

THE FUTURE OF VISUAL DESIGN AND STORYTELLING IN AFRICA: A NEWSROOM PERSPECTIVE

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The Future Of African Visual Storytelling: A Newsroom Perspective

ABSTRACT

Storytelling in Africa has come a long way from the family sitting by the fireside in the courtyard gleaning wisdom from the elders to just one click and you can access information on anything. In the past, the legends were unquestionable and opaque. The delivery of the stories was one way. Now we have to be transparent, interact, authenticate the sources, comply with copyrights, and above all tell the truth. Our content is constantly questioned. Stories are no longer abstract, they are emotional and personal. As a problem-solving tool, Design is many things, including a conversation. A problem cannot be solved without a conversation. You must relate, empathize and connect. Newsrooms thrive on conversations; listening, creating, reporting, and reminding. The audience wants to be informed, engaged and entertained but above all, they want to connect. The demand for sense-making in complex stories, big data, and the democratization of the digital space has made visual design (infographics, interactive graphics, photos, and videos) an enriching way in which we tell our own local stories and make a connection. This article argues that freedom of creativity must be tempered with the responsibility of honesty (visual integrity). We have at our disposal all the tools to create alternative truths, but the future of African visual storytelling in newsrooms relies heavily on honesty because trust is the only currency that media trades on.

Keywords: data, visual design, visual integrity, graphics, newsroom, truth, honesty, African

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The art of storytelling in Africa has evolved a long way from the informal fireside courtyard family gathering or kitchen wisdom from your mother /grandmother as she prepares a meal. Most of the narratives propagated were cocooned to specific cultures and little was spoken of other cultures outside the nucleus of a specific community. When they were told, they were peppered with fear to deter curiosity. Fast forward to the present day, there is now more structure, easy access, transparency, and variety.

There is now a push for transparency including verification and crediting the source, seeking permission for copyrighted material, sensor offensive/ sensitive material, questioning facts, doing background checks, and above all telling the truth. The quest for knowledge is audacious and persistent, a far cry from the hallowed sagacious wisdom of the elders. Visual design (infographics, interactive graphics, photos, videos, and virtual reality(VR) has elevated digital journalism by enriching the way we tell our own stories and how we distribute them to wider audiences. It is a key player in navigating the complexity of producing long features, investigative series, sensitive content, and national events.

Readers are certainly seeking out accurate pieces and want to find organizations they can trust for their news. Increased trust means more readership, improved reputation, and increased revenue. (Van der Lans, 2021) Our content credibility is constantly questioned. The luxury of lionizing the villains without telling the story of the victim no longer exists. Stories are no longer abstract as was in the past but are emotional and personal, relatable and relevant.

This paper seeks to answer how visual creatives can help our audience avoid information fake news and misinformation and convince them to trust our imagery (graphics, photos, videos) as credible sources of information. (Interaction Design Foundation, n.d)

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Disruption in the media industry

The mainstream media/newsrooms no longer have the hegemony in the production and distribution of content. The future of the media's relationship with the public hinges on an unwritten agreement of trust. (WAN-IFRA, 2016)

In the early stages of disruption, incumbents felt barely any impact on their core businesses except in the distant periphery (Mckinsey Quarterly, 2016) but with the global pandemic since 2020 media houses found themselves staring down a double-barrel gun. (digital disruption and the pandemic). This has necessitated the acceleration of digital-first strategies to stay relevant as they face stiff competition from independent content creators.

In the past, there existed clearly defined roles for editors, reporters, photographers, and designers but now we can no longer think of ourselves in these silos. The most successful modern news team must put digital at the heart of its newsgathering if it is to succeed. The teams need to acquire multiple skills to enable a seamless collaborative production process.

From a local perspective, the Internet is expected to be the largest driver of growth, followed by television and radio. Traditional mediums such as TV, radio, and newspapers will continue to be the first choice for most Kenyan advertisers in the foreseeable future.

