# INGREDIENTS PRODUCING VISUAL IMPACT OF A NEWSPAPER. A COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW OF PARTICULARS IN TODAY NEWSPAPERS' INFLUENCE BY IMAGE AND COLOUR

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#### **Abstract**

The visual impact of a text is the combined outcome of graphic communication and semiotics. Good media literacy practices do not overlook the fact that everything is a sign of something else, and signs are everywhere around us. It is in the nature of the human being to be influenced by image and colour. Behavioral psychologists claim that most of our decisions are based on intuitive judgment and emotions. Graphic communication is increasingly used because graphics acts both cognitively and emotionally. While text can only influence through words and it takes longer to influence as it appeals to cognition, visuals have a quicker and stronger influence as they first appeal to senses and emotions. We interpret visual texts by taking into account the elements that make up that text: images (colour), words (titles, headlines captions), typographical features (font, size), and layout (spatial arrangement). Various design choices; starting from the geometric dimensions of pages, sizes of type, texture of the paper, column widths, their spacing and alignment would exert subtle but important impact on the nature and quality of communication. Obviously, words are essential, yet verbal communication can be transmitted visually, by printing (or

Keywords: visual, impact, newspaper, media, design.

Aim: is to reveal the particulars in the layout of a newspaper that attract and trigger effects in readers. In order to emphasize that visual impact has tremendous significance in human life, without claiming that we entirely agree with this idea, yet stressing that this is the general propensity of the human being, we shall quote a statement of one of the most famous fashion designers of all times, Coco Chanel:

"Si une femme est mal habillée, on remarque sa robe mais si elle est impeccablement vêtue, c'est elle quel'on remarque».

This principle may also apply to writings. The visual representation of ideas influences perception and creates mind-sets in today's

world, because people are in a permanent hurry, they become superficial and appeal more to emotions and senses than to cognition.

Our research started from the idea that the visual impact of a text is the combined outcome of 1) **graphic communication** (design choicesgeometric dimensions of pages, typeface, texture of the paper, column widths, their spacing and alignment), have impact on the nature and quality of communication) and 2) **semiotics** (good media literacy practices do not overlook the fact that everything is a sign of something else, and signs are everywhere around us).

Methodology: The present research, based on the idea that, today, newspapers appear in both printed and electronic form, attempts at outlining the difference between the design of print newspapers and online newspapers.

The research material included various authors, works and professional designers that deal with newspapers design. Guided by an inner sense resulted from our long time experience in the media, we have collected remarks and practical conclusions in an attempt to reveal the elements that result into visual impact.

We consider our references to be valuable, because they reflect studies made on newspapers and bring empirical evidence from practitioners who have been working in the field of media design, and they have shared their experience, expertise and conclusions.

Our point of view is one of media professionals, who combine their journalistic experience with research. Our daily contact with layouts of various publications makes us understand that

raising awareness about visual impact is essential in attracting readership.

In our attempt to identify what are the particulars in newspapers that have impact on readers, we have gone through the following stages:

We have first made observations on what has been published on the topic Visual impact of newspapers;

We have selected authors that we found most relevant in terms of expertise, and examples that supported their ideas;

We corroborated the precepts expressed by authors and the available examples;

We performed a deductive analysis of the precepts expressed; and

We eventually summarized the ideas and conclusions.

Getting influenced by image and colour is part of the human nature. Behavioral psychologists claim that most of our decisions are based on intuitive judgment and emotions.

Although unconsciously, we tend to be influenced by graphics more than we realize, as graphics acts both cognitively and emotionally. Obviously, words are essential, but it takes longer to have an influence, as they appeal to cognition, while visuals have a quicker and stronger influence, as they appeal to senses and emotions. Graphic communication does not convey meaning better than text, but the secret of communication is in the combination of graphics and words that has a communicative power that neither of them possesses individually. That is why, we say in all languages that "a picture is worth 1,000 words".

