



Visible Language Evolves

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Abstract: The editorial goals of three editors for *Visible Language* are discussed sequentially, showing the development of the journal over 58 years of continuous publication. Particular attention is paid to research in communication design, a goal of the current editor. Several suggestions regarding the interdisciplinary nature of the journal and its future are discussed.

Keywords: design research; editorial design; research publications

1. First Exposure

My first encounter with *Visible Language* came in a professional design context. I was working on the first ever third grade thesaurus. The editor and I got into an argument about typography. He wanted to use the conventions present in the adult thesaurus — all cap, bold, italic, small cap, etc. I argued typographic coding would either escape the third grader's attention or overwhelm them. After all they were early readers. I was for having specific locations in the entry, a signal that a synonym or antonym could be found there; it was a location map. This was in the late 1960s. This should have been subject to a user study with children of an appropriate age. But that was uncommon at the time. Our argument was going nowhere, then he flipped a copy of *Visible Language* onto his desk. He asked if I knew the journal, I did not. I became a subscriber.

Merald Wrolstad was the founder of this journal. He had a Ph.D. from the University of Wyoming and he wrote his dissertation on typography. He worked as a designer at the Cleveland Museum of Art, where he had occasion to travel to Europe for the museum.

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During those trips, he met and became friends with many key type designers. I borrow from those who wrote upon his death in remembrance of Merald in 1987 in *Visible Language* (Banks et al., 1987). One writer observed that he led a double life — a skilled designer and a family man, while obsessed with all varieties of visible language. First named *The Journal of Typographic Research*, the journal then took on a more inclusive and poetic title *Visible Language*. The name change signaled the breadth of scholarship he wanted to support. Writing little himself, he supported authors with a generosity of spirit. He devoted the journal to others' scholarship. I consider him one of my mentors.

He started the journal on a shoestring and kept it going for 20 years. After his death, I contacted the journal's advisory board on which I served, to see if anyone was interested in picking up the journal. There was no interest. About this time, I was visiting Pennsylvania State University and saw in their library all of *Visible Language* to date, volumes 1 to 20 lined up on a periodical shelf. There was more to design than just professional execution. There was experimentation, research, function, and aesthetics to be explored. I applaud Merald's curiosity and determination to keep *Visible Language* alive. Extending the life of the journal he so ably began seemed a worthwhile goal; I acquired the journal. I only wish that he was available to coach me on the complexities of running and editing this publication.

2. First Transition

At that time, I was teaching part time at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in their graduate graphic design department. I thought it would be interesting to give selected graduate students a chance to design an individual issue of *Visible Language*. Tom Ockerse, the department head, would oversee their design and consult with them about the context and content. Consistency of style within the issue itself was also important. Students were paid as this was not an insignificant design and execution. The only constraint was the journal's six by nine-inch format printed in black and white. I enjoyed seeing the variety of their ideas; it was also a practical learning experience.

In its early days (1987) as I became the editor, digital typography had come on the scene and articles and images followed suit. RISD was exploring the digital transition, so our collaboration was seamless. We were all Apple users. I did many special issues, but I was warned that subscriber interests might not appreciate all of them. I had taken on responsibility for the journal, but I had little experience as a publisher or editor. I found that having guest editors not only lightened my workload, but I learned many subtleties from them about the editor's role; it was a kind of publishing tutorial. A sampling of special issues illustrates the broad range of interests — all connected to *Visible Language* (Table 1).

Table 1. A sample list of twelve special issues gives a sense of the range of journal interests.



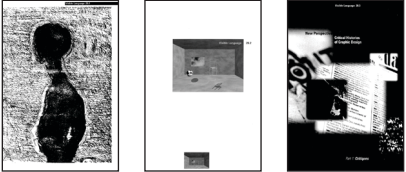



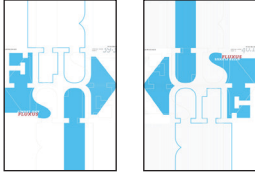



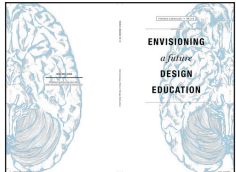
Cover(s)	Issue(s)	Topic
	26.4	Diagrams as Tools for World Making
	27.1 & 27.2	Writing in Stereo: Bilingualism in the Text
	28.1, 28.2, & 28.3	New Perspectives: Critical Histories of Graphic Design
	34.1 & 34.2	Words in Space
	36.2	An Annotated Design Research Bibliography: By and for the Design Community
	36.3	Research in Communication Design
	37.2 & 38.1	Cultural Dimensions of Communication Design