2.2 The democratization of media and digital access

Social media has become the main source of news online with more than 2.4 billion internet users, nearly 64.5 percent receive breaking news from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram instead of traditional media (Martin, 2021). Technology has democratized the publishing process to the point where anyone with an internet connection can create and distribute content. (WAN-IFRA, 2016). The convenience of instant information has quickly morphed into information overabundance (Gurri, 2021) with audiences drowning in the huge volumes of information being churned out by the second. The amount of data we produce every day is truly mind-boggling. There are 2.5 quintillion bytes of data created each day at our current pace, but that pace is only accelerating with the growth of the Internet of Things (IoT). (2018) (Marr, 2021)

The demand for sense-making in big data makes the graphics team in a newsroom an integral part of how we tell stories because of the bottom line impacts. How has the story impacted the audience to cause meaningful change, while also generating revenue? Visual design has in some ways been dishonest and contributed to gross exaggeration of facts from photo-shopped images, to excessive use of stock photography and misrepresentation of facts by using “beautiful visualizations to skew data. Attention span is fickle and such misleading visual strategies are used as clickbait lures and misinform readers.

2.3 Fake news and alternative facts

Although the interest in “fake news” spiked after the 2016 Presidential election, it is not a new phenomenon. The concept, known as “disinformation” during the World Wars and as “freak journalism” or “yellow journalism” during the Spanish war, can be traced back to 1896 (Campbell, 2001; Crain, 2017). – (Molina et al, 2019)



Fig 1: illustration of Fake news vs facts: source: shutter stock

There are two kinds of fake news:

Stories that aren't true. These are entirely invented stories designed to make people believe something false, to buy a certain product, or to visit a certain website.

Stories that have some truth, but aren't 100 percent accurate. For example, a journalist quotes only part of what a politician says, giving a false impression of their meaning. Again, this can be deliberate, to convince readers of a certain viewpoint, or it can be the result of an innocent mistake. Either way, it quickly attracts an audience and can become entrenched as an "urban myth." To confuse matters further, there are also people who claim that factually accurate stories are fake news, just because they don't agree with them or find them uncomfortable. (Mind tools, n.d) False information and fake news (McGarrigle, 2021) are a real threat to the credibility and future of media.

A recent survey by Portland, an international communications consultancy, suggested that 90% of Kenyans had seen or heard false news in the run-up to the poll. Many of the people surveyed felt that some news items had been deliberately misleading. It also found that while traditional media remained the most trusted source of information, large numbers of people got their news from Facebook and WhatsApp. (Portland, 2017)

Alternative facts was a phrase coined by White House adviser Kelly Anne Conway in 2017 to defend a false statement by press secretary Sean Spicer about the attendance of President Trump's inauguration. (Political Dictionary,2022)

Facts do exist. There are certain things that are true, for instance, the earth is round. Alternatives exist for any given belief and we are confronted with them every day. As designers tasked with the custody of public dissemination of information, our personal biases or beliefs should not get in the way of the real issues. We always have to fight the temptation of not letting the facts get in the way of a good story.

2.4 Fact-checking

According to the Oxford dictionary, fact-checking is a process seeking to "investigate (an issue) in order to verify the facts. It is a form of critical, investigative inquiry. It includes a wide range of approaches and practices. But there is a history behind fact-checking and the contemporary need for it.

The spread of misinformation is inherently human. Daniel Kahneman, a psychologist who won the Nobel prize in economic sciences, introduced the concept of "WYSIATI" (What you see is all there is), meaning that we tend not to look for what we do not see. We rather rely on the information that is directly available to us, without being fully aware of what we do not know. If we just see some elements of a story, we construct the best story we can out of those partial elements. Part of the approach of fact-checking is the awareness of the cognitive biases innate to each of us. While these biases help us navigate everyday life, they can cause us to overlook relevant facts, even when they are clearly presented.

