

Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca
Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences
Doctoral School of Political and Communication Sciences

DOCTORAL THESIS

*Editorial design in the digital world: traditions and
innovations*

Summary

Candidate: Ionuț Hușanu

Coordinator: Prof. univ. dr. Elena Abrudan

Cluj-Napoca

2024

Contents

Introduction.....	7
I. The transformation of news writing in recent decades.....	13
I.1 The role of written press in the development of journalism	13
I.2 The place of online journalism in the media industry in the digital age.....	15
I.2.1 Historical context of online journalism.....	15
I.2.2. News readers, users of news services	18
I.2.3 Data journalism - new opportunities	21
I.3 Online journalism characteristics.....	23
I.3.1 Hypertextuality, interactivity and multimedia.....	23
I.3.2 Online journalism characteristics	24
I.3.3 Principles of new media	26
I. 4 Conclusions.....	28
II. Design. Graphic design, communication design	30
II.1 General theories of design activity	30
II.1.1 Design culture	30
II.1.2 Design processes and principles	32
II.2 The designer and their role in conveying information	35
II.2.1 Definitions of the designer.....	35
II.2.2 Relevance of designers, when everyone is a designer	36
II.2.3 Characteristics of successful designers.....	37
II.3 Graphic design.....	38
II.3.1 Historical context.....	38
II.3.2 Elements of graphic design.....	42
II.3. Principles of graphic design	46
II.3.1 Gestalt	46
II.3.2 Structure.....	49

II.3.3 Visual hierarchy	52
II.3.4 Balance	53
II.3.5 Rhythm	55
II.3.6 Unity	56
II.3.7 Colour theories.....	57
II.3.8 Semiotics.....	62
II.4 Production of graphic design artefacts	65
II.5 Graphic design in the context of communication and visual culture	66
II.6 Communication design, message design.....	70
II.7 Information design.....	74
II.8 Conclusions	78
III. Editorial design.....	79
III.1 General aspects of editorial design	79
III.2 Elements of editorial design.....	83
III.2.1 Graphic structure of a publication	83
III.2.2 Typefaces and typography	91
III.2.3 Heading elements	99
III.2.4 Colours in the news	103
III.2.5 Images	106
III.3 Conclusions	112
IV. Editorial design in the digital age	114
IV.1 Transformations in print media design	114
IV.1.1 The influence of new technologies on newspaper design.....	115
IV.1.2 New opportunities for magazine design	118
IV.2 Online news design.....	120
IV.3 News design for mobile devices.....	124
IV.4 Editorial design as branding	128

IV.4.1 News design branding in The Guardian	131
IV.5 Redefining the news designer's work for online media.....	133
IV.6 Infographics and data visualisations.....	134
IV.6.1 Data visualisations	139
IV.6.2 Infographics	141
IV.7 Integrating multimedia elements into visual journalism	144
IV.8 Interactivity - the key strenght of online news design.....	148
IV.9 Visual narrative formats for online.....	151
IV.10 Conclusions	155
V. Analysis of the most appreciated online news articles from a visual and interactive point of view.....	156
V.1 SND - Best of News Design competition.....	156
V.2 Research design	157
V. 3 Results.....	166
V.3.1 Online news formats and genres	168
V.3.2 Design and interaction elements	177
V.3.3 Trends in news design	185
V.4 Limitations	188
V. 5 Conclusions.....	189
VI. Typefaces in European digital media: Serif or sans-serif, that is the question.....	194
VI.1 Research design	194
VI.2 Results.....	196
VI.3 Conclusions and discussion	209
VII. General conclusions	212
VI.1 Discussion.....	216
VI.2 Relevance of the work and originality	216
Bibliography	218

Keywords: editorial design, online journalism, graphic design, multimedia design, visual communication

Introduction

This thesis addresses the topic of editorial design and the redefinition of the activity it involves in the context of the development of new media. Starting from the well-established function of this activity in print media, we try to expose what are the visual characteristics of digital media and what are the directions of development of editorial design nowadays, in the online environment, in a context where news consumption is predominantly done in the digital space, through computers and especially mobile devices. In support of an in-depth understanding and clarification of certain aspects of this field, this paper proposes, in addition to an up-to-date theoretical framework, two content studies, in two different areas of analysis.

