

DOCAM '05: Proposal for PhD project

The influence of visual layout on document interpretation

How does the visual layout of a document influence the interpretation of that document? Increasingly, documents are presented in a variety of media and are often subject to artefactual constraints imposed by those media. As a result, the visual layout—the positions, sizes, and visual appearance of text, headings, notes, diagrams, etc.—of a document may change from one medium to the next. Describing the influence of visual layout involves many disciplines, including semiotics, psychology, typography, linguistics, and analytical bibliography. However, each of these disciplines has its own set of terms and its own discourse. Because these discourses are not entirely compatible, we need to bridge differences and find a basis for mutual understanding. In order to address the question how visual layout influences interpretation, we must to establish a rigorous interdisciplinary vocabulary.

Since this is a broad issue, I am focusing on something more specific: establishing a vocabulary to discuss how the visual layout of textual notes (footnotes, marginal notes, etc.) affects the interpretation of those notes, both in themselves and in relation to the document in which they appear. I argue that changing the position of the notes and their relation to the body text results in a different document, one that may be interpreted differently from the original. However, to describe these differences requires a consistent vocabulary and a rigorous conceptual system that addresses *how* visual layout influences interpretation. My work will attempt to: (i) capture the efforts of previous researchers; (ii) make visible the concepts and assumptions involved; and (iii) devise a vocabulary to describe how the visual layout of notes influences their interpretation.

My work will describe different types of notes and their functions in relation to the text of the document. I show how different visual layouts of notes can result in different interpretations of the notes and of their relation with the “main” text of the document. I will also examine the vocabulary currently used by several of the disciplines which have addressed the visual layout of documents. I will conclude with some of the issues and challenges I am facing.

Presentation:

This will be a computer slide presentation. I will require a projector that connects to a computer (Mac) or both a projector and a computer with presentation software (Microsoft PowerPoint) and a web browser (no Internet connect required).

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