Sensational Design: Layout and Display Typography in the Visual Rhetoric of Information Disorder

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Abstract: Political communication in the United States today is often characterized by 'information disorder'. However, studies of information disorder do not take into account the role of design in contributing to this phenomenon. Through a visual analysis of American political communication, specifically 19th-century sensational newspapers and 21st-century post-factual websites, this paper addresses gaps in current studies by analyzing two design elements: layout and display typography. In doing so, this study demonstrates how it is possible to use visual analysis to uncover the various presentations of the visual rhetoric that characterizes information disorder. This paper begins by situating sensational design within literature on design theory and visual rhetoric, sensationalism, and political aesthetics. The paper then examines layout and display typography in case studies of American political news from both 19th-century sensational newspapers and 21st-century post-factual news websites, two periods of 'information disorder' in American media, to understand how the visual rhetoric of 'sensational design' manifests differently in the two eras of 'information disorder'. The paper concludes with a discussion of how layout and typography 'act' as elements of visual rhetoric, how design can be incorporated into current conceptions of political aesthetics, and the implications of such a relationship.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, one of the most popular news topics has been the news itself. The terms "fake news", "mis-" and "disinformation", "post-truth politics" and "information disorder" are often used to characterize our fractured, largely digital media ecosystem, where false and misrepresented information is widely circulated. Of particular concern are the effects of this on democratic systems of governance. In the context of the United States, the geographic and cultural focus of this study, information disorder contributes to political polarization and can create feelings of anxiety, isolation and socio-political vitriol in the populace (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018, p. 6). This has the potential for disastrous and violent effects on American political norms. However, studies about information disorder and "fake news" (Andrejevic, 2020; Benkler et al., 2018; Corner, 2017; De Cock Buning, 2018; Grimm, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) largely do not consider the role of communication design in this phenomenon. I argue that a visual focus on the issue of information disorder is warranted, given that "an average reader perceives 80% of graphic elements and 75% of photographs in newspapers and notices 56% of headlines while being aware of just 25% of the newspaper text, of which only 13% is read in detail" (Moses, 2000, as cited in Ozretić Došen & Brkljačić, 2018, p. 2), indicating that visuals play a key role in readers' perception of news information.

This paper explores information disorder from the perspective of visual analysis, combining research on visual rhetoric and political aesthetics. It builds on existing studies of news design (Barnhurst, 1994; Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001; Ozretić Došen & Brkljačić, 2018; Sissors, 1965; Stark, 1985), online news design (Barnhurst, 2012; Ihlström & Lundberg, 2004; Knox, 2009a,b, 2017; Li, 1998) and news design in political contexts (K. Barnhurst, 1993; Conboy, 2014; Schindler & Müller, 2018), while exploring the aesthetics of political news within a "mediasphere" (Hartley, 1996, p. 13) characterized by information disorder.

What is the visual rhetoric of American political communication in a mediasphere characterized by information disorder? By analyzing the design elements of layout and display typography in 19th-century sensationalist newspapers and contemporary 'post-factual' news websites*, I demonstrate how it is possible to use visual analysis to uncover the various presentations of the visual rhetoric of information disorder, which I collectively term 'sensational design'. In doing so, I broaden the scope of what counts

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* This paper uses the term 'post-factual websites' to describe 21st-century case studies. This term, like 'information disorder', describes the socio-political environment in which news is produced and disseminated rather than attempting to define the truth value of the news itself.

as political aesthetics and contribute a design-focused perspective that sees sensational design as a rhetorical force in the 'disorder' of political communication.

Key to the visual rhetoric of sensational design is the way design elements capitalize on affect to appeal to readers' emotions — the *sens* in sensational, as well as how design forms can carry their own ideologies and cultural connotations that can affect the way news is mediated and consumed (Barnhurst & Ellis, 1992; Schindler & Müller, 2018). Rather than being defined by a consistent visual style, "sensational design", as a visual rhetoric, is characterized primarily by the way it can elicit affective responses from readers, and plays on different "genre characteristics" of news forms (Ihlström & Lundberg, 2004, p. 51). Appeal to affect may be accomplished through numerous visual means, and the genre characteristics displayed by a paper or website may vary. Therefore, I would like to emphasize at the outset that this research does not intend to define a uniform visual style, but explores some examples in which design, as a visual rhetoric, is used to shape political communication in mediaspheres defined by information disorder.

