

Inquiries on the Everyday Online Conversations of Design: Typologies, Comments, and Threads

Jessica Barness

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In this article, the author explores the nature of design writing in the online environment by looking at everyday conversations of design: the written conversations that occur as a combination of a design-centred blog or social media post, its reader responses, and affordances of its platforms. This study focuses on the authorial activities of readers on graphic design blogs and social network sites (SNS). These are located, analyzed, and traced through three evidence-based inquiries referred to as Typologies, Comments, and Threads, using select English-language graphic design blogs and posts on SNS. Findings are presented visually, followed by a discussion on their disciplinary significance, democratic participation, technological mediation, and issues surrounding reader identity. The study also points toward problems finding and archiving the conversations, and positioning them within the broader context of design writing and literature.

Keywords: blogs; design conversations; design criticism; design writing; graphic design; public discourse; social media

Introduction

Public discourse and design writing intersect online. Conversations taking place within design blogs and on social network sites (SNS) are vital evidence of a socially engaged design community. Beginning in the early 2000s, design blogs have served as places for sharing knowledge and inviting reader comments related to practice, culture, education, and so forth. SNS are generally considered the offspring of blogs and have furthered these online conversations. Blogs and SNS often lack the credibility or authority afforded by traditional publication processes; an author's work may not require editorial or peer review before it is published. One of the defining points of the online environment is the potential for multiple readers to interact nearly synchronously with a text and with each other. Few posts or comments lead to paradigm-shifting discourse, yet these everyday online conversations provide opportunities for voices and ideas without an outlet before the internet.

Though online bulletin boards and messaging were in use during the 1980s, it wasn't until the 1990s that the broad public began using platforms such as email, forums, and chat rooms to discuss important matters or exchange friendly banter. Blogs emerged and gained traction with Web 2.0 in the early 2000s. In their most basic form, blogs are discursive online spaces and cumulative. They exist as chronological streams of time-stamped posts of texts and hyperlinks (most recent at the top of the screen), containing links to various sources, and archives of posts and comments (Daille et al. 2011, 411–412). Blogs brought publishing freedom intertwined with informal language and a first-person perspective. The popular blogging platform Blogger advertised itself as 'push-button publishing for the people' and in 2004, the *Merriam-Webster* word of the year was blog (Rettberg 2013, 12–13). By 2008, the number of blogs recorded by Technorati was in the millions.

Design writing, traditionally published in print, inevitably found another home on blogs. During the 2000s, blogs such as *Design Observer* and *Speak Up* were bustling centres of reader commentary focused on topics relating to graphic design. Despite the number of graphic design blogs that have remained active, however, there has been a noticeable decline in reader commentary over the past decade. By the 2010s design communities — along with everyone else — experienced a cultural shift to posting, sharing, liking, and otherwise amplifying topics on SNS. What previously existed as a few central places for everyday online conversations of design appeared to be veering toward dispersion. Whether on a blog or SNS, everyday conversations provide a means for expression, unfettered deliberation, and information exchange with each new post and response. Reader comments are often written to provoke reactions and the interfaces allow for immediate response. The affordances of SNS platforms allow for meaning-making in many ways, ranging from low-level material features such as liking, commenting, and sharing as well as high-level complexities of social capital, mobile availability, and visibility (Bucher and Helmond 2017). Moreover, readers become writers by virtue of the text fields below a post inviting one to simply 'please reply'.

These attributes of blogs and SNS are experienced by all who participate in them, not just design communities. However, the nature of design writing specific to the online environment has not been thoroughly explored. This study grew from my curiosity on the significance and complexities of design writing on blogs and SNS. Throughout this article, I use certain terms to differentiate types of design-centred writing (Figure 1). The use of 'everyday'

is adapted from a blog essay by Rick Poynor about participation by design academics in the public realm, where concerns of practice, education, and research can intersect (2012). His post is accompanied by numerous reader comments debating the essay itself as well as points made within the comments section. Everyday conversations of design such as these — the written conversations that occur as a combination of a design-centred blog or social media post, its reader responses, and affordances of its platforms — can make visible the issues experienced throughout design communities. The authorial activities of readers on graphic design blogs and SNS are explored here through three evidence-based inquiries referred to as Typologies, Comments, and Threads. In doing this, I examine the everyday conversations of design as online, dialogic products of graphic design communities and ‘the circumstances in which such artefacts are distributed, received and/or consumed in and through various segments of society, and increasingly, societies’ (Blauvelt 1994a, 209).

Figure 1. Terms used in this study to differentiate types of design-centred writing.