Table 1 (continued)

Cover(s)	Issue(s)	Topic
	39.3 & 40.1	Fluxus and Legacy
	41.3	Visual Metaphor in User Support
	43.2, 43.3, & 44.1	Communication Design Failures
	45.1 & 45.2	Punctuation
	46.1 & 46.2	Envisioning a Future Design Education

Special issues were largely based on guest editor interests and research. The leaning during my editorial tenure was to expand from the fairly strict Wrolstad attention to typography and reading to include communication design. I would call my editorship rather fuzzy in its search for a focus. Research had yet to emerge as a useful consideration for academics in design and even less so for practitioners. There were only two Ph.D. programs in a design department in the United States during the decades from the late 1980s and following. There were more doctoral programs in Europe. Doctoral students can identify questions in need of answers, and they have the time, interest, and methods with which to explore them. Research in communication design is coming of

age, nevertheless not everyone sees its relevance as they are often caught in the pursuit of style rather than function and substance.

Digital technology and the web created numerous changes. Everyone became a potential writer, photographer, translator, or designer. Quality of course was wobbly as many filled forms that rendered a design pattern, while some were copycats picking up current design trends. At the same time, access to information became overwhelming. Willingness to spend the time to read a deeply argued position paper, regardless of whether research, history, or opinion, evaporated. We wanted people to write succinctly and cut to the informational essence. Three decades ago, Brock Haussamen (1994) wrote “The Future of the English Sentence.” In it he took an historical look at over four centuries of English writing and came to the conclusion that sentences were getting shorter and punctuation lighter. He speculated that this trend would continue. Older papers and books that I consider to be touchstones of thinking are often overlooked because of their age. Information is everywhere, but do we have the time and motivation to process it?

In 2008, I wrote an article titled “Design, Literacy, Discourse and Communities of Practice” (Poggenpohl, 2008). In it I listed 29 journals related to design and communication, their websites, focus and longevity. It is with some pride I note that *Visible Language* was the oldest of these journals, published continuously from 1967. From the year I wrote the article, the longevity of the journals cited could be estimated. Some of these journals faded away; often because they failed to find their community of practice and/or there was insufficient financial support primarily through subscription. Of the 29 journals listed, 13 survived, two merged with other journals on the list, 12 disappeared. One publisher maintained an archive of former publication. If no information was present on a website, I presume the title is no longer published, because journals must have a website. Nevertheless, new design journals appeared taking a particular focus in the attempt to capture a community of practice. One such journal was *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*. Underwritten by Tongji University in Shanghai, it took optimism and determination to start a journal from scratch. I was able to build on the work of the founder and first editor. The journal was international from the start. But finding a community of practice was not so easy.

Visible Language was a big idea. It is so ever present in our lives that it tends of be invisible. From typography and a reading focus, I pushed the journal into communication design, a larger context. Now Mike Zender has extended it to be more research oriented; I applaud this.

Designers know little about research — how to do it or how it can enhance the project at hand. User-centered, also called human-centered research, began in the late 1990s as the need for study of relationships between technology and people was recognized.

Especially in the screen dominated environment in which we now live, how people navigated and processed their tasks became particularly in need of user research. How we access, identify, and move through information became an issue. The shift in processing information changed.

At that time, I was teaching graduate students at the Illinois Institute of Technology's Institute of Design in Chicago. Research became a focus and an internal Ph.D. program in design existed. Importantly, it was within a design program where design was on everyone's mind. Doctoral programs that lack such a grounding may teach research techniques and end with a dissertation, but they lack the rich ebb and flow of design argument. This is where researchers in design are created.

3. Next Transition

After serving as editor and publisher for 26 years, in 2013 I gave the editorship to Mike Zender at the University of Cincinnati. The university also acquired the journal. Within the context of communication design more broadly, Zender focused on research. Now was the time that design programs began to realize all design could not be done in an off-the-cuff manner. The journal from its original idea adapted and changed in a positive way. Under Mike's guidance, a consortium has been formed of three universities to share in developing and executing the ongoing evolution in *Visible Language's* program. As mentioned, these are challenging times to run a publication.

I cannot resist making some suggestions about what this program of research might consist of. It would be interesting to survey the research methods already in use. Certainly, evidence-based methods like user-centered research or technically oriented eye tracking, or even historical analyses that call out and interpret evidence from multiple points of view, are useful. A question of interest is: What characterizes useful research results for practitioners and how do we bring this to their attention? Perhaps articles that demonstrate specifically how research is used, what research ideas are discarded as too big or undoable, might result in a kind of case study.