Though I focus on newspapers and websites here that are understood as 'sensational', it is important to note that sensational design's visual rhetoric may not be confined *only* to what scholars understand as sensational outlets. It is beyond the scope of this paper to conduct a full comparative analysis between traditional, legacy news outlets and 'sensational' media. That said, the visual relationship between legacy outlets and sensational outlets is one of the key aspects to understanding how sensational design, particularly in the 21st-century, plays on "genre characteristics" (Ihlström & Lundberg, 2004, p. 51). Whereas in the 19th-century, sensational reporting was associated with a sensational visual grammar (Campbell, 2001, pp. 7, 8; Olson, 1930, pp. 318–319), in the 21st-century, these distinctions break down. A modernist visual grammar for news design was promoted in manuals for newspaper designers throughout the 20th-century, characterized by balanced, symmetrical and grid-based layouts, and later, sans serif typography* (Allen, 1929; Allen, 1947; Garcia, 1993; Hurlburt, 1978; Moen, 1989; Olson, 1930; Sutton, 1948). This modernist visual grammar became associated with the "established vocabulary of newspaper authority", according to historians of news form Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone (2001, p. 21). Today, web templates or user interface designs often include visual elements styled within a 'functional/modernist' or 'traditional' genre, elements which might historically be associated with objectivity

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* This is not to suggest that all 20th-century newspapers adopted sans-serif typography, or that sans-serif typography is the only defining element that qualifies a 20th-century newspaper as "modern" in style. Rather, I include this to note the way in which typographic families played role in the creation of a modernist grammar(s).

or legitimacy. However, they can be imbued with content and imagery* by those who take advantage of online communication mediums to "do something beyond (or even counter to) its apparently genuine aims" (Gillespie, 2020, p. 378). Because it can adopt existing design grammars, the visual rhetoric of sensational design cannot be typologized and generalized in the same way we might understand 'modernist' or 'post-modernist' design styles. It is contextual, and the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate some of the contexts and forms in which it appears.

Further, this paper reveals that sensational design is not a visual rhetoric necessarily purposefully chosen and orchestrated by trained, professional designers. Instead, it seeps into the mediation of political communication through a more intuitive understanding by those creating newspapers and websites about what kinds of visual cues may cause an affective response, is a result of production and dissemination technologies, marketing logics, or (most likely) a combination of these factors. Here, "professional designer", refers to someone who has received training in communication design or otherwise recognizes themselves as the "author" of a graphic project (Rock, 1996). Professional designers are largely absent in the case studies. In the 19th-century, there was no news "designer" as such; design occurred as a result of the combination of the work of composition departments, illustrators, the editors and the print foreman (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, p. 101; Sutton, 1948, pp. 99–100, 172). In the 21st-century, designers appear as distant, in so far as they are responsible for designing online templates and setting the visual expectations of online news 'genres'. This raises important questions about the agency of professional designers and way visual rhetoric and communication design "act" in both historical and contemporary socio-political assemblages of political communication (Bennett, 2010).

This paper begins by situating sensational design within literature on design theory and political aesthetics. To note: these sources are drawn from American and European studies, thus delimiting the study's findings to a culturally specific, Western context. The paper then describes the study's methodology. It then examines layout and display typography in case studies of American political communication from both 19th-century sensational newspapers and 21st-century post-factual news websites. This diachronic, comparative approach explores the appearance of sensational design in American political news in different time periods, specifically eras of rising populist sentiments and technological innovation. The paper concludes with a discussion of how layout and typography "act" as rhetoric, how design might be incorporated into the field of political aesthetics, and the implications of such a relationship.

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* Though not the focus of this paper, photography plays a very important role in the rhetoric of sensational design. See: Chapter Five in Talley (2025).

2. Contextual Foundations

2.1. Communication Design in the Mediasphere

Ghosh and Nag (2016), in defining "communication design", use the term "meaningful information" to describe the content communication design frames, thus emphasizing the relationship between communication design and information (pp. 272–273). Lozano's (2016) definition of "information design" helps clarify how design mediates content in a value-laden manner. Lozano defines information design as "the process of organizing the content of a message based on a set of values that match some understanding and world order", which draws attention to the idea that there is a set of "principles and codes" that inform the reader's interpretation of the information (p. 199). This concept of information design as carried out via a set of established principles is key to understanding design as a rhetoric that carries with it pre-existing values shaping the content it mediates (p. 199). Combining Ghosh and Nag's (2016) definition of communication design and Lozano's (2016) definition of information design helps to describe the relationship between design and the mediasphere. A "mediasphere" is the "context in which mainstream journalism actually circulates", and it sits between the semiosphere, where meaning is made, and the public sphere, where news information is de-coded and interpreted by reading publics (Hartley, 1996, p. 13). Communication design operates within the mediasphere by acting as the visual rhetoric of news information, shaping the "meanings and relationships" (p. 13) that can be interpreted from that information.