Term	Characteristics	Types of Dissemination
Design writing	about, with, and for a range of design-centred topics	books, scholarly articles, magazine articles, blog posts, SNS posts, design artefacts
Design criticism	interpretation and analysis of design-centred topics; may be oppositional; ideological and historical contexts	
Everyday conversations of design	informal remarks and personal opinions of design-centred topics; everyday social contexts	combination of an original blog or SNS post, its reader responses, and affordances of its platforms
Design debates	arguments and interrogations of design-centred topics	all of the above

Literature: Design Writing and Web 2.0

The term design writing is sometimes used interchangeably with design criticism (Poynor 2005b), and the latter refers to ‘creative interpretations of the work, period or theory being analyzed’ (Vignelli 1999) or the ‘work of critical debate in design through writing’ (DHS n.d.). It also manifests through ‘fictive, vindictive, and improper’ attitudes (Baker 1997, 76), and a meta-criticism of design writing asserts it should explore new ideas rather than focus on the established subject matter (Willis 2013, 40). Selections of design writing and criticism, as well as studies on their practice, are discussed in a variety of graphic design books (for example, see Bierut et al. 1994–2007; de Smet and

De Bondt 2012; Lupton 1999; McCarthy 2013). Special issues of academic journals have also been devoted to the subject of design writing, such as *Design and Culture* (Guffey 2013), *Visible Language* (Blauvelt 1994b), as well as *Emigre* magazine (Burdick 1995). Design writing and criticism can be traced to the design studio classroom, in which the interrelated yet distinct activities of critique, criticism, and critical thinking are exercised (Thiessen 2017, 147). In the early twenty-first century, design writing experienced a ‘death rhetoric’ when printed publications ceased operation (Twemlow 2017, 250–251), and yet it found rebirth in new academic programs and events. It emerged in blogs and later within SNS.

The intellectual activity connecting practice and theory affects how design is written, empowering designers to ‘take on a more active role in establishing an “open relationship” (in a public sphere) which invites an argument rather than a passive reception of information’ (McCoy et al. 2002, 330). Writing itself is a technology that brings critique into existence (Ong 1986, 29) and online conversations are public displays and performative exhibitions of digital interfaces. These become part of online information feeds, which are semantic-based curations circulating ‘material that’s been meaningfully selected by humans around its capacity to assemble publics and generate discourse’ (Soulellis 2017). Performed by writers as well as readers, online conversations represent a type of critical discourse, even so far as to ‘generate a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements’ (Latour 2005, 5).

As much as the everyday conversations of design could be viewed as public displays and performance, they are also a social practice that merges people, authority, and influence. Citizenship and community identity emerge through the democratic nature of online discourse (Dahlgren 2005, 152; Hermes 2006, 302), and publics have the opportunity, and responsibility, to read and debate in the interests of themselves (Habermas 1989, 43). Online, people can form meaningful groups outside of formal organizations, and doing this transcends geographic, institutional, and socioeconomic boundaries. Where one chooses to post or comment may challenge established authorities (Hofheinz 2011, 1428) and advancements of public interest take place through power struggles and debates.

Design culture itself ‘encompasses the knowledge, values, visions, and quality criteria that emerge from the tangle of conversations occurring during design activities’ (Manzini 2016, 54). Blog and SNS comments may be seen as a contemporary form of public margin notes. Reader comments can converge,

diverge, critique, debate, and subvert the main text. These reader notes may add information through annotation; emphasize new or important points; evaluate ideas through praise or disagreement; or clarify meaning (Slights 2001, 25). The absence of margin notes does not always indicate a reader's agreement with a text; indeed, lack of notes may falsely appear to support controversial, or even inaccurate, subject matter. Annotated historical manuscripts 'did not only pass on knowledge but endeavoured to create it' (Madej 2016, ch. 2) and in this way, readers are part of written records and the spreading of ideas. Additionally, studies on digital annotation and interactive reading indicate that commenting on a text leads to a deeper comprehension of material (Bauer and Zirker 2015; Sankaram and Schober 2015).

As blogs gained momentum in the early 2000s, the printed publication of design writing and criticism appeared to be doing the opposite. An example is *Emigre* magazine (1984–2005), which is often celebrated as a pivotal force of graphic design authorship, writing, and criticism. It accomplished this as an independent, printed publication (inclusive of its multimedia issues). Founder and publisher Rudy VanderLans would later assert *Emigre* ceased publication because he decided to move on with other projects. Nonetheless, criticism of blogs appeared in essays about the magazine's ending:

Emigre magazine is dead, and the blogs have killed you. . . [it] failed to adapt to the rise of the blogs. . . The discourse was stolen not by a few visionaries with commitment and courage, but by the great leveling wheels of the internet. (Earls 2005, 119; Vit 2005)

Design blogs generate a lot of noise and they sure do love their own hype. . . They are places for chatter. . . In *Emigre*, form itself became a means of debate. What the magazine said was inseparable from how it looked. (Poynor 2005a, para. 7)

Given the constraints of web design at that time, the latter comparison with magazines did not have a parallel in early design blogs. Years of graphic design mastery applied to the printed page had not yet reached websites. Form, however, endures as a means of debate; perhaps it was not yet apparent, but what a blog said would prove inseparable from how it fused everyday activities of public provocation and reaction within an interface.