The use of facts and storytelling as a tool of political mobilization has been a long-established means to persuade the public of a group consensus. In recent years, fact-checking has become more prevalent in journalism. This is reflected in the increasing numbers of fact-checking organizations being established internationally. (Coinform, n.d)

2.5 Rise of visual design in media

Design is no longer a discipline limited to the concerns of a singular, specific domain. Like most

other industries, the field of design is being challenged. By the arrival of the fourth industrial revolution, systems are becoming more complex, requiring more intuitive user interfaces and multiple touch points, from wearable screens to virtual reality (Design. Think. Make. Break. Repeat.)

Despite the evolution/ transformation of delivery channels for example printed posters, and newspapers to interactive digital pop-up ads online, the design discipline is still what it has always been; problem-solving and now in newsrooms, we are doing that increasingly through visual storytelling both online (TV, web) and offline (print). Visual graphics have provided much-needed relief from the “death by text/speech” approach in the years past. It has necessitated collaboration across all the newsroom teams when packaging the news.

When people hear information, they’re likely to remember only 10% of that information three days later. However, if a relevant image is paired with that same information, people retain 65% of the information three days later. (Medina J. n.d) Content paired with relevant images gets 94% more views than content without relevant images. (Anorak, 2021)

2.6 Age of insight: telling stories with data. (Age of Insight, YouTube, 2015)

You can do a much better job of describing reality using data. WikiLeaks was a great disruptor in the newsroom as to how data is analyzed and interpreted. WikiLeaks is a media organization and website that functioned as a clearinghouse for classified or otherwise privileged information. It was founded in 2006 by Australian computer programmer and activist Julian Assange. (Britannica, n.d).



Fig 2: illustration of panama papers leak :<https://www.icij.org/>

Data storytelling is the best way to use data to create new knowledge and new decisions or actions. It is an integrative practice that incorporates knowledge and skills from several disciplines, including communication, analysis, and design.

Data is collected and shared to help us see patterns and have insights we wouldn't otherwise. Beginning on April 3, 2016, the Panama Papers, which was a giant leak of more than 11.5 million financial

and legal records exposed a system that enables crime, corruption and wrongdoing, hidden by secretive offshore companies. (icij,2021)

Data can help influence how people perceive a topic, especially if they value scientific methods. But with the power of data comes a lot of responsibility for the data storyteller. (Hooper, 2021)

2.8 Artificial intelligence

In the rapid shift toward a world characterized by digitalization, the power of AI expands and stretches till not even the media industry has been able to escape its clutches. The industry has also been undergoing a high degree of transformation with digital media paving its way towards becoming the main focus of interest across all its sub-sectors that including TV, Print, and Radio. (Rangaiah, n.d)

The use of Artificial Intelligence is constant and ever-evolving in every sector of life. Defeating the rising bias is one excruciating stigma that the media has been facing in today's modern world. The information being catered to the audience may often be layered with degrees of bias leading to misleading content instead of factual, balanced news. Algorithms cannot be trusted 100 percent because of the very fact that they can be manipulated. Currently, AI detection of Fake News still remains unreliable. First, current detection is based on the assessment of text (content) and its social network to determine its credibility. Despite determining the origin of the sources and the dissemination pattern of fake news, the fundamental problem lies in how AI verifies the actual nature of the content. Theoretically speaking, if the amount of training data is sufficient, the AI-backed classification model would be able to interpret whether an article contains fake news or not. Yet the reality is that making such distinctions requires prior political, cultural, and social knowledge, or common sense, which natural language processing algorithms still lack. (Lee, S. et.al).



