

Typographic voice: researching readers' interpretations

Jeanne-Louise Moys April 2011

Jeanne-Louise Moys is a research student in the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, funded by the Simplification Centre. This paper summarises the first phase of her doctoral research project up to April 2011, supervised during this time by Professor Rob Waller. It explores reader perceptions of typographic meaning.

Graphic designers make documents look attractive and distinctive, but does this actually shape our judgments about what we read? This report discusses a project to investigate the way readers interpret graphic features. It shows that people readily form a view of the document producer based on design, but that their basis for doing so is not exactly what designers imagine – for example, for the people we consulted, overall graphic treatment was more significant than choice of typeface.



Overview

Graphic designers put a lot of thought into choosing typefaces and creating layouts that will appeal to readers, and that will add something to what is communicated. But do readers actually notice, and does it shape their attitude to a document? The research reported here aims to find out.

The Simplification Panel is a group of members of the public who have registered as willing to participate in research studies run by the Simplification Centre. Anyone can register by completing an online registration form. The majority of members currently live in Reading, England.

Although the Simplification Centre is mostly interested in highly functional communications, we started this research project by looking into readers' perceptions of magazine typography. We chose magazines because they are an accessible and familiar genre of documents, and they cover a range of topics and readership groups. We invited members of the Simplification Centre panel to participate in the study. Fifteen of them attended interviews in which we showed them a selection of magazine feature spreads and covers.

We set out to identify:

- what kind of judgments readers make in response to different typographic presentations and
- which typographic features they saw as influential on their perception of a document.

We discovered that there are likely correlations between typographic presentation and readers' evaluations of documents. The study indicates that, rather than simply conveying a sense of mood, typographic presentations may actually influence how people interpret information. For example, they may form judgments about the kind, tone, depth and quality of the information. They may also make assumptions about who the publication was intended for and how and where they were likely to engage with it.

Significantly, although there is plenty of existing research that focuses on perceptions of typeface personality, our findings suggest that a wider range of typographic features influences readers' views.

The results of this study are being used to develop a series of documents which tests reader perceptions of particular typographic presentations and features.

What is typographic affect?

Graphic designers often talk about the ‘look and feel’ of documents. In the Simplification Centre, we prefer to talk about the ‘voice’ of a document to emphasise that documents are talking to readers in particular ways. The voice of a document is communicated through both its visual tone and the style of the writing.

Affect is usually a verb – something affects you. In everyday use the noun is spelled ‘effect’: something has an effect on you. In psychology, though, affect is a noun (you stress the first syllable when you say it: *á*-ffect) that means an emotional response.

In relation to typography, functional concerns such as legibility and ease of navigation for readers are key. But we should also consider the potential influence of typography on readers’ judgments of document address (that is, who it seems to be talking to) and voice. We call this typographic affect. Borrowed from psychology, affect is a term used to refer to emotive, rather than cognitive judgments. In the context of document design, typographic affect refers to perceptions of the expressive attributes of typography rather than its functionality or legibility.

Typographic voice in everyday documents

Different kinds of documents use typography in different ways. Over time, we have become accustomed to associating certain styles of typographic design with certain kinds of content and tone of voice. For example, we associate the brashness of tabloid-style newspaper typography with a different editorial persona and reader profile from those of more classically-designed broadsheet-style newspapers.

Not so long ago, reputable business communication adhered to the strict conventions of the typewriter era. Aside from the pre-printed company branding on a letterhead, a formal letter used one typeface, in one size and weight, in a single, justified column across the page with perhaps the occasional use of capitalisation for emphasis. A linear narrative of information was presented in a unified typographic style with a single typographic voice.

Today, technology enables document producers to use a lot more typographic features in a single document. These features range from typographic details – such as type size, style (roman or italic) and effects (outline, shadows and 3D effects), colour and weight (relative boldness or lightness) – to layout considerations – such as spacing, patterning and proportion. These features are not new to typesetting and document design but digital technology makes it much easier (and cheaper) to apply them across a range of genres. Our concern is with how particular combinations of typographic features may influence how a reader perceives a document.