Design writing benefits with contributions from 'classes, academic writing and training, from outsiders or insiders, from smart-ass students or senior

scholars' (Drucker 2013, 397) — essentially, democratic participation. The formal roles of experts and novices are traditionally delineated by design communities (Massanari 2012, para. 10) and the online environment challenges these things. The perspectives of unsanctioned knowledge have value and allow for discovering new ways to perceive design products and processes (Hazell and Fallan 2015, 110), and new opportunities for public participation become more inclusive and diverse as they 'enlarge the modes of citizenship by turning previously private activities into public roles' (Sarvasay 1997, 59–60). Everyday conversations of design can reveal diverse viewpoints on what design is, does, and might become.

Design blog comments, particularly those observed on graphic design blogs, quieted less than a decade after they began. Comments changed from paragraphs to short bursts of acknowledgement such as 'cool post!' and 'great!' The 'hit and link' economy of the information web, which included early blogs, had evolved into the social web characterized as the 'like' economy (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). Blog progeny of the 2010s include mainstream SNS such as Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter, where users construct profiles and make visible their connections and interactions with other users (Boyd and Ellison 2007, 211). Competing services and mobile devices characterize SNS, as does as 'a fragmentation of conversations which now to a lesser extent take place in the blogs themselves and are instead spread across Twitter and Facebook' (Rettberg 2013, 14–15). The viewpoints, knowledge, and information within online SNS communities circulated at a faster pace than before. Under these conditions, people could freely publish in an environment moving toward mass visibility, monetization, and being able to 'see ourselves being seen' (Dean 2010, 35–36). Through content feeds delivering a perpetual stream of published texts and algorithm-determined related matter, 'we experience information as a smooth, conversational flow — not individual events, like a post or a published edition of the news — but as an ongoing, on-demand chat' (Soulellis 2017).

As writing moves from printed media to blogs to SNS, conversations change from an exchange between writer and reader to resembling a chat among many. Comments diverge or converge relative to the original posts, sometimes to extremes. That archives of the everyday conversations of design exist is both fortunate and somewhat disconcerting. In casual conversation about popular graphic design blogs and SNS, two general perceptions invariably emerge: at their best, the reader comments lead to productive exchanges of ideas, and at their worst, insults and cliques dominate the design debates.

Methods: Three Inquiries

This study on the authorial activities of readers involved three inquiries: Typologies, Comments, and Threads. To facilitate these, I used graphic design blog archives, SNS, Internet Archive (archive.org), keyword searches, and spreadsheets. These are methods commonly used by students, scholars, practitioners, and so forth, without the need for specialized computational or other data science knowledge.

Inquiry 1: Typologies

The first inquiry focused on identifying types of design blogs and their opportunities for reader response. English-language graphic design blogs were gathered based on general popularity and online searches, subject to the following criteria:

- Publication history of at least three years, enough to observe general patterns of content.
- Publicly accessible, excluding any paid subscriptions or members-only content.
- Design-centred content, which may be multimodal (text, image, audio).
- Opportunities for readers to respond, in some way, to individual posts within the site itself.
- Excluded sites for retail, professional services, job-seeking, how-to guides, personal blogs, and portfolios.

Inquiry 2: Comments

The second inquiry focused on trends and identities associated with reader commentary on design blogs of the 2000s. Doing this required a method to study blogs throughout their lifespans, which in turn necessitated complete archives of everyday conversations of design. This inquiry centred on four popular graphic design blogs: *Design Observer*, *Eye*, *Speak Up*, and *AIGA Voice*. *Design Observer* was founded in 2003 by Jessica Helfand, Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, and Rick Poynor as a site dedicated to writings about design and culture. The site partnered with AIGA in 2016 and is still in publication as of this study. *Eye* is an international magazine published in the U.K. focused on design criticism and visual culture. *Eye* published its first printed issue in 1990, and the companion blog has been in publication since 2008. *Speak Up*, which was a design blog for critique and debate, was launched in 2002 by Armin Vit and Bryony Gomez-Palacio. They established their design studio UnderConsideration in 2007 and continue to publish design blogs. *Speak Up* ceased

publication in 2009. From 2004–2011, *AIGA Voice* was the online-only version of *AIGA Journal*, a printed quarterly periodical started in 1947.

This inquiry involved two methods. First, a means to examine blog reader commentary trends from 2002–2017 was established. Annual sample periods, akin to ‘slices of time’, consisted of the second full week (Sunday through Saturday) every odd month (January, March, May, July, September, and November). These periods were used for each year of each blog’s existence. Comments from these sample periods were manually tallied, and this resulted in six weeks of data, per site, per year. This process garnered enough data to show a preliminary measure of commentary trends over time. *Design Observer* and *Speak Up* organize their posts by category and topic, and the archives for *Eye* are arranged by category and date. The contents of *AIGA Voice* are not currently organized within an easily searchable framework.

The second part of this inquiry involved a closer look at the readers themselves. The approximate peak period for commentary volume, discovered through the previous time-slice method, was approximately from 2005–2007. Public user handles were manually recorded in a spreadsheet for each comment collected from 2005–2007 sample periods. This part focused only on *Design Observer* and *Speak Up* for two reasons. *Eye* magazine’s blog had not yet launched, and during this study, AIGA republished portions of their *Voice* archives and the original reader comments were no longer visible.

