

## ***Figures: the social in the visual – a context centred graphical news magazine***

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## **Abstract**

Our proposal seeks to bridge the gap between art and design through a collaboration between colleagues in visual arts and graphic design. This comprises research from cognitive and sociological backgrounds. Specifically, we are involved in constructing an on-line/off-line magazine built entirely from information graphics. Our research examines the potential for visuality to reconfigure news information. We are exploring if this approach has the potential to generate its own particular aesthetic range to bridge art and design.

Our common research interests lie in exploring what Jeffery P. Jones has termed *alternative media* through spaces of interpretation and communication away from mainstream notions of news, information and public space. It is our contention that the scope for art and design as tools for non-profit information dissemination has had scant exploration.

While we adopt Hans Rosling's call to liberate the public data held in user-unfriendly formats, our approach is new in exploring the possibilities of a context-centred graphical news magazine in examining what constitutes 'liberation of data'. The key idea is to visualise data as a communicative tool through which to expose inequalities as a function of globalisation.

We propose that globalised contexts demand alternative communicative spaces to mainstream media that allow diversity, plurality, intersubjectivity and new forms of interrogation.

**Keywords:** information graphics, Internet, alternative media, art and design

## ***Figures: the social in the visual* – a context centred graphical news magazine**

We are examining through practice led, interdisciplinary research the construction of a news magazine built entirely from information graphics. There is an associated web component for the trialling of ideas, visualisations and discussion to help forge online/offline networks. Combining our backgrounds in graphics and visual art respectively, we are attempting to provide a social application for visuality – a visual device to display socially orientated material. Central to this research collaboration are common ideas relating to social justice.

The research comprises an exploration of the visuality of news information and information graphics. It examines if a move away from photography's dominance in news visualisation will allow for greater contextualisation of events within a broader news landscape.

While we adopt Hans Rosling's call to liberate the public data held in user-unfriendly formats as seen on the website < <http://www.gapminder.org/>>, our approach is new in exploring the possibilities of a context centred news magazine in examining what constitutes 'liberation of data'. Studies are being carried out in an online companion of the magazine where we are publishing surveys and instigating online discussions. Our intention is that our website provides a communicative, interactive context where ideas, "are developed by participation...sharing of information and experience"<sup>1</sup>.

We propose that globalised contexts demand alternative communicative spaces to mainstream media that allow diversity, plurality, intersubjectivity and differing forms of interrogation. Colloquially described by Jeffery P. Jones<sup>2</sup> as alternative media, meaning to "represent a wide variety of politically conscious, non-mainstream media forms". Our research interests lie in exploring 'alternative media' spaces of interpretation and communication away from mainstream notions of news, information and public space. We acknowledge that we have an ideological position, however, we hope and intend that the visual approach we are taking has the benefit

of revealing its constructed nature and therefore openly declares its authorship. Our view of visuality concurs with Peter Dallow's<sup>3</sup>:

To use a term with a good deal of currency, we might think of the visual as being like an interface or cultural zone of social exchange, a space where the conventions in the construction of visual imagery and the prevailing or imminent social and cultural practices meet: a social sphere or arena where contemporary views of reality are displayed. Hence a notion of visual literacy could be the capacity to negotiate or "navigate" this visual cultural zone.

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

Taking Hans Rosling's cue to 'liberate the public data' held in dry or inaccessible formats, we are exploring what communicative possibilities are allowed by a move away from realism into the realms of information graphics or diagrams.

Using another diagrammatic metaphor, the realism continuum derived from Dwyer,<sup>4</sup> we can say that diagrams sit at the opposite end from photographic realism. The 'realism continuum', posited by Dwyer measures the effectiveness of representational images. The most realistic image (removed from the object itself) is the colour photograph of whatever the object happens to be. At the other end of the scale is the arbitrary graphic or the icon. It is these distilled images that are the modules upon which information designs or diagrams are built. Diagrams are the visual result of travelling along this continuum, removing detail in the process.

This stripping away of realistic detail allows the resulting image to amplify particular meanings in a way that realistic images can not. This suggests that diagrams, the kinds of visual material at the end of this process of abstraction and distillation, allow a deeper intellectual connection with visual material than is prompted by realism. At the very least, a reduction in realism must prompt a search for meaning beyond the representational. This could be described as seeing with the mind as opposed to merely seeing with the eyes. This is an important difference for the communication designer and the visual artist. Photographic realism has competed for the attention of art directors and designers with other, less realistic, visual modes, such as illustration and diagram, as the appropriate means of communicating the non-textual aspects of graphic design. Photographs have become the lingua franca of graphic designs imagery and news imagery.

A good diagram should have some rules or a strategy imposed upon it. Peter Grundy, information designer for the Guardian UK newspaper, says that this allows the “manipulation of drawn imagery to get to a place where complex things can be made simple to see and understand”<sup>5</sup>. These rules can result in a range of visual forms, but each could be described as a “system of seeing”<sup>6</sup>.