In close reading we tend to read the words on the page in order. More commonly, people use **strategic reading**: seeing the structure of a text in order to skim read, or to read different parts with different levels of attention.

Typographic variation and strategic reading

Not only are the possible combinations endless, but we are also increasingly encouraged to differentiate aspects of a message through typography. This differentiation and variation is not just a question of branding: it is about creating better documents for readers by using typography to facilitate what we call strategic reading. We know that readers have different skills and motivations for reading so they will read in different and selective ways according to their purpose. A range of typographic and organisational devices are used to make it easier for readers to see at a glance what kind of information they are getting and to make different kinds of information more accessible.

Typographic variation is used to differentiate and group particular kinds of information, create information hierarchies and reading paths, emphasise and highlight information and to convey the intended tone of voice and document personality. The letters and bills we receive today combine our statement of account with headings, explanations, small print, warnings and penalty information, marketing material and other information – all clearly differentiated through typography.

So what?

There is a range of research studies to support the idea that choosing an appropriate typeface is important for document credibility (Shaikh 2007). Most professional documents use a pre-defined set of corporate house typefaces that are intended to express the brand identity.

But, as we have described, designers manipulate a much broader range of typographic and layout variables than just choosing a typeface. For example they may also change the colour, size, style (roman or italicised), weight (relative boldness or lightness), and spacing of a text element and they may choose to add bullets, icons or boxes or even change the layout or positioning of a text element on the page.

The increasing use of typographic differentiation across a range of document genres raises a series of questions about typographic voice. These include:

- Does the use of increased differentiation influence the voice of a document?

- What combinations of elements appeal to particular readership profiles? For example, are there particular features that denote a particular voice or is the voice of a document a combination of the number of different text elements (frequency) and the degree to which each element is differentiated (amplification)?
- Do different typographic configurations influence how readers perceive a document and its credibility?

These questions form the rationale for a doctoral research project being conducted within the Simplification Centre. As a starting point, we conducted a study to explore whether readers' affective perceptions of magazines could be matched to different styles of typographic presentation. The study also investigated which typographic and other features readers saw as informing their choice.

What were our aims?

We set out to uncover:

1. What kinds of judgments readers make in response to different typographic presentations
2. Patterns in how readers tend to group typographic configurations and the meaning they attached to these
3. Particular variables which are noted as influential in determining their affective judgments
4. How perceptions of address and readership correspond to typography and
5. How significant the affective role of typography is in relation to contextual influences such as content and imagery.

Our intention was to explore which features were likely to be seen as important in order to identify which attributes should be tested further. It was as important to establish when content or images played a more dominant role, as it was to identify what readers did and did not notice about the typography. For this reason, we used natural documents (real magazines – all with different content and a range of images and printed on different kinds of paper) rather than controlled test stimuli.

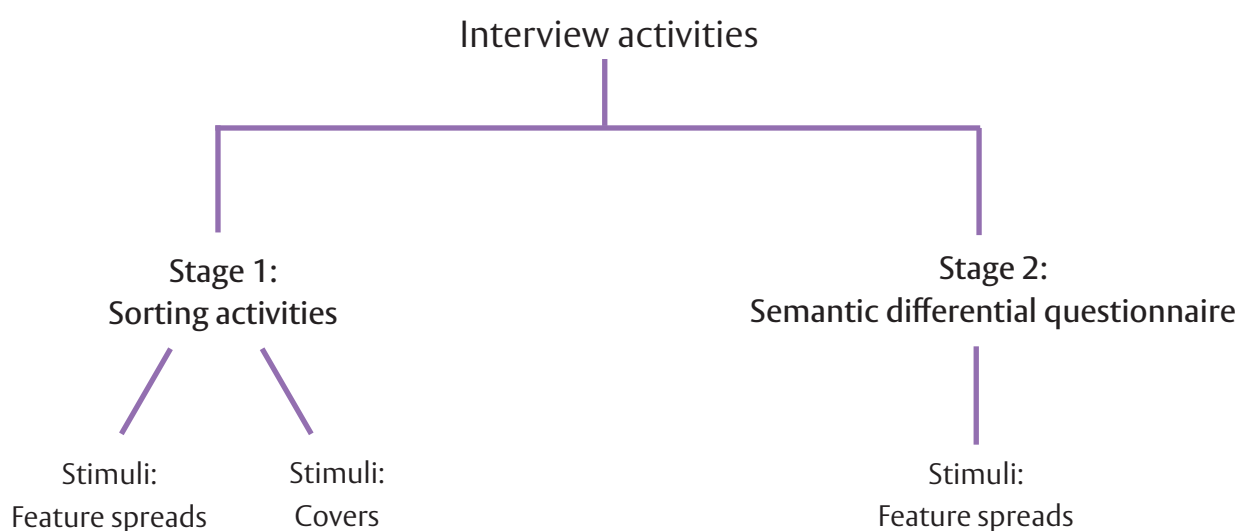
The study was also designed to evaluate the relevance of particular methodological approaches to the study of typographic affect.

