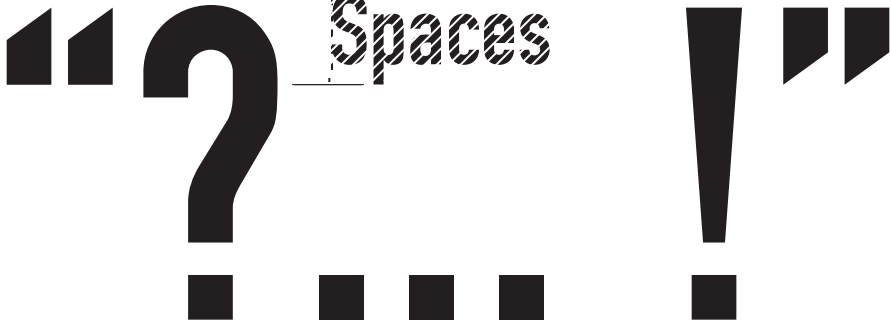


**Spaces that  
Speak:**

**Exploring Creative  
Opportunities in the  
Communication  
Design of  
Conversational  
Spaces**



In this article, I argue that designers can benefit from understanding social media spaces from a cultural and communicative perspective. This approach to designing interfaces can expand creative potential and guide the process of shaping innovative and engaging interfaces. Such an approach may also help the designer understand how visual design influences meaning in interfaces and how the meaning is socially situated and dependent on context. I argue that the design can shape online conversations by communicating intended values of the conversational space through designed features.

I demonstrate this through deconstructing, analyzing, and juxtaposing existing interfaces in terms of their visual language, intertextual references, and connotations. I discuss two design components of the interface – *typography* and *layout* – examples of tools the designer can use to shape meaning. I provide personal reflections, creative suggestions, and visualizations based on my practice as a graphic designer, in addition to metaphors that enable ways of thinking about the potential of such interfaces. The context is online magazines that promote conversation and dialogue – in particular, the interface of Medium.com, a hybrid of a magazine and a blog-publishing platform. The analysis is conducted through a social semiotic framework and a designer's way of looking – a complementing perspective in an emerging field of social media design research that often emphasizes functional perspectives and use quality. I found that there is creative potential in both *what* and *how* designers prioritize to communicate, that may influence the conversational space.

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**Keywords:**

*Visual Communication*

*Communication Design*

*Social Media*

*Conversational Spaces*

*Online Magazines and Newspapers*

*Social Semiotics*

*Design for Democracy*

*Typography*

*Layout*

### A designer's approach to studying social media

A colleague once said that “designers are thieves; they steal bits from here and there and put them together in new constellations.” As a designer who is interested in the cultural and communicative aspects of social media, I am curious about what the *bits* or *components* in these contexts are and how we can design and combine them into new, engaging, and inclusive concepts. Components of visual language can be understood as *semiotic resources* – resources for making meanings (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Graphic and interactive designers are constantly engaging in *semiotic activity*; our minds are storage places for semiotic resources – various typefaces, graphic styles, social media buttons, or images shot in a specific way – that we continuously collect from observing what we see around us (Suri, 2011). Designers investigate how these semiotic resources are used in our culture, contribute by shaping and discover new design features, or use them in novel ways and contexts as intertextual references that can carry meaning.

A designer concerned with visual communication often asks questions to bridge the connotations of visual language with the underlying concept, values, and needs: “Does the design seem too sterile, too serious?” or “Should the graphics be funnier, more easygoing?” When designing for interactive environments, this communicative perspective of shaping meaning seems less prioritized than functional perspectives or use issues. In design research, *communication design* is framed as a concept that discusses the complexity of websites containing information, interaction, and graphic design (Skjulstad, 2008, 2010), closely linked to the field of multimodal discourse (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) and drawing on social semiotics (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Communication design is, however, often used as an abbreviation for *visual communication design*, which is associated with graphic design (Løvlie, 2016; Frascara, 2004; Yates & Price, 2015). Løvlie (2016) frames communication design as a design practice beyond how the term normally is used for research.

Designers' approaches and communication design perspectives on social media have been little explored in research – with a few exceptions (Morrison, Westvang, & Skogsrud, 2010).

Computers, smart phones, tablets, and wearable technology can handle increasingly larger loads of graphics and animations, and our screens are becoming more fine-tuned for typographic details that are enabled through “typographic kits,” tools containing selections of typefaces that were previously unavailable for the web. Today, designers have access to software that helps them code without much knowledge of coding, and the development of software and hardware now enables a larger span of expressions and social media interactions. In this article, I explore these opportunities in terms of how we may construct the meaning we aim to shape, through the variety of possibilities we have available while designing for social media expressions. I focus on two main features: *typography* and *layout*. First, I will frame the spaces that I study as *conversational spaces*.

## Defining conversational spaces

Many of the well-known social media interfaces of today are defined as *social networking sites* (SNS). Researchers have defined these to include a complex social system with user profiles, lists of relations, and newsfeeds with user-generated content (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison & Boyd, 2013). Although this definition may describe Medium.com (as a user-generated magazine), it is poorly suited for describing interfaces that provide conversations in editorial online newspapers and magazines. Such interfaces can take several forms – e.g., custom-made and low-threshold polls or modular blog comment hosting services for commenting that is often placed below an article (which I will discuss in the following section). These are frequently used by online magazines and newspapers that don't have sociality as their main activity but rather for conversations about a topic that is already introduced in an article or blog post.

