

VISUAL COMMUNICATION ONLINE – DESIGN TRENDS AND PERSPECTIVES OF MEDIA IN A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

VESSELINA VALKANOVA

Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication

v.valkanova@uni-sofia.bg

Vesselina Valkanova. Visual Communication Online – Design Trends and Perspectives of Media in a Digital Environment

Abstract: The nature of visual communication and the ways in which the media address their audiences is changed from the functioning of the media in a digital environment. In the new user situation, the design is called to serve the reader's control, their independence and freedom of use, therefore it is necessary to offer the contents in the most flexible form possible. It is pointed out in the article that communication design is a strategy for giving certain forms of representation to all the functional changes that traditional journalism has undergone in recent years. In the end, it is concluded that designers because of and with technology will gain new, powerful and expressive ways to build, share and influence visions.

Keywords: online visual communication; trends; perspectives; media; digital environment; communication design

The functioning of the media in a digital environment is changing the nature of visual communication and the ways in which the media address their audiences. The one-way communication of traditional media, clothed in unified and recognizable visual forms, is giving way to personalized models oriented to different audiences and groups.

The increasing consumption of online-based media is due to their advantages: global accessibility, multimedia, interactivity, automatic search, constant updating of information, provision of additional messages to articles through links to internal and external sources, free use of the archive, entertainment and services that distribution through the Internet provides to readers – such as dialog communication forms: chats, discussion forums, votes, e-mail, visitor logs, user groups. Let's add the organizational system of the Web, based on the hypertext with its complexity, multidimensionality and linguistic depth – both advantages and challenges of the

new type of communication. The associative structure of hypertext is considered to be more in line with the way human thinking works than the principle of linear text.

The path taken by modern online journalism, although relatively short, already provides a field for analysis and research. Between the extreme opinions that the Internet is gradually displacing traditional media, to the opinion that publications on the www are only their addition, enrichment and continuation, there are sober assessments of such a dynamically developing media environment. And if media sites offer reduced, expanded or changed content compared to conventional media, they also bring other information, new ways of presentation and tools of their presentation that remain unavailable to the "old" media, create mechanisms of reception that essentially distinguished from them. What is more, less and different in the online environment and how audiences find their way in it are current questions of media theory and practice.

Transformations in the Journalistic Visual Narrative and the Role of Communication Design

Recently, the rapid development of mobile Internet consumption poses essential questions to editors, publishers and designers about the forms of presentation of journalistic content and what transformations of creation and layout are able to be adaptable and profitable in the new environment and for the new consumption. Because the analog world and its conventions and postulates step irrevocably on smartphones, tablets and the latest generations of technical devices, and the journalistic narrative is changing, taking advantage of digitization and perfecting its forms of presentation for the new platforms.

Whereas in print media, control over predetermined page dimensions, color, placement, font size, hyphenation, etc. is in the hands of the designer, in the online environment the conditions are completely different. Here, the design must function in the true variety of devices, technical parameters, user environment – from the small displays of smartphones, through tablets to the wide-screen monitors of desktop computers; when controlling with a mouse or touchscreen; from digital denizens to casual visitors. For example, in the web space, even the output parameters of the document are not a clear constant, they are unknown – its width and height depend on the device and on the individual settings of the user, colors look different on different devices, and the initiative for the way of consumption remains with the user.

In this user situation, the design is called to serve the reader's control, his independence and freedom of use, therefore it is necessary to offer the contents in the most flexible form possible.

Among the needs of the recipient of online content, the **functionality** of the site is a priority. This quality of design in media products is mostly associated with the readability of the texts. So, taking into account the diversified user context of the product, the designer creates the most comfortable conditions for reading. Not without importance are the **reliability** of the site, security, accessibility and the trust it builds in the audience. **Usability** and optimizations for efficient, simplified and satisfying consumption are among the main qualities of online publishing. At the same time, the **positive associations** that the site generates, the desired impact and its relevance to the typological style of the media are conditions for its communication success. The full value of media sites in terms of their interactivity, dialogic conditions, their communicative value and the conditions for optimal consumption depending on individual needs and audience interests increase product performance and traffic.

