Editorial multimodality and society

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Editorial for Multimodality and society, issue 4:1

This issue, the first of volume 4, marks the start of Multimodality & Society’s fourth year and provides a good moment to look across the past 3 years to review and reflect on the journal’s contribution to multimodality. Multimodality & Society aims to consolidate and advance multimodal theory, methodologies, and empirical understanding of interaction and communication. This editorial considers the collective contribution of the 12 issues published to date and points to how the journal can continue to push the boundaries of multimodality forward. We highlight the significance of the journal’s expansion of...
multimodal formats, and several directions embedded in the journal scope which we have advanced.

**Expanding multimodal formats**

The expansion of publication formats is a central pillar of *Multimodality and Society*’s aim and encompasses the emphasis on theorizing communication that includes a full spectrum of resources. Promoting genres other than the standard research article within *Multimodality and Society* is a central way to deploy or reflect on these diverse modal resources. Until recently, research articles have been more of the standard genre in academic publishing. Research articles make an original contribution to advance theory, method, and empirical analysis and have a certain acceptable length, usually somewhere between 5000 and 8000 words. In addition to the research article, *Multimodality and Society* welcomes ‘practitioner reflections’ and ‘multimodal sensations’. Practitioner reflections are defined as engaging with the ideas, practices and concerns of practitioners (such as architects, designers, and educators) working in fields where multimodality and multimodal tools and practices are central. These are short pieces geared at explaining a field of practice within a maximum of 3000 words. A practitioner reflection can also be about work in progress and need not reflect a completed research study. Multimodal sensations extend the notion of a visual essay and utilise the digital potential of the journal; these pieces can indicatively be between four to eight pages, yet the format is very flexible and authors can make a multimodal argument beyond the page boundaries, also through links to digital artefacts hosted on the journal website. As multimodal work involves resources and tools other than books, *Multimodality and Society* welcomes reviews of exhibitions, conferences, analytical multimodal research tools, and online resources, as well as book reviews.

By encouraging alternative submissions, *Multimodality and Society* acknowledges that meaning-making is complex and multimodal and challenges the position of the formal research article as the only format of publication in academic journals. Our expansion of formats is part of a broader trend in academic publishing to encourage different genres, such as thinking-aloud pieces, reactions, debates, methodological reports, video essays, meta-analyses and opinion pieces. We are not the only journal to welcome alternative genres. Practitioner perspectives can be merged with voices of researchers, and modes other than language and numbers are employed, such as images, video or sound clips. Meaning-making in academia is, however, always in tension between “pulls towards convention and pushes away from the centre towards more hybrid, experimental and open forms” (Thesen 2014: 6). The formats of *Multimodality and Society* contributions illustrate this tension well and, in a way, can be viewed as ‘genres of possibility’ (cf. Giroux 1992) for different kinds of meaning-making.

These alternate genres are open to alternative semiotic resources for arguing and representing knowledge or experience. The visual means of representing knowledge in, for instance a comic format, is an interesting, productive and engaging way of contributing to publishing in an academic journal. Multimodal textual design can serve to effectively distance these alternate genres from the research paper genre (cf. Archer and
Björkvall, publication pending) and may allow for new ways of representing knowledge (Kress 2010) within academic journal publishing.

Expanding the formats of contributions also raises some challenges. There is some consensus regarding the goals of the academic research article, namely to present research that is fully supported and evidenced so that it can be verifiable, to make clear the contribution to a field, and to perform some more or less obligatory ‘moves’ and ‘steps’ of research articles (Swales 1990). These moves involve ‘establishing a territory’ and include steps such as claiming importance or making some kind of generalizations about a specific topic, and reviewing previous research. Research papers are seen and expected to be theoretically rigorous, which includes the need of a rationale for the research, the importance of providing a strong theoretical positioning for the piece and references to secondary sources. This makes the work of the reviewer relatively clear. But how do we review the new formats?