Engeström (2005) discussed *social objects* or *object-centered sociality* as possible factors in the success of SNS, building on the work of Cetina (1997) on knowledge objects. Engeström (2005) suggested that successful SNS don't center on *people* but around *objects* – e.g., jobs, photos, URLs, or events. In this view, the blog comment hosting services of online magazines and newspapers have vague social objects focused on debate, discussion or questions, or perhaps even *changing* social objects, depending on the topic of the article that is being discussed.<sup>1</sup>

Similar types of interfaces are often described with terms such as *commenting forums* and *commenting boards* (Santana, 2013, 2016) or *asynchronous online discussion environments* and *threaded forums* (Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013). However, as a designer and a researcher aiming to open up creative possibilities and show opportunities and variety in designed features, I need a broader and *less* definite term that doesn't close too many doors for alternative choices. I describe and frame these spaces and sites as *conversational spaces*: communicative spaces where conversations take place. While framing and describing Medium.com alone, a more specific term could have been used, but when reflecting on possibilities in the design, a specific and precise term would have limited these possibilities. Not all expressions wished for may be defined as *comments*, not all designed structures should be *threaded*, and perhaps not even all discussion environments should be *asynchronous*. The more specific the term is, the less creative opportunities for stepping outside the boundaries can exist. That is not to say that there aren't a lot of opportunities *within* the boundaries of the terms, but rather that I see other possibilities yet little explored in design and research.

It is argued that designs are not culturally and ideologically neutral (Mazé, 2016), and the design, values, content, and expressions of these spaces may shape implications for how users perceive this surrounding space and feel empowered to contribute (Lysbakken, 2017). In my research, I focus mainly on *the designers'* possibilities to guide interpretations, and not various users' many ways of interpreting these choices – though knowledge on users' perspectives is essential for designers.

<sup>1</sup>In a forthcoming article, I discuss designs that separate various social objects in these contexts and presents alternative social objects; *argumentation and emotional reactions*.



In this article, I contend that a cultural and communicative perspective on conversational spaces can expand creative potential and help designers see how they shape meaning based on their knowledge and backgrounds. This meaning is socially situated and can change depending on the context for the designs. I also argue that the design of the conversational space can give voices to people and facilitate inclusion and engagement. I do this by analyzing the typography and layout as components of the conversational space of Medium.com from a communication designer's point of view. I further reflect upon the creative possibilities I perceive through an auto-ethnographic approach, informed by a large collection of semiotic resources used in such conversational spaces. I juxtapose Medium.com's designs with other designs to build knowledge that may inform the designs of conversational and democratic spaces online.

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## Designing for a democratization of debate

Conversational spaces are important platforms for public debate. Medium.com is one example of an interface that facilitates a *democratization of debate*, through its ways of engaging people to participate in public discourse through a user-generated and non-editorial content platform. Online newspapers and magazines that support conversations can also be seen as agents for a democratization of debate. In my doctoral research, I have a particular interest for contexts that have a mission in society to include and engage various people and perspectives in public debate. Yet I find it problematic to believe that the complex issues regarding various people's participation in society are solved merely by giving them a practical and functional possibility to speak out in a public space. Handing out a microphone on a stage will not automatically provide everybody with the liberty to speak their minds. I find that social media that promotes debate is designed with little attention to these complicated issues.

The last twenty years have provided online magazines and newspapers with modular blog comment hosting services (Shin et al., 2013) like Disqus, Echo, IntenseDebate, and Livefyre – pre-designed systems that have made a democratization of debate possible. They can be customized in various ways, as is visible in *Figure 1*, a screenshot from the online newspaper *The Guardian*. These interfaces are giving users the ability to share comments, links, and images, and to view and evaluate other people's contributions. These contexts, technological developments, and modular systems also create various challenges for designers, who must adapt to pre-designed systems that give them less freedom to explore expressions, layouts, visual hierarchies, and conversation architecture. Few newspapers and magazines seem to put resources into building larger systems on their own terms. In addition, modular-based forums are debated and critiqued for trolling, discrimination, sexual harassment, "echo chamber" effects, and polarizing content (Sunstein, 2009; Biber, Doverspike, Baznik, Cober, & Ritter, 2002; Coleman, 2012) Several media houses have closed down their forums and moved discussions to social media (Reuters, 2014; Gross, 2014; Rygh, 2016), giving actors such as Facebook more power, as articles are often shared and

comments (1215)

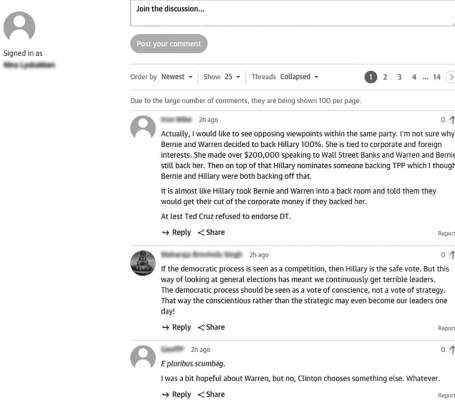


FIGURE 1

The Guardian's commenting field, powered by a blog comment hosting service.

discussed in such platforms, as opposed to in custom-made systems.

Wright and Street (2007) contended that the impact and role of design are underestimated factors in facilitating or thwarting deliberation in online discussion forums. Researchers outside the contexts of online magazines and newspapers have attempted to design, build, and analyze debating systems by challenging common design choices, such as reward systems and information architecture (Faridani, Bitton, Ryokai, & Goldberg, 2010). Other researchers have analyzed the editorial decisions and moderation (Ihlebaek, Løvlie, & Mainsah 2013; Santana, 2016), and the civil effect of anonymity versus requiring a full name (Santana, 2013).

Few (design) researchers have studied the surrounding space, how the digital "room" where conversations take place is formed. Wright and Street (2007) argued that the shape of the parliament may create hostility, which may be transferrable to how the design of online discussions affect deliberation (p. 853):

There is a longstanding view that the design of parliament buildings, council chambers and the like, not to mention the electoral system which fills those spaces with representatives, affects the quality of the discussion and the nature of the debate (Olson, 1998). For example, the physical shape of the UK Houses of Parliament, with the government on one side and the opposition directly opposite, is thought to create a hostile and adversarial environment, while circular chambers lead to open debate and less vitriol. In the same way, it might be contended that the "shape" of discussion boards affects significantly the kinds of deliberation which takes place within them. In this article, I initiate an inquiry into how the designer may influence this environment and these surroundings to enforce particular values such as *hostility* or *inclusiveness* in democratic, online conversational spaces.