Inquiry 3: Threads

In the third inquiry, reader responses to two salient graphic design blog posts were traced through SNS. As discovered in the previous inquiries, blog comments have diminished and the opportunity to comment is not universally available. General observation shows that readers tend to respond to blog posts on SNS rather than on the blog itself. Here, the criteria for selecting examples were two-fold: the blog posts showed potential for design debates, and reader responses to the post were largely off-site. The first post studied was published on *Eye on Design (EoD)* and the second on *Design Observer (DO)*.

The *EoD* op-ed ‘Why Can’t the U.S. Decolonize Its Design Education?’ (Anderson 2017) was selected for this study because of the attention it received off-site. *EoD* does not provide on-site space for reader comments. Instead, there are options for readers to share essays through SNS or email. Two weeks after publication, the AIGA Design Educators Community blog expressed they

‘received feedback from several AIGA DEC members that they would like to discuss the recent Op-Ed in *Eye on Design* by Margaret Anderson’ (aigaeducators 2017) and they invited commentary on their blog. This resulted in three comments. In February 2017, the Design Research Society (DRS) newsletter referenced the *EoD* essay in connection with an upcoming event on the same topic. The next month, the DRS newsletter referenced the essay a second time and included a URL for the AIGA DEC blog post, citing ‘a number of design educators do not agree with the article. Their counterarguments may be seen here’ (Durling 2017). Given the graphic design community’s growing interest in the topic of decolonization, I searched Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Pinterest to locate reader responses surrounding the *EoD* essay that appeared between 2017–2019.

The *DO* essay ‘The Tension Between Graphic and Type Design’ (LaRossa 2019), was selected for this inquiry because of the critical remarks and opinions from readers on Twitter. *DO* invited reader commentary using a Facebook plug-in and the essay received some comments on-site. Initially, reader responses to the *DO* essay were investigated in the same manner as the previous *EoD* essay, however, the only platform containing substantial activity was Twitter. For this reason, the method was adjusted to trace multiple Twitter threads responding to the *DO* essay over the three days following its publication.

Results of the Inquiries

The categories of design blogs developed through the Typologies inquiry (Figure 2) reflect the general nature of their contents, affiliations, and self-identification including their visual characteristics. This set of examples is not exhaustive and it should be reiterated that these blogs are primarily focused on graphic design. Blog types were developed through visual analysis, and each site was placed within one of the following: Competitions, Forums, Organizations, Magazines, and Thematic. Thematic design blogs emphasized the site’s brand and identity, whereas Magazine design blogs showed numerous advertisements and sponsorships. Competition design blogs facilitated the evaluation and review of designed products. Forums, a predecessor of blogs and still in use, may also have an email-based presence. As shown in Figure 2, the design blogs invited reader responses in different ways, and opportunities for on-site comments were not universally available. Figure 2 also includes notes on the various modes of interaction by a user through a laptop or mobile device.

Figure 2. Results from the Typologies inquiry. Types of graphic design blogs and opportunities for reader response.

Blog Type	Example Blogs	Reader Response Opportunities				Notes
		C	S	L	R	
Competitions	Awwwards	●	●	●	●	◆▲◎
	CMYK		●			
	Graphis			●		○
Forums	Design Incubation	●	●			◆◎
	Type Drawers	●		●		◆◎
	PhD Design archives	●	●			◆
Magazines	Eye	●	●	●		▲○
	Interactions (ACM)	●	●			▼
	Juxtapoz	●	●	●		■○
	Print	●	●			◆▼
	Walker Reader		●			
Organizations	AIGA Design Educators	●	●			▲
	Design History Society	●	●			▲
Thematic	Alphabetes	●	●			
	Brand New	●	●		●	▲○
	Design Matters	●	●	●		P⚙️◎
	Design Observer	●	●			■
	Eye on Design (AIGA)		●			
	It's Nice That		●			▼
	Revision Path	●	●	●		P⚙️◎
	Scratching the Surface	●	●	●		P⚙️◎
	Speak Up	●				N
	Typographica	●				
	Voice (AIGA)	●	●	●		▲ N

C comment (text entry)	▲ Uses Disqus plugin for comments
S sharing (text entry, click/tap)	■ Uses Facebook plugin for comments
L liking, favouriting (click/tap)	◆ Uses site login for comments
R ranking, scoring (click/tap)	▼ Displays number of times post is shared
	○ Likes or rankings (anonymous)
	◎ Likes or rankings (identifiable)
	⚙️ Observed on SoundCloud.com
	P Podcast
	N No longer active

The Comments inquiry provided for a deliberate reading of the everyday conversations of design found on graphic design blogs of the early 2000s. Reader comments were sometimes multi-paragraph and likely written using a traditional keyboard. The following are excerpts from the comments section of a *Speak Up* post in which the author considers the value of the design organization AIGA (Stairs 2005); the post itself contains a boldface editorial footnote encouraging thoughtful dialog:

Design is an anticipatory practice. We can make ourselves useful as a profession by offering our services and knowledge to those sectors who have the greatest impact in the quality of life. Design will be understood when it is seen in action in a public forum. (Alice, September 14, 2005)