2.2. Visual Rhetoric

Communication design carries stylistic characteristics and ideological foundations that form a visual language affecting the perception of information. Writing specifically on newspaper design, Craig (1990) describes how design practices can be understood as "conventions" and the system of design practices as "codes" (p. 21), making the argument that these codes constitute "semiotic meaning" (p. 22). Craig notes specifically that these codes are created in part through their historical conditioning in design practice, which aligns with Ihlström and Lundberg's (2004) work describing how news genres can be associated with particular visual characteristics.

Craig's argument can be contextualized within a body of literature that argues for the consideration of design as a form of visual rhetoric (Atzmon, 2011; Bonsiepe, 1965; Brumberger, 2003; Buchanan, 1985; Ehses, 1984, 1995; Helmers & Hill, 2004; Kinross, 1985; Patton, 2020; Wyatt & DeVoss, 2018). Rhetoric can be defined as "a corpus of applied methods of persuasion" which can be used to "shape opinions" and, relevant to this study, "specifically political opinions" (Bonsiepe, 1965, p. 24). Visual rhetoric, expressed through elements such as color, images and typography, can be persuasive

in the way it "speak[s] in familiar voices, show[s] concern for commonplace virtues and, hence, seem[s] authoritative" (Buchanan, 1985, p. 15). Atzmon (2011) collectivizes the qualities of visual rhetoric as "design narratives" (p. xiv), writing that these narratives work as rhetoric by appealing to "a worldview or a set of meta-beliefs" (p. xiv). This characteristic of visual rhetoric as appealing to "meta-beliefs" complements Ghosh and Nag's (2016) definition of communication design and Lozano's (2016) definition of information design. The concept of a rhetorical design narrative appealing to certain worldviews parallels the idea that communication design visually organizes content based on established values and understandings of the world. In doing so, communication design can both construct and leverage values that match particular understanding(s) of the world. Thus, communication and information design are inseparable from their deployment as a form of visual rhetoric. Building on the work of design scholars who have addressed the way visual rhetoric is used as a means of persuasion in communication design (Almeida, 2009; Atzmon, 2011, 2015; Bonsiepe, 1965; Buchanan, 1985; Drucker, 2014; Kinross, 1985; Rath, 2020), this paper recognizes that the visuals that form sensational design are not necessarily purposefully chosen by professional designers, but can appear in the design of newspapers and websites through a more intuitive understanding by non-designers about what kinds of visual cues could cause an affective response, as well as emerge from other technological and economic factors shaping the medium by which information is disseminated. Further, sensational design can act on information in ways that belies the existing values associated with certain visual codes, making it a slippery and deceptive example of visual rhetoric.

2.3. Sensationalism

'Sensational design' does not currently exist in design literature as a defined visual rhetoric but is established in this paper as a term to collectivise the visual rhetoric(s) present in periods of 'information disorder'. Sensational design is distinguished from 'sensationalism', the latter being a historical term typically used to describe a genre of journalism characterized by dramatic textual content. Sensationalism in the 19th-century is associated with "yellow journals" or "yellow journalism", a descriptor for newspapers with sensationalist content or "frequently associated with misconduct in newsgathering" (Campbell, 2001, p. 25).* This study sees sensationalism as an early precedent for contemporary information disorder in American media. Existing studies of sensationalism focus on the textual content in defining the genre (Dicken-Garcia, 1989; Francke, 1978, 1985). However, Campbell (2001) atypically defines sensationalism

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* This is distinct from the term "yellow peril", describing Sinophobia, which also appears in context of political communication during this period (see: Frayling, 2014).

through both its content and visual characteristics. The visual qualities Campbell identifies include:

- ▶ "frequent use of multicolumn headlines that sometimes stretched across the front page" (p. 7);
- ▶ "the generous and imaginative use of illustrations, including photographs and other graphic representation such as locator maps" (p. 8);
- ▶ "bold and experimental layouts, including those in which one report and illustration would dominate the front page [...] sometimes enhanced by the use of color" (p. 8).