## A cultural perspective on conversational spaces

This article builds upon a cultural understanding of interfaces, seeing the interface as a mediating artifact in which the values and ideology of our culture are mapped implicitly and explicitly (Selfe & Selfe, 1994, p. 485). I contribute to the research that understands interface design from a cultural perspective (Marcus & Baumgartner, 2004; Bolter & Gromala, 2003; Eikenes, 2010; Balsamo, 2011), where culture is understood as a shared symbolic system of signs and meanings (Balsamo, 2011, p. 5). I draw on social semiotics to deconstruct interface features as communicative artifacts. I see the visual and interactive design of social interfaces as the designers' language, consisting of meaning-making signs and components such as typography, images, graphics, layout, navigation, information architecture, reward sys-

FIGURE 2

The redesign of Facebook's "friends icon." Published with permission by Caitlin Winner.



tems, and input options for contributing. How these are designed depends on the designer's knowledge, background, gender, values, and surrounding social conditions, such as the example in *Figure 2*. This shows the redesign of the "friends icon" by a Facebook employee who created the new icon to the right in light of her gender and perspective (Winner, 2016a). These design choices can be seen as inseparable from the culture and time in which we live.

This detailed example is part of a communicative landscape – a component of an environment in which conversations take place. In the analysis of this article, I explore how the designers of the conversational space and surroundings can connote meaning that may direct the conversation, both in terms of *who* they give voice to and *how* these are given voice. I investigate how values and culture can manifest through the design and how designers create this communication. As a designer myself, I see these components as my meaning-making tools to guide the users' interpretations. I can borrow components that carry social significance from other genres to help me shape the meaning I seek.

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## The conversational space of Medium.com

The case for this article is the interface of Medium.com, as shown in *Figure 3*. Medium is an example of a conversational space that promotes debate and dialogue. Medium is important, as it engages many, while at the same time, it is a concept difficult to categorize. It can be understood as a hybrid between a blog-publishing platform and an online magazine, founded by Evan Williams, also an entrepreneur of Twitter and Blogger. Medium was supposedly intended for more in-depth content than Twitter – content that enhances and raises the quality produced by users (Letzing, 2015). The magazine emphasizes topics such as technology, design, and culture. The platform provides writers with the possibility of a larger audience – instead of writing an occasional post on an unknown personal blog. Users can contribute with social highlighting, comments, and marginal notes (the latter are not provided at Medium.com anymore but are still interesting as a design choice for this article).

Medium.com does not look like a typical blog-publishing platform and is described as *confusing*: "[...] Medium's nature isn't confus-

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2 Caitlyn Winner, a female employee at Facebook, redesigned the "friends icon" in which "the woman was quite literally in the shadow of the man; she was not in a position to lean in" (a reference to Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's book and organization for women Lean In). The icon on the left could be seen as connoting an unequal position between women and men, showing the man larger, in front of the woman. The new icon Winner designed (on the right) showed the female and male icon as the same height positioned next to each other. Winner's story seemed to hit a nerve (Winner, 2016b) in a social and cultural context in which the women in the male-dominated tech-environments of Silicon Valley are fighting for equal rights (Pontin, 2014).

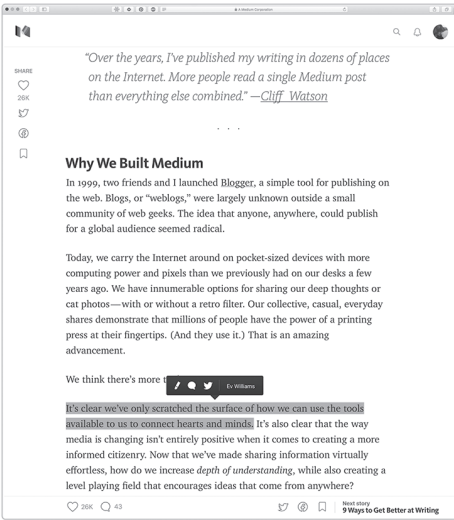


FIGURE 3 (L)

A screenshot of an article at Medium.com, gathered on May 10, 2017.

FIGURE 4 (R)

A collage showing the typography at Medium juxtaposed with typography from the *Daily Star* and *The Guardian*. All detail images are screenshots that are downscaled equally. Author, 2016.



ing by accident — it's confusing by design" (Dash, 2013). As I will elaborate on in the analysis, Medium does not resemble a homemade personal blog; Medium looks like a serious, in-depth, editorial magazine, but its users seem to have a lot more power in this environment than in traditional editorial magazines. As a designer, I find this compelling and seek to explore how these connotations are shaped through various components. In the following sections, I will deconstruct and analyze the two intertwined components of typography and layout in terms of how I perceive these in a social and cultural context.

## Typography as Communication Design

When graphic designers are working with typography, they can select from thousands of fonts – depending on **CONTEXT**, *purpose*, platform, **GENRE**, usability, and **communicative** aspects. In this analysis, I show that the choice of typography can influence the meaning of the content in particular contexts. The case for this article is the conversational space of Medium.com, where I find that the typography helps guide the readers' interpretations to an impression of a *serious, in-depth magazine with easily accessible content*. I show this by comparing Medium's typography with typography used in other genres. I argue that using typefaces that are frequently seen within a specific visual genre (such as newspapers) provides "hints" and intertextual references that guide the users' interpretations to the values of these particular genres.