Visuals have a dual impact:

- 1) **Cognitive:** Graphics enhance our level of communication. They increase comprehension, recollection and retention. Visual clues help decoding the text and focus the attention, thus increasing the likelihood that the audience will have a better recollection.
- 2) **Emotional:** Pictures stir emotions and attitudes. Graphics rouse imagination and creative thinking by stimulating various areas of our cortex, which leads to a deeper and more accurate understanding of the information.

Emotions play an essential role in decision making, perception, learning and, more than that ... they influence rational thinking.

Neuroscience confirms that emotions somehow control our life, as they react first, whereas the number of right-brained subjects seems to exceed the left-brained ones.

Visual characteristics of printed newspapers: We interpret texts by taking into account the elements that make them up: images (colour), words (titles, headlines captions), typographical features (font, size), and layout (spatial arrangement). A letter and a space between letters can signify more than one may imagine.

When using printed words, we have in mind the audience, what words are best to use and what information is conveyed by them, because we think in linguistic terms. A close analysis of the typographical features reveals the importance of capitalized / non-capitalized, letters, smaller or large fonts, that may determine the orientation of reading or the importance of information. The layout also influences the meaning, depending on the placement. Top / bottom direction suggests that top grabs attention, and bottom brings new information. Left / right suggests that left includes already known information, while right presents new information.

Guity Novin, an American graphic designer, explains in detail how the design of a newspaper page creates psychological, behavioural and attitudinal effects. She suggests that: 1) there is a "visual grammar of the layout" that underlies a text and 2) the design already sets the context of a text and has a visual impact that orients readers' decoding of the message.

Designing a newspaper page has to do with art, says Guity Novin: "Page layout is the process of composing text, image and negative space on the page to produce a balanced and harmonious visual impact. No text has a single meaning or a unique message, and different designs create different meanings and different messages for the same text. A layout designer usually uses a grid system to subdivide a page into geometrical spaces that would constitute the grammar of layout design made up of vertical, horizontal,

oblique and curved borders, margins, columns, inter-column spaces, lines of type, and negative spaces between blocks of type and images. The layout can occupy just one narrow vertical column, many columns, or they can spread over an entire page. Similar to the grammatical impacts of various tenses of a verb in a sentence, these visual grammatical variations change the dynamics of the visual meaning in the space and time."<sup>2</sup>

Each choice communicates ideas, attitudes and values. Designers make the layout visually attractive to the eye, and tell the story through designs and context, as well. Design choices, from geometry of pages, sizes of type, texture of the paper, column widths, their spacing and alignment would exert subtle but important impact on the nature and quality of communication<sup>3</sup>.

David Machin, author of a book on visual communication, confirms that "writing itself comprises an image, composed of kinds of type faces, alignments, as well as font colour and paper quality" (Machin, 7). The form of the fonts, angularity, the space between them, their direction and size, all have a semiotics, they suggest, connote and denote.

David Machin presents in details the semiotics of all elements in a text: colour, space, fonts. "Diluted colours point to more muted moods as opposed to the emotional intensity of those that are highly saturated. Letter forms suggest something light, dynamic and soft as opposed to those that are more angular, heavy and fixed (machine, 8). Letter forms can be connected to each other, as in running handwritten script, almost touch each other... Or they can appear separate and selfcontained. Where letters are further apart, this may suggest isolation, disconnection or even fragmentation. It evokes a sense of individuality, space to think and room to move. When letters are closer together it can connote integration, wholeness and unity", explains David Machin (Machin, 63). Slightly larger spacing between letters creates a sense of room to think, giving space for opinions. The compact type faces signal up the newspaper as more dogmatic traditional informer of the public. Along with the curvature, softness and the lower case suggesting subtlety and moderation, spacing

also suggests room to think and opinion. Letters more closely placed suggest wholeness and a unity of purpose, creating the impression of relationships, belonging and warmth. Angularity can suggest harshness, aggressive, technical or masculine characters, also associated with rationality and modernity, whereas post modernism has brought curvature back into design (Machin, 63).