Communication design implies a visual identity of the media online, so that the reader is used to recognize his publication by the fonts, colors, layout and synopsis of the home page.

And while until the end of the 1990s Internet sites followed and imitated traditional media and communication products, at the beginning of the new millennium interactivity, multimedia, visual elements overturned both presentation and reception. The visual credibility of the images, authenticity and visual truth as part of the objectivity of the media requires a careful assessment of the various forms of manipulation – not only originating from the act of filming, but also occurring in the post-visualization.

The dynamics of communication, the non-static contents, the essential role of the user as a creator (Gestalter) significantly change the face of online media.

Several major factors contribute to the effectiveness and reader-friendliness of an online media interface and these are:

- Consistent design, following the line of adopted and consistently applied visual means, on which the recognizability of the building elements of the page and the successful identification by the user of their character and function are based;
- Individual visual sight of the site, built from carefully selected, homogenized, standardized graphic resources – from the style of the typographic palette to the presentation of the photos and graphics, the presenting elements, etc.;
- Building a clear hierarchy of the site. This requirement falls not only on typography, where it manifests itself in the creation of detailed typographic schedules for each font element – from the body text, through the presentation of links and standard typography, to the largest heading elements. Accurate graphic execution at each typographic level is essential to design functionality. The hierarchies are particularly visible in the use of photographs and graphics, because through volumes, proportions, placement and arrangement, the orientations for the structures and content of the publication are created;

- Limitation of the colours used in the design. Conciseness regarding the selection of colour elements is important both for creating and emitting the individual style of the media, and for loading colours with certain meanings and turning them into chromatic signs that orient, guide, build identity, inform the user. Strategies in this regard concern not only the use of colour for backgrounds and in typography (where it is desirable to limit it), but also for icons, logos, graphics, which are bright optical elements, and hence elements of quick visual identification;

- Achieving high levels of ergonomics of the verbal parts. The good perception of text tables also depends on the optimal selection and combination of: font size; the length of the line; interline spaces; the type of exposure of the typographic elements on the screen space – for example, from their colour or reverse reproduction, from the use of backgrounds and textures. At the same time, for the ergonomics of the verbal elements, the practices of a more diverse optical sight of the font, built from internal highlights and highlights, segmentation and movement of the monotonous flow of a uniform typographic mass with carefully selected elements, have been proven to be better. Such variants of typographic presentation are not only better perceived, but also more effective in terms of communication.

With the transformations in the environment, a new understanding of editorial design was established: from a method of combining form and content (Paul Rand) into a conscious means of organizing and presenting information in logical structures and accessible architecture. In doing so, communication design transforms words and images into a form relevant to content, context, audiences. Thus, visual journalism combines the professionally considered arrangement of photographs, illustrations, infographics and design in a complex system for communication and impact on readers.

Online Communication – Types of Use and Expression of the Contents

A leading characteristic of modern communications is the individualization of media consumption. There is no need to adapt to the media inherent in traditional journalism – for example, television, which, despite the progress of technology, requires its audience to comply with time, place, duration.

Online communication guarantees the public this right of individual self-determination through the possibility of choosing what, when, where, how much and how to use the rich information supply. Obviously, the media of the future will develop this attitude towards freedom of use, but also of expression.

It is about a completely new world of digital communication, which is now inhabited not only by young audiences, but has penetrated widely into social plan and engage people from different demographics.

Developments for new platforms, the result of the constant and rapid development of technologies, tools, approaches, increasingly demand from designers ideas for lasting success, not just "digital replicas" or reduced variants of the main site – but meaningful management concepts of content, reader search and vivid graphic identity, powerful visual journalism and easily accessible reading structures.

The digital turn and online-based media are primarily related to branding and a more aggressive search for readers, but also to the much more active dialogic function of the media. The brands and corporate identity of online media compete with portals and news sites, with agencies and electronic media. Therefore, design, structuring and information architecture are critical to communication and to transfer the reader's confidence in the relevance, seriousness and professionalism of the media to its online presentation.

Thanks to digitalization, it has become possible to merge media and channels that are different in their technical nature and, as a consequence – the emergence of something inherently new in the media industry – greater than the sum of its parts.