### Medium's typography as intertextual references to other designs

Medium's headline typography, shown on top in the collage in Figure 4, is set in a bold, expanded sans serif typeface – *FF Kievit* – in black, high-contrast color. The body text is set in the serif typeface *Charter*. The collage compares



Medium's typography with the typography of the tabloid newspaper the *Daily Star* and the more in-depth newspaper *The Guardian*. I demonstrate that the typeface of the *heading* letters of Medium is more similar to the heading letters of the *Daily Star*. The *body text* letters of Medium, however, are more similar to those of *The Guardian*. I argue that this is an instinctive (but perhaps unconscious) choice by the designer – to use intertextual references to other designs in order to guide a user's interpretations of Medium to the specific values for which these contexts stand.

The previous designer of Medium described his typography choices in terms of how the different typefaces matched and shaped meaning about Medium's brand:

The preference of *Freight Sans* [earlier heading typeface replaced by *FF Kievit*] was used because it had more personality than the "corporate" looking *Myriad Pro*. Nuances in *Freight Sans* (the form, ears, tails, same x-height, et al.) complimented [sic] *FF Tisa Pro* [body text typeface replaced by *Charter*] much better when set against our brand values/placement. (Taylor, 2013).

The designer also stated that one of the typefaces was perceived as more *formal* and *authoritative*, and that Medium intended to encourage more *storytelling* than *fact-finding* articles. Hence, he chose a "slightly softer, more inviting typeface that would encourage that from our users." The body text typeface was changed to *Charter* (Wichary, 2015), a serif typeface designed with a large x-height that was made for low-resolution output devices in mid-1980. The large x-height of the letters makes the typeface look bigger than it really is and is space-saving, as it demands less of size and line heights. Thus, such typefaces are economic on paper and practical in print and have been made for and used by editorial newspapers, magazines, and books – arenas that required cheap printing. In today's online environments, these space-efficient typefaces now provide little economic and functional value. They are instead being used to communicate and shape meaning about the design – that may influence the conversational space.

In the contexts and arenas of credible newspapers like *The Guardian*, body text typography is normally set in a professional manner – meaning it takes many aspects into account – for example, legibility: Shorter line lengths (the amount of letters in a line length) enable more efficient reading (Dyson & Haselgrove, 2001). Professionally set typography can also provide contrasts in the reading experience (contrasts that we often *hear* in oral language; **emphasis** on particular words is set in bold or italics), different levels of headings that group different topics together, and quotes that are separated in the text through indents, italics, lines, or different colors. In addition, professionally set typography takes aesthetics into account. Researchers have previously studied the aesthetics of the reading process and have demonstrated that high-quality typography can induce a good mood in the reader (Larson, Hazlett, Chaparro, & Picard, 2007), though the readers may not be able to spot the details of the typography themselves. Medium.com is setting its typography in this type of professional manner, with attention to the details (Wichary, 2014, 2015) of line lengths, line heights, font weights, and contrasts.

A graphic designer's training involves sensitivity training for these subtle differences in typefaces and the contexts in which they were made. We make our choices by reflecting on what the design is conveying and then revising and changing it to make the design communicate what we intend.

Designers, but also readers, are accustomed to seeing this professional typographic treatment in the context of in-depth newspapers, magazines, and books. These publications have a historically strong reputation of credibility and quality, as opposed to today's reputation of non-editorial blogs. Edited, educated, and "selected" voices still seem to carry meaning as more trustworthy in our culture, though perhaps more challenged by social media and the recent focus on "fake news" (Marchi, 2012). The term "blogger" is often characterized as *unprofessional*, even though a blog voice can be either a prime minister or a twelve-year-old. When Medium – a blog-publishing platform – is using typefaces and professional type treatments that are frequently seen within particular newspaper genres and *not* within homemade blogs, it is probably because the designer intended to guide the readers' interpretation to specific values. I contend that Medium's use of body text typography shapes the meaning that guides the reader to interpret Medium as a credible, in-depth magazine of quality.

Initially, I wrote that the headlines of Medium are more similar to those we can see in tabloid newspapers like the *Daily Star*. Most tabloid newspapers use similar bold or heavy sans-serif typefaces in contrasted black or white, as can be seen in *Figure 5*. This context is not known for its in-depth reflections but for more *lightweight* and *easy-access* news. By choosing this type of heading typography, Medium may be using an intertextual reference to a typographic convention that will guide the reader to interpret such values of tabloid newspapers.

In questioning the design of conversational spaces, it can be interesting to ask what meaning could have been constructed if Medium had deliberately chosen, for example, a **handwritten typeface** or a **mono-line typeface** for its headings – or a **COMIC FONT** or a more generic body text typeface like the sans serif typeface used in the *Daily Star*. What if the body text was set in a less professional manner, perhaps with less emphasis on details, craft, and levels? How would that affect our interpretation of the conversational space of Medium? Could it have insinuated a lower quality of content or less reflected voices?

In this section I found that Medium's choice of typography can connote a *credible* and *in-depth* conversational space – yet one with *easy access*. This may be seen as contrary to the popular, quick, and easy social media services such as Twitter, where in-depth texts are not encouraged in the design.

FIGURE 5

A collage of various tabloid newspaper front page screenshots, showing bold sans serif typefaces as headings, similar to Medium's heading typography. These may be used as references to communicate easy-access news.



## Layout as Communication Design

Designers of digital interfaces often use the layout (in combination with other components) to symbolize and guide the readers to understand what

genre they are looking at. Is it a magazine, a personal blog, a game, a book, or a dating app? We rarely see dating sites presented with the layout of a newspaper front page, though that could be an interesting approach. In the physical designs of visual communication, the *format* and *material* are perhaps the main communicators of genre and content – like the large size and cheap, light paper of newspapers or the smaller size and glossy paper of certain magazines. In digital interfaces, the format can be a mobile screen or a desktop screen and tells less about the content of the interface. The layout may therefore be a more important feature to communicate content in digital spaces.