Here is the significance of font type, font size and font colour explained by David Machin: "Flatter fonts can appear more stable but also seem heavy and inert. Tall, slim fonts can suggest aspirations and loftiness, but also pompousness and self-satisfaction" (Machin, 63). "Regularity and irregularity in letters have their meaning potential. We often find irregularity in advertisements for children products. This can suggest fun or playfulness, as opposed to the formal regularity of letters. It might also point to a lack of conformity or even wackiness or craziness. Letters might comprise loops and swirls to communicate energy, flamboyance or lightness, or may include iconographic imagery. An important flourish is the "foot" of the serif, which now tends to connote tradition. Where they are not present, there is more sense of modernity" (Machin, 64).

Colour is also full of significances: "Colour can communicate ideas, attitudes. Bright or saturated colours can be used to draw our attention to them. More muted colours communicate more subtle moods. Pure colours communicate greater levels of certainty than impure colours. Colours can be used to create hierarchies and links on a page between objects, logos and texts. Darkness is associated with secrecy, ignorance, concealment, lies, depression, and even the irrational and the primitive. Light is associated with openness, truth, reason and optimism. Intense brightness can go further to mean purity, spiritual vision, ever otherworldliness, whereas dark and shadow can mean evil. Richly saturated colours suggest intensity of feelings, exuberance, adventure or vibrancy dilute colours may mean subtle, tender or even moody. Saturated may mean showy, vulgar and garish, whereas dilute can mean dull, lacking in energy, moody" (Machin, 63).

For instance, a Metro sale ad: 4



- What are the words that are meant to capture viewer's attention first?
- What is the next thing that captures your attention?
- With regards to the typographical features, why do you think the poster is created as such?

The word *Sale* is the biggest and red, to draw attention. The word *Clearance* is the 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest and many-coloured to suggest variety of items. The number 70% is bigger than the period of sales 2-15 *January*, as if with the hope that the smaller figures will not be noticed and the potential customers will rush to Metro to grab the 70% discount.

Size and colour in photos signify a lot. Traditionally, large photos and dramatic headlines are associated with tabloids, as against the serious broadsheet newspapers. However, Machin emphasizes that, due to the increasing communications landscape, this traditional differentiation is dwindling and you can find serious newspapers with one large photo reigning on the front page and overlapping. "The design must speak the visual language of the specific readership", says Machin (Machin, 76).

In their book about designing with typography, James Craig, Irene Korol Scala and William Bevington also explain in detail the graphics significance in telling stories, in terms of font type, size and colour, as well as type spacing and line spacing: "Regardless how subtle the difference between typefaces, the typeface you choose will greatly affect the appearance of the entire printed page" (Craig, Scala&Bevington, 14). "Linespacing greatly affects the appearance of a setting. When more linespacing, the blocks of text appear lighter and more open" (Craig, Scala&Bevington, 20). "Normal spacing is the easiest to read and the recommended spacing for most applications" (Craig, Scala&Bevington, 21).

David Machin emphasizes rhyme, contrast and iconography: "Rhyme: elements within frames or across frames thatcan be linked through some common quality - shape or colour. Contrast: elements can be different through colour or size. Iconography: frame shape and style can carry meaning, also have iconographical qualities" (Machin, 70).

The reading rhythm, namely the choice of words in titles and on a page, may also influence the readers. For instance, in the French newspaper *Liberation*, the strategy of creating titles had in mind the two possible types of readings, paused and condensed, being "an important part of communicating ideas and attitudes from the title" (Machin, 69).

The reading rhythm may be also achieved by text grouping on a page. Segregation-elements are separated by a frame, occupy different domains and are therefore of a different order, separation-elements can be separated by empty space, and there is no physical border, overlap - the elements have some similarity but some differences, and elements cross boundaries or seep into other spaces, contrast, everything contributes to the rhythm (Machin, 70).

