

special  
issue

# communication futures



Visible Language

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the journal of visual communication research

april · 2023

## Visible Language

special  
issue

communication  
futures

the journal of  
visual communication  
research

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studying the potential  
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methods for improving  
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reading tools for  
students with dyslexia

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SPECIAL

ISSUE

PREFACE:

**a note on the cover design**

Inspired by the content of this issue, the outer cover was designed using a generative design script to translate the full text of each article into visual patterns. The back cover shows a higher fidelity line pattern, while the front cover shows a lower fidelity block pattern.

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For over 50 years, this journal has sought to create an environment for evidence-based discourse

on a wide range of topics related to visual communication. At times, this has meant a focus on specific aspects of typography and reading; at others, it has meant investigations into symbols and symbol systems. At still other times, it has meant a look into the cultural impact of visual communications, including the evolving technologies used for their production and use. As part of its mission to connect visual communication to empirical and theoretical issues in adjacent fields, the journal also occasionally invites or accepts requests for guest editors to produce an issue focused on a particular topic. This is one of those special issues.

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Myra Thiessen, Daphne Flynn, Leah Heiss, Rowan Page, Nyein Aung, and Indae Hwang are researchers in the Design Health Collab at Monash University, Australia. As an interdisciplinary team, the Design Health Collab explores a range of challenges related to the experience of healthcare, including developing models of care, systems for complex communication in health-related environments, and medical device design for improved care. Design Health Collab is a leading member of Future Healthcare, a Monash-led interdisciplinary co-design initiative at the intersection of university, healthcare, community, government, and industry that seeks to transform healthcare systems.

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Led by Thiessen, the Design Health Collab proposed a special issue of *Visible Language* focused on “Communication Futures.” The Call for Proposals invited articles that “explore how we might shape future communication, in form and structure, by considering the opportunities afforded to us by digital and technological networks.... Submissions may evaluate existing methods and systems for communication, report new experimental data, or evaluate the application for use of emerging technologies and communication platforms.”

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Special issues like this one create a platform for the journal to bring new voices, new topics, and new perspectives into the journal’s orbit. This includes broadening the journal’s network of authors, contributors, and readers. Of course, the academic integrity of the journal cannot be diminished in this process. While guest editors will typically invite new contributors—and, this is quite welcome!—the double-blind peer review is still used to ensure that each submission meets the standard of academic rigor.

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We are grateful to Thiessen and the team of guest editors, the contributing authors, and the many peer reviewers who donated their time and expertise to bring this special issue on “Communication Futures” to fruition. We hope you enjoy it, and maybe even learn something new.

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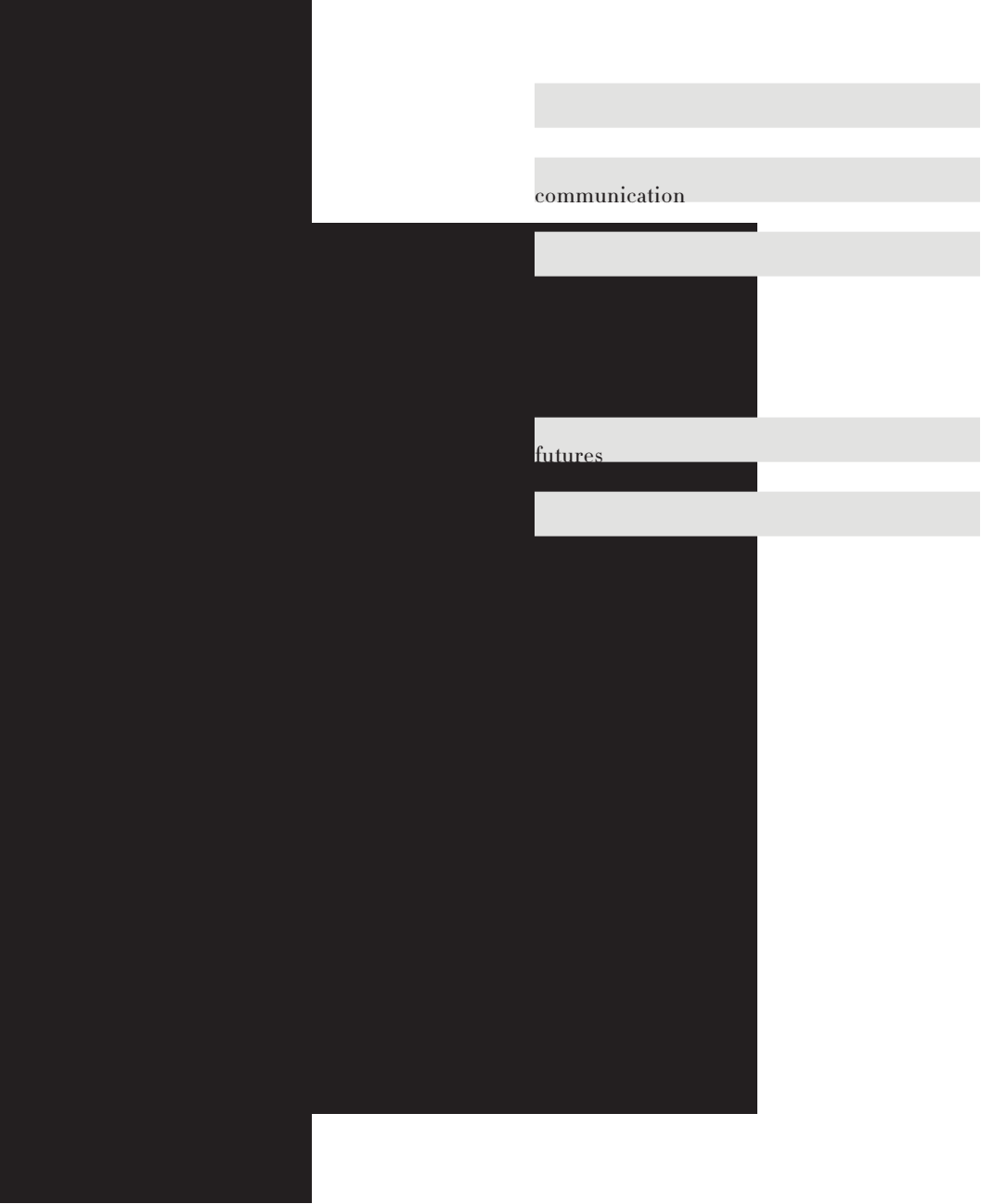
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S P E C I A L I S S U E

