

Communicating Safety: Warnings, Appeals for Compliance and Visual Resources of Meaning

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Abstract : Discourses, in Foucault's sense of the term, exist as alternate knowledges about some aspect of reality. Discourses act as cognitive frameworks for how social matters are understood and legitimated. Alternate social discourses can stand competing and in conflict or be effectively interwoven. Discourses of public safety, for instance, can alternately be formulated in terms of physical risk; as a matter of social responsibility; or in terms of penalties and litigation. This research study investigates discourses of safety used in public transportation and consumer products in the Japanese cultural context. Employing a social semiotic analytic approach, it examines how posters, consumer manuals and other forms of visual (written and pictorial) warnings have been designed to influence behavioral compliance. The presentation identifies specific ways in which Japanese cultural sensibilities and social needs inform cultural design principles that operate in the visual domain. It makes the case that societies are not uniform in the way that objects and actions are represented and that visual forms of meaning are culturally shaped in ways consistent with social understandings and values.

Keywords : communication design, culture, discourse, public safety

Conference Title : ICLCH 2016 : International Conference on Law, Culture and the Humanities

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : December 29-30, 2016