Together, we propose that our magazine and website will construct a different visual context for disseminating social information. While the Internet’s potential for colonisation by global capital is increasing, the research for *Figures: the social in the visual* concurrently examines the potential for increased social discourse within the news magazine format allowed through increased accessibility to and reduced costs of publication. There is much debate contesting whether the Internet has an emancipatory potential, however, to borrow from Jurgen Habermas<sup>7</sup> it is also another colonised space. We therefore contest a physical-space and virtual-space binary to establish the possibilities of increasing social capital through the development of social networks via two popular and pervasive forms. Strategies in strengthening social capital are often achieved through participation in counter institutions. It is this that we hope to construct with *Figures*, that is, an alternative space for the dissemination of information via visuality. Our central aim is one of social justice, and how aesthetics and digital technologies can develop alternative communicative spaces.

### **Research areas: Information graphics and the online/offline dynamic**

One of the keys to separating out our work from work undertaken by information designers generally, is the social focus. Our foregrounding the social in the visual, we believe, necessitates a drive toward accessibility.

Anthony Woodiwiss makes a scalpel sharp distinction between *vision* and *visuality*. Vision, in essence, is that which we see in the world around us which purports to be unmediated. A view of the world which could be described as empirical or observable, even photographable. Visuality on the other hand is a way of describing the world through structural models which help us to understand its workings. This difference, between what we see with our eyes, and what we can make visual in our minds, has a political dimension. In an obvious example, we are reminded of Marx’s “famous

architectural metaphor of base and superstructure”<sup>8</sup>. Marx urges us through his visual model toward picturing the inter-relationships of society in a new light.

Hazel Henderson’s ‘Layer Cake with Icing’ is a model that works in a similar way because it makes visual that which is not photographable or able to be represented in a realistic manner. Henderson explains that<sup>9</sup>:

The icing on the top is the private sector, which rests on the layer below, the public sector. The top two layers are the only ones economists typically measure. But in this analysis, there are two lower layers that are non-monetized and invisible to economists, but which are really supporting the whole thing. These include the Love Economy—unpaid productive work like raising children and maintaining the household, serving on the school board, do-it-yourself housing, rehab—and Mother Nature, the vast wealth of biodiversity that keeps our air and water clean and provides all the food and fibre and resources we need to sustain life, which go completely uncounted.

One can not go out and photograph either Marx’s or Henderson’s model, but through these diagrammatic explanations, we can conceive of the possibility that there is some *truth* in what is being described. When the visual communicator is confined to using realistic images only, s/he is effectively attempting to communicate by pointing at objects. This is essentially all realism allows. To explain the shortcomings of such a means of visual communication, Goldsmith<sup>10</sup> tells of her analysis of Schonell’s (1932) Essential Spelling List. His list comprises around 400 words which he proposes form the basic vocabulary for children. Goldsmith could only identify about 120 words that could be directly illustrated. Even at an early age then, children’s language is already dealing with non-object words. In other words, realistic pictures, at best, will easily illustrate only about one third of the written language for children.

And yet, this is not the only way in which diagrams can express the truths that realism can not see and capture. We maintain that there is an inherent honesty in non-realistic visual modes proportional to their distance from realism. Immediately upon seeing an image that is clearly not photographic, the reader knows it was authored by someone. There is no denial of authorial voice and so, such an image may be openly critiqued as being only one person’s point-of-view. Diagrams clearly reveal their constructed nature.

Photography on the other hand, easily the dominant visual form in news, pretends that it’s not structured, and there is no author’s voice or agenda. From its early history,

accounts tended to “separate the photographer from the photograph and empower the photograph as an independent print of the world”<sup>11</sup>. Photographs, Sontag attests, have gained an “insuperable power to determine what people recall of events”<sup>12</sup> and yet, photographs can not possibly capture whole relations or economies within the social realm because such interactions are often invisible. All images are subjective, and are the work of someone<sup>13</sup> so we believe that it follows that the images to be *trusted* are the ones that explain to us by their very appearance that they have been ‘made up’.

This is where we see validity for the online potential of *Figures*

<<http://figuresmag.com/>>. Through the interactive context provided by the online version of *Figures*, users can post images or text that other participants can add to or delete. This manipulation of information can actually subvert the top-down authorship model of much news information and also provide differing ways of presenting content and statistics via visual means. This is why our research employs an online/offline dynamic as we see much potential for this binary juxtaposition to develop social visual communication, as Lee Salter<sup>14</sup> suggests, “The Internet enables social-movement groups and organizations to communicate, to generate information, and to distribute this information cheaply and effectively, allowing response and feedback”. It is the potential for *Figures*, like many contexts and new(est) social movements, to provide alternative models to dominant, undemocratic practices, “Couldry and Curran use the term to refer to ‘media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take’”<sup>15</sup>. It is these *concentrations of power* that we attempt to confront.

