Creative Features of the Interplay of New and Old Media in News Websites

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates four attributes in the interplay of new and old media in contemporary news websites to discuss the outcomes and narrative entanglements these features generate. These attributes, understood through the observation of online news websites, are hierarchy, sequence, consistency and space-time. The article is contextualized within the field of existing literature, which briefly describes the current situation of online news layout design and the development of remediation. The results provoke further discussions about the feature of space-time as it invokes new ways to consider our engagements with the media.

INTRODUCTION
When considering questions of digital culture, the Web pleases us in its diverse and overwhelming dynamism and instability, and simultaneously disappoints us with its perfect reflection of impermanence and openness (Wardrip-Fruin, 1999, p. 353). Rather than assuming a caustic perspective, however, we believe that the revolutions brought by digital reading are much more dramatic and influential than imagined. According to Bolter and Grusin (1999), the logic of immediacy has manifested itself since Renaissance to the present day. Having emerged from and within cultural contexts, new digital media are refashioning other media in the process of remediation. We can definitely recognize some threads of immediacy throughout the historical trajectory of remediation. For instance, we have witnessed the locus of media changing, whether they are two-dimensional immersive images (painting, photography, film), or three-dimensional (sculpture). Yet whatever modality the medium carries, the desire to realize reality in our creations has never changed. Amongst contemporary media, digital graphics have become tremendously popular and attractive, and heralds a new cultural definition of technological development. Children younger than three years have already started to slide fingers to unlock our smartphones, thus indicating the acceleration of the new era of digital reading.

Virtual worlds provide us with not only virtual experiences but also “infinite reproducibility”, “lossless archiving” and “continual versioning”, as Wardrip-Fruin describes the characteristics of Web culture (1999). The traditional method of distributing news according to the fixed scheduling of publishing newspapers has become outdated, as it can no longer meet people’s needs to read everywhere at any time. In our visual experiences of news websites, the graphic space is continuous and full of objects, filling a viewer’s field of vision without rupture. As to the content of news websites, they contribute much more space to advertisements through applying many dynamic and flashing effects to gain more attention from audiences. Observing digital news reveals opportunities for the everlasting spread of new information and time-efficiency, yet such visible phenomena in news websites also contribute to the disorder of visual structure. Visual structure here refers to the visual layout of a page, rather than its underlying digital programming or engineering, as any of these disciplines is beyond the discussion of this article. With this conception of visual disorder in mind, we can see that focus on efficiency, credibility, and modernity has been distracted by the openness and disorganization of the whole layout in news websites. Deuze (2006) defines such a distraction as “dead”, even a “zombie institution”.

It is assumed that digital networked technology of electronic document storage eliminates the restrictions of terrain that limit space, and simultaneously keeps the door open to unlimited periods or spaces for archiving while continually offering the most current information for viewers. Yet we have also witnessed the failure of “re-embedding” (Jensen, 2002) in relation to distant others, issues, and arenas. Therefore, common criticism of the modern news website does not exclusively center on the disorganized layout. In this vein, the new cultural definition of media technology is fragmentary.

Readers are unsatisfied with today’s news websites, which directly copy elements (news, text, pictures) from printed newspapers, by reduplicating similar columns’ ideas or comments, and by applying similar visual systems as other news websites. Recent years have seen the failure of news websites to exploit the unique characteristics of the medium. Such critiques come mostly from design practitioners, like graphic and UI designers, who have trained themselves to have an uncommon eye for detail. Yet Manovich (2001) argues that when we view a random Web page from the late 1990s, we can all see a definite graphical resemblance to magazine layouts from the same decade. The same is true for today’s news websites that current news websites are a reduplication of printed newspapers. Despite the possibilities of Web design, the page remains dominated by text – headlines, hyperlinks, and blocks of copy, a few visual elements squeezing the texts – photographs, graphics, and advertisements. If we want to understand the effects of changing media and its resulting effects on culture as a whole, we must not stop our analysis at this stage. Practice determines the consumer’s needs, and consumer’s needs, cyclically, determine the orientation of practice. There is no reason to privilege the copying of print media styles as
the main approach for the design of news websites and media production.

This article presents four creative features of the interplay of new and old media in news websites: hierarchy, sequence, consistency, and space-time. Yet our purpose is not merely to describe every detail of these characteristics, but to arouse further discussions of the meaning these features convey in the context of changes in news websites and the networks their development created.