Visually, sensational journalism is historically associated with a "mixed make-up" in front-page newspaper layouts, or those which use differing headline widths and broken columns (Olson, 1930, pp. 314–319). Associating this layout type to sensational journalism is Olson (1930) who, in his guide for the growing field of professional newspaper designers, writes that mixed make-up is the preferred form of sensationalism (p. 318). Olson derides the style as being "a jumble of headlines, boxes, and cuts of all widths and sizes, dumped helter-skelter into the page, each head fairly shrieking for attention", "excitement breeding" and directly cites the Hearst newspapers as an example (pp. 318–319).

Though these visual characteristics of sensationalism do appear in the 19th-century case studies, this paper posits that sensational design can be understood as a visual rhetoric divorced from a particular news genre in a particular period. Rather, sensational design is characterized by a constellation of different formal elements with an underlying appeal to affect, while sometimes also using genre characteristics of particular news forms to appeal to constructed "meta-beliefs" associated with those visual codes.

2.4. Propaganda, Tabloidization, Emotions and Affect

Writing on propaganda, tabloidization and emotional design can be used to explain how the visual rhetoric of sensational design appeals to affect, particularly in political contexts.

In histories of graphic design and visual culture, studies of propaganda are numerous (Aulich, 2011; Clark, 1997; Moore, 2010; Philippes, 1982). This study differs in that it focuses on the design of 19th-century newspapers and websites, revealing how certain characteristics of propaganda, such as appeals to affect through design, can work in a distributed visual rhetoric, as opposed to systematized operations. Sensationalism also appears as a characteristic of the "tabloid style" in studies on tabloidization (Zelizer & Bird, 2009). Tabloidization is understood as a term describing a "serious decline in journalism discourse" in the 20th-century and "framed in terms of increasing trivialization" (Zelizer, 2009, p. 41).

What connects sensationalism, tabloidization and propaganda is that they often desire to appeal to a publics' emotions.* Bernays refers to the emotion throughout his 1928 book *Propaganda*, particularly in reference to propaganda in a political context (Bernays, 1928, pp. 93, 102). Appeal to emotion also appears in White's (1971) analysis of "five forms of persuasion" (p. 26), and when describing the principles that an analyst can use to examine techniques of propaganda, Jowett and O'Donnell (2006) list the "arousal of emotions" (pp. 304–305). In the tabloidization of news, sensationalism is understood as an emotional dimension, connecting affect with news reporting (Zelizer & Kitch, 2009).

The affective qualities of design is the focus of the interdisciplinary field of emotional design, which seeks to connect design and its potential to "evoke emotions" and "patterns of behaviors and attitudes" (Damazio, 2016, p. 359). Much of the literature surrounding emotional design is in reference to product design, rather than visual communication (Chapman, 2015; Norman, 2004). Nonetheless, Norman's recognition of an "affective component" in the emotional processing of design relates emotional design to scholarship around affect and emotions, which informs the case study analysis (Ahmed, 2014; Dean, 2010; Johnson, 2018; Norman, 2004, p. 25).

Together, literature on visual rhetoric, propaganda, tabloidization and affect help establish a common base, 'affect', underlying the many visual expressions of 'sensational design'. Sensational design is distinguished from propaganda and tabloidization in that it is not a defined visual-verbal design *system*, as in propaganda, or *process* of news transformation associated with particular content, as in tabloidization, but rather, it is a visual *rhetoric* that can appear across news genres and at different moments in history.

2.5. Political Aesthetics

The aestheticization of politics is defined by its dialectic with (idealized) "rationalist" modes of politics (Corner & Pels, 2003, p. 8). Aestheticization refers to "performativity, style and spectacle" as applied to political communication, which is otherwise defined by its "commitment to substantial debate" (Aiello & Parry, 2016). Manipulation is a characteristic of the aestheticization of politics (Aiello & Parry, 2016). The definition of "manipulation" in the context of information disorder is drawn from Tandoc et al.'s (2018) classification of "manipulation" as one of the typologies of "fake news". Specifically referring to photographs, Tandoc et al.'s (2018) definition of manipulation is one that creates a "false narrative" that may use some facts, but overall has "no factual basis" (pp. 144–145). This definition, though based in discussions of photography, can be applied to other studies of visuality in the context of information disorder, such as this one. Much work on the aestheticization of politics (Corner, 2003; Corner & Pels,

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* 'Publics' here is used to recognise that there is no monolithic news reading 'public' (see: Warner, 2010).