Our research methods

The study consisted of a series of 15 individual interviews with volunteers from the Simplification Centre's participant panel. The study was designed to explore non-expert perceptions of typographic configurations. Participants had to meet the criterion that they had neither formal design training nor professional design experience.

Each interview had two stages as shown in the diagram. During **stage one**, participants performed a series of sorting activities of magazine examples¹. Our interviewer asked participants to explain their choices using different themes (typographic style, mood and readership) in order to explore their opinions of the typography and layout of the magazines. Both the cover and a feature spread from each magazine were used.

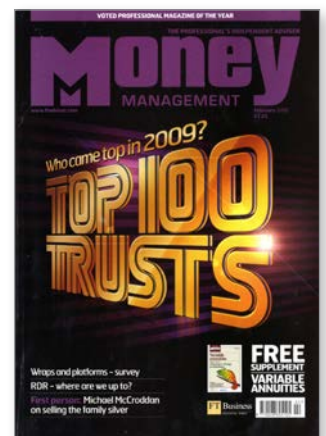
In **stage two**, participants completed a questionnaire in which they ranked the appropriateness of 20 adjective pairs for the typography of each of the magazine spreads².



¹ This method is derived from an approach known as multiple card sort analysis.

² The questionnaire was adapted from a semantic differential study of newspaper typography by Click and Stempel (1968).

While the research project explores a range of document genres, we chose magazines as a starting point because they are a familiar genre and because they use a range of typographic configurations (from display-style cover typography to longer articles). From a larger sample of magazines across two subject areas (finance and gardening), we selected 12 magazines by choosing every third magazine from alphabetically-arranged groups of titles in the two subject areas. The 12 publications we used were: *Investors Chronicle*, *Money Management*, *Money Observer*, *Moneywise*, *What Investment*, *World Finance*, *Gardeners' World*, *Gardens Illustrated*, *Grow It!*, *Grow Your Own*, *House and Garden*, and *Kitchen Garden*. We chose the main feature article and the cover as stimuli for the sorting activities.