In this section, I find that a communicational understanding of layout design is useful for me as a designer. I also reveal that the design of a layout can be used as a tool that influences the meaning of a conversational space. By comparing Medium's layout to other layouts and analyzing it as a semiotic resource, I show that the layout can symbolize power relations. Drawing on Selfe & Selfe (1994), who argued that design can reflect ideological, political, economic values, and hierarchies adopted from real life, I suggest that the design of Medium can be interpreted as a social arena where users' opinions are highly valued.

In my Western culture and language, we often use metaphors to symbolize hierarchies and values – for example, *top* or *bottom* can indicate that a person at the top is of *importance*, or the bottom can denote *insignificance*. Hence, placing an element at the top or bottom of an interface can also be understood as a signal of power relations, similar to other meanings that may be shaped by composition: left and right, foreground and background, relative sizes, and contrasts between objects (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 183). Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) argued that this integration of various semiotic codes is the work of an overarching code with rules and meanings that provide the multimodal text with the logic of its integration. This overarching code, may be related to for example specific intended values or even ideology. Whereas I previously found that Medium's typography helped communicate values of *trustworthiness*, *credibility*, and *quality*, I found – on the contrary – that Medium's way of designing the layout of articles is *distancing* itself from the references and traditional design of editorial newspapers and magazines.

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## A layout that gives voice to people

Traditional editorial newspapers and magazines often emphasize the editorial voice and play down the users' voices by placing the article on top and users' voices at the bottom of the site, as shown in the example on the left in *Figure 6*. Medium's design can be interpreted as elevating users' voices and adding value to users, due to their choice of layout. In Medium's layout, users' voices are placed in several positions within the layout, as visible on the right in *Figure 6*.

In existing online newspapers and magazines, users' comments on online articles are often enabled through a modular blog comment hosting service like Disqus, IntenseDebate, or Livefyre. For editorial

newspapers and magazines, this layout may be a natural choice, as users' voices normally *are* regarded as less important than the editorial content. Editorial newspapers have a history of being the "lecturer" of a passive listener. For Medium, however, users' voices and the discussion around the article are the essence of the concept and a fundamental part of their values. Medium is also a product of its time, a time in which users' involvement and participation are regarded as highly important.

FIGURE 6

A juxtaposition of the layout and placement of users' voices in an editorial newspaper on the left (here shown by an article at Guardian.co.uk) and in a Medium.com article layout on the right. Author, 2016.



In Figure 6, I show that Medium placed users' voices over the *whole* article layout (highlighting, marginal notes, and comments), though the users themselves are also writing the articles. The users' comments on the articles are positioned both at the bottom of the site and on the side of articles as marginal notes. The marginal notes have changed over time, becoming *Medium Notes* and *Medium Responses*. Marginal notes are not a new feature of social media; the annotation and highlighting of text are visible in books from the 1500s, such as *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543) (Meggs & Purvis, 2011, p. 113), and have also been a topic for research on annotation practices for digital libraries (Marshall, 1997). In social annotation, other users' highlighting is seen as valuable information. In the context of online magazines and newspapers, however, this is a rarely used feature. For this article, the social highlighting and marginal notes of users' voices are interesting, because they can be interpreted as a design feature that emphasizes and lifts users' voices upwards in the hierarchy and layout. If I look at users' voices and the layout of these in other social media concepts, I can see that the placement and position of users' voices varies. In Figures 7 and 8, I show the layouts of Opinion Space and Soundcloud, two social media concepts that promote commenting and discussion. Opinion Space has a layout in which users' opinions are represented as dots in an open space, almost signifying glowing stars in the universe. Soundcloud is designed with a layout that is structured on a sound clip timeline. This type of layout does indeed shape the conversation, because users *have* to comment at a specific point in time and not at the end. Marginal notes perform similarly; the user can choose a specific place in the article to discuss or highlight and does not have to search for the end of the text before highlighting or commenting. What meaning could these variously designed choices shape, and would they change the conversation? Would the timeline structuring shape more detailed and concrete conversations on specific elements in the sound clip

Soundcloud

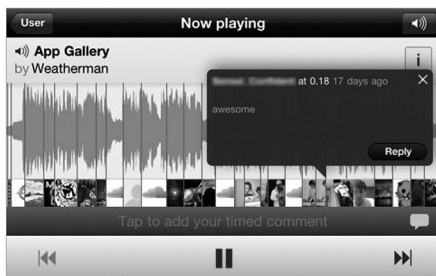


FIGURE 7 (L)

A screenshot of the conversational interface of Soundcloud. Soundcloud is a space where people can upload sound clips and get feedback from others. The conversation is structured on the timeline of the sound clip, meaning one must comment on a specific moment in the sound clip.

Opinion Space

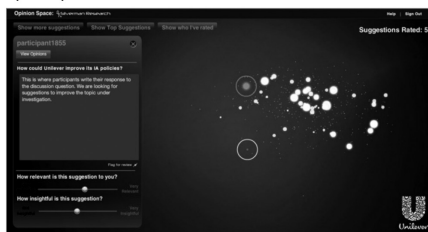


FIGURE 8 (R)

A screenshot of Opinion Space, a tool designed to help communities generate and exchange ideas about important issues and policies (Faridani et al., 2010). The layout of the interface is designed as a graphical "map," an open space with opinions represented as dots. These may resemble glowing stars in the universe, implying that everybody's opinion constitutes the universe. When a dot is pressed, a person's opinion becomes visible at the left, and users can express their agreement or disagreement with that opinion.

and not a holistic conversation on the *entire* clip? Does commenting *below* articles provide a discussion that evolves more around the holistic reading experience of the article?