INTERPRETATION OF THE INTERPLAY OF NEW AND OLD MEDIA

Wertsch (1998) proposes mediated action to be the pervasive factor in the agglutination of agent (subject/person) and agency (instrument/meditational means/cultural tools). Today, humans can not only reinterpret their perceptions of the world, but also identify more institutional norms about the tools we have used and the impact they have had in cultural and historical contexts.

Consider written records as an example. James H. Breasted (1972) suggested that the invention of the script and a functional system of writing and archiving had a greater influence on the development of the human race than any other mental advance in human history. With contemporary technological developments, however, it has become customary today to welcome digitalization as a necessity of life. This change leads to historian Daniel Boorstin's comment, "Our society is particularly ingenious at thinking up alternatives to the book" (1983).

Television, film, computer graphics, digital photography, and virtual game spaces all work as a part of the mediation of virtual reality, which is constituted by technological development, particularly its cultural dimensions. Yet we must now conceive the notion of media anew for an age when there is no alternative to technological mediation in communication. Bolter and Grusin offer a simple definition, "a medium is that which remediates" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 65). It is quite difficult to depict in detail how the genealogy of medium develops, but it is important to keep in mind that all media serve to realize reality. A peculiar aspect of the modern age is that newer technologies may enter our social and economic culture to remediate the older ones almost out of existence. To interrogate and understand visual production in the modern news website, it is essential to conceive of media as mapped points in history and narratives within a network. A common criticism of online journalism centers on its failure to account for the unique characteristics of the new medium, regardless of its questionable credibility and reduction in cost.

Looking at the media and approaches that news practitioners use, the various ways designers engage in their design practices is of central significance. This dynamism has the unique capability for interplay with reality and the imagination. For designers, journalists, and readers, the process of posting news in websites is both a mental reflection and a professional convention, spanning the purposes of education, research, and practice. Pallasmaa regards the essence of architectural space as determined by a design practitioner, while considering imagination attached to the specific creative capacity of the designer but primarily as the foundation of mental existence itself, as well as the processor of stimuli and information (Pallasmaa, 2001, p. 22).

We suggest grounding the interpretation of the interplay of new and old mediums in news website on the following considerations. In a work of online news, the shifts reflected in the digital platform intensify the encounter of ourselves and our own being-in-the-world through cognizing the reality which those shifts realize. Following connections we have already established in the interplay of new and old media, we suggest that a given medium possesses numerous potentials both from philosophical and practical viewpoints. We must account for in the above four attributes of online news comprehending the development of technologies and the constitution of the existing cultural interface.

CHRACTERIZATION IN NEWS WEBSITE

The business of online journalism only began at the end of 1990s. As the concept of experience and interactivity in online reading emerged and developed, online newspaper publishers realized how difficult it would be to build a brand identity by only copying the same model of news distribution from the printed newspapers. As media critic Howard Kurtz notes, the following common phenomenon occurs in online news websites:

As you travel around the country, it's hard to tell where you are by reading the local papers. They all carry the same wire stories, with the same syndicated columns. When there were three or four newspapers serving each city, they had distinct personalities – eccentric or irascible, crusading or corny. Now most of them look like they're put out by the same faceless market research folks. Once you get beyond the dozen or so top markets, there are hundreds of breathtakingly mediocre newspapers out there. The growth of chains has stamped hundreds of one-newspaper towns with a certain ethos – what Jack Germond calls "corporate journalism" – that is not quite awful, but awfully boring. (Kurtz, 1993, p. 362)

With the contemporary era of information explosion, it is an urgent priority to create a particular style to stand out from the "hundreds of breathtakingly mediocre newspapers". Online news websites are a disparate lot: they might be considered highly credible or barely trustworthy; targeted to a particular readership or written for a global audience, or with multiple sections open to a variety of readers. Setting up a special visual layout for online newspapers could be one solution for creating a particular style, since visual marks have been a method of identification for centuries (Meggs & Purvis, 2012, p. 412). In the following, four creative features from a perspective of layout design, can constitute these visual marks when applied to a news website.

When discussing the visual hierarchy of layout design, the grid is the structure that bounds the whole design
together. Conforming to a grid keeps the placement of text and images in an orderly position.

These invisible threads of visual hierarchy are frequently applied in the layout of newspapers to control readers’ attention. For instance, a website’s design raises a readers’ caution when its visual hierarchy shifts attention from the news to its advertisements. According to Victor Papanek, “Design is the conscious effort to impose a meaningful order”. Today, computerized and digitalized techniques produce hierarchic structure almost automatically. In this vein, it is the visual designer and editor’s responsibility to balance and replicate the distinct character of a newspaper through an on-screen appearance.

