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## Visual Communication and the Digital Turn

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## Visual Communication and the Digital Turn

Part of the journal section “Forum: The Digital Turn: A Roundtable”

Bettina Fabos, “Visual Communication and the Digital Turn?”

I am very excited about the Digital Turn on multiple levels as a way of expressing ideas in visual form and making them more accessible and finding different ways to tell stories. As Joan Didion wrote, “we tell ourselves stories to live,” and I live and breathe that phrase.

For this presentation, my aim is to show you the new forms of communication that excite me to no end, and then talk about how our relationship with new media content producers has drastically changed. If you have never heard of *SnowFall*, an incredibly impressive piece of [interactive media](#) that the *New York Times* produced in 2012, please allow me to show it to you. As you can see, as I am scrolling down all these cool things are happening and you are learning all these amazing things about the mountain. You are reading while somebody is skiing by you. It’s just an extraordinary example of this new kind of technique called “parallax scrolling; and this piece “Snowfall” made such an impact that “snowfall” has become a verb among multimedia news producers, as in ‘shall we “snowfall” this story?’; perhaps now so many people are “snowfalling” now that the technique will soon wear itself out.

We are already looking for what’s new on the horizon in multimedia narratives. One example is another *New York Times* release: another amazing narrative called [“The Short History of the Sunrise.”](#) It’s basically poetry; it consists of five parts and the story of how skyscrapers developed is told through After Effects animation. I am completely excited about this kind of storytelling; it’s the kind of stuff I want my students to do. It presents information in a lyrical and captivating way.

But, as excited as I am about all these new ways to tell stories, we now have to access these narratives, and so much of our general media content through the Internet. And in my field of communication studies, as well as in legal and political disciplines, we are getting increasingly concerned about how companies that run the internet are dictating the way in which we read and write and changing our relationship with the text. No matter how excited I am about the new forms of visual communication, I want us to think about what main media technologies were in our lives ten years ago? It wasn’t YouTube. YouTube has only been around since 2005. And it wasn’t Facebook, and it wasn’t Twitter, and it wasn’t the iPhone. It’s amazing that all these things have been created less than a decade ago. The digital turn is very recent, and these incredible new devices were not even in our lives ten years ago. I like to show this picture (insert picture) because it’s from 1954 and shows a scientist working on a kind of futuristic idea of media convergence. He even added a steering wheel, which is my favorite part.

The digital turn has to do with media convergence, and we use this term in communication studies to mean two different things. First, media convergence is the convergence of devices. Do they do more than one thing? Do you find yourself answering email and watching your favorite movie at the end of the day? Do your smart phones do more than one thing? The answer is yes.

The second kind is the media convergence is the convergence of content. Radio, TV, movies--all these things used to be separate things. We used to talk about them separately. They influenced each other, for example, when a book would wind up as a script for a movie, or when a TV show would be adapted from a radio show. But now we are surrounded by converged content. We can listen to the radio through the internet. We read a newspaper on an iPad. We can access all media through one incredible network.

And now there are different media companies that are involved and getting increasingly powerful. I have been updating this chart in the textbook I co-author called "Media & Culture" for 10 years, and every year I have to look up the latest data. These companies, which started off as search engine and computer hardware and software companies, are now surpassing Comcast, Direct TV, and Disney, the top media companies for years. Boom! Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, and Google are all there. They all have tablets, they all sell software, and they all are making media content. They are owning what we read and write.

And now we have to consider "clouds," because every one of these companies wants us to upload all of our content on their cloud so we can access it on all of their devices. Because of this, we don't really own our own media content anymore; we just sort of point and release our data in these "clouds," and trust our data with these companies. We have to make decisions: are we going to be an Apple person for life? Are we going to be an Amazon person? Is all of our content going to be in one place? Will we continue buying from the same place? How can we switch if we ever decide to do so? In the age of the digital turn, there is a war going on between these companies, who are desperately trying and get us to commit through their devices. Every device has incredible options: and yet by committing we are also giving up a lot of our own independence we enjoyed with our media.

Earlier I asked you about our relationship with traditional media companies and how that has changed. On some levels the change has been really good. It has broken up the television's advertising system, especially when it comes to politics. There are now different ways to gain political prominence rather than just television advertising. It's not about who has the most money for political TV ads anymore. We have immediate access to more content than ever before. It's amazing.

But on the other hand we don't own our content anymore, and even more significantly, we don't own ourselves. With the digital turn, with the seeming necessity of devoting our lives to the cloud, we, ourselves, have become digital commodities. In the old media days I would buy a book and I would give it to Jim, and he would make Nick read it. No one ever knew who was reading what. It was a product that was a stand-alone product, there was no data collection going on. But with digital media, in order to buy products we have to register. In registering we get tracked. All these digital accounts make it easy to track us. I don't think we completely understand the implications of all this yet. For example, how does Netflix know exactly where we stop watching our favorite series? While it is convenient, it's a big invasion of privacy. I want to point out that each digital company wants to bring us all this digital content, but once we become dedicated users, we also become the property of these companies. In gaining convenience, we lose privacy. Companies keep track of what we might

download, what we end up downloading, the speed in which we are consuming content, the list goes on and on. Google and Apple are also tracking our emails and are sending these emails back to their databases so they can sell us more content. Everything we upload to the cloud is tracked as well.

Maybe you have heard of CourseSmart, which is a textbook company that facilitates online textbooks. Now we can make our students buy a CourseSmart textbook and use it to spy on our students. We can find out what they are reading, highlighting, writing notes on, and we can know when they are skipping pages and not bothering to take notes. We can also tell if they haven't opened up the book at all. Advocates describe CourseSmart as being a bit like Big Brother, but with a good intent. This is in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, saying that media is creeping into every aspect of students' life. (Insert link) I find this terribly creepy.

Finally, digital advertising in our favorite media content is right around the corner. It is so easy to put product placement and ads into different platforms of technology that it's only a matter of time—Kindle already has a cheaper addition that inserts ads into books. The scariest part is to think about this: when will all this commodification start changing the content? How will the writing of advertisements change based on the digital platforms? We will no longer be writing to write, but writing to please the commercial system?

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#### Question from Associate Dean Coon-

Bettina, it's always been the case that writers who want to be seen have to cater to what is popular, fundable, and what a publisher will publish; so in that case it is not any different. It just might be more immediate. I don't know if it will be that different; that aspect of things hasn't changed. Writing for a living has always been commercial.

#### Response from Dr. Fabos-

A lot of it is how television is so corrupted by product placement. Now you don't write a script until you know which products will align with the script. The same goes for movies. They are heavily funded by product. It hasn't affected books to that point yet, but it is setting the groundwork. Commercials in the movie theatres are also very common. It is gradually chipping away. In fact, cable television used to be sold as commercial free. But now, cable has more commercials than you can possibly imagine and it's full of product placement.



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