Fig 3: A young lady using an AI powered system. Source: Shutterstock

While Artificial Intelligence holds a massive degree of power and capacity and the promise of evolution and booming of the media and all its varied sectors, its very power could also prove to be its biggest deadly weapon. Thus AI has to be effectively channeled and accurately used for it to be a positive

advancement (Rangaiah, n.d). As designers, we cannot hold back the tide of AI. It is not our replacement; it is our enhancer. We need to be identified with credibility, honesty, and trustworthiness to “future-proof” creative work.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This theory of visual integrity in design leading to audience trust borrows heavily from the works of Edward Tufte, an American statistician and professor emeritus of political science, statistics, and computer science at Yale University, who has published several seminal books on the construction of accurate graphical representations of data according to his rules of “graphical excellence.” (Granite State College, n.d,) and *Deceptive Miscommunication Theory (DeMiT): A New Model for the Analysis of Deceptive Communication* by Anolli et al, 2001)

Visual Integrity in simplest terms, means that the use of visual media should neither intentionally distort the integrity of a message nor promote a false impression or interpretation, which, as a whole, impacts to the credibility of the author. This definition is adapted from the works of Edward Tufte.

“When you are in media management, you hold to reigns not only to what information people get but how they get it, in what order they see or hear it, and sometimes how they feel about it”. -Katie Mckay, 2009

With increasing ease, editors, photographers, and designers can open up Photoshop and wreak havoc on a particular issue of interest. Some may argue, “What’s so wrong with wanting to print, show, and publish the best-looking photos we can. It looks good and it wasn’t changed that much?” The challenge with that reasoning is that, as far as the audience is concerned, they trust that the author would only show something to them if it were true and accurate.

3.1 Integrity in graphical representation

There is an old aphorism that says that you can make statistics say anything you want them to say through some form of manipulation. Tufte has devoted his work to the study of and the development of standards for data visualization so that graphic designers can uphold the integrity of their visual media.

Design in the newsroom starts with the people, not the story. You start by listening to your audience. Firstly, identify who they are, and then you can talk to them and perhaps do additional research to find out what they most care about, what their goals are, what they currently know, what decisions need to be made, and what additional knowledge might help them make the decisions that will help them reach their goals. (Hopper, 2021). Then you begin to organize the facts into logical sequences to inform/educate the audience.

News making is continuously evolving to include the audience in a more hands-on way. The major role of design in a newsroom is to make the readers’ work easier. We collect, analyze, distill and package complex stories and data into bite-sized graphics, photo essays, videos, and slideshows that can be understood easily by the target audience. Aesthetics are important but rank low on the totem pole compared to the accuracy and effectiveness of the visuals as it relates to a story.

Persuasion is a key element in getting the attention of the audience and convincing them to

interact with our work. This involves learning with an emotional dimension, altering current beliefs and emotional payoffs.

3.2 There are 3 elements necessary for Persuasion:

3.2.1 A Credible Source: a person the audience trusts, delivers

3.2.2 Logical approach: presenting new knowledge, skill, or attitudes in a way the audience recognizes and understands with an...

3.2.3 Emotional Appeal: a negative or positive emotion to encourage their new knowledge, skills, or attitude. (RNTC Media, n.d)

As we aim to persuade and appeal to emotions, we use visual cues to draw attention to a particular subject ultimately inspiring a certain action. But sometimes we get carried away with aesthetics and make the representation unnecessarily confusing, are infatuated by our creative delivery, are running paid-up content, or are out rightly biased on an issue. This leads to distorted images, proportions, and a gross misrepresentation of the facts. use subtle hues of creativity to obfuscate the untruth.

In addition, with paid-up/sponsored content the audience may not be able to tell the difference. Every time a story/image pops up in your inbox, or social media, there is always a question mark. Can I trust this? Is it from a verified source? Could it be a scam? When images and videos are shared on social media, they lose important metadata which can be used to help verify content hence the anxiety associated with viral images/videos and graphics.

4.1 QUALITATIVE APPROACH

4.1 Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen as the research method for this study. This process involves a process known as induction, whereby data is collected relating to a specific area of study and from this data, the researcher constructs different concepts and theories. A qualitative approach was considered more relevant to undertake this research as it allowed greater capacity to gain more depth and meaning based on an individual's experiences of interacting with graphics and images online. The researcher chose interviews, observations, and text documents.

