

MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES THROUGH A MULTIMODAL LENS

A Report by

INTER/ACTIONS: Multimodal Academic Communication Task Force

International Association for Media and Communication Research

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What is Multimodal Research?

Media and communication research has long rested on the power of text (e.g., books and journal articles) despite the discipline's interests in the multiple forms in which media and communication practice takes shape. Media and communication scholars regularly study images, sound, music, and performance but with the underlying assumption that words are the only appropriate, if not the only legitimate, vehicle for presenting research findings. It is not surprising, then, that sound projects, video or photo essays, documentary and ethnographic media, installations, performances, and other modes of mediated engagement are typically assumed to belong to the realm of art and creative practice, not to media and communication research proper. At the same time, research creation, practice-based research, visual/sensory ethnography, and intermediality are just some of the multimodal practices that have been part of the discipline's scholarly engagement and vocabulary around the world.

Multimodal research is an umbrella term for wide-ranging research practices that leverage expressive modes of knowledge production and/or arts-based methodologies to ask critical, social, cultural, and political questions that are of interest to media and communication studies. Multimodal research is complementary to, not a substitute for, traditional scholarship. It recognizes that **each mode of knowledge production has its own affordances and limitations.** The examples abound. Video has long been used to document gestures, tonality of voice, and silences that cannot be captured in text.¹ Dance and performance treat the body and space as key mechanisms for capturing and conveying cultural information.²

Instead of reifying the antiquated academic division between theory and practice, multimodal research asks for a productive questioning of their inextricable linkage. It reflects on how and under which circumstances **theorizing through and as production can generate new research insights for media and communication studies.**³

¹ Pinchevski, A. (2019). *Transmitted wounds: Media and the mediation of trauma*. Oxford University Press. Ristovska, S. (2021). *Seeing human rights: Video activism as a proxy profession*. The MIT Press.

² Parviainen, J. (2021). Body knowledge: Revised epistemological reflections on kinaesthesia, movement, and dance. In Cataño, R. J. (Ed.) *Beauty and life: Exploring the anthropology behind the fine arts* (pp. 171-198). Edizioni Santa Croce.

³ Jackson, J. L. (2014). Theorizing production/producing theory (or, why filmmaking really could count as scholarship). *Cultural Studies*, 28(4), 531-544. Henderson, L. (2020). Media Studies futures: Whiteness, Indigeneity, multi-modality, and a politics of possibility. *Television & New Media*, 21(6), 581-589.

Examples of Multimodal Research

Scholars like Sol Worth, Jay Ruby, Karl Heider, Faye Ginsburg, Zora Neale Hurston, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Deborah Spitulnik Vidali, and E. Patrick Johnson have long experimented with film, fiction, dance, performance, and more to push the limits of scholarly possibility beyond the classic academic book or journal article. Below are just some examples, which are by no means exhaustive or representative of the range of multimodal research practices around the world.



Professor Cherian George published an award-winning, peer-reviewed book with The MIT Press on political censorship in the format of a graphic narrative.⁴

Documentary & Ethnographic Film

As much is lost in the translation of images and sounds into text, social scientists have long worked with camera equipment to gather, analyze, and represent sociocultural data. There is, of course, a long history of scholars using photography and film in their research. These discussions usually begin with invocations of Robert Flaherty's 1922 docu-drama *Nanook of the North*.⁵ Today, Harvard University's [Sensory Ethnography Lab](#), the University of Pennsylvania's [Center for Experimental Ethnography](#), and Teachers College's [Media and Social Change Lab](#) differently support the cultivation and institutionalization of multimodal scholarship like documentary and ethnographic film. [The Creative Ethnographer's Notebook](#) (2025), edited by Professors Melisa

⁴ George, C. & Liew, S. (2021). *Red lines: Political cartoons and the struggle against censorship*. The MIT Press.

⁵ Ginsburg, F., Abu-Lughod, L., & Larkin, B. (2002). *Media worlds: Anthropology on new terrain*. University of California Press.

Cahnmann-Taylor and Kristina Jacobsen, and the documentary film *Making Sweet Tea* (2019), directed by Assistant Professor Nora Gross and Provost John L. Jackson, Jr., make differently pitched cases for how multimodal scholarship can be undertaken in impactful ways.

