for users to collaborate, share, contribute, and author their own content, and is responsible for decentralizing the locus of content available to consumers like you.

Whether you realize it or not, you’ve picked a thrilling time to learn about digital content production. Technology is evolving at a break-neck pace which, more often than not, is creating a great amount of potential for you as a content producer. You now have the opportunity to produce content for your client or employer—or for yourself for that matter—and disseminate that information to a very broad audience. You have much greater control over the entire process. You might choose to be a writer, a photographer, a designer, or a filmmaker; in all actuality, the professional world that you’re

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about to enter will probably ask you to be all of these and more. You’re also preparing to enter the digital media profession at a daunting time, one full of new technologies and the complexities they entail. The career you pursue will be both exciting and complex.

Technology will in many ways define the choices that you make and the directions you take. Though it will be challenging, it’s an exciting time to begin a career in visual communication, one rife with opportunities for you to exploit.

How Are They Different?

Pretty amazing stuff, don’t you think? As you dig a bit deeper into the topics at the core of this book—ones that will prepare you to become a producer of sophisticated digital media—you need to accomplish two objectives: 1) You need to understand the place in which you find yourself presently situated within the overall media landscape, and 2) You need to realize what it is that you’re either actively doing or that you have the potential to be doing with all of this digital media.

To set the stage for the chapters that await, let’s address the question of what you need to know to become a savvy producer of non-linear, bi-directional, interactive content. Before you begin to figure out the major differences between old media and new media,