Interest in typographic studies remains ever present, and the generation of writing systems for those cultures without one is particularly interesting. Cultural preservation depends on the written record in large part; those without such a record will disappear. The history of the generation of writing systems and their typographic translation are worthy of scholarly attention. Likewise, the "reading" of pictograms, diagrams, and other non-typographic information also needs study beyond a quick understanding of message or appreciation of aesthetics.

Non-designers in large part misunderstand the range of what designers can contribute. Designers need to formally stake out the territories they already work in as synthe-

sizers, creator of prototypes, people who think not in abstractions, but in the world of people needing information. Questions can be formulated in early project work: What do I not know that is essential to the work? What research exists that answers my question? Who does such research? Why or how will research enhance the success of the project? Many practical considerations follow from this approach.

A coming challenge that is likely to intensify is working with others who come from different disciplines. This comes with larger and more critical projects; it comes with less frivolous goals. Designers have always worked with writers, editors, photographers. This has expanded to code writers, technology experts, and computer scientists. Now psychologists, sociologists, statisticians — the list could be very long — contribute to design communication. Design is moving from its art-centered core into more meaningful work that centers on healthcare for example — something we all care about. Jorge Frascara guest edited a “Design and Health” special issue (*Visible Language* 49.1 and 49.2). Understanding financial systems is another. We have a stake in bringing our skills in design and research to realms that are critical for people to understand.

4. Conclusion

Taking a look back, in 1971 Wrolstad created a chart outlining *Visible Language's* concerns. He divided Conception & Formulation from Reception & Interpretation (Figure 1). The world of *Visible Language* has expanded and changed significantly since 1971. A new retconning of the journal's interests is in order. Building on the past, adding the present, and looking speculatively to the future would bring some clarity to the journal's program. The result might be a three-dimensional diagram or something that exists in time on a website. It probably is the result of much back and forth by a team of interdisciplinary people. It would be a worthy contribution to the journal and beyond. Instead of a Call for Papers, why not engage researchers and practitioners in the challenge to map the journal's concerns and publish the most interesting?

Returning to where this paper began with the argument about typographic coding or spatial coding, a simple user study giving children either option, while performing a related task, could have answered the question. The question could be expanded to include whether they remember the coding a few days later, whether a spatial diagram helps them, or the calling out typographic alternatives. Developing the question is a critical step. Children are great subjects for study, they like to be consulted and express their opinions. It was often surprising what research revealed when given an open-minded chance. Matching graduate students to research with children is a non-threatening experience — it overcomes graduate student reluctance to engage.



Figure 1. Reproduction of Wrolstad’s (1971) chart of *Visible Language*’s concerns. [Editor’s note: This reproduction utilizes Baskerville URW and retains many nuances of Wrolstad’s original (e.g., line breaks, uncapped “symbols” in the first head) with imperfect adherence to others (e.g., single redrawn arrows from what was an arrow glyph with two em dashes of indeterminate origin). Baskerville URW was the closest approximation of the original Baskerville immediately available for typesetting.]

Now returning to Wrolstad's chart (Figure 1), the journal has a degree of responsibility for design's awakening in its ability to create and use research. Not all research is complex, some is fairly straightforward and simple. Can we collectively sort out the many technological changes, time limitations, and competition for attention that we encounter daily that complicates our lives? Is this a worthwhile task for the journal? Can we make functional and effective communication that not only looks good, but goes beyond the surface to the frontier of real understanding?

5. References

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Author

Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl taught in three remarkably different and notable design programs: the Institute of Design (ID) at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, the Graphic Design Program at the Rhode Island School of Design, and Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Design Program. Working with graduate students with Keiichi Sato, she coordinated ID's PhD program in design. She was a proponent of human-centered design as well as collaborative and interdisciplinary team work. A generalist, she is a critical voice regarding design education and its future. She received two teaching awards, the Education Award from the Society of Typographic Arts and the Master Teacher Award from the Graphic Design Education Association. For 26 years, she edited and published *Visible Language*, an international, interdisciplinary journal that covered visual communication research and experimentation. She encouraged research and publication to deepen scholarship in design. A recent book review was "A Book to Think With," covering Geoff Kaplan's *After the Bauhaus, Before the Internet*, based on the Yale conference of the same name (in *Visible Language* 57.2). "Waste and Agency in the Digital Era: Who's in Charge?" appeared in *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 6(3). She self-published *Design Theory to Go, Connecting 24 Brief Theories to Practice*. With Keiichi Sato, she co-edited *Design Integrations; Research and Collaboration with Intellect*.