4.1.1 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected to carry out this research study. This allowed the participants to elaborate and with that provided more flexibility, range, and therefore the capacity to elicit more information from the participant. Semi-structured interviews permit the scope for individuals to answer questions more on their own terms than the standardized interview permits, yet still provide a good structure for comparability over that of the focused interview (May 1997). They were conducted using questionnaires with open-ended and closed-ended options on the phone, text messages, and email. (see appendix 1)

4.1.2 Observation

The researcher's work is based in a newsroom and this provided valuable insight as she observed and took

notes from the daily interactions with the reporters, editors, and designers.

4.1.3 Text Documents

There is a lot of information online on the subject that the researcher collected to support this research. The sources included scholarly websites, news websites and reputable blogs.

4.2 Sampling and selection

In choosing the sample of participants the researcher used a purposive sampling method. The inclusion criterion was based on participants who are currently heavy consumers of online content. In undertaking this study the researcher chose to interview individuals aged between 25 to 45 years of age due to the insight required on the topic. Participants were sought through personal contacts of the researcher. Initially fifteen participants were recruited to be interviewed; however, six withdrew from taking part.

No	Gender	Age	Job Title
1	Female	42	Auditor
2	Female	28	Lawyer
3	Male	29	Physiotherapist
4	Male	37	IT
5	Male	42	Designer
6	Female	39	Insurance Agent
7	Female	32	Photographer
8	Female	33	Accountant
9	Male	35	Reporter

4.3 Data collection

Data collection took place in January 2022. A Phone app (Otter) was used to record the interviews and all interviews were fully transcribed verbatim. six of the nine participants were acquaintances of the researcher; the other three were recruited through third parties known to the researcher. Most participants were contacted through email containing details of the research and by telephone with the interview particulars.

4.4 Data Analysis

Once the data was transcribed, it was then coded, analyzed, interpreted and verified. The process of transcribing the interviews can help the researcher to gain more understanding of the subject from listening to and reading the transcribed interviews severally.

The next stage involved interpreting the data by identifying any reoccurring themes throughout and highlighting any similarities and differences in the data. The final stage involved data verification, this process involves a process of checking validity of understanding by rechecking the transcripts and recordings again, thus allowing the researcher to verify or modify hypotheses already arrived at previously (Sarantakos, 1998).

5.0 FINDINGS

- 5.1 Most of the people interviewed had a high level of mistrust for the information they access online including stories, graphics and images.
- 5.2 All except one of the participants cited online channels as their Primary source of news/ information.
- 5.3 All of the participants had been victims of fake news in the course of consuming information online.
- 5.4 Six out of nine participants did not trust the data online represented in form of graphics.
- 5.5 Seven out of nine participants cited images as the major determinant whether they would click on a story online.
- 5.6 Visuals played a role of enhancing the online experience for most of the participants (seven out of nine).
- 5.7 Six out of nine participants didn't really understand how design plays a role in their online experience.
- 5.8 Others have on many occasions found the content online confusing especially when stories were paired up with generic images that quickly attracts clicks only to be disappointed since they are not the true representation of the subject in the story.
- 5.9 Six out of the nine participants said that they always try to verify the source of the content they consume online.
- 5.10 On the ease of navigating interactive content online, most of the participants found it moderate, with just two finding it easy and one finding it challenging.

Below is a sample of some of the responses:

On level of trust for online content Participant number 3, a Physiotherapist said. " I would give it a 7 because not everything you see online is true/ real."

On how design affects consumption of content online:

Participants number one, an auditor said "I like going to sites where the information is well arranged and is easy to navigate. I hate cluttered websites with images and headlines popping as you scroll."

On the impact of interacting with misleading images affected how content is consumed online:

Participants number 2, a lawyer said, " Once I identify a site that uses misleading images to market their content, I ignore it subsequently. As a lawyer I like dealing with facts not fiction."