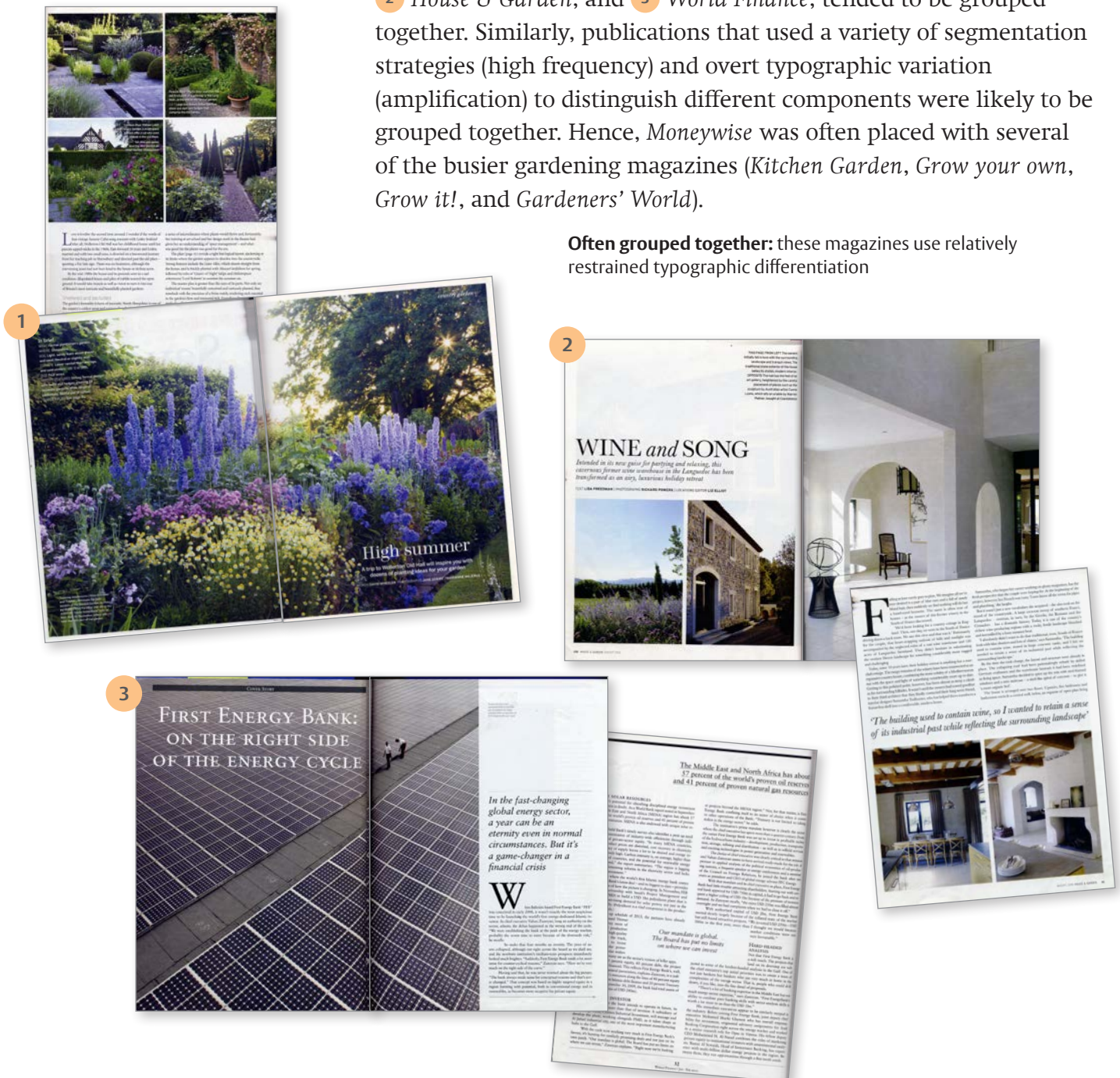


How did participants group the publications?

Grow your own and World Finance turned out to be the magazines least likely to be put together. And *Gardens Illustrated* and *House & Garden* were the magazines most likely to be grouped together. *Gardener's World*, *Kitchen Garden*, *Grow your own*, and *Grow it!* were also among those frequently grouped together, as were *Money Management* and *Investors Chronicle*.

In particular, magazines with restrained typographic differentiation (limited frequency and amplification), such as 1 *Gardens Illustrated*, 2 *House & Garden*, and 3 *World Finance*, tended to be grouped together. Similarly, publications that used a variety of segmentation strategies (high frequency) and overt typographic variation (amplification) to distinguish different components were likely to be grouped together. Hence, *Moneywise* was often placed with several of the busier gardening magazines (*Kitchen Garden*, *Grow your own*, *Grow it!*, and *Gardeners' World*).