I. The transformation of news writing in recent decades

The first chapter is a contextual setting of journalism in the digital landscape, tracing the evolutionary path of the online news media and determining its main characteristics. Using Paul Bradshaw's (2024) theory, we go through the seven stages of development of online journalism that he proposes, from the early adopters in the middle of the last decade of the last century to the redefinition of working and consumption patterns driven by the Covid-19 pandemic.

We show the future directions and opportunities for media development based on an understanding of user behaviour and the access to data. News readers have become users of news services. However, news reading competes with other information and entertainment activities offered through social media. That's why news also becomes interactive, based on multimedia as well as data, in the quest to provide an engaging digital experience. Data journalism creates new opportunities for newsrooms, which now have a wealth of resources at their fingertips from which they can build remarkable new content.

We highlight the characteristics and particularities of online media using the theories launched by Gabrielle Hoofacker (Online journalism: Copywriting and conception for the internet. A handbook for training and practice 2022), Mike Ward (Journalism Online 2002) and Lev Manovich (The Language of New Media 2001).

We highlight the three primary features of online journalism: *hypertextuality* – the digital medium allows direct connections to other areas of the web space through hyperlinks;

interactivity – participatory actions by users in relation to the digital journalistic content through various forms of interaction, in human-human, human-computer and human-content relationships; *multimediality* – presentation of journalistic information packages using various media formats: text, photo, audio, video, etc. Researchers have subsequently identified four other main characteristics: *memory* – the archiving capacity of websites; *instantaneity* – information can be delivered in an immediate time; *personalization* – creating unique consumption experiences for each user; *ubiquity* – information can be consumed from any location with an internet connection.

Journalistic content is now configured using CMSs that allow several members of a newsroom to collaborate on the production of materials. The editorial workflow involves multimedia producers and editors, and an important part of it is the promotion of the news stories on social media.

II. Design. Graphic design, communication design

In the second chapter we focus our attention on the design activity, focusing on graphic design, as this is the branch to which editorial design belongs. Starting from the ideas expressed by Herbert A. Simon (The Sciences of the Artificial 1996) and Nigel Cross (Designerly ways of knowing 2006), we go through general theories of designers' practices, showing the processes and principles that guide them. We understand that designers have knowledge of how people will use the objects they design and try to anticipate their behaviours in relation to them. Designers rely on a combination of elements taken from the research preceding the design and their intuition at the same time.

The implication of creativity in the design process is considered essential. We understand the act of being creative as a manifestation of unexpected and innovative ideas for a given situation. The creative act, however, is not a spark that appears out of nowhere, but is based on all the knowledge and experiences of the person who produces it. In addition to creativity, however, successful designers also possess other attributes, such as being solution-oriented, intuitive, predictive of user behaviour, playful, aesthetically inclined and possessing excellent communication skills.

Graphic design is about creating visual structures on aesthetic and functional grounds to convey a particular message. Although the production technologies of graphic design artefacts have changed over time, the same main elements are still used today: spaces, dots, lines, shapes, colours, type, images, and textures. Combinations of these elements allow the creation of new graphic forms for various visual products.

Alongside the design elements, we also highlight the theoretical principles that guide this activity, structuring them in a concise and original way, using concepts from key works in the field such as those of authors Meredith Davis (Graphic Design Theory 2012), Johanna Drucker (Graphesis: visual forms of knowledge production 2014), Robert Bringhurst (The Elements of Typographic Style 2004) or Rune Petterson's extensive collection of works (Graphic Design 2023, Text Design 2023, Cognition 2023, ID Theories 2023). We have identified the theoretical and physical principles of graphic design: principles of Gestalt, elements of structure, visual hierarchy, balance, rhythm, unity, colour theories and semiotics. These concepts are part of the visual understanding that graphic designers master for the benefit of creating effective graphic artefacts with respect to conveying a given message.

In the pursuit of an understanding of processes, the designer's expertise is also based on an understanding of visual codes. These are a pre-established set of common cultural rules or perceptions, explicit or implicit, that are understood by the members of a society in a certain way. The sphere in which graphic design is most visible and expressive is in what we generically call mass communication, specifically in advertising, journalism and media (TV, film, video games), corporate communication or cultural events. We have established the position of graphic designers in relation to other types of design, understanding that their role is to create messages. It is therefore important to recognise them as communication designers. Thus, designers are creators of information. We thus understand that designers are seeking to convey messages with precision and integrity.