In the genre of the practitioner reflection, the balance between personal reflection, practical contribution, and theoretical rigour is highlighted. The ‘personal reflections’ and the ‘sharing of perspectives’ are what make the practitioner reflection genre unique. In a similar vein, the genre of the multimodal sensation allows for various forms of representation to be approached from, say, the perspective of an artist or an architect. Here, the discussion might revolve around a set of research findings, an artefact, or an exhibition in which modes combine, and the discussions tend to rely less on language alone. As with research articles, practitioner reflections and multimodal sensations need to bear the audience in mind. This could involve some definitional work, making explicit some of the key terms and ideas raised. Especially in the more practitioner-oriented reflections, referring to concrete examples can be useful. This can be tricky because terms and concepts point to very specific theoretical paradigms. However, publishing new genres in academic journals probably goes hand in hand with the crossing of disciplinary boundaries, together with an openness to perspectives other than those that have come to define a particular research field. While research articles often require explicit connections between aim, examples and descriptions of how the aim is reached, in these alternate genres, sharing results and findings is not always part of the goal, which might instead be to generate conversation or offer inspiration. Indicating a research gap is a common step in research articles, according to Swales (1990). However, if this is done in a ‘practitioner reflection’, the gap can be filled with reflections rather than traditional research results or development of theories and methods.

In response to the question of how to review contributions in these genres: it is usually different from reviewing traditional research articles. From the first volumes of Multimodality and Society, most reviewers talked about how ‘refreshing’, innovative, thought-provoking and even ‘inspiring’ these genres are and how they enable novel approaches to multimodal meaning-making and communication. However, there has also been some confusion regarding issues such as what the results really are and the role of, for instance, previous research. As an editorial team we have worked to foster open discussions with both authors and reviewers, which we see as key to developing the practices around these genres. Even as the available modes with which to communicate and represent ideas and meaning are being expanded across the sites of practice where multimodal researchers
situate their research, the forms of research outputs have largely remained tethered to the written word. Submissions from the last few volumes have provided conceptual invitations that may be further embraced in future submissions to the journal, as the representational capacities of image and sound are increasingly harnessed in research outputs. Playlists, podcasts, videos and films, different forms of making (arts, wearable tech) all hold potential as research inputs as well as outputs. But how does one review a playlist as data? What does a reviewer listen and ‘read’ for when reviewing a submission of an arts installation? What journal section might it fall into? And does genre presuppose section? For instance, could a podcast be a research paper? As Multimodality and Society continues to grow and serve as a site for innovation and debate about the intersections of multimodality and society, we hope to engage the field in these questions. 12 issues in, these conversations continue as does the work to establish alternative ways to publish in the journal.

**Pushing at the boundaries of multimodal research**

To date we have published 48 research papers, 14 multimodal sensations, and 16 practitioner reflections in the journal. These have tackled a wide variety of topics, theories and methods. Collectively these contributions reflect the overall aim of Multimodality and Society, and push at the boundaries of multimodal research in several directions.

**Moving beyond the visual and language**

Contributions to date have sought to account for a full range of modes. Some have dealt with resources so far unexplored or little explored. A key example of this is a special issue (2.3) entirely devoted to touch. Other papers have contributed to this ambition by sketching a mode’s social semiotics, such as papers on the semiotics of movement (Van Leeuwen, 2021). The expansion of formats beyond research papers, to include multimodal sensations and practitioner reflections, also speaks to this ambition. In his multimodal sensation (3.2), Pool (2023) brings a visual artist’s sensibility to the examination of art-making with children, in particular the use of photography itself as an outcome of collaborative arts practice and research. The inclusion of photographs (Pool, 2023), comics-based arts practices (Degand, 2022), audio files (Charette et al., 2022) and poetry (Schwartz, 2022), for example, in multimodal sensations opens the possibilities for what ideas can be expressed through the affective affordances of different modes. Likewise, modal expectations may need to be readjusted for reviewers and readers to sever deterministic assumptions associated with modes.

**Theoretical and methodological boundaries**

Pushing at multimodal theoretical and methodological boundaries through the work of critiquing, mapping, consolidating, and advancing multimodal theory, concepts and methods is vital for the field. Authors have contributed to further exploration of concepts so far only theorised, such as experiential meaning potential (Thorsnes, 2021) and
traditionally explored only for language, such as affect (Westberg, 2021). Indeed, some contributions have focused on language itself in novel ways, such as for its potential of disclosing and revealing semiotic practices (Christensson, 2021). Others have innovated multimodality in the field of methods, for example the assessment of eye-tracking (Chen, 2022), along with established approaches being applied to entirely new realms, such as geosemiotics for the analysis of runestones (Holmberg, 2021). We have strived to represent the many different approaches within multimodality including papers from within multimodal (critical) discourse analysis, social semiotic analysis, multimodal ethnography, corpus analysis, systemic functional linguistics, genre theory, nexus analysis, embodied interaction and conversation analysis among the many. This has opened the space for questions to be raised and proposals advanced on the role of multimodality within the academic disciplinary landscape (Bateman, 2022). We will continue to nurture this unfolding dialogue between the papers in *Multimodality and Society*.