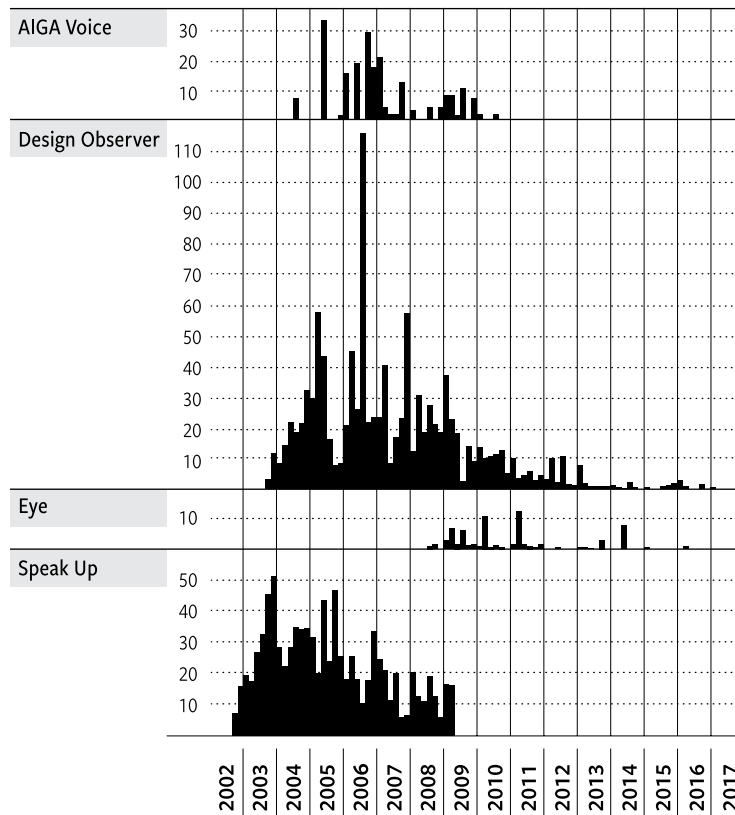
Am I the only one who finds the points made in this piece frustratingly naive? The author's complaint about AIGA's post-Katrina effort to galvanize the design community is particularly beyond the pale; it feels gratuitous and oddly self-serving. (Jill, September 14, 2005)

So perhaps this all boils down to: how do you successively be an UMBRELLA organization when we as Americans find ourselves increasingly looking to separate (polarized) identities? I am not sure I have an answer either. (DC1974, September 15, 2005)

Why is it that we pay so little attention to the matters that affect those outside our borders? When will the organization wake up and realize that we live in a diverse world — one that requires action if we are to bring about social change? [...] All I can conclude is that you are right, we've clearly lost our way. (Christopher Simmons, September 19, 2005)

Figure 3 shows the amounts of reader comments collected from the Comments inquiry, arranged along a timeline. Reader comment activity on *Design Observer*, *Speak Up*, and *AIGA Voice* peaked between 2005–2007, and generally diminished starting in 2008. *Eye* magazine's blog was just starting at that time. To reiterate, these comment quantities were from sample periods, and do not represent the total comments in existence. To streamline the data for visualization purposes, I calculated the average number of comments found within each week. These amounts were visually arranged by year. External factors were also situated alongside the comment data in the timeline. These factors were not included to imply a causal relationship with the comment fluctuations; instead, these provide context for understanding some of the economic and technological circumstances surrounding blogs and SNS.

Figure 3. Results from the Comments inquiry, part one. An average number of reader comments on popular graphic design blogs, based on sample periods from 2002–2017.



SNS and mobile technology launch dates	
Pre-2002 social media include platforms such as BBS, Blogger, and LiveJournal	
MySpace, LinkedIn, WordPress	2002
Facebook	2004
Reddit, YouTube	2005
Twitter	2006
iOS, Tumblr	2007
Android, Soundcloud	2008
WhatsApp	2009
Instagram, Pinterest	2010
SnapChat	2011
Medium	2012
Slack	2013
	2014
	2015
	2016
	2017

