

Examining media

A medium is the material, vehicle, or technology that conveys an idea. It can be as substantive as stone or brick, as delicate as watercolors, as ethereal as radio waves, as abstract as numbers, letters, and words. Texts have always communicated through a vast array of media. Artists decorated the walls of caves, writers left marks on tablets of stone and wax, bishops used stained glass to teach moral lessons, queens wove their thoughts into tapestries, and players turned a humble wooden stage into all the world. But no prior era was as aware of media as ours is, perched as we are at a moment when digital technologies are daily revolutionizing how ideas are shaped and shared. New media can be scary, but, in fact, many of us seem to be adapting well to watching movies on cell phones, sharing our life stories (with pictures) on social networks, or living in fictional worlds we create with others. The only constant seems to be change.

UNDERSTAND MEDIA

The medium a text uses is not a small matter. You cannot really understand a text apart from its mode of transmission. Nor should we think of texts as having messages separable from their media: they are a single package. Of course, concepts and ideas have long migrated from medium to medium and that trend has only accelerated thanks to electronic technologies. For example, you've probably encountered Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* on the page, on stage, and on film. What changes? Almost everything. Each medium makes its own demands on your imagination and your senses. Read the play, and you create most of the work in your head. Watch it from a front-row theater seat, and you might duck when the swords start clashing. See *Romeo + Juliet* on DVD, and Leonardo DiCaprio becomes the default Romeo in your mind.

Book Media deliver messages in particular ways and we process and experience those texts so differently that they can become different works entirely (see also "Choosing a Medium" on pages 77-79). That's why not every good book translates into a successful film, why receiving an e-mail isn't quite the same experience as receiving a handwritten letter, why going to a concert is a different event than listening to a CD. Or consider how differently you experience a news event if you learn of it via a magazine, a newspaper, a nightly news program, a twenty-four-hour news channel, or a Web site or blog. The medium shapes the message, or at least a good part of it (see Item 1.12).

So in encountering a new or puzzling text, take a moment to consider how well it works within its medium. Ask why a writer, artist, scholar, or politician has selected one medium rather than another to present his or her ideas to the world (see Item 1.13). Could another medium have been more effective or memorable? Note, too, that media play to different senses and sensibilities: photographs and paintings to our eyes, operas and oral poetry to our ears, sculpture and textiles perhaps to our fingertips. How do you encounter a text and what part does the medium play in your response to it?

APPRECIATE LANGUAGE AS A MEDIUM

All the attention paid to visual and electronic media makes it easy at times to forget that words remain our most common and subtle tool of communication and expression. But sometimes it takes stepping back and looking closely at the medium of language to appreciate how it works. Everything you read has a style that you can analyze, though it may take some practice to recognize the elements that give writing its character. Here are some features of the medium to look for in a document:

- **Voice.** How individual is the voice you *hear* as you read? Some writing is very cordial, other writing has a manufactured personality, and much academic work is deliberately