Often grouped together: these magazines use relatively restrained typographic differentiation



The covers were where the most cross-over between subject areas occurred. In fact, among the most frequent pairs, finance and gardening combinations were high ranking. In particular, *Moneywise* was often paired up with gardening magazines (*Gardener's World*, *Grow your own*, *Grow it!*). The use of a lot of typographic variation seems to create covers that are perceived as shouting at readers.



Often grouped together: these covers use highly amplified typographic differentiation

In contrast, more austere covers with less typographic variation are perceived as more authoritative and quietly stating who they are. Thus, *World Finance* was often grouped with *Gardens Illustrated* and *House & Garden*. *World Finance* was less likely to be grouped with the more general appeal gardening magazines. Similarly, *House & Garden* was less likely to be grouped with *Moneywise*, which is arguably the financial magazine with the most general appeal.



Often grouped together: these covers use very subtle typographic differentiation

Analysis of the sorting data shows that, beyond similarity of content, there are particular clusters within the subject groups and within these clusters certain publications cross over the subject boundaries. For example, *World Finance* was often grouped with the more upmarket gardening magazines but not with any of the other gardening magazines. Similarly, *Moneywise* was grouped with the general cluster of gardening magazines. This suggests that, regardless of content, there is a likely similarity between the typographic configurations of *World Finance*, *House & Garden*, and *Gardens Illustrated* and that these tend to be perceived in corresponding ways. Similarly, while ① *Moneywise* and ② *Money Observer* may have been grouped within the main cluster of financial magazines (③ *What Investment*, ④ *Money Management*, and *Investors Chronicle*), they are sufficiently typographically similar to the style of the main cluster of gardening magazines (*Kitchen Garden*, *Grow your own*, *Grow it!*, and *Gardeners' World*) to sometimes be seen to have similar affect to these and grouped with these instead.



Not subject constrained: these magazines were more likely to be put with gardening magazines that shared the same kind of typographic treatment



Subject constrained: these magazines were unlikely to be put with the gardening magazines

What judgments did participants form?

Participants said they found the ‘mood’ theme harder to sort than the ‘typographic style’ and ‘readership’ themes³. But they did describe clear affective differences between publications for all the themes. Mood was the sort where they appeared to be most influenced by content: particularly in terms of colour and images.

Participants tended to group publications according to whether they were perceived as:

- formal/informal
- friendly/serious/brash
- relaxed/energetic
- factual/light-hearted.

These descriptions, used in conjunction with the data from the questionnaires, are useful for identifying suitable descriptors that can be used in future studies of typographic affect. They also indicate that readers do readily form judgments of document address and tone in relation to typography.

We initially anticipated that participants would describe the personality and style of the typefaces when questioned about the typography. However, overall they expressed a greater range of affective judgments. For example, in relation to typography, participants commented on:

- different reading strategies and modes of address
- ease: whether it was easy to see what an article was about, whether it was easy to navigate, whether it was easy to read
- the nature and tone of the information: whether the tone of the article was likely to be friendly, patronising, opinionated or authoritative and
- how informative an article would be.

In particular, participants commented extensively on reading patterns across all the sorting themes, particularly in terms of whether an article was perceived as light or heavy reading. Participants discussed reading strategies and modes of address, even

³ This is not an unexpected finding as research methods that allow participants to articulate their own constructs generally find that people find it more difficult to describe abstract qualities.

before being prompted to sort according to ‘readership’. They were also inclined to comment on who the readers were likely to be.

What features did participants see as influential?

The recording of the interview discussions during the sorting tasks makes it easy to discern when participants were basing their judgments on the typographic presentation and when they were influenced by other factors such as content, images, colour, and paper. We had expected readers to be influenced primarily by these factors and their answers did show when these factors were dominant influences. However, we were surprised at the extent to which most participants also expressed affective judgments formed in relation to typographic presentation. In particular, given the focus on typeface personality in the field, we were also surprised at how few remarks were made about this feature.