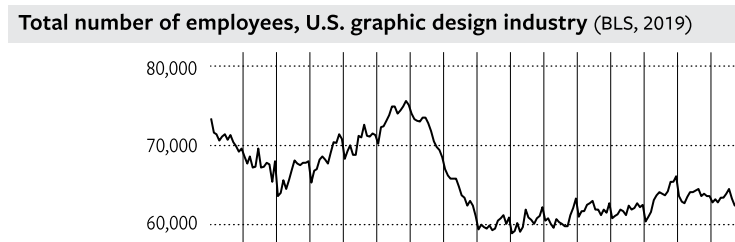


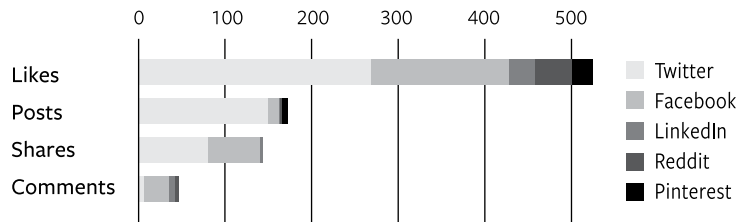
Figure 4 presents information on the readers themselves from *DO* and *Speak Up* posts between 2005–2007, collected using the sample periods (i.e., six weeks of data, per blog, per year). Comment frequency per person occurred in two extremes: people that wrote 10 or more comments over this time and those that wrote 1–2 of them. Some readers chose to use their full name as their handle, and others preferred anonymity. Public user handles revealed little about an individual’s identity unless they used their full name. Based on the sample data, the majority of public handles accompanying 10 or more comments were recognizable as full names of men, inclusive of blog owners and chief contributing authors. The number of individuals writing 1–2 comments was much larger; full names as handles were still recognized primarily as those of men but the reader majority used pseudonyms, initials, or solely first names. As a result, the information about individual readers responsible for the majority of the comments was limited.

Figure 4. Results from the Comments inquiry, part two. Reader comment frequency and public handle identities that were found within posts from the 2005–2007 sample periods.

	Design Observer	Speak Up
Commenters	788	498
Readers with 10+ comments	14 (2%)	22 (4%)
Handles as full names	9 (Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Kenneth FitzGerald, Jessica Helfand, Joe Moran, James D Nesbitt, Rick Poynor, Felix Sockwell, Gunnar Swanson)	16 (Mark Andresen, Marian Bantjes, Doug Bartow, Jeff Gill, Bryony Gomez-Palacio, Randy J. Hunt, Gregor Jamroski, Mark Kingsley, Tan Le, Robynne Raye, Jonathan Selikoff, Felix Sockwell, Michael Surtees, Gunnar Swanson, Jason Tslentis, Armin Vit)
Handles as single names, initials, pseudonyms	5 (aj, DesignMaven, Niccolo, pk, Su)	6 (Darrel, DesignMaven, Mark, Raven, Rob, Su)
Readers with 1–2 comments	703 (89%)	383 (77%)
Handles as full names	249 (189 men; 50 women; 10 undetermined based on handles)	125 (103 men; 22 women)
Handles as single names, initials, pseudonyms	454	258

In the Threads inquiry, the findings for the *EoD* essay (Figure 5) were organized by response opportunity (likes, posts, shares, and comments) with specific SNS platforms noted as a secondary element. Based on the collected data, the reader majority responded off-site most frequently through clicking/tapping the like button, and written comments were the least common form of response. Certain platforms were also more popular than others and used differently. For example, the *EoD* post received more likes on Twitter and Facebook than on the other platforms, and the few comments made by readers were mainly on Facebook.

Figure 5. Results from the Threads inquiry. Types and amounts of reader SNS responses to the *EoD* blog essay, 2017–2019.