Ed Henninger, a design consultant, explains how to divide the pages of a newspaper in order to attract readers: "Want to make your page—especially your front page—more compelling? Give it more impact? Get more readers to give it a close look? Use a dominant visual. Whatever that visual may be, there's one quality it must have to make it work. Size.My guideline has always been 3 columns wide by 8 inches deep, 4 columns wide by 6 inches deep—as a minimum. Make sure that other elements are no larger than half the size of your dominant visual. Select an element with compelling content for your dominant visual. Look for action and strong color."<sup>5</sup>.

The importance of the headline is stressed by Danuta Reah, who claims that newspapers are ephemeral texts, intended only for the day when they appear, so headlines become extremely important to attract readers. Sometimes, headlines have to shock and over time, headline writers have developed a vocabulary that is effective (Reah, 15). Headline's shape, content and structure are dictated by the importance of the story. The space it occupies

and the type face are dictated by the layout of the page. The headline will rarely be written by the writer of the story. It usually appears on the front page and it is supposed to attract the readers (Reah, 13).

There are authors who claim that newspapers, and especially a magazine with strong visual impact, are actually more efficient than television. "In fact, newspaper stories, with their catchy headlines, bulleted main points, and information-filled leads are more likely to create a short attention span than is television" (Paulos, 27), says John Allen Paulos, a mathematician who explored aspects of life and wrote about the permanent uncertainty of life and on how to read the news.

According to John Allen Paulos, "turning the pages of a newspaper can be disorienting. Everything seems to be of equal importance, especially if one is unfamiliar with previous development in ongoing stories. Part of the fascination of newspapers, this unnatural cross section of times and locations is certain to appear disorderly and confusing. But there is an easy receptivity to incongruities that permeate any newspaper" (Paulos, 49).

Charles Apple, a freelance visual journalist and instructor, believes that using the fonts and the sophisticated type faces is real art, and this is half the secret of story telling in journalism. He believes that "Good visuals are about story telling. The trend is toward sophisticated, intricate use of typography. It looks simple on the page. But, in fact, there are lots of balances between weights of fonts, leading (the space between lines), widths of copy blocks and so forth. There is spacing to consider. Use of white space. When to use colour text and when not to."<sup>6</sup>.

Tim Harrower and Julie Elman believe that the key in designing newspapers in today's world is "that editors, writers and designers must realize that today's readers are visual. Impatient. Easily bored. Readers absorb data in a variety of ways: through words, photos, charts, maps, diagrams. They want news packaged in a sort of "information mosaic," a combination of text, data and images that approaches complex issues from fresh new angles. Years ago, when big stories broke, editors assigned reporters to write miles and miles of pure text. (And yes,

readers would read it.) Today, when big stories break, editors assign reporters, photographers and graphic artists to make concepts understandable in both words and pictures" (Harrower & Elman, 164).

Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone confirm that readers' way of reading and interpreting the news depends of the visual impact of newspapers, which orients their reading choices and their way of making meanings: "Readers may make meaning, but not of their own choosing. In the case of newspapers, the form constraints meaning-making. The form imposes tacit rules that allow for certain reading practices" (Barnhurst & Nerone, 7). Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone believe that the truism never judge a book by its cover is too much generalized, actually the appearance influences us a lot. They claim that the subtle, unconscious differentiation between text and images is actually the result of historical institutionalization of the two: "the distinction between word and image is far from natural. No one confuses words and drawing, but making words and making pictures both originated from drawing" (Barnhurst & Nerone, 10).

Elizabeth Rogers claims that "Visually, paper pages become like computer screens. Yet, electronic newspaper pages retain some print medium features. On those screens, one can still see a combination of type, photographs and graphics. Stories are still stories, and writers are still writers".

Definitely, printed newspapers are less and less read, but unlikely to disappear. There are still certain countries and certain professional categories that will prefer printed newspapers instead of online versions.