III. Editorial design

The theoretical concepts in the first two chapters are connected in the next two chapters. Firstly, in the third chapter we deal extensively with the subject of editorial design. We refer to editorial design both for the design of printed journalistic materials, newspapers, and magazines, as it was understood for a very long time before the advent of the internet, as well as for digital ones, online newspapers, online magazines, blogs, webzines and so on. Many of these have mobile variants or apps. We understand that the role of editorial designers is to frame the text in an appropriately presentable format, considering the journalistic nature of the written material. An interest in journalism is part of the job description, as editorial designers are directly involved in the production of news, so even if they do not write the texts, they contribute to how readers will understand the information. We explain the main elements of editorial design at length, laid out in parallel for print and online media. In summary, the main elements of press design are the structural systems, typefaces and

typography, heading elements, colours and images. The column layout ensures consistency and visual unity, while typefaces are the 'clothes' that the text wears, and are thus an important differentiator from other publications. However, designers must also ensure that texts are readable. Heading elements are the forms of information about the journalistic content. They create variation and ensure a clear hierarchy in print and online pages. Colours are the way to break the monotony of text columns. They can contribute through the colours of photographs, or other colourful visual elements, but without creating too much graphic clutter. Colours are part of the visual identity of publications, both print and online. It is important, however, that designers provide sufficient contrast for coloured elements. Images are part of the journalistic content of a page. Sometimes their role may be small, to support the text of an article, other times the image itself may be the subject. We are dealing with three types of images: photographs, illustrations and diagrams. Photographs can be retouched for correct reproduction, but it is important to preserve their integrity in accordance with journalistic codes of ethics.

Given the dynamics of editorial designers' workflow, it is facilitated by pre-established structures and templates that they use to find appropriate design solutions in the shortest possible time. Even though designers mostly use pre-designed elements, they also have the possibility of creative expression for the more important stories. Templates are created by the same or more specialised editorial designers, but the process of establishing a new visual format is more complex and time-consuming. In online, the graphic landscape tends to be even more template-driven than in print, due to the greater rigidity of CMSs. But this is subject to change as publications gear their efforts towards achieving this.

In support of these views, we have used theoretical notions from several works dealing with the subject of editorial design from different periods, written by authors such as Alan Hutt (*Newspaper Design* 1960), Roy Paul Nelson (*Publication Design* 1991), Mario Garcia (*Contemporary newspaper design: a structural approach* 1993, *Pure Design: 79 simple solutions for magazines, book, newspapers and websites* 2002, *The Story: Volume III: Design* 2019), Francesco Franchi (*Designing News* 2013) and Cath Caldwell and Yolanda Zappaterra (*Editorial Design: Digital and Print* 2014).

IV. Editorial design in the digital age

The fourth chapter explores the directions of development for editorial design in the context of new technologies. As newspaper design enters a phase of automating page layouts with the help of artificial intelligence, magazines remain the space of visual expression for designers in print media. However, new ways of displaying content are emerging in the digital space, beyond the templated layouts that audiences were used to. The digital environment now allows for the integration of multiple media types of content: text, still images, video, audio, data visualisations, accompanied by animated transitions and interactive exploration. We remark on the trends and opportunities for the development of news design in the current context, identified in the scholarly literature of recent years such as Francesco Franchi (*Designing News* 2013), Mario Pérez-Montoro and Xaquín Veira-González (*Information Visualization in Digital News Media* 2018), Steve Hill and Paul Bradshaw (*Mobile-First Journalism: Producing News for Social and Interactive Media* 2019), or Martin Conboy (*Journalism, Technology and Cultural Practice: A History* 2023).

Graphic design mainly affects the visual form of communication materials. When they are static and have a well-defined material form, designers need to ensure visual legibility and practical usability. In online, however, a new dimension emerges: interactivity. Designers are not just decorators of content, but they provide an experience of navigating it. So we have the experience component. User experience design has acquired its own branch among design activities, but in the case of online media design, graphic design and experience design are interconnected.