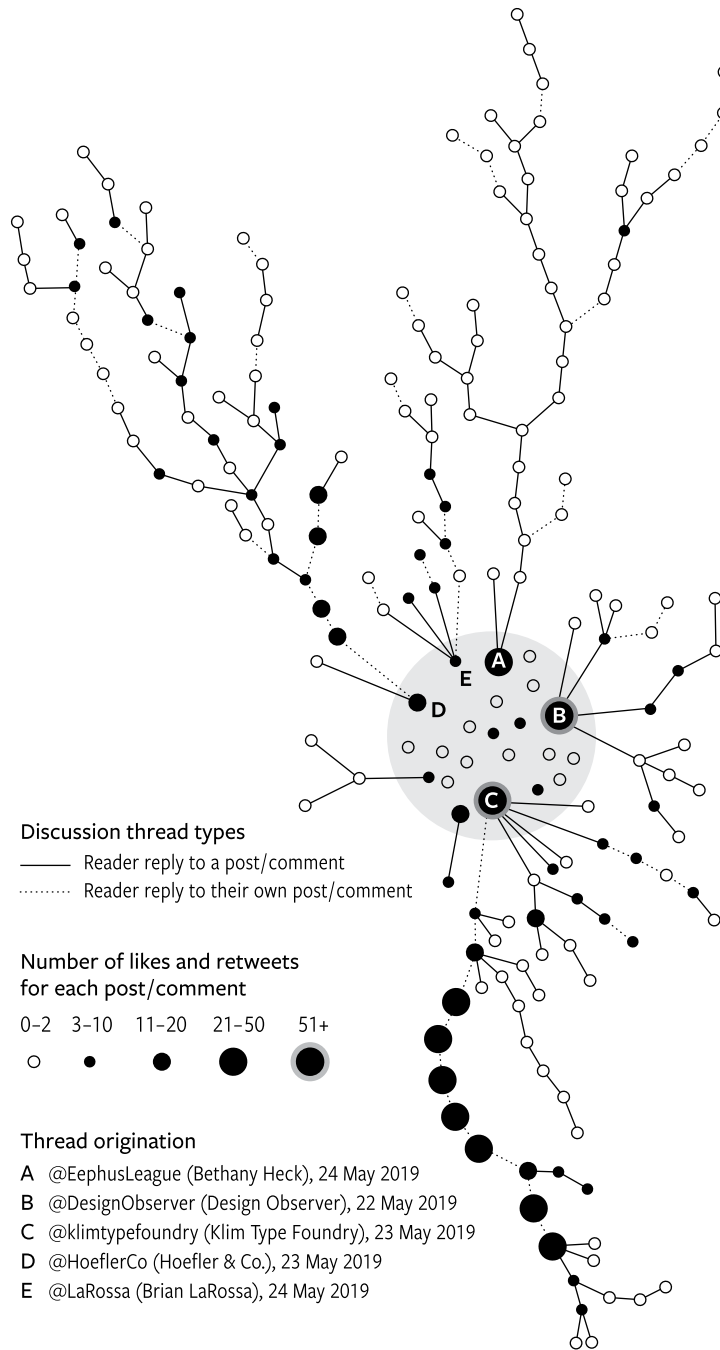


Unlike blog comments with their linear, chronological arrangement, Twitter conversations extend in many directions. Because of this complexity, I used the browser extension tool *Treeverse* (Butler 2017) to gather data. Figure 6 shows the Twitter threads stemming from the *DO* essay. These responses contained many threads and five stand out based on volume and activity (A–E). As a way to bypass Twitter’s word count limitations, readers often commented on their own tweets; these were visually differentiated from other comments using a dotted line. The varied circle sizes for each post indicate the number of times it was amplified through liking or sharing/retweeting. In contrast with individuals’ handles on blogs, SNS handles tended to also include organizations, businesses, and so forth. The following excerpts are from 280-character limit tweets found within these threads:

I said ‘it reminds me’ because I feel the type industry sees itself very differently than the way it’s seen by designers, which is similar to what’s going on in that example. (@MrEchs, May 23, 2019)

I know I am an outlier. [...] I think the problem arises when something breaks down and isn’t approached (from both sides) with kindness and understanding. (@typegirl, May 23, 2019)

Figure 6. Results from the Threads inquiry. Twitter threads of reader responses to the DO blog essay, 22–24 May 2019.



His main thrust is that type designers are elitist and antagonistic towards customers/designers. (@klimtypefoundry, May 23, 2019)

BTW, using Facebook as the sole comment platform is a significant roadblock for diverse discussion. Many designers, particularly young designers, do not have or want a Facebook account. (@typographica, May 24, 2019)

There are a lot of people who would do amazing things when given a megaphone, and the gatekeepers in the industry continue to hand it over to whoever happens to be close by and thinks highly of themselves enough to ask for it. (@EephusLeague, May 24, 2019)

Discussion

The inquiries in this study were carried out using example cases and sample periods, and consequently, the results do not represent all activity on graphic design blogs and SNS platforms. Instead, the results provide broad insights into the authorial activities of readers. Reflections on this, including considerations for future studies, are discussed below.

Positioning the Conversations

As design scholars study and implement design practices, processes, education, theories, and research methods, it is worth considering what sort of disciplinary value the everyday conversations of design might have for graphic design. In particular, these informal conversations may benefit activities and ideas outside the traditional canons of design. When compared with peer-reviewed or editor-reviewed publications, however, their legitimacy as a literary genre is quite low. Not all posts would qualify as design criticism, and reader comments often contain opinion rather than analysis. Nonetheless, given their public visibility, design debates emerging from blogs and SNS can influence mass readership. Though design criticism and the everyday conversations of design have their differences, they share the use of writing as a critical catalyst to provoke responses and debate. Audiences and aspirations vary among the graphic design blogs in Figure 2; the typologies themselves are broad, and further analysis could reveal the distinct contributions of each site. Blogs and SNS empower readers to take on the roles of writers. In doing this, the cultures and practices of design communities are partly shaped through a type of social writing that is also measurable public data. There are few, if any, precedents for this in the history of design.

Over time, maintaining the everyday conversations of design becomes more complicated. The professional graphic design community preserves the blog archives used in the Comments inquiry (figure 3), not scholarly institutions. This could pose problems for future research and education involving graphic design blogs. UnderConsideration, for example, made the entire *Speak Up* archive available on their website. Conversely, AIGA's erasure of reader comments in their republished *AIGA Voice* articles demonstrates how everyday conversations are vulnerable to the decisions of editors and curators; this implies that reader comments of the past have little or no value. Everyday conversations of design could be accepted as a type of non-traditional, informal design literature, or as a design product genre, or something else entirely. The decisions to preserve or to abandon them will influence the way future graphic design communities perceive and acknowledge their own written records.

Spaces and Places

Design organizations and conferences were once considered essential venues for discussion and debate, and online platforms offer different opportunities for these activities. Blogs offer an individually branded, dialogically oriented *place* for accessing specific content, and their SNS offspring provide semi-customizable, data-oriented public *space* for ubiquitous interaction. The latter are subject to more noise; not only are bots and other non-humans publishing in SNS feeds alongside everyone else, but 'whereas the old model could be seen as meaning-based, the new model [for online publication] is syntactic — using protocols, keywords, and context-related selection to deliver material' (Soulellis 2017). Individuals within design communities, alongside everyone else, are navigating an increasingly data-intensive online environment driven by factors such as algorithms and personal expectations. Beyond the SNS used for the Threads inquiry, the everyday conversations of design are also alive and well on sites such as Slack, Medium, and Instagram. These were excluded from this study (for reasons of semi-public accessibility, paywalls, and limited search capabilities) but their contents and affordances, and how they are used by design communities, call for further study.