In order to see possibilities and meaning potential in these layouts, I look to metaphors. Perhaps the designs of Medium and Soundcloud can be understood as similar to a lecturer who asks for questions *in between* – questions that guide the lecture. This choice could signify a lecturer's flexibility and curiosity. A metaphor for the editorial newspaper's classical layout with the comment field below might be similar to a lecturer who demands questions *afterwards*, which may signify rigidity but perhaps also integrity and knowledge – depending on who the lecturer is and how the audience knows him or her. A third metaphor for the layout of Opinion Space could be the lecturer who doesn't lecture but *facilitates* conversations and debate on a topic. Metaphors such as these are used throughout a graphic designer's education while constructing visual identities and thus may help a designer understand the potential meaning one can create with the designs of conversational spaces.

In this section, I have shown that the designer can manipulate connotations and communicate social hierarchies through the design of the layout. Knowledge about the context and how readers perceive this context is essential, as one online newspaper known for certain values may not be able to choose the same layout as Medium with equal success. I found that the layout of a conversational space can carry meaning in the same way as images and typography. In addition, I discovered that the combination and placement of elements may emphasize or devalue users' voices. This is important knowledge for a designer to be able to reflect upon while improving sketches and concepts, as these design choices may create various opportunities for people to contribute in conversational spaces. In the following section, I will discuss different opportunities in the design process that can shape different meanings and implications.

## Reflections on Creative and Strategic Possibilities when Designing for Conversational Spaces

This analysis shows that designers prioritize and emphasize different aspects with the features they have available. This prioritization shapes the surroundings of online newspapers and magazines, and can alter people's expectation

to the conversational space. Medium's typography can connote something about the *brand* Medium and the *genre* of online magazines, whereas the layout may communicate something about *users'* importance. Designers are often consciously or subconsciously prioritizing *what* to communicate, and hence makes choices that may have implications for how users perceive the space and the atmosphere surrounding the conversational space.

These reflections are divided into two parts: 1) reflections on *what* designers choose to prioritize through features such as typography and layout and 2) reflections on *how* designers choose to communicate through their designs.

## Reflections on *what* designers prioritize to communicate

It is fundamental for designers to understand which components they can use to shape meaning about the conversational space; which elements can be prioritized in the visual hierarchy, but also *what* these components communicate to the user. As a younger designer, I would quickly and by default choose a magazine layout with titles and picture placement that I had seen in other magazines – picking references from the same genre, rather than picking from a completely different genre, such as one in which users were a larger part of the concept. Visual conventions would limit the creativity of my designs, and I chose components less consciously from within the genres I knew. I also automatically assumed that magazine typography should be used as a semiotic resource to communicate something about the *genre* or *brand* to distinguish it from other magazines. The following list includes four different aspects to communicate that can all represent different values. Hence, these may shape different surroundings for conversational spaces, and influence how users interpret the space.

### ..... Prioritizing to communicate something about the genre

As pointed out earlier in this article, typography and typefaces with a large x-height that are custom-made for newspapers can be used to communicate that the design is within the online newspaper *genre*. Images can also be used as components to communicate genre, such as in traditional *women's magazines*, with distinct types of photographs; beautiful women, poses, clothes and colors (Lysbakken, 2017). Layouts of dating apps is another example that is perhaps developing into a visual genre; we rarely see dating apps with a similar layout as online newspapers front pages – though a long front page consisting of images and titles could shape a different meaning and connote the “news” of single people. A different meaning arises when designers breaks with some of these well-known references and features – like Medium does when building on newspaper typography, yet distance themselves from the online newspaper layouts where users and commenting forums are placed at the bottom. In Medium's case, it was perceived as *confusing by design*, which can connote that it is “untraditional” or “different.” These connotations related to genre, may also challenge the user's preconceived idea of what types of conversations the space may contain.

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## Prioritizing to communicate something about the brand



FIGURE 9

A screenshot of the Norwegian online newspaper Aftenposten showing diverse typefaces and styles that shape categories of content.

This can be done by using the same typeface and type treatment for every article in the magazine, making the website and the brand Medium.com immediately recognizable and understood. It is common to use different typography than one's competitors, *The Guardian* is one of several editorial newspapers that has a professional, custom-made typeface that is used throughout the newspaper. Most readers are probably not aware of details in the typography, but many will still recognize articles in this typeface as *The Guardian*. This is relevant to conversational spaces as users may draw on their diverse interpretations of such typefaces or other components while shaping their immediate and preconceived opinion about the space. Depending on how users know contexts such as *The Guardian*, they may draw on these values also when seeing the same typefaces in new contexts. This means that if users interpret *The Guardian* negatively as a *top-down, superior* newspaper – or rather as a *serious* and *reflected* newspaper – they may carry with them these preconceived ideas when initiating conversations in the space. This way of communicating and enforcing the brand is done through the many components of visual language, such as the use of image manner (format, filters, poses, angles), graphics (style), colors, and layout. A different approach could be to tone down the brand awareness and importance, and rather emphasize what *type* of space it is, or users' voices.

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## Prioritizing to communicate something about article content



FIGURE 10

Screenshots of print covers of Wonderland magazine with various typefaces used to shape meaning about a person and an article.

Another aspect to communicate is the content of each article. It is less common to use typography as a feature to distinguish between every article but rather common to use images instead as differentiator. The example in *Figure 9*, a screenshot from the mobile version of the Norwegian online newspaper *Aftenposten*, shows how various typographic styles can be utilized to distinguish between diverse types of articles. Another example, *Figure 10*, are the front pages of the *Wonderland* paper magazine, where images and headline typography communicate something about the represented cover person and story. This could nudge users to discuss the person itself, as opposed to a topic. Online magazines where the typography is applied to communicate something about *each* article are rare. Such an illustrative approach to designing magazines was used in the experimental *Emigre* paper magazine (Barnes, 2016), and may connote values such as *different, untraditional, explorative* or *radical*. Such focus may also communicate something to users about the importance of the article content, in this particular space. It may also serve as inspiration to how we may differentiate the design of different conversational spaces and modules within one magazine or newspaper.