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## Introduction:

For this special issue, we aim to explore the changing landscape of communication and connection and asked questions about what constitutes communication and what role technologies have had in it, both positive and negative. We call the issue “Communication Futures” because we are deeply interested in what emerging technologies afford us and how they might continue to affect how we communicate, how we practice (communication) design, and our ability to connect globally, as well as more intimately, with those things immediately around us. We called for papers that explored how sectors like healthcare, transportation, and education are evolving and changing, assisted by technologies but also in the light of the time and place we find ourselves now—after COVID-19 and witnessing how it affected our way of living and communicating, immediately and profoundly. This issue is a collection of informed hypotheses, which was not what we expected or planned—but in hindsight, we are not so surprised. The contributing authors in this issue are exploring territories that are breaking new ground and recognize that that ground is also continuing to shift and change at a surprising rate. This issue is interested in how the ideas of communication and connection are evolving in the face of such rapid change, how it might be strengthened, and how we might be able to contribute to wide-scale systems change as a result.

As part of this special issue, we also had the opportunity to engage scholars in contemporary areas of design thinking and research in conversation about the future landscape, and also asked them what design is and is not doing well. We invited Yoko Akama<sup>1</sup>, a participatory design researcher, Meredith Davis<sup>2</sup>, emeritus professor of Graphic Design, and Terry Irwin<sup>3</sup>, who specializes in transition design, into a dialogue about connection and the way we live together and occupy space on this planet. Many themes arising from that dialogue are echoed in the papers that form this special issue and focus on issues related to what communication is, what constitutes connection, and the changing landscapes that affect the way we live, think, and act in our roles as design researchers, teachers, and practitioners. Perhaps most important is the need to recognize the moment we are in. As observed by Irwin,

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*COVID-19 was a landscape level event that disrupted all societal systems almost immediately around the world [and] when something at the landscape level disrupts the entire socio-technical system like that, norms and practices and mindsets change immediately. So, knowing that, we're in a really pregnant moment in so many ways, [just] look at how our norms around communication changed. There's more permission, there's*

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1 Yoko Akama is Associate Professor in the School of Design at RMIT University, Australia.

2 Meredith Davis is Professor Emerita of Graphic Design at North Carolina State University, USA.

3 Terry Irwin is Director of the Transition Design Institute at Carnegie Mellon University, USA.

*more ready intimacy, I think we were more forgiving, we were more caring of one another. So, how do we drive those new signs, those new ways of being, so that they become the norm and we don't go right back to the way we were before? I mean, I think that is maybe the only positive of huge systems disruptions, is looking for the shoots and buds of new ways of being that are actually positive, that arise out of it.*

In this issue, Thiessen et al. present a case study that shows the viability of a participatory communication design practice and its ability to contribute to complex challenges like scaling global health initiatives, such as those undertaken by the WHO. This proposition is made in the light of the observed reluctance of communication design practitioners to leave behind traditional models of practice that prioritize the object and that perpetuate exclusive and exclusionary ways of thinking. This reluctance may be affecting the overall progression of the field of knowledge and capacity to respond to the complex and wicked problems that require the valuing of lived experience and contrasts the idea that “[o]ur participation is people first and is cultures first, and then [...] we bring back to our disciplines to research, to teach” (Akama).

