

Exploring the Boundaries Between Visual Anthropology and Visual Communication Design Research

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Researchers and/or designers in visual anthropology and visual communication share the visual aspect or visual study as a common interest. However, their views are different. Visual anthropologists consider the social impact and/or meaning of the visual communication within a culture. They are also interested in ways to present anthropological data by means of visual techniques. Visual communication design researchers create visual communication, and are interested in how participants respond to visual matter in order to enhance the human experience. In a way, they are (partly) producing the visual culture visual anthropologists are reflecting upon.

In order to find out how and whether such disciplinary exploration might be fruitful, we were assigned three articles from *Visual Anthropology Review* within the category "Deaf Visual Culture." As typographic legibility researchers within READSEARCH this felt familiar, since we have conducted several design studies (published and in preparation)—more specifically, practical legibility research—for the deaf and hard of hearing community.

As design researchers in legibility studies, we do see possibilities to build bridges among the disciplines of visual anthropology and visual communication. A remarkable resemblance between the different fields of study within a deaf culture, in our eyes, is the approach of trying to capture legibility/illegibility within language (spoken, signed, and/or written) by means of visual properties. Therefore, we would like to highlight differences and similarities between anthropology versus visual communication, drawing conclusions about why both disciplines should keep a close eye on each other. Implementing insights into their research practices and/or visual communication design artifacts may open horizons within innovative or even collaborative research projects. Both fields, visual anthropology and visual communication, are trying to contribute to a specific common concern in deaf education—namely, the educational context of language practice.

Deaf Visual Culture in

visual anthropology studies

Deaf Visual Culture is understood as a broad understanding of the social impact and/or meaning of a diversity of ways among the Deaf to communicate visually within specific contexts. Sign language (as their native language) seems to form a core element in their visual culture in order to explore dynamic interactions concerning a wide range of topics in language practices in social and educational contexts. Studies done by visual anthropologists contribute to this knowledge of the visual language by studying

the communicative issues of the visual matter that shape, in an important way, the Deaf Visual Culture and values of Deaf visual tradition.

According to Laksmi (1999–2000, p. 6), in a visual anthropology milieu, it is important to “record what people actually do, rather than what they think they do and say they do.” Methods for visualizing social practices for analysis are diverse: collecting quantitative images/videos/art, practicing (long-term) observations, and/or a form of elicitation sessions. Some of these methods trigger a participatory action research method. Every form of analysis of social practices that is made visible to reflect upon a deaf-centered perspective can serve as a platform to start dialogue on matter that before, seemed to be difficult to discuss with non-peers and even with peers (with the latter, we are referring to the article, “Reappropriation of gendered Irish Sign Language in one family,” by Barbara LeMaster, 1999–2000).

The attention of visual anthropological results, which are extracted from research into Deaf Visual Culture, focuses on what happens when visual connectivity is not understood—illegible—or even worse, avoided or shunned. In order to start up the dialogue evaluating a deaf experience, language confusion is, among other things, portrayed by visual anthropologists. This happens through documenting language produced during interactions within Deaf Visual Culture (e.g., deaf art, sex-segregated sign language, deaf pedagogy) and within an overarching community of multiple language usages (e.g., deaf vs. hearing, signs vs. oral, gendered sign language). Moreover, this documentation provides visuals and visual analyses that may serve as communication tools toward a variety of audiences, holding the potential of serving social change.

Out of the received articles that we had to critically assess, we noticed that the main areas of interest and contributions in these studies lie in stressing the above-mentioned awareness of language confusion and/or the feeling of being misunderstood by a deaf individual or deaf community in a hearing society. Additionally, they contribute to the understanding of existing language barriers and the restrictions deaf people experience. Expressed differently: the importance of native sign language, not necessarily interlinked with written text and spoken language, is a communicative tool that stands for an ideal component of independence.

Differences between visual communication design research and visual anthropology in the context of Deaf Visual Culture: Opportunities for collaboration

Visual communication design research aims to understand how any community, determined by a given context, behaves toward a communicative artifact of visual matter and creates innovative solutions within the scope of visual communication that lead to improvements in the well-being of that community. In essence, visual communication design research provides an evidence-driven academic foundation that establishes the direction of the design decisions. Considering this, we postulate visual communication design research in the scope of action. Therefore, this kind of research is deeply embedded within action research. Through action research, design researchers achieve understanding in an iterative process that encompasses “a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting” (Yeo, 2014, p. 5). This dialogue between an action and critical reflection turns participants into active counterparts. This results in a design process *with* rather than a design process *for*. In this collaborative or participatory methodological approach to research, visual communication design researchers get involved in investigated matter, trying to come up with the most suitable solutions. Other than providing a platform for the self-expression of the Deaf, visual communication design research creates a space for innovation where Deaf communities may find new ways to interact with hearing and non-hearing peers that have never been imagined and applied before.

Visual anthropology in Deaf Visual Culture has proven to be an invaluable source that reveals many different realities that Deaf communities experience in their communication with peers and/or non-peers. Within the scope of visual communication, design research has focused its attention mostly on finding visual strategies that bring elements of non-written communication, such as sign language and prosody in oral speech, into written communication with the aim of helping Deaf readers gain a deeper understanding of the content by improving their communicative skills when interpreting and processing visual information.

One example within the context of visual communication design (action) research in Deaf communities is the ongoing typographic research carried out by READSEARCH (Hasselt University/PXL-MAD School of Arts, Belgium) where researchers are creating new tools (e.g., prosodic typefaces, typographic layouts) that bridge the gap between the monotone of the written text and prosodic variations from oral speech to provide a deeper understanding of the content when reading.

Conclusion

Establishing visual communication design research within the framework for action requires visual communication design researchers to be advocates for social—and environmental—responsibility. Visual communication shapes our visual world, bringing ideas into tangible realities that can be connected and articulated into new ones. Hence, within the context of Deaf Visual Culture, design researchers, having an interdisciplinary expertise and working method, contribute to the creation of alternatives that may enrich the communicative process and interaction among people with different hearing qualities.

The collaboration in Deaf Visual Culture between visual anthropologists and visual communication design researchers could open interesting and innovative paths for future research. It should also be mentioned that both disciplines should have designers as one of their audiences they are aiming to reach. Empirical information is needed to improve, in a designedly way, visual matters in any “reading” environment. The multiple communicative realities that Deaf communities represent within their visual culture, and which are displayed through the observation and analysis of participants in visual anthropology studies, can provide visual communication design researchers with insights/inspirational sources that would not have been considered otherwise. A deeper understanding of these multiple communicative realities enables designers to introduce more and different perspectives in their hypotheses and considerations during the decision-making process. Consequently, this collaboration could potentially contribute to the creation of innovative practices that lead to designing more inclusive models of interaction among people. Additionally, the interdisciplinary framework from visual communication design research could broaden the approach of visual anthropology to the possibilities for areas of visual communication in Deaf Visual Culture that may potentially be explored and examined.

References

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