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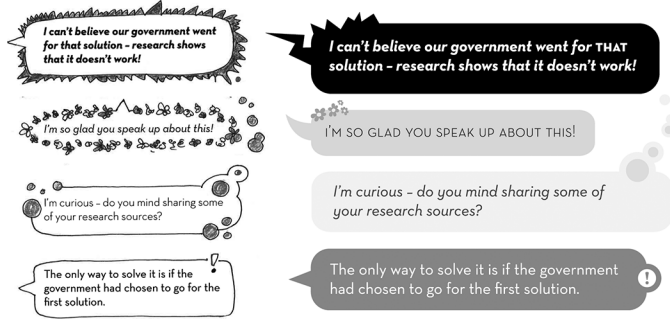
## Prioritizing to communicate something about users' content

How designers present users' input and comments is a matter of visual emphasis. As I have shown with Medium, the layout may give users' voices visual emphasis by elevating these in the visual hierarchy. How could Medium, online newspapers and magazines emphasize and present users'



FIGURE 11

Using graphics and typography to emphasize and visually prioritize users' voices. The top comment is intended to denote anger, the second joy, the third curiosity, and the fourth a more emotionally indifferent comment. If the comment in the last grey bubble was visualized in the black angry bubble at the top, the content might have been interpreted differently. This visualization will be developed and further discussed in a forthcoming article. Author 2015.



voices in diverse ways? One option is to communicate something about the *content*, *atmosphere*, and *emotions* of users' comments, as my sketch in Figure 11 shows. In this way, the visual design attempts to help the reader understand the "body language" and tone of voice behind the comments – an aspect that is less communicated in the design of commenting forums. Other ways could be to use font sizes between important and less important voices, or to use layout to extract certain voices. Such an approach would emphasize conversation and users, and communicate that users are not included as a "hidden" and obligatory aspect of the concept, but rather as valuable voices that influence the entire concept.

## Reflections on *how* designers choose to communicate

Identifying *what* aspects may be communicated and *how* these can be communicated through design features is important, as it may provide designers with creative possibilities and innovative solutions. As a designer, I often borrow design features and conventions from my surrounding world and from the knowledge I gain about different contexts and genres. Challenging common choices in the design of conversational spaces could contribute to shaping inclusive and engaging interfaces. Particularly if one considers how these design choices affect the meaning that supports the strategic goals for the space.

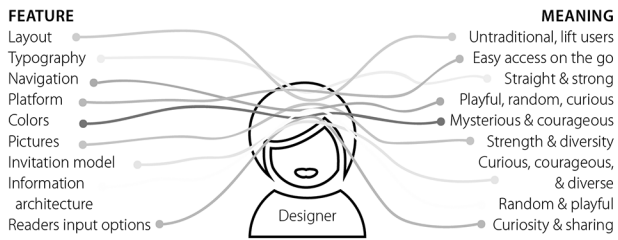
### Combining and balancing meaning-making components

When designing a living room, a designer may build the whole room around certain values and perhaps a particular object, like a sofa – a prioritization that leads and balances the design of the surrounding elements. If the goal is to create an informal and relaxed playroom for kids, the designer likely would *not* choose an old-style, firm Chesterfield sofa that demands straight-up sitting. A good designer might be able to make it work, but the choice will have consequences for balancing the rest of the elements in the room. When designing for online conversational spaces, we can think similarly: If shaping an easy-going and informal space for kids, we may not choose a renaissance serif typeface and avatars with serious faces, as these often function as references to *serious* or *formal* contexts.



## MODEL 1

A model that exemplifies how diverse design features can be used to shape and balance different meanings. Author, 2016.



I build on the notion of *design as a balancing act*, not only as balancing various interests and goals (Lurås, 2016, p. 28), but also as balancing meaning-making components. In the previously mentioned visualization in Figure 11, the features of typography and graphics were used to shape connotations of users' emotions, and also as a way of demonstrating the importance of users' opinions. In the analysis of Medium, I showed how typography is used as a feature that can signify a conversational space that is *credible, in-depth* and yet with *easy-access*. I designed Model 1 to exemplify these ways of designing diverse features to shape diverse connotations about the surrounding space. This complex mix of intended connotations shapes the holistic design.

These design features and connected meanings are often balanced against the concept values and strategy. Medium chose to use the *layout* as a feature to make visible and elevate valuable user comments, but other features could also support this. *Typography* could, for example, be used to show comments of high value in a larger type size. *Color* could be used as a feature to emphasize valuable comments. Perhaps selected users' comments could have *graphics* or *images* to accompany them and support these comments' messages, as visible in Figure 11. What meaning could be formed if a magazine had an architecture that was structured with front page titles in *alphabetical* order instead of being based on *time* and *importance* as many are structured today? Or what if the conversation below an article was structured on categories of selected emotional reactions rather than on the most recent published comment? Perhaps it would connote a radical magazine that relies less on being *current* and *fast*. What would these choices do to the space and the conversations?

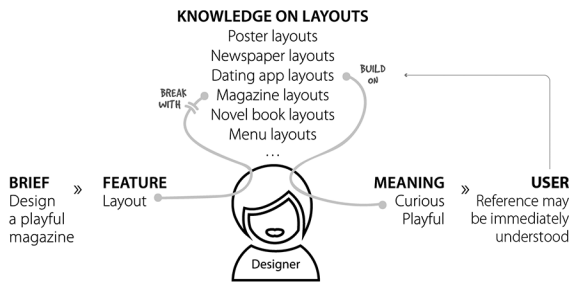
The ways of designing features and combining these are unlimited. I suggest a larger awareness of possible choices and a creative attitude toward exploring components and meanings – rather than only being informed by the choices that are common in our time. I also suggest that more knowledge is needed on the implications of these design choices.

