

The Role and Relevance of Typography in Screen-Based Media

AN OVERVIEW REPORT

A survey into the attitudes and beliefs of Graphic
and New Media design practitioners and educators.

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Centre for Design Research
Northumbria University
Squires Building
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 8ST
United Kingdom

Email: joyce.yee@northumbria.ac.uk

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INTRODUCTION

The medium which graphic designers have been trained for has increasingly moved from purely print-based to screen-based media in the last decade. The digital revolution has not only changed the way designers work but also the way they design and communicate their message to the audience. The 'democratising' of typography has created an environment where anyone with the appropriate software is able to create his or her own design personally. This situation has further fragmented the way typography is understood and applied.

The introduction of screen-based media has, on one hand, created more possibilities for the application of typography, but on the other, created more confusion and ignorance about its application. The rules and history of typography are ignored in favour of novelty and expression. Designers are increasingly expected to be proficient in both print and screen. How would future designers gain an understanding of typography for both seemingly different media? Is there a gulf between the views of practitioners and educators on the future role of typography in screen-based media? Would graphic designers trained in print find it more difficult to adjust to the demands of the new medium? Finding answers to these questions is part of the development of a PhD research study. It looks at the development of an alternative practice-led framework for the application of typography in screen-based media.

PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY

The purpose of this survey is to obtain a clearer understanding of issues held by design practitioners and educators towards the application and role of typography in screen-based media. The by-product of this survey will also serve to identify potential collaborators or reviewers who might be interested to participate in the research project in the future. Findings from this survey will be used to inform the development of an alternate framework for the application of typography in screen-based media. Additionally, the findings will help to design and structure the next stage of research, which will involve one-to-one interviews.

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METHODOLOGY

Sample

The selection of the respondents was based on a 'judgement sample' as opposed to a random selection of participants. The sample was selected from 3 countries, which were the United Kingdom, the United States of America and The Netherlands. The sample consisted of Graphic and New Media design practitioners and educators.

Respondents

Participants were contacted through email by the researcher and asked to fill in an online questionnaire. A total of 182 questionnaires were completed and returned to the researcher. This represents a return rate of 26.6%.

The survey asked respondents to rate what professional design activities they were involved in. If the respondents answered that they spent more than 50% of their time in a design practice, they would be classed as a practitioner. Table 1 shows the percentage of the respondent groups, while Table 2 shows the breakdown of the principal occupation of respondents. The 'others' occupations indicated in Table 2 consisted of Typographers, Web Developers, Design Writers and Design Researchers.

| RESPONDENT GROUPS | % of Respondents |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Practitioners | 63.5 |
| Educators | 25.0 |
| Practitioner and Educators (equal) | 6.5 |
| Others | 5.0 |

Table 1: Breakdown of Practitioners & Educators

| PRINCIPAL OCCUPATION | % of Respondents |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| Graphic Designer (GD) | 29.5 |
| New Media Designer (NM) | 27.5 |
| GD & NM (equal) | 2.0 |
| Others | 41.0 |

Table 2: Breakdown of Graphic Designers & New Media Designers

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KEY FINDINGS

1. Principles of typography are still crucial and relevant

There is a general acknowledgement and awareness that screen-based media brings with it its own nature, characteristics, constraints and freedom. However, most respondents view that print-derived knowledge, history, tradition and skills of typography are still crucial to the understanding and development of any type of typography. While the profession of typography may be shaped by the printing technology, ultimately the role and function of typography remains unchanged, which is to communicate a message. In particular, the issues of legibility and readability still remain important factors for designers when learning and applying type in any medium.

2. Type remains the main tool of communication

There was not such strong support for type becoming a more visual or interactive element as first predicted. This result was a little surprising considering that it was assumed that designers are always eager to experiment and be more expressive in a medium thought to be less constraining than print. Perhaps it is a reaction towards past mis-usages of screen-based type by early pioneers of the New Media, who would not necessarily have fundamental typographic training. The medium is entering a consolidating phase where the early excitement of endless possibilities has matured to one which emphasizes the communicative function of typography. Instead of focusing on the visual and expressive quality of type, designers and educators are going back to the basic principles of typographic design.

3. A typographic education model that is independent of its medium

The majority of respondents agreed that although current New Media design programmes place less emphasis on the knowledge and history of typography, they were undecided if there should be a separate curriculum developed specifically for screen-based type. However, judging from their responses from other sections of the questionnaire, it was clear that a majority would be in favour of a typographic education which begins by teaching the fundamentals and history of type before moving on to the specific characteristics and limitations of different mediums.

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KEY FINDINGS

4. There is no philosophical divide between the four main sample groups

Contrary to what the researcher initially hypothesized, there is no marked difference in opinion between practitioners and educators; and between Graphic and New Media designers. Perhaps this is because a majority of design educators are still practitioners, and thus not far removed from issues affecting the practice of New Media. It is common for designers to practice in both print and screen media. These two points may explain the more homogenous responses collected in this survey. It also provides an interesting insight into the relationship between practice and education in the visual communication field. It suggests a close relationship between the world of the design profession and design education; and dispels a common belief that the field of design education is disconnected to the changing nature of the design profession.

5. An 'extended' rather than an 'alternative' framework

There was wide support towards the development of an alternative framework for screen-based typography. The most common view was that it should not be dependent on the medium of transmission, focusing first on the fundamentals of typographic knowledge, skills and function. Typography is still the primary means of communication. Designers should also take a wider, more multi-disciplinary approach to New Media in general. Subjects such as film, communication, information and usability studies should be considered important elements towards the development of new knowledge for screen-based media. Lessons learnt in print should not be forgotten but rather applied sensibly and appropriately in a manner that suits the purpose of its message as well as the medium it is in. Creating a balance of appropriated existing knowledge with new knowledge will be the challenge faced in the development of the framework. Rather than an 'alternative' framework, perhaps it is better to address it as an 'extended' framework in which existing knowledge needs to be appropriated and adapted to the context of screen-based type application.

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NEXT STEPS

The study has, at this stage, focused on collecting views and opinions about the current role and relevance of typographic knowledge from the perspective of designers and educators in print and screen-based media.

What can other disciplines bring to screen-based typography?

Findings from the survey have suggested that designers are still thinking and applying typography for screen using a print model. This research posits that the re-construction of an alternative typographic framework needs the influence and knowledge gained through disciplines, which reflect the essential nature of screen-based media. Looking at related disciplines such as New Media art and Hypertext Theory will complement and add to the knowledge needed to develop a comprehensive framework for screen-based typography. The next step of the research is to conduct one-to-one interviews with professionals from a range of cross-disciplinary fields.

Cultural differences

The sample surveyed was limited to 3 main countries, which were the United Kingdom, the United States of America and The Netherlands. Generally speaking, it is a western model with a mature design industry. Comparative studies in other non-western countries, with a less-mature design industry may yield different results. It will also help researchers to determine if cultural differences would have an impact on issues facing screen-based typography.