Thus, the coalescence of different types of media – print, radio, television, thanks to the Internet – a process that significantly changes not only the organization of work, but also the media products themselves, the audience's approach to their use and ultimately – business models. Direct, interactive communication with the audience, the offering of complex contents, at the same time with a multimedia character thanks to the use of various software applications, **creates a completely new type of communication, the characteristics of which represent a different level of communication with the audience in dialog mode.**

Multi-, cross- and transmedia storytelling today is all about effective communication and impact on audiences.

The immense advantages and possibilities of the converged media model to reach a wide range of potential consumers, engage the attention of audiences with diverse interests and ultimately lead to an efficient business model with expanded assets and reduced production costs make it desirable and sought after by side of media management.

The organization of work in journalism is being transformed substantially, with content production workflows adapting to the new nature of media.

The organizational structures of the traditional media with departmental division of labour fall away as non-working, flexible teams of specialists with syncretic skills, related by profile or topic, appear, which can more effectively react to information flows and produce contents for different media platforms.

360-degree multi-platforms and new workflows require 360-degree professionals who are able to work in a new environment and a new organizational strategy, with integrated processes serving a variety of platforms.

Contemporary communication design practices combine the media's presentational forms with its informational purposes. Therefore, **communication design is a strategy for giving certain forms of representation to all the functional changes that traditional journalism has undergone in recent years** – its aspiration to preserve its informational merits and analytical rigor, but to obtain the qualities necessary for its survival:

- good "visibility";
- clarity, transparency and unhindered perspicuity;
- clarity and orientation towards the audience;
- accessibility and unimpeded readability.

This is how formative principles and criteria arise, aimed at ensuring these qualities, at the construction of organization and hierarchies, at structures and forms of communication of a new type – non-linear, selective, interactive.

Flexible site solutions tailored for different resolutions, screen sizes and user contexts are based on scalable design elements, structures and contents that are able to fit in different environments and be usable with different input and command methods, but also meet the requirements for ergonomics, functionality, aesthetics in terms of fonts, colour design, contrast, composition, spacing, size of buttons and links.

The good structuring of the contents at the macro level – information architecture, and at the micro level – arrangement within the individual page, guarantees to a large extent fast and unhindered use.

The most intuitive and comprehensible organization of the information architecture of the site, the clear presentation of the navigation possibilities of the horizontal and vertical structures and multimedia contents are among the main tasks of the information design.

The coherence of the media presentation on different devices, while not implying a completely uniform view, requires related contents, a visually unified interface. The visual consistency of the personal platforms is built on the basis of flexible contents, structures and design concepts that can be dynamic and adapt to the end device.

The design of the second decade of the 21st century is predominantly two-dimensional, laconic, clear, easy to use, it is rich in contrasts, but poor in details and content-centric. Experiments with colours, textures, fonts, photographs and graphics, with the layout of the menus lead to extremely clean projects with guaranteed functionality and content favouring, aim to charm users with a simple but captivating design and clean lines, direct them to the information, leading the attention and favour usability through more structured content, ensuring good reading rates and quick comprehension. Therefore, the perspicuous organization, balanced compositions with optimal font sizes, clear visual hierarchies, functional

accents and adequately found proportions between texts, images, structuring and design are a guarantee for the communication success of online media.

Ever since the media stepped into virtual reality, its development has been marked by euphoria and sobering, by ups and downs, by experiments and risks. The digital life of the media and its development as dialog media has quickly become an attractive communication opportunity. The incredible technical potential of the Internet, far exceeding the capabilities of traditional media with advantages such as: interactivity, multimedia, access to internal and external networks, permanent update of information, functions such as search, selection, quick access to many messages, etc., has changed fundamentally the profile and communication of the new century.

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Animation, virtual reality, 3D printing – the future of graphic design is very much about "design in motion", creating worlds, and interactive graphics, communicating with films and audiovisual production, optimizing content for the digital world, so that they reach the audience easily and are more understandable by using images, infographics, slideshows, video, quotes and other tools that were also used in the printed style. Without a doubt, the environment for deploying design is new, very "noisy", so design to be successful will have to be even more immersive, and a digital feel will be all around the user.

Dependence on technology will continue, but designers because of and with technology will gain new, powerful and expressive ways to build, share and influence visions.

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