

The screens that dominate our lives demand literacy. How else would we utilise our digital tools, or the social media that have become so important to us? In fact we read and write more than ever before. Yet the primacy of text has passed.

Not only are the texts we produce becoming ever shorter, more importantly our communication becomes multimodal. The populist expansion of audiovisual media we now witness finds parallels in the 1970s, when offset lithography democratised print production. Cutting and pasting text for offset reproduction, which could even be typewritten, eliminated the expensive investment in cumbersome presses, metal type, and highly skilled typesetters. Offset lithography generated an avalanche of printed matter on culturally and politically ‘marginal’ subjects.

Similarly, anyone can now produce photos and videos, often in preference to textual messages. Just as offset lithography supported—if not fomented—grass-roots movements for social change, the democratisation of audio-visual media will prove transformative.

For images can be extremely eloquent, but they do speak differently than texts. If images and sound increasingly merge into the communication stream, what might happen, for example, to sustained discursive prose? Will multimodal communications replace textual argumentation? And if so, how will images argue?