The story behind *Making Sweet Tea*, for example, started with the scholarly book, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, an oral history by Professor E. Patrick Johnson and evolved into a performance and a documentary film, with each format highlighting different characters and topics while engaging new audiences.



Screenshot from *Making Sweet Tea*

Screenshot from *Shama*



Documentary and ethnographic film can expand the possibilities of both knowledge and representation. Integrating writing and filmmaking, Associate Professor Arezou Zalipour highlights how documentary practice not only amplifies the voices of underrepresented ethnic communities but also functions as a rigorous

research methodology—one that transforms the act of filmmaking into a mode of inquiry and knowledge creation.⁶

Video Essay and/or Videographic Criticism

At a time when video has become the most popular medium of information relay,⁷ media and communication scholars have built on the long tradition of videographic criticism in film/cinema studies. Embracing the format of video essay, they have sought to democratize knowledge production and circulation by reaching audiences on a range of questions central to media and communication studies within and

⁶ Zalipour, A. & Nicholson, J. (2023). *Shama*, an insider looking in: A community-centered collaborative documentary production. *Media Practice and Education*, 24(3): 291-308.

⁷ Kaufman, P. B. (2025). *The Moving Image: A User's Manual*. The MIT Press.

beyond academia. A group of Brazilian scholars, for example, have recently spearheaded efforts to establish the video essay as a scholarly format that intertwines art and science, allowing for dialogue across scientific fields and disciplines.⁸ *Scenes of the Extreme Right in Brazil: The Fusion of the Values of Militarism and Religiosity* by Professor Pedro Pinto de Oliveira illustrates this effort well. Screened as part of the [Flow34](#) submissions at the 2023 IAMCR Conference in France, this video essay looks at the 2022 attempted coup in Brazil. Based on original research, it shows how the values of militarism and religiosity were central to the coup narrative promoted by the far-right movement in the country led by former president Jair Bolsonaro.



Screenshot from *Scenes of the Extreme Right in Brazil*

Another example is [Power and Gardens](#), a four-part video essay by Professor Nico Carpentier, that investigates how human-nature relationships are condensed in the gardens of the European cities of Paris, Lyon, and Prague.

Exhibition



As a unique mode of expression, an exhibition allows for the display of a diversity of multimodal formats. *Justice by Video*, by Associate Professor Sandra Ristovska, Assistant Professor Darija Medic, and PhD candidate Nandi Pointer, for example, is an interactive exhibition that uses video, sound, and text to explore the intricacies of seeing video in court.

⁸ De Oliveira, P. P. & Moreira, B. D. (2024). Comunicar Ciência: Democracia, Cultura e Audiovisual. *Cadernos Multimundos*, <https://doi.org/10.31560/PIMENTACULTURAL/978-65-5939-953-6>

Addressing the power and limitation of video on its own audiovisual terms, the exhibit asks the viewer to consider how the unregulated approach to evidentiary video in U.S. courts may lead to uneven and unfair renderings of justice. *Justice by Video* has been exhibited in an art gallery, a public library, and a community center in Colorado (in Boulder, Greeley, Estes Park, and Steamboat Springs) in 2023 and 2024.



Photos from *Justice by Video* (with research assistance from Rory Fitzgerald Bledsoe). Mariani Gallery, Greeley, CO, March & April 2024. Funded by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS).

The exhibition format also allows for curatorial interventions like *Moulding Nature* at the Färgfabriken Arts Centre in Stockholm, developed by two Färgfabriken curators (Daniel Urey and Emilia Rosenqvist) and one academic curator (Nico Carpentier).⁹ Another example is the *Ecomedia Arts Festival* at the 2018 IAMCR conference at the University of Oregon.

Installation Art

Installation art, which consists of "large-scale, mixed-media constructions, often designed for a specific place or for a temporary period of time,"¹⁰ is a less common mode of multimodal research. It often moves in closer proximity to the art world(s) because of its material nature and its need for a site of display. At the same time, installation art, with its translation of ideas into material assemblages, offers opportunities for innovative multimodal research projects.