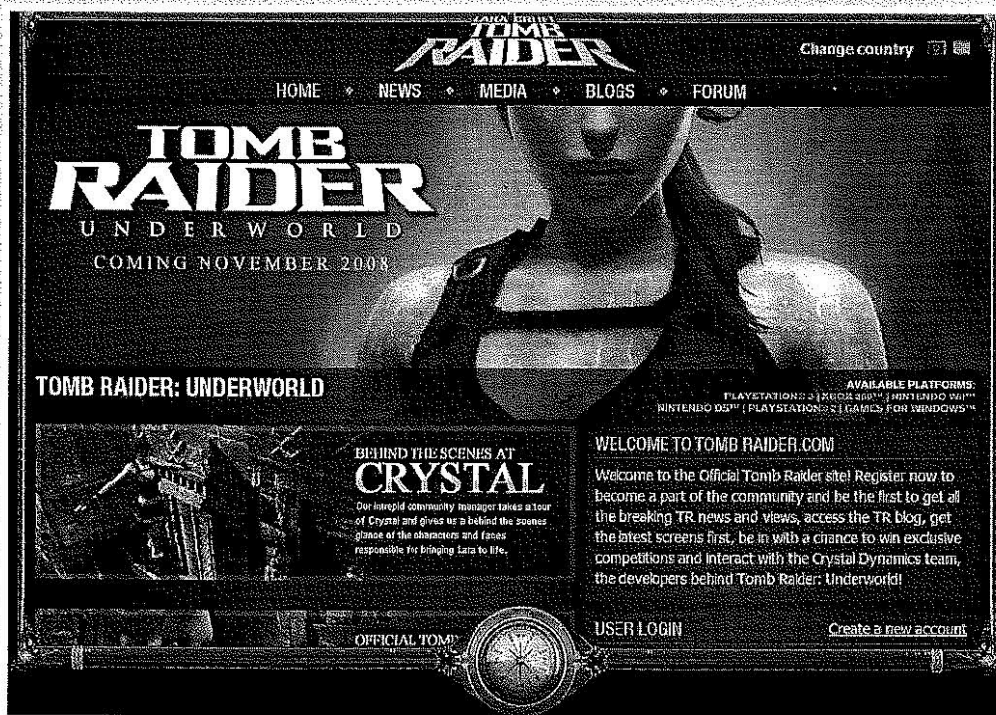
im
it),
■ To
ph
■ We
vo
ers
rea
ing
has
■ Lev
ize
bus
ing
■ Lev
ject
is v
■ Fig
spe
by

EV
ITEM 1
A number
What are
problems

impersonal, purged of character. You can look to features such as pronouns (*I, you, we, us, it*), contractions (*we're, you'll, won't*), or dialogue to discover and describe voice.

- **Tone.** Words can express both emotions and emotional distance. Look for specific words or phrases in writing that make a piece warm or cold, friendly or intimidating, and so on.
- **Word choice.** Words are a medium that can send many signals, and the level and choice of vocabulary items reveal much about a text. Vocabulary items may indicate much about writers: their age or experience, the social groups to which they belong, the audiences they wish to reach, and their sensitivity to difference. A word like *underprivileged* has a denotative meaning; it comes across as objective, and we can agree on its meaning. A word like *downtrodden* has a more connotative meaning; it strikes us as more opinionated and emotional.
- **Level of formality.** Formality in writing is related to tone and voice. You might characterize the language as casual and easy (as in a personal letter); direct and professional (as in business writing and journalism); or serious and formal (as in academic writing, legal writing, or writing for special occasions).
- **Level of technicality.** Some writing tries to explain every detail to readers new to a subject, some works hard to accommodate the needs of generally educated readers, and some is written specifically for experts.
- **Figures of speech.** Writing of all kinds relies on metaphors, analogies, and other figures of speech to convey thoughts, ideas, and emotions. You can learn much about a given piece by identifying its most characteristic devices of language.

film close captioned
 visual rhetoric
~~denotative~~
 aural rhetoric (spoken)
 visual + textual
 aural + textual