6.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The main objectives of this research study were to examine the impact which visual online content has on an individual from a design viewpoint, and how manipulation of the process of news making through design affects perceptions.

The findings of this study are based on the interpretation and analysis of data obtained through the process of semi-structured interviews of nine participants from a cross section of professionals. As expected, the participants in professions that involve verification (auditing, accounts, legal and technology (IT, design, news reporting) were more cautious in trusting online content.

Another factor emerging from the study findings was that all participants seemed unsure about the sincerity of the media in packaging the news and had to corroborate with different sources to be certain.

Some participants reported the major role that visual imagery plays in enhancing their online experience. This was among the reasons some of them were duped by fake news.

What also emerged in the course of the research was the need to educate people more on the role that visual designers play. There is still an underlying belief that it doesn't take much time, effort, to produce content, it is just a matter of using colors, photos and filters.

It is hoped that the limitations of researcher bias were kept to a minimum in terms of its effect on the respondents' answers.

Allowing individuals to present some balancing positive and negative effects may have helped to reduce this inevitable bias.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Everybody has an agenda with the content they are creating/sharing. There is always an angle. Sometimes it is subliminal and other times, it is in plain sight. When we present our visual stories, we always want our audience to do something and we have to be clear about what the specific action is using the appropriate visual cues.

The Covid-19 pandemic amplified the digital disruption, transforming it to a double barrel gun cocked on the head of the media industry. Although now our canvas is enlarged and the mural is diversified, the responsibility of truth in that widened aperture remains. There was a time in our culture that stories were told for and to the audience; it was controlled but now our audiences have found their voices and many more options.

As visual creatives, we have at our disposal, all the tools to create an alternative truths and but the future of African visual story telling in media relies heavily on visual integrity because trust is the only currency that media trades on. The lion in the African proverb that says "Until the lion learns how to write every story will glorify the hunter" has now been vindicated through technology.

The freedom to explore and share our creativity in the digital space must be tempered with the responsibility of credibility, visual integrity because within it lies the power to set agendas, frame perceptions, control and predict narratives.

The aim of this research was to:

7.1 Find out the impact of visual content (videos, images, graphics) on the perceptions of online content consumers

7.2 What role design has played to shape perceptions, clarify, obscure meaning of content online

We have benefited largely from global content distribution apps and channels like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Google, CNN and BBC but we are now localizing our content and designing for home grown channels and content e.g. local news apps, websites that are heavily design driven (visually). Many of our stock image repositories have predominantly foreign concepts and there is an opportunity to grow a more Afrocentric library for local consumption. (There is a local stock site called pichastock making great strides here). This will aid our credibility and visual integrity because we shall be giving our audience a true representation of the stories we are publishing.

There is a need for more education, awareness amongst our online audience as pertains to the role of design, (its importance, possible manipulation and relevance) to the news production/ packaging process.

The findings of this research are relevant to the wider study of media transparency, freedom and impact in the digital space.

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APPENDIX 1:

Sample Questionnaire

1. What is your primary source of information? ONLINE TV NEWSPAPER RADIO
2. When online, are you more likely to click on a story because of the headline or the image shown?
 YES NO
 Explain
3. How do visuals (images/videos, graphics) impact your perception/understanding of content online? (does it enhance it /reduce it? explain)
4. How has the impact of interacting with misleading images affected how you consume content online?
5. What role has design played to enrich your consumption of content online?
6. How would you rate the ease of navigation for interactive content online?
 EASY MODERATE CHALLENGING FRUSTATING
7. What is your trust level of visual content online on a scale of 1-10 and why?

8. Do you trust the accuracy of graphic data online (statistics on topical issues e.g elections, COVID-19)?
 YES NO
9. Have you ever been a victim of fake news through images/videos/graphics?
 YES NO
10. Do you verify sources of information that you consume/share online?
 YES NO
11. Do you have trusted sources of information online where you never feel the need to verify?
 YES NO