One example is the *Mirror Palace of Democracy*, an installation art work that combines videos, mirrors, and woodwork to create a maze that exposes visitors to the cacophonous experience of an ideological bombardment. The project signifies the contingency of democracy, playing with representation and participation.¹¹

⁹ For a visual impression of *Moulding Nature*, see <https://revolve.media/views/moulding-nature>

¹⁰ Tate (n.d.). *Installation Art*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/installation-art>

¹¹ Carpentier, N. (2020). Communicating academic knowledge beyond the written academic text: An autoethnographic analysis of the *Mirror Palace of Democracy* installation experiment. *International Journal of Communication*, 14: 2120–2143.



Photos from *Mirror Palace of Democracy* by Nico Carpentier

Another example is [*The Cabinet of Lost Memories*](#), an experimental documentation of trashed and burned objects in Varosha (Cyprus), by Associate Professor Aysu Arsoy. Varosha is a city under Turkish military control whose Greek Cypriot residents fled in 1974. Arsoy has been collecting and photographing discarded and burned possessions of the city's former residents since 2013. She has exhibited a selection of the photographs and objects as part of a metaphorical cabinet at different venues, raising questions about collective memory, displacement, colonialism, and dark tourism.



Photos of the metaphorical cabinet, some of the found objects, and the mixed media installations that comprise *The Cabinet of Lost Memories*.

Performance

Staged performance and collaboration with artists such as actors and playwrights in co-creating arts-based research and knowledge is yet another example of multimodal research. In such an exercise, researchers typically aim at addressing new audiences, using experimental communication strategies. One method is a co-creation of a playscript in a close dialogue between a research team and artists to transform the conceptual language of research into a series of scenes in a play.

Afterlife: Conversations with the Living Dead (translation from Finnish), performed at the Finnish National Theater in November 2024, illustrates the possibilities afforded by performance as a type of multimodal scholarship. It creates a world where death is not the end of a human relationship. In the reality of the play, global technology companies offer individuals an AI-based service that creates a digital character from a deceased relative. The protagonist, returning from a funeral and having lost a loved one, opens an operating system that brings the deceased loved one back to life. How does the participation of the living dead in the human world change us, our society, our experiences with death and life? In contrast to mainstream media's depiction of an AI-based dystopian future, *Afterlife* seeks to imagine diverse possibilities. It was produced in collaboration with the *Digital Death: Transforming History, Rituals and Afterlife* research team led by Professor Johanna Sumiala at the University of Helsinki and an artistic team consisting of a playwright/director and an actor.



Screenshot from *Afterlife* (dir. Petter Korkman, 2024), a short film based on the play that premiered at at Maalaamo, Finnish National Theater. November 28, 2024.

Performance as a multimodal tool thus invites scholars to think about how to translate their research and findings into dramaturgical principles that can facilitate affective modes of knowledge production by enabling an emotional identification with the characters on stage and their life stories.

Opportunities & Challenges with Multimodal Research

From documentary film to performance, multimodal research shows the **integrated and iterative nature of the different components of knowledge production**, in which the communicative dimension cannot be segregated from the entire process of knowledge production.¹² In other words, multimodal research shows the importance of the **interaction of doing and thinking**, where the process of material creation feeds into the process of knowledge production. Multimodal research thus opens spaces for more affective approaches to knowledge, where **knowledge can be experienced and felt, not just rationally processed**. Here, arts-based scholar Patricia Leavy's notion of resonance¹³ is important, as multimodal research offers opportunities for knowledge to resonate with its creators and audiences, enabling them to experience and feel ideas.

Expanding the boundaries of scholarly communication beyond written texts, multimodal research holds the potential to **democratize academic knowledge** and to create a more **diverse and inclusive academic community**. Among the motivations for producing multimodal research is the ability to reach different constituencies and communities within and beyond the academy. Multimodal research can be **a form of publicly engaged scholarship that broadens the scope of academic communication and provides new means for the exchange of knowledge in society**. Documentary and ethnographic films, video essays, exhibitions, installations, and performances are just a handful of examples that show how multimodal research has the potential to speak to a variety of audiences in public spaces. It invites new publics to think about key questions in the discipline, such as the politics and ethics of AI, democratic governance, the role of visual communication in court, culture and identity, collective memory, and migration.