Participants commented on features such as how the layout, use of columns, density and degree of variation influenced their judgments. When it came to typeface they were more likely to discuss its treatment than its choice: whether something was in bold, capitals, italics, colour, had a drop shadow or other effects, seemed to influence its distinctiveness far more than the choice of typeface.

An interesting and unintended finding was that the image:text ratio was very influential on perceptions of mood. In some of the gardening magazines, the similarity of colour (greens) and image was highly influential for the majority of participants. Some participants expressed a preference for green over other colours, and others



Colour: the use of green in these magazines often meant they were grouped together

In terms of the magazine covers, we expected that some participants would sort according to the type of font used in the masthead. Using categories of serif, sans serif and script, we anticipated the following groups: *Grow it!*, which uses a handwritten-styled script would be on its own, the sans serif mastheads would be together, *Which Investment* uses both sans serif and serif so could be on its own or with the either of these groups, and the serif faces would either be grouped together or split into two groups according to whether they were ‘posh’ serifs or more chunky faces.

But in reality, readers sorted the covers differently to these expectations and the category of typeface seemed to matter less than whether it was in all caps or lowercase or the amount of white space around it. Only one person put *Grow it!* in a group of its own because it was in a script face, although another two individuals commented on this. What we do with the type and the overall impression of busyness in the layout is possibly far more influential on the typographic voice than what typeface is used.

Upper case



Predominantly lower case



Use of capitalisation: many participants grouped according to the use of capitals or sentence case rather than according to typeface categories

What did the questionnaires tell us?

The data collected from questionnaires provides descriptive profiles of the 12 publications used in the study. However, these descriptions may not be a pure indication of typographic affect. It is impossible to tell whether readers were influenced only by typographic presentation when they ranked the appropriateness of the adjectives. The colour, content and images are likely to have biased the results. We are now following up with a study which isolates typographic influence.

The profiles created from the questionnaire data can be compared with the various descriptions generated in the interview to assess whether the adjectives taken from the 1968 Click and Stempel study are still appropriate for a contemporary study of typographic affect. For example, it would seem that today's readers are more inclined to consider whether an article seems 'important' or 'authoritative' rather than whether it is 'objective' or 'unbiased'.

In addition, comparison with the results obtained by Click and Stempel points to a strong difference in the statistical significance for what Click and Stempel call 'stylistic factors'. It is possible that this difference may be related to cultural changes in document design and perception since the late 1960s. More importantly, it could also indicate key differences in magazine and newspaper typography. Both explanations point to the need for studies of typography to take account of contextual factors such as cultural context and genre.

What are the implications?

While the influence of content (words and images) and other variables such as colour on perception cannot be ruled out given the nature of the test material, qualitative interviews did reveal what motivated the responses, suggesting that typography can influence readers' judgments sufficiently to merit further investigation of typographic affect.

In particular, the study showed that:

- documents that have similar frequency and amplification patterns of typographic variation tend to be perceived as having a similar typographic voice
- typographic voice is conveyed through a range of variables

- participants did not tend to sort the stimuli according to typeface categories but were more likely to consider the use of capitals or italics and perceived similarity of type weight (usually a combination of size, boldness, and/or stroke thickness)
- participants' judgments of typographic affect were more likely to be influenced by macro variables relating to visual structure and spatial organisation (such as image:text ratios, similarity of segmentation in terms of frequency and amplification, and the overall sense of variation on the page)
- readers readily discern who the publication is likely to address, where and when it is likely to be read, what reading strategies and levels of engagement are facilitated, the information value and style, what tone of voice is being used, and how the producers position themselves.

These findings indicate that typographic voice is not just a question of establishing a typography or visual mood but that typography plays a role in how a document is seen to address its readers and position itself. To understand this phenomenon better, reader responses to a range of typographic features need to be tested.

What next?

This study has shown that typographic presentation does have an affective role and has identified a number of factors that may influence this role. We are designing some documents with controlled content and typographic features to test the role of the following in typographic affect:

- a broad range of macro and micro typographic features
- the relationship between the frequency and amplification of typographic differentiation.

References

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