Design ideas and culture spread across platforms over time. For example, the *EoD* essay about decolonizing design education from the Threads inquiry is one node within a growing body of writings on that topic. There are also similarities among the comment examples from *Speak Up* and Twitter: disagreements about the premise of an essay, remarks and opinions about the author's stance,

ideas for new paths forward, and questioning the practices and values within graphic design communities. Platforms may change over time, but the everyday conversations of design remain steady, and perhaps also repetitive. In both sets of comment excerpts, readers show self-awareness of the public platform(s) in which they participate. Of significance is that readers are aware of their role in the conversations and also conscious of the viability of public forums for design issues.

Results from the Comments inquiry (figure 3) suggest that commentary on four popular graphic design blogs peaked and has all but disappeared — a phenomenon curiously aligned with SNS development, mobile devices, and U.S. graphic design employment data. At the same time, some blogs such as UnderConsideration’s *Brand New* continue to have very active comment sections in the late 2010s. Graphic and interactive designers are responsible for designing conversational interfaces and their meaning-making possibilities (Lysbakken 2018), and the reader response opportunities mentioned throughout this study are partly guided by the material affordances of a platform’s interface. Modes of interaction can vary from typing with a laptop keyboard to tapping and swiping on a touch-based screen. The availability of blog commenting and sharing opportunities (Figure 2) may be due to legacy platform settings or perhaps by the intentional decisions of blog owners. For the *EoD* essay, the tendency for readers to like or share a post is greater than writing a response (figure 5); if those readers are accessing a post on a mobile device, it may be easier to tap a like button than to write a lengthy comment. Though these click/tap features can increase a post’s visibility to others, however, they are not substitutions for the critical analysis and debate that fosters citizenship and influence within, and among, graphic design communities.

Reader Identity and Visibility

Blogs and SNS allow for a reader’s full identity disclosure as well as total anonymity. In using full names as their handles, readers convey their desire to make known their identity and authorial influence. Based on observations made throughout the Comments inquiry, reader handles on blogs tend to represent individuals. Of particular interest is the prevalence of full name handles that are recognizable as names of men (figure 4). In contrast, the handles of single names, pseudonyms, and initials represent people that have become part of the written records of graphic design, but as a mass of unknowable readers. A deeper, critical investigation on this could reveal more about the identities of influencers and dynamics present within the graphic design blog comment sections of the 2000s.

Current SNS give the appearance of democratic platforms, and yet users with higher numbers of followers tend to have more social capital. Moreover, conversations on SNS risk becoming siloed and this limits a sense of close community (Ellison 2014). In the Threads inquiry, readers responded to the *EoD* and *DO* blog essays (figures 5 and 6) on SNS in many ways. These examples are important to understand that similar to margin notes, a lack of on-site blog comments does not indicate a lack of interest. Readers simply chose a different means to respond. Consequently, this also scatters the conversation; it affects a person's ability to find, sort through, and follow the conversations, and it also presents difficulties for rebuttals and reconciliations within the debates themselves. The response threads extending from the *DO* blog essay (figure 6) took place off-site in a space where its audience was already situated: Twitter. The dominant conversation threads (excluding *DO* and the essay author) occurred at nearly the same time and were started by Twitter users with thousands of followers. Their posts were also amplified by reader likes, retweets, and comments. The identities and visibility of readers, as observed through the Comments and Threads inquiries, warrant further exploration. The supposition that the everyday conversations of design are facilitated by the few, influencing the perceptions of many, and also being made more visible by many — through increasing algorithmic mediation — may provide insight on the ways online writing informs power dynamics within graphic design communities.

Conclusion

The practices surrounding design writing changed with the advent of Web 2.0 and it will likely continue to evolve. Everyday conversations of design — the written conversations that occur as a combination of a design-centred blog or social media post, its reader responses, and affordances of its platforms — are inextricably linked to the people sustaining them.

This article presented a study on the authorial activities of readers on graphic design blogs and social network sites (SNS), explored through three evidence-based inquiries. Future studies on this topic would benefit from investigating reader identities, response content, and the spread of ideas across time and platforms. By looking closer at these activities in the online environment, we may better understand the extent to which the authors and readers of graphic design communities have impacted their conventions and cultures. From an educational standpoint, critique and writing are fundamental in

design curricula. The influences of the everyday online conversations of design, particularly those that involve design debates, might be advanced in design classrooms.

Design writing has not shifted entirely from print to online/digital (print is not dead!) and this study shows the ways its purview expands through graphic design blogs and SNS. Such as with the invention of moveable type, however, the ways online platforms are used and made by design communities do not simply give form to the everyday conversations of design — they transform them.

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