If a complex hierarchy of units (advertising banner, news sections, columns, photos and other components) defines the horizontal axis of reading order, then sequences of hyperlinks to different web pages constitute the vertical axis of reading a story. Paivio assumed that smaller units are organized into larger units in a sequential or successive fashion (Paivio, 1986, p. 61). The visual hierarchy guides reading, while the sequence is an interrelation designed within the context of the site to facilitate news navigation, helping readers to work out what the most interesting news/item/thing is.

A good publication is detail-oriented, which requires a coherent experience from the audience. One of a visual designer’s jobs is to maintain the consistency of the entire design by keeping a clean, clear, and singular visual language. Randomly arranged elements may distract readers’ attention and cause a collapse of eye tracking in the reading experience. A news website’s layout requires a dynamic pattern of visual consistency to perform a comfortable ratio among each unit of news columns, pictures, and sections. Successfully achieving consistency is not particularly easy, but needs a careful purpose of editing in mind.

When a new medium develops, it is little more than a marker indicating some profound changes around the bend. Bolter and Grusin (1999) conceive of newer media as “repurposing” older ones in a process of remediation. In this sense, online news is the remediation of printed newspapers. It is with this dynamic in mind that the transfer from the traditional printed news to online news has constituted the unique space-time embodiment of digital journalism. When we consider a news website as a special place for events to happen (Pink 2011), it may be easier for us to acknowledge the positioning of narratives and the emplacement of design practitioners. Such an investigation is ultimately beneficial to design practices in return.

**DISCUSSION: A WAY FORWARD**

We have discussed some characteristics of news websites from our observations and studies, focusing not so much on their content as on what is unique when moving news from the medium of the printed newspaper to digital platforms. Only when we understand the special features of new media can we use full means of representation now available to present news and make coherent connections throughout the layout design in news website.

With regard to the contemporary wisdom of cultural, economic, moral, and aesthetic analysis, Silverstone’s *Why study the Media* (1999), synthesizes his conceptions of the media process, knowledge, and technology, organized around the themes of “play”, “performance”, and “consumption”. On this reading, this article’s interpretation is far from a complete understanding of the interplay of new and old media in news websites; its point is to lead to the production and reproduction of inalienably discursive and dependent media through the human experience of mediation. Therefore, the development of remediation constitutes a considerable impact on human life.

Applying new media to people’s digital reading experiences of online news means that older and newer media can simultaneously coexist. This is because, at this intermediate stage of development from printing to online news, traditional reading is still unbeatable to some extent, due to the low satisfaction with many aspects of digital news such as its disordered layout and credibility problems. Accordingly, how can we use our observations of the four creative features to make both reading experiences more immersive?

My interest is to construct a balance between new and old media that invokes the feeling of movement in new ways. When we situate news contents in terms of their outcome and simultaneously as part of the collective place of the whole news website, we conceptualize an intricate series of intertwined processes as two subjects touch, be they readers and journalists, designers and editors, readers and editors, and designers and journalists. In this sense, it seems that a news website is constituted by every effort from a collective group, as in Pink’s (2011) concept of “place”. If a news website is created through collective inputs of humans, skills, discourses, and other technologies and processes, then how can we better understand its interplay of new and old media? What role does each character take in the process? As a preliminary answer to these questions, various processes interact with the attribute of space-time to complement it, including sensory perception, the movement of people and materials, a constantly changing digital environment, and every day practices.

I argue that the transformation from printing to online news brings new features in design discipline, and an attendant necessity to rethink the design process. These suggestions would require a paradigm shift, a different way of viewing the visual structure of news website from a design perspective. Design practices would become more thoughtful and draw on social semiotics to include associated domains, while still respecting features of old media practices. Doing so will lead to a greater maturity of the design field, which is already more open for readers’ reflection and more critical for online news to become more convenient, commercial, and conventional in nature.

This article has considered the creative features in the interplay of new and old media in news website design. Of the four design characteristics of hierarchy, sequence, consistency and space-time, the role of the fourth remains hazy, as the former three are already skillfully applied in news website design. In reviewing the value of aesthetics in news website and observation in online news designs, I hold that design is the inevitable part of combining the properties both of new and old mediums. Regardless of the former three features (hierarchy, sequence and
consistency), visual designers tend to connect the attribute of space-time with their current design practices in news websites. As well, I suggest that the field could be extended to include visualization thinking created from collective inputs, as well as design practitioners that explore and innovate the visual design space.

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