

The Need for a Simultaneous Reading of Multimedia*

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What is meant specifically by 'multimedia' in any instance is often clearer to the speaker than her audience. Its a term that is a part of the rhetoric, beliefs and activity of so many different groups that its meaning shifts in different contexts.

The term 'multimedia' is problematic, it does not define a technically distinctive medium as *television* or *newspaper* does, or a creative domain it may encompass as *cinema* or *music* does. But it is a better term than 'computer' or 'digital media' to refer to the broad realm of communication and distribution technology that we now have. It is also useful because, despite its ambiguity, it seems to identify something of significance.

In the current high voltage technohype atmosphere of cyber policy formation by commercial and social institutions and the growing social expectation that these have led to, definitions of *multimedia* inevitably refer to the digital and computer technologies upon which it is based and endower these technologies with the 'power' to 'merge', 'aggregate' or 'integrate'. Across these definitions there are variations of emphasis and additional elements such as 'convergence' and 'interactivity'. What is common is that these definitions seek a justification for multimedia's use in the instance which it is referring to.

It at once refers to what has come before and offers something new; *Multimedia* is about much more than a site for cultural production, it is about the culture of reception.

The 'multi' in multimedia comes from the issue of interface, a way of mediating communications between machines and humans. The 'media' comes from the use of computers as an agent for communicating between people. These are two different results of computer interface development - combined into the one term.

(*a strategy suggested to me by Rose Woodcock.)