Online editorial design is becoming more flexible, and less template driven. Its strengths are the ability to create and present multimedia content, which provides a more engaging experience. Access to online news is no longer a given, as many well-known publications choose to make their content available for a fee. Mobile news design is becoming increasingly important, as this is where most users spend their time. This is shaping new digital-first and mobile-first attitudes in newsrooms. Design for the eye is becoming design for the finger, and designers need to consider gestures and touches.

Media organisations are no longer just newspapers, TV or radio broadcasters. They are becoming news services, technology-driven corporations building their own brands. The widespread use of social media has led these institutions to establish themselves as brands, using their own visual identity. This has created a need to differentiate themselves from other publications and to be perceived as trusted sources in a vast pool of online publications. In addition, they need to have a common look and feel across all the mediums through which they

distribute material, both on their own platforms and on other platforms, especially on social media.

Digital journalism increasingly exploits interconnectivity, digital formats and content consumption on mobile devices, so journalistic narratives are diversifying to include various formats and modes of expression - visual, auditory and tactile. We thus understand that today, where journalism and design collaborate best is in multimedia, data-driven and interactive stories. Thus, designers are visual journalists and creators of user experiences. The opportunities offered by the multimedia, interactivity and data journalism are helping to create new formats, some rooted in previous media - infographics and interactive, animated data visualisations, or entirely new ways of presentation - formats of interactive, multimedia storytelling journalism, news games, quizzes and interactive calculators.

V. Analysis of the most appreciated online news articles from a visual and interactive point of view

The fifth chapter is also the first research of this paper. This research aims at interpreting the most appreciated news stories of the past years (2017-2022), which were awarded at the prestigious SND - The Best of News Design competition, on various visual and functional criteria. This extensive research, which involved the analysis of 557 distinct articles, took into account several aspects: digital formats and genres, interactivity and design elements, which were in turn divided into multiple categories. In this study, in the context of this design competition, we sought answers to the questions *What are the predominant multimedia and interactive press design formats?*, *What are the most commonly used design and interactive elements?*, and *What are the trends in recent years in the design of online press articles?*

As a result of the analysis, we have shown that the main formats that allow exciting and engaging visual exploitation are those that create complex narratives using multimedia elements. Explainer articles, reports, documentaries and investigations can be augmented in this way by integrating multimedia elements, forms of interaction and animated transitions triggered by scrolling through the given material. Stories related to current events displaying real-time data use high-level interaction modalities to allow users to explore the data provided. In today's cultural landscape, the impact of visual elements is very important. Audiences are drawn to images, videos and animated or interactive presentations that can communicate complex ideas quickly and clearly. Information consumption in the digital age requires information to be conveyed efficiently and promptly, so visuals help communicate messages in an intuitive and accessible way.

Regarding the importance given to data visualizations in articles, we observed a prevalence of articles that graphically highlight data through visualizations, which play a key role in the narrative of these materials. We noted that a very high proportion of the articles use a linear, non-interactive progression, and the feedback through which users observe progression in the narrative is predominantly based on scrolling text, but a significant proportion of these articles also use visual animations to mark this progression. Articles related to current events that display real-time data use high-level interaction modalities to allow users to explore the data provided.

We have noticed a trend for publications with significant resources (financial, human, technological) to establish themselves as innovative leaders in news design by entering many articles in a contest of this sort. Publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or *Reuters* have an increased presence in this study, as they place a high value on design, but also have the resources to consistently deliver quality work, but also to experiment and push the boundaries in terms of editorial design. These publications have an organizational culture that values design, excellence and innovation and act as influential leaders in the media industry. These strategies lead to unique and quality press projects.

These award-winning news articles are from renowned publications around the world, but predominantly from the United States and Western Europe. We see a correlation between the visual quality of articles from a particular country and the media literacy of the target audience. The expectations of a more informed public is likely to be higher, so publications are innovating and experimenting, investing financial resources in the design of their products in the quest to meet or exceed these expectations.

Our study uncovered and highlighted trends in the use of design elements to build impactful visual narratives in online media in recent years. This research involved analysing distinct narrative units in turn to understand how they are constructed to deliver powerful visual experiences.

VI. Typefaces in European digital media: Serif or sans-serif, that is the question

Chapter VI constitutes the second investigation of this thesis and is concerned with the use of typefaces in online news media. To this purpose, we analysed the most popular journalistic websites in several European countries regarding the use of typographic elements in their articles. This research was based on finding answers to the questions *What are the most used typefaces in European press websites?* and *What are the most common typographic*

features in press design in Europe?. This research was conducted in 2020 and repeated in 2022 using the same sample, so that comparative observations could be made to determine the evolution of these aspects over time.