Our focus analyses the role of visual culture and creativity and what function, if any, it has in bringing about social change. How to generate community *commonality*, is therefore an important question for our research, as it is through the online component that we have started this process. We consider there can be an emancipatory aspect to information communication technologies, as long as we analyse the unequal distribution of wealth, governance, access and literacy, even although gross differences provide anomalies. For example, the price difference between an Internet connection in the USA and in Nepal – in the U.S.A. the cost is 1.2% of an average monthly salary, whereas in Nepal the figure is 278%. Further more, only 20% of the world has access to the Internet. It is precisely how we negotiate unfair distribution of resources like these that our research aims to make visible. Our purpose, therefore, is

to identify specific social disparities brought about by globalization and communicate them through visuality and interactivity.

Digital networks are already affecting us in more ways than the broader society may wish to acknowledge, as Zizek<sup>16</sup> points out:

So, perhaps, one can conclude with a modest Marxist point: since the digital network affects us all – since it already *is* the network that regulates our daily life right down to its most common features, like the water supply – it should be *socialized* in some form or another.

We can already see the influence this is having, across diverse contexts. The Internet is increasingly being used by; terrorist organisations, law enforcement agencies, governance groups, banking institutions, educational contexts and also by social movements. This diversity of ideological purpose exposes how complex it is to navigate. Active reflexive creative practitioners who are both socially and ethically aware are vital for this purpose. Hence the importance we place on developing alternative digital news.

### **Figures: Description, intention and collaboration**

Our research hopes to make evident the ways creativity can contribute to a greater sense of commonality amongst individuals. Not just creativity for creativity's sake, but to instigate productive exchange through visuality leading to social awareness. We examine if it is possible to apply new visualisation techniques to produce a pilot issue of an online and print journal comprised entirely of information graphics. Can data which is currently embodied only in dense or textual/tabular formats, be made more accessible through graphical means in such a journal? Can such an on-line journal be used as a social arena to research visual literacy and awareness? Can the outcomes of our research provide engaging new aesthetic forms? These questions form the basis of our research regarding the transformative nature of visuality, as proposed by Poracsky, Young & Patton<sup>17</sup>:

Graphic images can quickly communicate relative values, quantitative comparisons, and numerical trends. A pie graph showing the proportion of the federal budget allocated to various agencies can be an instant and forceful civics lesson. The information conveyed by a sharply rising or plunging line on a graph can create elation or fear in the heart of a stockbroker or an investor. While numbers are powerful, they remain abstract to many people; a graphic can make quantitative information resonate immediately.



The outcome of our study is twofold – a news magazine and a website. The news magazine will have no photography or written text other than where these elements may fit within a diagram as appropriate images or captions. This is an attempt to describe news visually as a context in which events happen, with which we can and should engage, rather than news as disconnected events. This is to challenge much of our contemporary media landscape.

The magazine's concurrent web presence encourages discussion of trends in data visualisation, as well as allowing the trialling and showcasing of new diagrams. This web space is also a channel for surveys on the relative effectiveness of different methods of visualising the same data and invites interaction from interested parties to help form an online community. This is conducted by partaking in discussion on the website via the *Figures* blog, as Lovink<sup>18</sup> attests:

According to the utopian blog philosophy, mass media are doomed. Their role will be taken over by 'participatory media'. The terminal diagnosis has been made and it states: closed top-down organizations no longer work, knowledge cannot be 'managed', today's work is collaborative and networked.

This interaction involves research and experimentation into what visualities are most communicative for the data. We anticipate experimentation in this regard via the *Figures* website through comments, feedback and comparisons, "“ Blogging is neither a project nor a proposal but a condition whose existence one must recognize. ‘We blog’, as Kline and Bernstein say. It’s today’s *a priori*””<sup>19</sup>.

We have begun to visualise in a range of graphical ways public data held by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other federal and state government agencies. The intention is to make the data more engaging and more communicative for its audience.

The importance of this initial experimentation resides in its capacity to demonstrate which visual forms are best suited to which data, especially in terms of making the data accessible and digestible to its audience. As this research is in the early stages, our primary audience is at ECU – with colleagues, undergraduate and postgraduate students – before cross-institutional links are made to debate the diverse content of the magazine.

### ***Figures future***

Project findings and work by participants are incorporated onto the *Figures* website allowing national and international reach. If the pilot project is successful, the on-going magazine will itself become a publication through which these data visualisations are disseminated. Our research focus is on new directions in visuality and interdisciplinary approaches to the visual.

In addition, we will seek contributions from journalism (professionals, academics and students) to supply the information upon which new designs can be built. We expect these contributions from a global pool by way of a call for entries to journalists, designers and artists, and small teams comprised of all and other interdisciplinary practitioners. Further, we want to see if this approach has the potential to generate its own particular aesthetic range that in and of itself has the capacity to engage viewers and elicit contributions from interested designers, artists and journalists for an ongoing magazine and web presence. It is our contention that the scope for art and design as tools for non-profit information dissemination has had scant exploration.

Using the pilot magazine and web presence built from this current study, we can approach a range of potential partner organisations including the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and the Society of News Design. We intend to collaborate with online communities and offer our services as visualisers for information of public interest. One potential site for our visualisations is GetUp, where we will propose a kind of residency for our diagrams and begin building links back to the *Figures* website.

Through our magazine *Figures*, we attempt using visuality to develop transparent communications and build social networks within the virtual and physical world.

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