

## Visualizing digital discourse (review)

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sinozic, T. (2020). Visualizing digital discourse (review). [Review of the book *Visualizing digital discourse: Interactional, institutional and ideological perspectives*, ed. by C. Thurlow, C. Dürscheid, & F. Diémoz]. *TATuP - Zeitschrift für Technikfolgenabschätzung in Theorie und Praxis / Journal for Technology Assessment in Theory and Practice*, 29(3), 78-79. <https://doi.org/10.14512/tatup.29.3.78>

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## REVIEW

# Visualizing digital discourse

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Visual communication in everyday digital messages between individuals has become ubiquitous in the last few decades. Given its proliferation, it begs the question of how it is evolving with our language practices and social norms. *Visualizing digital discourse. Interactional, institutional and ideological perspectives*, edited by C. Thurlow, C. Dürscheid and F. Diémoz, is a collection of recent research by some of the best academics in the field of digital discourse analysis, assessing social impacts of visibility with exciting new data from key sources such as YouTube, SMS services, Instagram and Distractify. The disciplinary lenses through which the data is viewed are sociolinguistics and communication studies, with specific focus on the technology area of multimodality. Multimodality implies the combination of graphemes and symbols within one medium, such as for example letters and emojis in text messages.

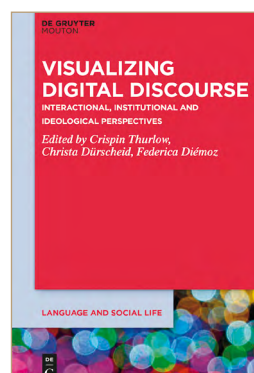
In the book's introduction, editors C. Thurlow and C. Dürscheid state that digital discourse studies is by now a well-established field because scholars have been continuously expanding their theories and methods to keep up with fast-paced innovations in communication technologies. Although traditionally concerned with language and linguistic developments, C. Thurlow and C. Dürscheid argue that "the increasingly multi-media and inherently multi-modal nature of digital communication makes this single track, and sometimes single-minded, approach more and more untenable" (p. 3). In short, increasingly diverse options to communicate in multi-media formats require a step towards analyzing the social change with respect to these new modes. The concern for how our individual interactions and practices in digital communication create and are created by social norms and power relations also makes this a relevant book to enrich technology assessment (TA). The findings from other interdisciplinary fields open some novel gateways to answering questions that arise in TA research.

## Book content

The first chapter by R. Jones, a leading scholar in the field of discourse analysis, sets the scene by analyzing mobile digital photography as a medium through which we negotiate power relations between ourselves and others. Taking selfies and filming videos of interactions with law enforcement officers illustrate how these two activities create and reinforce specific 'rights'. The 'right to see' and the 'right to be seen', for example with the turn of the camera to oneself ('look at me'), signify a novel way in which these technologies are structuring users' relationships.

The following chapters are organized in three parts. Part 1 focuses on popular symbolic complements to written language, such as emojis, emoticons and other kinds of symbolic images, for example in text messages. C. Thurlow and V. Jaroski present a critical analysis of the dominant mediatised view of emojis as making users dumb and illiterate. Based on analysis of new text message data, the authors find that emoji symbols are enriching rather than replacing 'proper' language. In the next chapter, G. Albert offers a definition of emojis and positions them in language theory. He argues that they should not be labelled as images, but rather defined by their functions in text, which over time have become quite stable. The following chapter by R. Panckhurst and F. Frontini examine emoji use in a French language corpus of text messages. In their data they identify three main uses of emojis: (1) *redundant addition*, where an emoji is used in text but is not essential for comprehending the text; (2) *necessary addition*, where an emoji is used in text in which it is required for accurate interpretation; and (3) *lexical replacement*, where an emoji replaces actual words. The authors find that redundancy is the most frequent usage, followed by necessity and lexical replacement.