As Irwin observed,

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*Wicked problems are primarily rooted in our unsustainable and inequitable socioeconomic political paradigms, which are causing harm to the environment and people. [...] I think communication [...] designers have a vital role to play in reframing problems, in challenging these dominant socioeconomic political paradigms, and offering up alternatives through futuring, through the development of narratives, but also even at lower systems levels to communication and narrative-based interventions that are aimed at changing people's practices, behaviors, as well as mindsets.*

And digital technologies likely have an important role to play. However, the widening of our communication sphere through technological advancements has in many ways highlighted how important it is to recognize and value, as stated by Akama:

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*Communication itself is an all-permeating way of being for everything, humans, animals, algae, minerals, bacteria. And it is one that I think contains a lot of hope for understanding ... perhaps not even understanding, just being with that entanglement. Because I think it's the entanglements or the interrelatedness [that] is what seems to be eroded through what Terry talked about, these dominant socioeconomic structures that commodifies it, individualizes it, makes things linear.*

However, how does this entanglement change when it includes not only natural and biological participants, but also artificial intelligences? In this issue, both Ellerton and Taljaard and Thiessen

explore how the integration of AI into daily practices has opened up and introduced new ways of thinking about collaboration and where value may lie when we collaborate with AIs. From one perspective, Taljaard and Thiessen look at the potential of using AI to support learning practices for readers with difficulties like dyslexia. University students with dyslexia often develop elaborate coping strategies to keep pace with course content, which often involves reading selectively. However, such readers may be able to draw on inclusive augmentation supported by AI to improve their capacity to engage with deep learning practices as part of their studies.

Ellerton, by contrast, presents a critical reflection on what it is like to collaborate and be in dialogue with AI, exploring the role, or what might be “a role,” of AI in design and academic practice. Ellerton presents an autoethnographic reflection of her own experience collaborating with generative AI technology to author her paper. Arising from this are questions about who and what we connect to and what constitutes collaboration. COVID-19 necessitated the need to connect remotely, and this changed the way we communicated and worked, with collaborative activities facilitated by online platforms like Zoom and Miro. This challenged what collaboration meant and the means through which we did it. Davis, Akama, and Irwin observed—as part of their own experience—an increase in online collaboration, and in many ways, care. For Davis, it was how:

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*Zoom [became a] co-authoring [space], because I think there was an awful lot more use of that. The conversations would happen in this medium and then move to the co-authoring spaces. And so something like a Google Drive became really a conversational space, as well as a production space, and I think that was really useful.*

**Irwin reflected on the experience of delivering online workshops and the value this afforded to reach people from all parts of the world:**

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*So, 80 people working in a Miro board. It was this weird experience, right? And then you'd be hopping into breakout rooms, and the people that we met through that then we connected with later, and because we were all home, there was a more immediate intimacy with people you've never met in the flesh and you'd never met in a formal setting of a conference room or an office, and kids were running through and dogs and babies, and we all rolled with it. So, in many ways, we connected quicker and more deeply with people online around the world. We made more connections than we had probably in the previous three to five years, and that was really unusual. [...] So, I've been reflecting on that a lot, and we are such communicative animals that even during those unprecedented times and through that transition we're still in, we found a way to connect, I think, on a very deep level, which again, it's cause to be hopeful, I think.*

For Akama,

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*A benefit [of our experience of COVID-19 is that we observed] a bucket of optimism. [...] it's not quite a social capital in [that] sense, but it's a kind of a tank of fantastic stuff that is the reason why I get out of bed and go to work and do what I do, because [everyone else] is doing that also. [...] It sort of escapes a lot from that by the fact that we're trained to look at these things when in fact there's a lot of social glue and a lot of goodwill turning around. To think about it, as in the feminist notions of care, I think [it] is actually quite abundant. And I think we are in a better landscape through [COVID-19] for recognizing how important that is.*

**It was not the intent of this special issue to explore the changing communication practices that arose out of COVID-19 specifically, but it is difficult to discuss communication futures and the landscape we find ourselves in today without recognizing its impact. Above all, this special issue seeks to provoke and to explore how the evolving nature of communication as facilitated by technology may affect future design practices.**

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### **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to Yoko Akama, Meredith Davis, and Terry Irwin for sharing their time and insights as part of the roundtable discussion that informed this introduction. Thank you.