Commentary
Image-Centric Practices as Global Design Strategies

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We are in the midst of a Fourth Industrial Revolution, an age characterized by ubiquitous devices, transmedia storytelling, and where data visualization strategies dominate. The three chapters (10, 11, and 12) included in Section 4 of this collection bring together case examples for developing and interrogating criteria and methods in defining image-centricity within the context of contemporary news media practice. What is shared by these three case examples is the foregrounding of design and its corollary strategies to generate new ways of approaching image-centricity and genre development. John S. Knox argues for a consideration of the design and technological affordances of tablet-based news apps and how these might be exploited in application and across geographic boundaries: he takes as his starting point the home pages of internationally recognized news apps from Australia, the USA, and the UK, and building upon the work of Caple (2013) links image-centricity to design and genre. Peter Wignell et al. focus on a visual interrogation of editorial design for Islamic State's online magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*: they explore the ways in which communication strategies use patterns and recontextualization to promote an ideological construction in forming a fundamental worldview. Martin Engebretsen focuses on how the newsroom and its journalists are increasingly relying on the visualization of data-driven evidence making accessible to users statistical, historical, or geographical information material in diagrammatic or cartographic representations: he provides examples drawn from Norwegian online news sites to evidence a new kind of multimodal interplay, a form of media literacy and a nuanced definition of image-centricity.

The juxtaposition of these three essays identifies a gap in academic studies which might benefit from taking into account a design-led perspective on the construction of image-centricity for global design strategies. The study of image-centricity has increased exponentially with social and online media platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter. The image is ever-more prominent, especially in the way it is used to *lead* in the communication of news stories, information messaging, and promotion. Used effectively, images rapidly grab the attention of a tech-savvy readership. Whilst image-centricity may be analyzed through a social-semiotic approach, a more nuanced

understanding of design knowledge and methods is equally needed. One thing does not negate the other: it is simply a question of getting the fullest picture via a variety of methods.

In its purist sense, design is concerned with the "planning, inventing, making and doing" (Cross, 1982, p. 221) in the realization of new products, and includes services, systems, networks, and experiences. Design informs how we communicate with people as an activity; that is, a "process of conceiving, programming, projecting" (Frascara, 2004, p. 2) and "constructs, represents and contests the social world" (Jewitt, van Leeuwen, Scollon, & Triggs, 2002, p. 7). Design according to Kazmierczak (2003, p. 47), is "an interface for meaning making, or simply the design of meaning" and holds "semiotic systems such as images, layout and typography" (Bednarek & Caple, 2014, p. 136). The inherent ways in which designers design for "encounters" (Atzmon & Boradkar, 2017, p. 2) may help to shed light on the creation of meanings in new kinds of socio-technological contexts. In exploring what Knox, Wignell et al., and Engebretsen have to offer, we might also consider asking: what does the designer bring to this discussion of image-centricity as a producer of meaning in the study of multimodal artifacts? To do this, I would suggest the potential role for design is best described as *mediated actions*, encompassing the designer as producer, designing for audiences, and designing as storytelling.

Designer as Producer

The rise of mobile news media apps, as Knox describes, suggests we have access to news from anywhere in the world, at speed, and at any time of the day or night. Such unprecedented access in news reporting results in new kinds of challenges for journalists and designers in determining effective ways to communicate this. Knox's chapter is excellent, and sufficiently detailed in his discussion on reportage, composition, and visual metaphor. However, taking the designer's process into consideration may offer an enhanced perspective. Thus, an interview with Alex Breuer, the creative director of *The Guardian*, elucidates the rationale behind the newspaper's ground-breaking rebranding in 2014 (Alderson, 2014). A design strategy was adopted to evolve a new design and brand language that was consistent across all platforms. Breuer states that he began with "a new responsive design built around the key proportion of the core image size" (Alderson, 2014, n. p.) used across platforms. Equally, a redesign was needed to adapt to "the readers' changing needs" and to an "evolving global news organisation" (Alderson, 2014, n. p.). Since 2014, the design of *The Guardian* home page has been iterative, with initial language systems built around color, customized icons, commissioned typeface (*Guardian Egyptian*), greater personalization, flexible formatting, and refresh animation. It is only by looking at this side

of the story, as well, that we can fully understand the complexity and challenges of such new technology.

Designing for Audiences

Technology has afforded publishers' greater access to extending their reach to audiences across geographic borders, and with it all the associated complexities of language and visual representation. My second example considers the role of the audience and global design strategies. Whereas tablet-based news-media apps, as described by Knox, are drawing from previous design approaches found in print newspapers, Wignell et al. show how editorial design has impacted online digital magazines (in this case, the design of *Dabiq* – an ISIS-related, English-language online magazine produced between 2014 and 2017).