2003; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2000; Zoonen, 2005), and the way it manipulates communication, builds on work of Edelman (1971, 1995, 2002) who linked semiotics and political behaviors. Understanding the aestheticization of politics as verbal and visual helps center communication design's role as influencing the mediation of political news.

The narrativity of the aestheticization of politics works to create a sense of order or coherence in the political sphere by targeting the beliefs of certain publics, as opposed to the "disorder, murkiness, and contradictions that characterize much of everyday experience" (Edelman, 1995, pp. 4, 117). In the 30 years since Edelman's observation, the sense of national and global disorder has only increased due to the interrelated systemic risks to contemporary planetary ecosystems and social cohesion, summarized as "polycrisis", which is exacerbated by modern technologies (Tooze, 2022). This context makes the function and effects of political aesthetics all the more important to study. This paper asserts that sensational design should be considered a form of visual rhetoric within political aesthetics. Further, focusing on visual rhetoric emphasizes the way communication design works to manipulate political communication in mediaspheres characterized by information disorder.

3. Methodology

The study can be understood as a contemporary design history of visual communication in so far as it critically considers design and design practice as affecting present events, while also using a diachronic approach to elucidate the historical trajectory of contemporary phenomena (Teasley, 2019, p. 13).

An integrative literature review into newspaper design, sensationalism and contemporary information disorder in the United States provided the historical and theoretical context, informing the selection of cases (19th-century newspapers and websites), sub-cases (specific front pages and home pages) and graphic units for analysis (typography and layout).* Front pages and home pages were studied in relation as they are the most equivalent to each other, and there is precedent in studies of web news design to use home pages as a "metaphor" for front pages (Li, 1998, p. 355). Studies exploring newspapers' effect on voting behavior, relevant to this paper's focus on political communication, also use front page stories as a metric for determining newspapers' ideological leaning (Gerber et al., 2009, p. 40).

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* This paper does not discuss illustrations and photography, which play a key role sensational visual rhetoric. However, a comprehensive study is the subject of the author's PhD thesis from which this paper is drawn (see: Talley, 2025).

Case studies were chosen using purposive sampling (Emmel, 2021, p. 5). Due to the limits of scope for an academic article, this paper presents a schematic of cases that were analyzed as part of a much larger study (Talley, 2025).

The *New York World* and *New York Journal* were selected as exemplary cases as they are the most referenced newspapers cited as popularizing sensationalism in academic studies of the subject (Campbell, 2001; Stevens, 1991). Front pages of the *Journal* were downloaded from the Library of Congress digital collections and front pages of the *World* were downloaded from Newspapers.com. Dates ranged from between 1893 and 1900, a period constituting the rise of sensationalism and the 'circulation wars' between Hearst and Pulitzer. Most analysis has been conducted on material collecting starting in the year 1895, after Hearst's acquisition of the *Journal*, and what Campbell (2001) defines as the beginning of the era of sensationalism (p. 6). Front pages were sampled on the basis that they contained national political news in a headline. This news was understood as relating to presidential elections, the passage (or failure) of federal congressional acts, strikes, wars, economic depressions, recessions and territorial annexations. A focus on national political news was chosen, rather than local news, as post-factual news websites today tend to discuss national news items, even if the website purports to be from a specific locality. This survey resulted in a corpus of 380 front pages from the *Journal* and 397 from the *World* that had at least one mention of national political news as a headline item. Front pages were then coded for political stories using both open coding and selective coding (Holton, 2022), based on the list of historical events and populist rhetorical themes from Kazin's (2017) *The Populist Persuasion*. This focus on populist rhetoric for coding was chosen as both the *World*, *Journal*, and post-factual online news outlets are understood as appealing to populist socio-cultural narratives (Müller & Schulz, 2021) and aligns with the study's focus on political communication.* Populist rhetoric, like sensationalism, is characterized as appealing to affect (Demertzis, 2006) and, importantly for this study, is specifically associated with information disorder (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). Therefore, populist rhetoric is used here as a coding criteria to select examples of political communication within the sub-cases on which to then conduct visual analyses. However, it should be emphasized that sensational visual rhetoric is not *only* apparent in populist political communication. The pages were coded using the "regions" feature in NVivo, selecting, by area, headlines and illustrations. Pages with approximately more than 50% of their total front page coded as having populist political content (determined by total area of coded regions within the front page) were then selected to create analysis memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 117; Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 77). These memos formed the

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* Other possibilities outside political communication might have included focusing on rhetoric around crimes or celebrities, for example.

basis of formal visual analysis, with notes highlighting aspects such as bold headlines and common layout strategies.