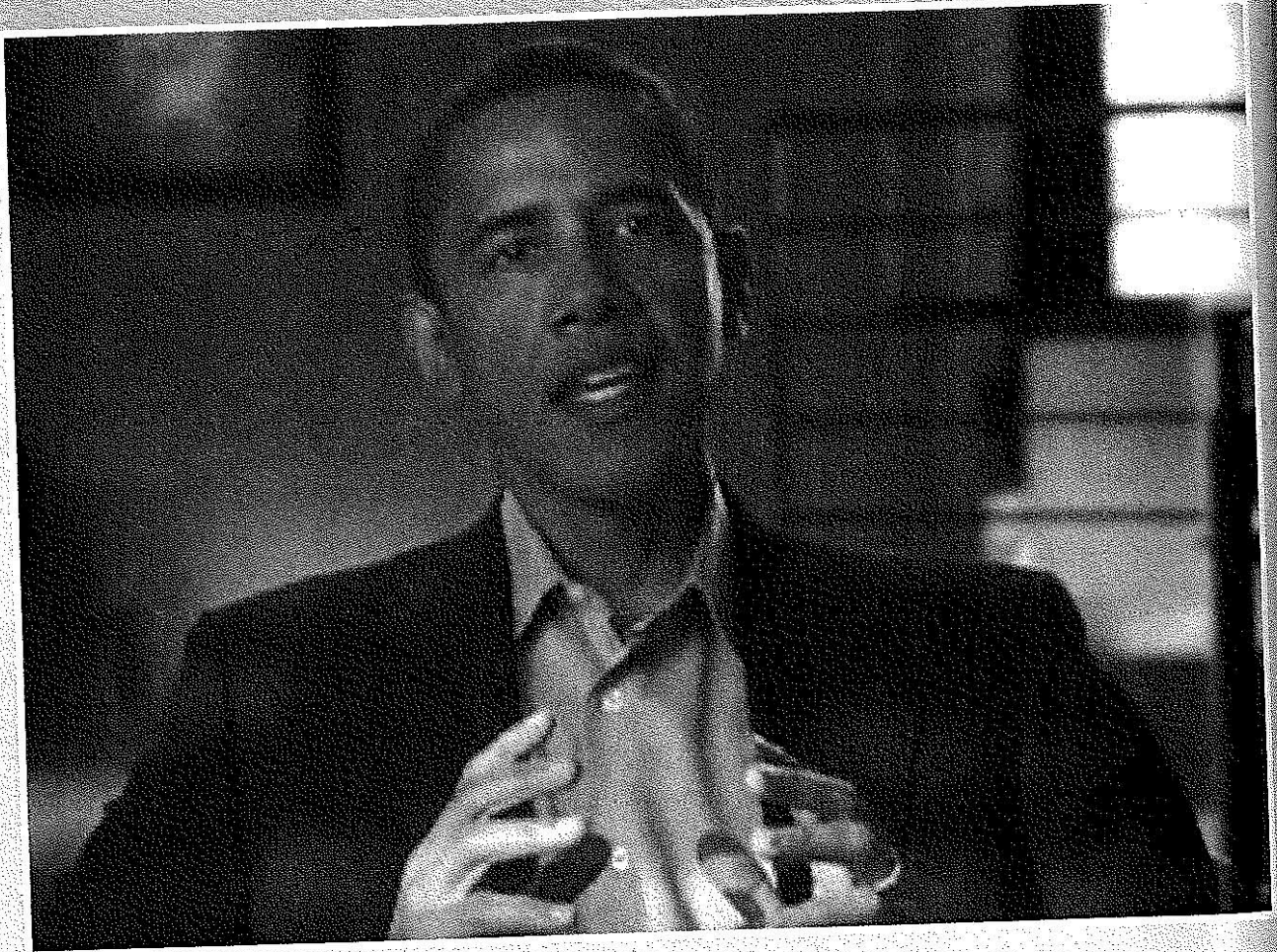


ITEM 1.12 ■ Lara Croft Tomb Raider Online Game

A number of popular video games have been translated into films, some more successfully than others. What are the differences between these two media? How might those differences translate into potential problems when turning a game into a movie? Why would movie producers go to the trouble?

ITEM 1.13 ■ Barack Obama and John McCain Presidential Announcements, 2007

Early in 2007, Democrat Barack Obama used a video posted on YouTube to announce his intention to run for President of the United States. The medium gave him complete control of his words and images. A few months later, Republican John McCain made his announcement more traditionally, speaking outdoors to an audience from behind a podium. The images from his event were created by photographers, with the power to fashion their own take on the candidate. Which medium do you suspect candidates will use in the future?



Barack Obama 2007 Presidential Announcement

CONSIDER

- 1 When does a physical substance—such as stone or metal—become a medium rather than merely a material? Can you give examples? Is the distinction between medium and material useful or important?
- 2 Can you think of several other texts like *Romeo and Juliet* that you may have experienced in various media? Which medium provided the best environment for the text? Why?
- 3 In recent years, many photographers have experienced a major change in their work process as they made the adjustment from film-based to digital photography. Given what you may know about photography, would you regard this shift as a change in technique or medium? Discuss and explore the differences with colleagues.