The [Collective for Advancing Multimodal Research Arts](#) (CAMRA) at the University of Pennsylvania is just one institutional example that nurtures multimodal research. CAMRA has developed a fellowship program that is premised on the understanding that **an expanded, multimodal definition of what counts as scholarship will help lead to a more diverse professoriate**. CAMRA believes that many talented undergraduate students decide not to pursue a doctoral education because they accept the idea that embracing a "life of the mind" means giving up on expressive and experimental methodologies. Through its fellowship and mentorship program, an annual festival, and monthly workshops, CAMRA seeks to expand the definition of

¹² Murray, J. (2009). *Non-discursive rhetoric: Image and affect in multimodal composition*. State University of New York Press.

¹³ Leavy, P. (2015). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

what constitutes scholarship so it could enlarge the variety of people interested in academic life. The work of CAMRA thus exemplifies how **multimodal research holds promise for a more inclusive discipline both locally and globally**. Multimodal research can engage with intellectual energies that have not been formally recognized within institutionalized academia but are necessary to move the discipline forward.

The efforts and energy sustaining multimodal research, however, have not always been met with open arms by academia broadly, and media and communication studies specifically. **Instead of helping students develop and hone their expressive skills, traditional doctoral training in media and communication studies around the world asks them to set those skills aside**: "communicatively, we de-skill graduate students."¹⁴ In many parts of the world, **multimodal scholars effectively have to do double-duty**, publishing the expected number of books and articles on top of any multimodal offerings. **Lack of resources**—from financial and organizational to time pressures for degree completion, promotion, and other career benchmarks—are another impediment to pursuing multimodal research. Failure to address these challenges may be a lost opportunity for the discipline at a critical time when it is tasked to respond to new technological developments and a global wave of political pressures that challenge the core of what academic knowledge is, who is it for, and how it benefits society.

What IAMCR Can Do to Support Multimodal Research

As a leading international association in media and communication studies, IAMCR has taken important steps in promoting multimodal research. Through the [Flow34](#) screenings and the establishment of a [Multimodal Communication Research Working Group](#) (MCR), IAMCR has spearheaded efforts to highlight the multimodal offerings of the discipline through its annual global conferences.

INTER/ACTIONS: Multimodal Academic Communication Task Force has identified several areas where IAMCR's support will be essential for making a lasting impact in the discipline.

- IAMCR should continue to offer and cherish platforms for multimodal research at its annual conferences, with renewed efforts for Flow34 and for new exhibition spaces to diversify the multimodal offerings.

¹⁴ Henderson, L. (2020). Media Studies futures: Whiteness, Indigeneity, multi-modality, and a politics of possibility. *Television & New Media*, 21(6), 581-589.

- IAMCR should reserve a small part of the Local Organizing Committee (LOC) budget to finance diverse modes of display at its annual conferences.
- IAMCR should strengthen the promotion of its member's multimodal scholarship (similar as to the promotion of members' books).
- IAMCR should support a thematic award for multimodal research.
- IAMCR should support the creation of an IAMCR handbook on multimodal research.

About the Task Force

The report was prepared by members of the IAMCR's INTER/ACTIONS: Multimodal Academic Communication Task Force.

The Task Force was established with a threefold mandate: (1) to examine the various possibilities for multimodal research; (2) to develop initiatives and strategies that stimulate the use of non-written communication of research findings at IAMCR; and (3) to reflect on the use of such strategies at IAMCR and beyond. Its members include:

- Sandra Ristovska, Associate Professor, University of Colorado Boulder, USA (Chair)
- Arezou Zalipour, Associate Professor, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand
- Aysu Arsoy, Associate Professor, Eastern Mediterranean University, Cyprus
- Jeremy Shtern, Professor, Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada (EB liaison)
- John L. Jackson Jr., Provost, University of Pennsylvania, USA
- Johanna Sumiala, Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland
- Nico Carpentier, Extraordinary Professor, Charles University, the Czech Republic
- Pedro Pinto de Oliveira, Professor, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso, Brazil