The changing typography of the web

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Since the World Wide Web's earliest days, whether you were shopping on Amazon or researching on Google or catching up on news, chances are you were looking at just one of four typefaces -- Arial, Verdana, Georgia or Times -- each formulated for computer monitors and trusted by web designers to display properly on your screen.

In other words, a seventh-grader writing a book report on Microsoft Word had more font choices than the person designing Esquire Magazine's website or the IKEA online catalog. But now that is about to change.

Beginning Tuesday, Monotype Imaging, a Massachusetts company that owns one of the largest collections of typefaces in the world, made 2,000 of its fonts available to web designers. The move follows the San Francisco-based FontShop, which put several hundred of its fonts online in February. In just a few weeks, Font Bureau, a Boston designer of fonts, will make some of its typefaces available online as well.

Web designers, understandably, cannot overstate how big of a deal this is.

"It's like the 'Wizard of Oz' moment when they go from black and white to color," said Tal Leming, a typeface designer. "It's going to be huge. It's going to be absolutely huge."

But how much change will this online font explosion bring for nondesigners, particularly a public that rarely thinks about fonts at all?

According to many designers, the change will be subtle -- just how it should be. Good graphic design is generally meant to be invisible, they said, enhancing a reader's experience of the text but not getting in the way of it.

"It's like walking into a room that has bad lighting," said Ellen Lupton, curator of contemporary design at the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York and author of "Thinking With Type."

"Most people walk into the room and they know it is unpleasant. They know they don't feel good in the room, but they don't know why. An interior designer walks into the room and says, 'It's the lighting.' Typefaces work the same way."

Shu Lai, vice president of the Society of Typographic Aficionados and interactive creative director at the Pereira & O'Dell ad agency in San Francisco, put it this way: "We don't necessarily want people to notice the change. We just want them to be happier."

Traditionally, the fonts you see when you surf the Web are owned or licensed by Apple or Microsoft or whatever company is running the computer's operating system. If a designer wants you to see Caslon (one of the most popular typefaces for books, but unavailable online) when you go to her website, you must have Caslon installed on your computer; otherwise it will default to a font that you do have, such as Times. When it is really important to show certain lettering -- for example, the Los Angeles Times' gothic-looking header -- then a designer would essentially save the type as a photo or graphic. The correct font would display, but the words would not be selectable, searchable or resizable because according to the computer, they are an image, not text.

Now, if a designer wants you to see Caslon, she can purchase it from the

font company that owns it or through services such as Typekit, which has a library of fonts available by subscription. That font will be delivered to the designer's website and to anyone viewing it, even if the font is not installed on the computer.

The designer is satisfied because you are seeing what she intended you to see, and the typeface designers are satisfied because they were paid.

Frank Martinez, a New York lawyer who specializes in intellectual property law and who represents several typeface designers and foundries, said the difference between having a font temporarily downloaded to your computer and having it installed permanently on your computer is like hearing a song on the radio versus getting a band's CD. "Either way you receive the music," he said. "But if you hear it on the radio, you don't own it, and you can't play it again."

A few small foundries started rolling out these temporarily downloadable fonts -- the industry term is "web fonts," as opposed to the "system fonts" installed on in your computer -- in 2007, but only now have the major font houses followed suit. Typekit, which launched in November, has 2,000 fonts from several designers available. The company has more than 100,000 customers including the New York Times, Twitter, Gizmodo and the Wall Street Journal.

Designers have been calling for more fonts to be available on the web for years but faced some pretty significant obstacles. Popular web browsers such as Safari, Internet Explorer and Firefox weren't capable of delivering fonts to individual computers. Bandwidth wasn't fast enough. Perhaps the biggest hurdle: People who create and license fonts worried that their work would be pirated or given away for free.

"We've all been around the Internet from Day One and we've seen what happened with the music industry," Martinez said. "Technology is

coming, we can't stop it, but we want to put in place a rational methodology so if a customer wishes to license a font they can. Rather than hold back the sea, we've built a boat."

While most designers are excited about the opportunities all these new font options will afford, not all of them are convinced that it will lead to beautiful Web design.

"It's great, but it's also horrible," Lai said. "Now if people want some random handwriting site, they can have one. It's going to go through growing pains, there's no question about that."

Allan Haley, director of words and letters for Monotype Imaging, equates it to the desktop publishing revolution of the mid-'80s.

"We saw a lot of horribly typographic examples back then, and a lot of 'because I can, I will,' design," he said. "People were mixing up typefaces and there was this horrible goulash, but it pretty quickly went away. You don't want to sell people short. I think we are seeing much better graphic communication on every level now."

Stephen Coles, type director of FontShop and editor of the typography blog Typographica, is similarly hopeful.

"I was originally concerned because Web designers are not necessarily trained in typography, but I don't think it is going to be so heinous," he said. "I think Web designers are pretty savvy about what things work."

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