The results of the study show that sans-serif fonts are the most used for both body text and headings on the studied websites. However, it should be noted that the preference for either serif or sans-serif fonts seems to be influenced by cultural aspects of the editorial design tradition in the region. This research is consistent with studies showing that the audience prefers sans-serif fonts, leading to their use in news sites to confirm users' aesthetic expectations.

We observed that although there are a few typefaces used in multiple websites, the overall landscape is a very diverse one, and in this respect, comparing the 2020 data with the 2022 data, we see an increasing trend towards even greater diversification. This increasing diversity of typefaces shows the dynamic nature of typography in online media in Europe.

A remarkable aspect revealed in this study concerns the way fonts are procured. We see a trend towards an increase in commercial fonts, both for the body text of articles as well as for headlines. This trend suggests that publications are increasingly investing in website design. At the same time, it also reveals the importance of a distinctive visual identity, a brand image that ensures visibility and increases user loyalty.

We have noticed a discrepancy in the types of licenses used in press sites between countries in the north, south and west of the continent and those from the former communist area. Those in the former group have a higher level of use of paid fonts, while those in the latter group predominantly use free fonts. Correlating the results with studies showing the level of media literacy in Europe, we infer that geographic spaces where there is a prominent level of media literacy favour the use of serif typefaces, which may appear more pretentious, more sophisticated, but also more traditional. Publications in these countries thus seem more inclined to adopt a more extravagant, tailored graphic design, using commercial typefaces or ones created specifically for a distinctive visual presentation.

VII. General conclusions

In this thesis we have shown which are the general characteristics and which are the future directions of news design practices. Understanding the transformations that print media has undergone in recent years, we have tried to shed light on the practice of those who deal with the visual form of news presentation. Through the six chapters of this thesis we have exposed, from the general to the particular, the redefined practices of journalists in the context

of an increasingly digitised world and the ways in which news designers can contribute visually to the transmission of messages in the most effective, yet aesthetic and engaging way.

The studies in this paper reveal current practices in digital media design. We found that the main formats that allow for interesting and immersive visual exploitation are those that create complex narratives using multimedia elements: explanatory articles, features, documentaries and investigations. These can bring added interest from users looking for compelling journalistic consumption experiences, especially when displayed on mobile devices. Thus, user satisfaction comes more from the element of surprise brought by the revelation of something new throughout the story rather than the use of complex interactive interfaces. We have shown that there is a preference for sans-serif typefaces, both for the body text of articles and for headlines, but in Western and Northern Europe the use of serif typefaces is higher than in other parts of the continent.

The first research is based on examples of excellence and quality in graphic design and experience from digital news media around the world. The second research, however, is intended to show which design practices - specifically, the use of typography - are practiced at a somewhat less elite level, in a more general setting where websites are included on criteria that do not necessarily imply design prestige. In correlation with studies showing the level of media literacy in the world, we can deduce that countries that pay more attention to press design are those that also have a higher media literacy index. With a better-informed public, consumers have higher expectations of journalistic products and a better capacity to appreciate carefully developed and presented journalistic content, which in turn increases design quality and also increases innovation.

By highlighting aspects of how to create impactful multimedia journalistic narratives, as well as practices for using typographic elements in news websites, this work can be used by news managers to implement new design strategies, by visual designers interested in journalism who are looking for relevant current information in the field.

This paper presents some important insights that can be used in journalism education. The findings in this paper about the formats most sought after and appreciated by today's news audience can provide the basis for new understandings of online journalism productions. We can thus highlight the importance of explanatory articles, long-form multimedia stories or data-driven journalism articles in the current media landscape. Audiences appreciate the use of multiple ways of presentation in a single article, combining text with photos, data visualisations, static images and audio-video, and future journalists benefit from learning the skills to create such projects.

In conclusion, this thesis shows both current practices and opportunities for graphic expression in news design in the context of transformations in online media consumption and distribution. In a world increasingly on the run and digitised, journalism design emerges precisely by exploiting these new consumer needs. We can see that although the function of press designers has been redefined, they are becoming indispensable for the creation of quality journalistic products.