### ..... Selecting design features and intertextual references

Prior to my work as a researcher, I was aware that I sometimes referred to other designs through the pictures I used. I was *not* aware of how tied I was to *visual genres* – that I automatically picked, e.g., a traditional magazine layout when the design brief said “magazine.” I have realized that my designs could have been more innovative if I had chosen to be inspired by layouts within other genres as well. In Model 2, I have exemplified this process of drawing on inspiration from different genres and contexts to shape a

## MODEL 2

A model that exemplifies how the designer chooses features and conventions from various genres and contexts in order to shape a particular meaning. Author, 2016.



particular meaning in a design. At Medium, the layout of the magazine article draws more on other types of social media platforms – where users are regarded as quite important – rather than on traditional magazine layouts.

In Model 2, the designer intended to shape a mobile magazine on a given topic, that represents the values of *playfulness* and *curiosity* and hence searched in her mental library to find a visual genre known for these values. She then borrowed a layout reference from the context of playful dating apps (a layout with one large image and title on the front page in addition to the navigational features of swiping to the next “headline”) that can connote these values. The designer therefore broke with today’s conventional magazine layouts (a layout with many images and titles down a long page) in order to communicate the concept values of *playfulness* and *curiosity*. Such use of design references, requires that the user knows these references well enough to make these – often instinctive and unconscious – connections. A case of an online magazine design where unconventional designed choices in layout is made, is explored and analyzed in terms of gender perspectives, ideology and power (Lysbakken, 2017).

.....  
Knowledge required to shape meaning through the intertextual references of design features

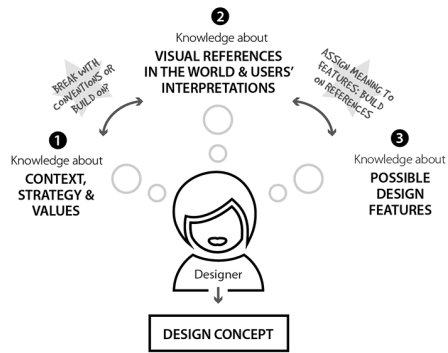
A designer may therefore both *build on* and *break with* the conventions of design references, like Medium built on typographic references from other types of newspapers, and broke with their layout references. I find that in order to do this successfully, it requires that the designer both has a broad knowledge of visual genres in general, but also of the genres and contexts the *user* knows. As mentioned, such use of references requires that the user knows these references well enough to make subconscious or instinctive connections. In this article, I mainly address the designer’s choices in guiding interpretations and using references to existing designs, but a designer’s knowledge must include information on users’ perspectives, needs, objectives, interpretations and diverse ways of engagement with the interface.

In Model 3, I address the different types of knowledge required to design for communicating with users within a culture. She needs 1) knowledge on what to design for – the context, the strategy, and the values to be communicated; 2) general knowledge on the visual references in our world and specific knowledge on users’ visual references and how they interpret these; and 3) knowledge on what possible design features she can use to communicate through and how she can assign meaning to these.

A designer who is already interested in skateboarding may,

## MODEL 3

A model showing the knowledge a designer needs in order to shape meaning in the design. Author, 2017.



for instance, have an advantage when designing for readers who are skaters, as she knows about the cultural codes and visual language in skating magazines and movies. She may also be able to transfer these codes to other contexts to represent the values connected to skateboarding culture (e.g., playful, laidback, cool, and casual). The benefit of designing for one's own generational group is supported by research (Mainsah, Brandtzæg, & Følstad, 2016).

I argue that by combining features and meanings from different genres and contexts the user has knowledge about, we may shape new meanings – unexpected, surprising, interesting, or innovative ones. This is not just valid for conversational spaces and their surrounding space, though that is the context for this article. This process requires reflection while mixing social contexts, values, design features, users' references, and signaled meaning.

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## Conclusion

Designers can benefit from understanding interfaces and social media spaces from a cultural and communicative perspective. Through the analysis of design choices at Medium.com – an online conversational space and a hybrid between a blog-publishing platform and an online magazine – I demonstrated that various components, in this case layout and typography, can connote different meanings depending on the context. These meanings may alter people's expectations to the conversational space.

By using intertextual references to other design features from diverse contexts, these features can carry meaning that transfers to a new context. To see various components in this light has helped my understanding, thoughts, creativity, and reflection in the design process. Rather than choosing components that are common to use when designing for interactive environments, I see that the details and opportunities in each component can carry meaning that changes the holistic perception of the design. Designers should understand which features they may influence creatively, and expand their library of possible references and semiotic resources to draw on – but also distance themselves from – in diverse contexts.

Designers need knowledge and awareness of their own (sometimes unconscious) ways of collecting semiotic resources and building

new designs from their mental library of these. The designer is not a neutral creator but a creative source of values, interests, and abilities that may inform different designs. An awareness of *what* designers choose to prioritize in their designs and *how* this is emphasized in the visual hierarchy through particular features can enable new possibilities that better communicate the underlying concept and values.

Graphic designers and visual communicators are also needed in the early conceptual stages of the interaction design process. They are often trained with an emphasis on communication, intertextuality, values, and strategy, as opposed to interaction designers' emphasis on use and functionality.

The design of the surroundings of conversational spaces may change how we communicate together. The designed components may shape conversational spaces and democratic spaces by communicating inclusive (or exclusive) values, changing power relations, and challenging readers' expectations to different voices in society. Hence, the design may influence the reputation of new public voices in conversational spaces. I find that more knowledge is needed on these issues. In the future work that forms part of my doctoral research, I will explore the designer's language in these conversational spaces and social media components further. I explore how the design of components such as *input options*, *conversation architecture* and *reward systems* may have an impact on the conversations for which we are designing.

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