**Innovative multimodal research and exploring the potentials of interdisciplinarity**

*Multimodality and Society* has sought to address a variety of people from a wide range of fields who share a common interest in multimodal communication and its role in society. We have published studies with research methods ranging from ethnographic-historical research, affective discursive approaches, spatial design, computational methods, chronophotographic techniques, embodied participation, autobiographical reflections, geosemiotic frameworks, cultural production, mediated discourse analysis to the more familiar approaches in multimodality. This has served to stretch multimodality through mixed methods to look at bodily movement in space (McMurtrie, 2022), or adopting a historical perspective to look at first attempts at capturing and transcribing it (Paterson, 2021).

In methods too, contributions have conducted explorations of synergies, as with digital humanities on distant viewing (Hiippala, 2021). Synergies have been established with other domains and professions, such as explorations of light in architecture (Lowings, 2021) and product design in human-computer interaction (Khot et al., 2021), which shows applications of multimodal research for everyday needs such as facilitating healthy relations with snacking. New fields have been launched or mapped further, particularly through the journal special issues, such as Multimodal anthropology (special issue 1.3) with papers on memory, senses, feminism and urbanism, migration, and the colonial gaze, as well as multimodality and race (special issue 3.3), while in volume 4, the special issue will map and consolidate further the application of multimodality in museums. Similarly, the journal has actively published articles that engage sensory perspectives on multimodality to offer robust analyses of timely phenomena (Allen, 2023). We want to continue to challenge multimodality by stretching its concepts, and refining them by exploring multimodality in new contexts.
Investigating the role of material, social and cultural resources

Interrelations in materialities, human activities, senses and semiosis have been explored in novel and unexpected ways, both through research papers and through multimodal sensations and practitioner reflections, for example by exploring human anatomy through textiles (Harris, 2021), by looking into listening (Charette et al., 2022), and by using beads to reflect and refract the richness of our endangered oceans (Brenner et al., 2022). We hope the journal can expand on this area of investigation over the coming issues.

Interrogating the digital

Contributions to Multimodality and Society evidence how the digital is increasingly a part of the multimodal research process of data collection and analysis (e.g., eye tracking and computational methods) and as a topic of multimodal study. These papers have interrogated a variety of technologies in use from storytelling in VR, wearable technology to ameliorate loneliness, virtual choirs on youtube, through to shaming on TikTok. Technologies are of particular interest to multimodality as they reconfigure modes and multimodal ensembles in ways that shape how we communicate, interact and learn - all central issues for Multimodality and Society. We hope to expand a critical multimodal focus on the complex digital landscape that we live in, as well as to explore how multimodal theories and methods can inform the design and development of new technologies.

Multiple voices

Through the varied contributions of Multimodality and Society over the past 12 issues, the journal has provided a forum for new researchers – postdoctoral and early career researchers, to publish and highlight their work alongside established multimodal researchers and practitioners. The journal formats have worked to broaden the voices within multimodality. Key to engaging with fuller understandings of how multimodality blossoms in situ are perspectives crafted from the stance of practitioners. Multimodality and Society has published practitioner reflections from researchers, designers, and artists, including those who live and work in the global south. The journal has worked to expand the network of global scholars to give voice to contributions from contexts and areas usually underrepresented including notable contributions from China (e.g. Yuan et al., 2021), Japan (Amundrud, 2022), South America (Leaha, 2021), Africa (Ngwenya et al., 2022) and indigenous communities in Brazil (Marin, 2021). Moving into our fourth volume we reiterate our commitment to support contributors who have been marginalised through the power of the academy in different ways.

The papers published in Multimodality and Society are reflections of the diverse and international nature of the academic community interested in the study of multimodality in communication and interaction. Collectively, they are an expression of our editorial commitment to advance, critique and open up multimodality.
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Archer A and Björkval A Decolonizing Academic Publishing Through ‘Disruption’: Peer.


