

Re-mediating postmillennial posters

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Abstract. While modern conference papers have evolved almost universally to exploit the potential of digital technologies to enhance the effectiveness of their presentation, academic posters still largely ignore the novel affordances of digital tools and media, rather continuing to operate almost entirely within the constraints of their traditional material format. This paper offers an explanation of this anachronism and suggests a more dynamic vision of poster presentations. First, it distinguishes posters as a unique genre of academic presentation with its own set of communicative purposes. Next, with these purposes in mind, it identifies key considerations in effective poster design. Finally, it offers a practical proposal for leveraging the novel affordances of digital technologies to enrich this design, such as by integrating rollover text, audio, and video links into posters that can be downloaded through QR codes to permit local user control.

Keywords: poster presentations, genre, multimodal communication, user autonomy.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of multimedia technologies in the Digital Age has produced profound changes in the ways people present and process information, in academia as elsewhere. In most scholarly fields today, conference presenters are expected to complement their oral message with some sort of visual support, at a minimum. However, whereas oral presentations have now evolved to incorporate such digital resources as slideshows with audio-visual elements and hyperlinks, poster presentations, with rare exception, tend to rely mainly on the paper or cloth medium on which they are printed. While technology should never be implemented merely for its own sake, here we wish to examine this discrepancy and suggest a

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re-mediation of posters to capitalize on some of the digital resources that would render them more effective.

2. Background

Given the limited number of time slots and meeting rooms at most conferences, vetting for paper acceptance is often highly competitive, and otherwise worthy papers, regrettably, cannot always be included in the program. To mitigate this unfortunate situation, conference organizers generally prioritize large-scale, completed research projects, which are expected to have wider appeal than other efforts, such as pilot studies or works-in-progress. They also expand opportunities for conference participation through the option of logistically less demanding poster presentations.

While calls for papers are gradually changing, poster invitations have traditionally been offered to paper proposals that were rejected for oral presentations. As such, posters have a reputation as being lower in prestige, their acceptance being seen as a consolation prize for a second-rate paper (MacIntosh-Murray, 2007). Sadly, many posters inadvertently reinforce this notion by merely condensing and reformatting what was originally conceived as a formal talk. However, posters are not simply short papers, and to view them as such would be analogous to a magazine editor asking a short story author to resubmit his or her contribution as a poem so as to take up less space and require less reading time. In short, posters constitute their own genre of academic presentation and need to be treated as such.

Swales (1990) defines ‘genre’ as “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes” (p. 58). Moreover, he notes that it is recognition of these distinct purposes that informs the conventions that define them, not the reverse, although the latter still influence the former. In other words, the mode and medium of expression should be appropriate to the intended communicative purpose, in what Kress (2010) has come to call “aptness” (p. 156).

Although electronic posters have existed in some form since the turn of the century (e.g. De Simone et al., 2001) and their evolution continues to this day (D’Angelo, 2012), at present they generally entail displaying a document on a large LCD screen, sometimes with the option of giving a short introductory speech and the possibility of changing the projected image in the same manner as slides. In short, it appears that these e-posters are trying ever harder to imitate formal talks, whereas it is our contention that posters will never truly rise from their second-class status so long as they do not come to terms with their identity as a genre of their own.

So what exactly are the communicative purposes of posters? And how can digital technologies best be used to advance them?

3. Discussion

Whereas oral presentations may be characterized as one-to-many, largely top-down communications with interaction mostly limited to a brief question-and-answer session at the end, poster presentations may rather be seen as one-to-few, bottom-up encounters initiated by an audience that is drawn to a physical artifact. As such, posters must take into consideration the attractiveness of their visual design in order to compete for visitor attention in a way that oral presentations do not. As posters are limited in shape, size, and orientation, however, they must also employ their semiotic resources judiciously so as not to sacrifice content for form.

Another important consideration for posters is the nature of the intended interaction. Unlike oral presentations, which control the flow of information in a linear fashion, posters display their entire content at once, thus risking redundancy on the part of the presenter. As most posters are indeed the products of either pilot studies or works-in-progress, the presenter should ideally seek to engage the audience not for the purpose of making broad knowledge claims but rather soliciting comments and questions from interested peers. As such, although the poster design should be logical, it should also allow the viewer to peruse its contents independently at his or her own pace in any order, much like a restaurant menu.

A final consideration is that poster presentations do not involve captive audiences. Though the number and depth of interactions between presenters and their audience may be more substantial with posters than with oral presentations, poster visitors should be free to come and go as they please and not feel pressured to stay for a certain length of time as they do during a formal talk. In short, the poster should be designed not only to elicit engagement but to naturally sustain it as well.

Taking these three main considerations into account, below is a proposal for how electronic poster sessions might evolve to make full use of current digital technologies.

First, digital posters should be created as webpages rather than as conventional electronic documents (e.g. PDFs) to be printed and hung or displayed on a monitor. This would allow visitors to view them on the device of their choice. As to the question of how to keep the presentation focused when the viewer can potentially link deeper and deeper into the web page, our suggested solution is to use an in-

image interaction tool, such as ThingLink, which allows users to link text, audio, and video as rollovers on a fixed background. In short, these links can essentially be viewed without navigating away from the homepage. In fact, [Rowe and Ilic \(2009\)](#) came up with a similar idea, namely incorporating interactive elements into a static image. However, they were constrained to the use of a single laptop, thus limiting local control to only one user at a time.

Next, we suggest that QR codes should be included in conference programs along with the presentation titles and abstracts. In this way, conference participants can scan the codes and preview the posters to help them decide which ones to visit. Moreover, with the poster contents now resident on their devices, participants can truly navigate the material at their own pace in their own manner. Depending on the software, visitors might even be given permission to clone these posters so as to make modifications and, thus, personalize the content. As such permission generally requires a code from the poster creator, it also provides an additional incentive for personal interaction.

Finally, actual paper or cloth posters would still need to be made. However, their function would shift more toward helping pre-interested parties locate the presenters and to attracting incidental visitors.

4. Conclusion

Though conference paper presentations have successfully managed to take advantage of new digital technologies, academic posters seem comparatively stifled in their development. A major hindrance has been a pervasive view of them as second-rate papers, which has resulted in a failure to acknowledge them as a unique genre of academic presentation with their own communicative purposes. To raise the professional profile of posters, we need to become explicitly aware of these distinct purposes and take them into account in our poster design. Only then can we truly begin to take advantage of the novel affordances of the Digital Age.

In short:

A poster is more

Than a slideshow on paper.

Let's keep this in mind.

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