Part 2 of the book presents four chapters on how social media is shaping relationships and interactions among users, and more generally in society. The first chapter by S. Leppänen on blogging mothers is a captivating analysis which compares and contrasts two types of blogs, namely mothers signaling their perfection and mothers signaling their imperfections. The blogs are interpreted as either replicating two social stereotypes of motherhood. On the one hand, mothers are depicted as being neat, tidy, responsible and modest, thus conforming to the elitist im-



Thurlow, Crispin; Dürscheid, Christa; Diémoz, Federica (2020):

**Visualizing digital discourse. Interactional, institutional and ideological perspectives.**

Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

273 pp., 77,99 €,

ISBN 9781501518744

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<https://doi.org/10.14512/tatup.29.3.78>

age projected by sustainability and organic food movements. On the other hand, the counter-image is produced by ridiculing mothers' strive for perfection through the display of images of 'bad' motherhood, or images of lower class motherhood. In both cases, bloggers are neither poor nor lower class. In a very original way, the authors show that classy motherhood blogs are in a sense truly portraying their reality, whereas the 'bad mother' blogs are fakes that use degrading stereotypes to caricature and ridicule lower class motherhood. In the next chapter, A. Schmidt and C. Marx explore the attraction of a very popular Youtube genre, known as *Let's Plays*, i. e. recorded videos in which gamers talk about what they are doing while playing a game. The authors describe how players make these videos entertaining, even though it is not possible to join them playing. The third chapter by D. Cserző analyses virtual video chat tours in which users show their surroundings to others through the camera of their devices. The approach used is mediated discourse analysis, a combination of methods to precisely evaluate details of frames and comments. In the authors' analysis two video chatters convey their social status and create intimacy throughout their dialogue, accompanying the multi-modal video tour. R. Venem and K. Lobinger in the following chapter show how users manage close personal relationships by exchanging photos, and how this is related to general cultural policy and social representation. In contrast to dominant public views of the negative impacts of sharing images on relationships, this chapter finds that photos make people feel close, connected and mutually bonded.

'haul' videos in a popular Youtube channel whose presentations target teenagers to purchase the clothes being shown. Acting as an older sister or friend of the teenage viewer, the so called 'hauler' and 'influencer' projects intimacy and trustworthiness to her teenage audience, for example by creating an impression of intimacy (by filming in her bedroom). At the same time, the 'hauler' is described as a 'trickster' who navigates between the intimate space of her home and the professional sphere of modelling, through which she is not experienced by her audience as a fraud, but rather as a fashion expert, and thereby increasing her popularity.

### Benefits in a TA context

This book is a stimulating read for TA researchers and practitioners because of three main reasons. First, in TA studies it can be a real challenge to get good data, and to figure out which kind of data is needed to assess technology impacts on society. The types of data presented in this volume, as well as the methods of analysis, are useful for understanding how to evaluate impacts of technical change in new media on social relationships and individual consumption. Even though the findings are perhaps not all surprising, the material presented is fascinating because of the diversity of data and methods. The reader is given an overview of how much analysis can be done with relatively small bits of data (lines of text, individual videos), given suitable frameworks. Second, the perspectives in the book are interdisciplinary and the framings (for example, Foucault, Heideg-

*This book's findings open some novel gateways to answering questions that arise in TA research.*

Part 3 focuses on multimodality in digital representation, thereby deepening the book's general argument that communication consists of more than just words and letters, but rather includes symbols and images, 'listicles' and (advertising) videos, all of which have become much more powerful through the internet. H. Stöckl discusses image-centricity as a central concept in multi-modal media research and argues for a differentiation between images in new and traditional media, suggesting that new media technologies have reconfigured the role of images in communication. The next chapter by L. Portmann analyses the construction of 'good taste' in how two supermarket chains in Switzerland, Coop and Migros, display photos of simple foods on Instagram. Portmann states that through the use of materiality and modality the two supermarket chains present very mundane and simple foods as sophisticated and classy. In the following chapter J. Pflaeging analyses the use of purposefully distracting texts such as 'listicles' on websites that take readers' attention away from on their intended focus towards advertising and ideally motivate them to start shopping. The final chapter of the volume by D. Meer and K. Staubach analyses so-called

ger, or Bourdieu) are familiar, making the book comprehensible to an interdisciplinary TA community and to anyone unfamiliar with the field of sociolinguistics itself. Third, the individual chapters are very well written, presenting original and critical perspectives based on theoretically informed analyses. I recommend this book to anyone trying to both get a grasp on deeper social issues played out in our day-to-day communication, as well as to experts in the fields who seek novel takes on traditional questions of social change. Finally, the sociolinguistic framings for textual analysis could be very beneficial for questions raised in the TA community on the impacts of new media products and systems on individuals.