According to MediaMiser.com, an American PR organization, newspapers have their Strengths such as: daily delivery, frequency opportunity, geographic selectivity, interest selectivity, intensive coverage of specific geographic market, well-educated audience, wide range of editorial material aimed at a broad audience, great flexibility in ad size, complex information, second shortest lead time, pass-along audience in household, credibility of print in general, they can be read at leisure, they are portable, can provide 'keepers", but also

Limitations, such as: short life,low quality colour reproduction, not demographically selective, cannot deliver sound and motion, messages compete with one another<sup>8</sup>.

From SpinSucks.com, another American PR organization, we learn that "In 1990, The Poynter Institute, a journalism think-tank, launched the *eye track studies* and the results showed that people *looked at* Headlines, Photos, the First paragraph, and *Not* so much at the rest of your story. Later on,the newspaper design made sense to this research: larger headlines, larger photos, more pull quotes, graphs, and more graphic elements"<sup>9</sup>.

Clay Morgan, writing for SpinSucks.com, confirms that readers are mainly visual because the eye track research led designers in an important direction -visual story telling so that, instead of writing a story about tax revenues, a graph tells us the story. Another discovery was that people do not mind reading online but they are not finishing stories. PoynterEyetrack research revealed that people read 77% of the text of a story, choosing to read online and short text with strong visual elements capturing attention most.

The trend of packing news in attractive graphics is running across the world.

African countries, such as Kenya, seem to be also aware that visual impact is major in attracting readers. I. M. Chege, researcher at the University of Nairobi, writes that "Most readers are interested in the gist of the story. Kenyan newspaper publishers have an obligation to cater for these readers by packaging content that will be reader friendly, relevant and graphically appealing"<sup>10</sup>.

M. Chege's research confirms what Tim Harrower and Julie Elman say in their book, namely that, 30 years ago, newspaper readers were focused on information and able to read more text while, in today's world, readers are on the rush and their attention to headline and information is oriented actually by visual factors: "Prior to the 1970s design did not play an important role as today" and "Fifteen years ago a Kenyan newspaper had a couple of black and white photographs alongside a mundane layout which included pages cluttered with text

that was visually strenuous.", says Chege, but "Today's newspaper has multiple coloured photographs with an exclusive layout. There is a greater awareness of graphics among newspaper designers/publishers and readers today. The need for newspaper publishers to produce more graphically appealing pages in order to maintain a captivated audience is a concern"<sup>11</sup>.

## Visual characteristics of online newspapers:

Online newspapers, issuedn for the first tinme in the 1990s, are increasingly preferred by readers around the world, due to the boom of smart gadgets. However, dynamics is a huge challenge posed by the virtual world - readers are more and more on the rush, more superficial, their distributive attention is less accurate and they tend only to scroll up and down, instead of properly reading or at least skimming through the texts. Moreover, smartphones and ipads are deficient in displaying contents.

In his explanations about E-newspapers, Deniz Bokesoy claims that "today's e-newspapers make use of many modern technologies which give them an advantage over the print medium. Their design mimics print medium. However, the elements behind the traditional design of print newspapers do not always make sense in the virtual world "12.

Deniz Bokesoy stresses that online newspapers allow a sort of creativity and freedom of choice in searching the news in the virtual world, due to the links and hyperlinks available: "the reader defines the relevance, importance and even the length of the news through hyperlinks, so there is a tendency of control shift from editors to readers as the changing role of newspaper editors from a "gatekeeper" to "pathfinder", where the design suggests how the news *could* be read, rather than how it *should* be read."<sup>13</sup>

Deniz Bokesoy sees the paradox in having more freedom on the Internet- more freedom and less burden for designers of online newspapers, but this is a double-edged sword: readers can be satisfied more easily, but how can you satisfy all readers across geographical borders?