We learn from Wignell et al.'s findings that English-language publications such as *Dabiq* and subsequently *Rumiyah* are used as tools for radicalization of individuals from afar, employing literary conventions and Western symbolism, editorial design, and multimodal image-making strategies. The role of the editorial designer in this process of meaning making is made manifest in the construction of text-image relations as iconic artifacts. Images move easily across cultural borders, are recontextualized, and are picked up by the mainstream press to find new meaning as another form of propaganda.

Whilst Wignell et al. present useful insights into image-centricity and image tracking, the study offered by design researchers Scheuermann and Beifuss (2017) suggests a more detailed visual analysis of the typographic design and layout of *Dabiq*. It takes a designer's eye to discern the shifts in typographic and graphic placements in *Dabiq,* thus making it possible to suggest that its "editorial design is subjected to a multitude of changes" (Scheuermann & Beifuss, 2017, p. 63) in ISIS design policy. Scheuermann and Beifuss (2017, pp. 72–73) conclude in their study of the magazine that ISIS "up to six different designers might have been involved in a single issue", "including at least one designer, who might be trained as a graphic designer in the western hemisphere". Such an analysis may inform how designers engage with global design strategies and, in this case, for the development of "graphic design of future counter-terrorism activities" (Scheuermann & Beifuss, 2017, p. 9). A case might be made for design-led research which sits alongside more conventional image-centric approaches offered by Wignell et al. and others. The design of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* becomes an 'encounter' between publisher, designer, and reader, thereby establishing connections for the reader as an active participant in the process of meaning making. As Buchanan (1985, p. 6) has pointed out, design rhetoric is "an art of shaping society, changing the course of individuals and communities, and setting patterns for new action".

Designing as Storytelling

My third example suggests the role of the designer as a digital storyteller of information in the production of data visualizations. Graphical forms have the power to communicate, in an immediate manner, complex messages; although as Weber cautions, "not every infographic is a visual narrative or tells a story…" (Weber, 2017, p. 250). Engebretsen explores data visualization as "a semiotic phenomenon of growing prevalence in contemporary society". Within a context of media literacy, his primary example is from the Norwegian tabloid *Verdens Gang* (VG) – an online news site. Whilst Engebretsen gives brief mention of the perspectives offered by practitioners in the design of data visualization, citing the writings of Per Mollerup and Edward Tufte, he does not fully develop the practitioner's position in his essay. Yet, he acknowledges that "the visualization is still a product of many choices", and that decisions have to be made that inform not only the selection of data but "the context in which it is placed", and ultimately, the transformation of complex data into graphic forms. But perhaps here more could be made of the decision-making process and methods used by designers in their everyday work.

One example which sits outside of the field of news media may provide a clue in moving toward a design-led perspective on data visualization (small and big) and the everyday. In 2011, designers Barbara Hahn and Christine Zimmermann wrote about their collaborations with statisticians and how they employed design-based methods in the development of "knowledge visualisations" (Hahn & Zimmermann, 2011, p. 72) for the Bern University Hospital Inselspital. "Knowledge visualisations" in this case refers to "a form of knowledge transfer that uses all types of graphic media to guarantee an effective transfer of information" (Hahn & Zimmermann, 2011, p. 72). An in-depth set of visual experiments using reflective research provided the basis for visualizations focusing on daily hospital routines including hospital waiting times, decubitus risks, ward routines, and patient discharge. The design-led process not only precipitated effective visualizations, but also made "aspects visible that were lost or not visible in the statistical evaluations" (Hahn & Zimmermann, 2011, p. 80). The new insights which could be deduced from their visualizations contributed directly to the improvement of patient care (Hahn & Zimmermann, 2011, p. 83). In this way, *thinking like a designer* was crucial to the way in which the research questions were framed, and the data harvested and visualized. The manner in which designers utilize a "designerly form of activity that separates it from typical scientific and scholarly activities" (Cross, 1982, p. 223) might be a welcome addition to the studies of image-centricity as a global design strategy.

Design as addressed from a different discipline can be useful, but also creates distance. The more active inclusion of the designer (e.g., interviews, design ethnography, visual analysis, experimental practices) might provide a fuller picture of decision-making, intentions, and audience interaction and evaluation. For all the chapters' strengths – and there are many – the gap is in a lack of engagement with design as a lived experience. The fourth Industrial Revolution is here, and in the age of fake news, it is more important than ever to understand information flows. Designers are a crucial part of those flows and require to be contextualized in the same way as any other semiotic approach.

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