While print newspapers rely more on the front page to attract, online newspapers may rely more

on detail, and each square of the screen may attract toward further links, so the task of the designer is somehow easier, because: a) details may save the newspaper from an overall first bad impression, by orienting the reader toward further links: "For the publishers, there are two advantages: the audience of online newspapers is spread over a larger spectrum compared to the print medium, as geographic limitations do not apply in the Internet; and research shows that most traffic to the e-newspaper's web site comes from searches rather than by the "front door". This means that for readers who are visiting the e-newspaper via links, the suggestions made by the design of the main page have less significance"14.

Online newspapers pose the challenge of how to present a front page that meets 2 requirements:

1) to have a core of graphical tastes, and 2) a nutshell of basic information, where visual impact should be optimal, so that it could orient further searches. Difficult for editors and designers to decide what would be the best for all, and how to achieve balance between freedom and orientation.

Another challenge posed by online newspapers is interactivity which may limit the focus on content while giving space to debates: "In the beginning, e-newspaper content was text-based and was a replica of the print version. Gradually, with the interactive elements coming into play, e-newspapers started to build a unique identity to gain more importance in the industry. Interactivity became a symbol of identity for e-newspapers. However, too much focus on interactive elements or technological abilities, at the expense of content quality, might lower editing standards and credibility. E-newspapers also rely on technological design and less on content"15.

## Case study 1

<u>Financial Times front page refreshed in</u> <u>September 2014</u>

The Financial Timeslaunched on 15 09 2014 a refreshed newspaper, designed for the new reader.



FT editor Lionel Barber said: "The refreshed newspaper is an agenda-setting slice of the best of the FT. It complements FT.com and other channels, providing the definitive global perspective on what readers need to know each day. The new FT has visual impact and is easy to navigate, highlighting trends and providing original news, insight, analysis and context."

In terms of visual enhanced accessibility, the new look of Financial Times made changes in the positions of traditional columns, in colours and fonts, and introduced new headlines to orient readers more easily. A new custom typeface, 'Financier', new colour graphics, a new-look front page allowing easier navigation, an index that lists companies, sectors and people mentioned in the companies section, a new trends feature which guides readers to emerging themes<sup>16</sup>.

## Case study 2

Tim Harrower and Julie Elman describe the changes made to Times-News newspaper from Twin Falls, Idaho (Harrower & Elman, 232):



The major changes reflect what David Machin explains to be significant in the design of a page. In colour, black and red, strong colours, replaced the softer blue hues, in order to draw attention. In spaces, columns are no longer separated by frames. In fonts, the previous Quiosco fonts were replaced with Chronicle Display and Archer. In size, the new headlines are twice or even 3 times bigger than the former ones and combine black and coloured typefaces, in bold. Again, the use of Serif-type face seems to have been preferred in headlines for clarity and modernity.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Although unconsciously, readers are influenced by graphic communication.

Graphic communication is increasingly used because graphics acts both cognitively and emotionally.

The secret of communication is in the combination of graphics and words that has a communicative power that neither singularly possesses.

We interpret texts visually, by taking into account the elements that make up that text: images (colour), words (titles, headlines captions), typographical features (font, size), and layout (spatial arrangement). Page layout is the process of composing text, image and space on the page to produce a balanced and harmonious visual impact.

Different designs create different meanings and different messages for the same text. Design choices orient the nature and quality of communication.

Design means:
geometric dimensions of pages
texture of the paper
column widths
column spacing
column alignment
type face
type face colour
type face size
line spacing
rhyme
contrast
iconography
reading rhythm.

Editors, writers and designers must realize that today's readers are visual, impatient, easily bored, and that readers want news packaged in a combination of text, data and images that approaches complex issues from fresh new angles.

Readers' way of reading and interpreting the news depends of the visual impact of newspapers, and the form in which the news is presented orients their reading choices and their way of making meanings. In the case of newspapers, the form orients the meaning making and tacit rules allow for certain reading practices.

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