Post-factual websites were chosen from BuzzFeed News' "Top Fake News" articles from 2016 and 2017 (Silverman, 2016, 2017)* and from Melissa Zimdars' (2016) "False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical 'News' Sources" list. The sources in these lists were then matched to websites mentioned in other academic studies or news articles on mis- and disinformation, indicating they had some significance in information disorder discourse. Sites were then evaluated to determine which examples had been scraped by the Internet Archive with enough detail to capture significant visual elements. In the case of the technical limitations imposed by poorly archived websites, there were periodical evaluations to determine how well certain cases that might have been considered at the outset were not fit for analysis. This resulted in a corpus of 17 post-factual news websites, with screenshots taken from archived versions of these sites on the Internet Archive's Web Archive. This final selection has the caveat of potentially inflating the impact of certain cases in terms of their overall influence on information disorder in American media. However, the study is not concerned with evaluating the significance of individual cases, rather, it is interested in investigating the visual rhetoric to which the cases collectively contribute. Like the focus on populist rhetoric within the 19th-century examples, post-factual websites were chosen based on their right-wing political leaning, which today is associated with an appeal to populist narratives (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023). This decision to focus on right-wing outlets also aligns with previous research that analyses the strong influence of right-wing media on information disorder in the US media landscape (Benkler et al., 2018) and studies that demonstrate the abundance of right-wing mis- and disinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2018; Silverman et al., 2016). Though this study examines right-wing populist narratives, I ultimately argue that sensational design is ideologically agnostic, and future studies might look to see how the rhetoric appears in reportage across the political spectrum.

In the visual analysis, the front pages of newspapers and home pages of websites are broken down to analyze two design elements: layout and display typography. These elements were chosen as they receive particular focus in literature on newspaper and web design and are considered "immutable graphic elements" in news design (Ozretić Došen & Brkljačić, 2018, p. 5). They are also graphic elements listed as part of Campbell (2001) and Olson's (1930) description of sensational news. Finally, they are comparable across eras. The separation of design elements and their analysis is

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* Buzzfeed used the communication marketing tool BuzzSumo to survey 96 "fake news" websites (compiled from a list drawn from the sites' own investigations and the online tool Hoaxy) to identify top-performing Facebook content.

informed by previous studies on newspaper design and layouts which combine methods of multimodal analysis with socio-historical research (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001; Knox, 2007, 2009a,b, 2017). In particular, this study follows Barnhurst's (1991) analysis of newspaper form, which focuses on headline size, width, typography and layout.

3.1. Cases' Historical and Cultural Context: 19th-Century Sensational Newspapers and 21st-Century Post-Factual Websites

This paper examines case studies from two of the most infamous 19th-century sensational newspapers, the *New York World,* published by Joseph Pulitzer, and the *New York Journal,* published by William Randoph Hearst, as well as examples from several 21st-century post-factual websites between 2016 and 2017, years around the Donald Trump-Hillary Clinton election. The two eras of comparative case studies are characterized by information disorder in the American mediasphere, appeals to populist narratives in political communication, political polarization and technological innovations that effect news production, mediation and distribution, which is why they have been selected for comparison. By eras of information disorder, I mean points in American history where the mediasphere is characterized, in popular and scholarly discourse, by an increase in manipulated political communication at the point of production, mediation and distribution. I expand Hartley's definition to include non-mainstream 'journalism' in the 21st-century, which is affected by the same technological, economic and political drivers as traditional news outlets.

New York City in the 1890s was dealing with many of the same socio-economic complexities, including market downturn, a rise in immigration and nativist backlash, political corruption, influx of new technologies, globalization, that the entire country would be facing 110 years later. Indeed, New York can be considered both a microcosm and a canary in the coal mine for many of the issues facing the American mediasphere as a whole today. Both eras evidence the same populist rhetorical themes (Kazin, 2017), including religious speech, producerism*, xenophobia and nationalism, evident both in text and visual motifs. These periods are also characterized by great leaps in technological innovation for news publishing, such as the invention of color printing presses in the 19th-century, and in the 21st-century, the use of template software to produce news webpages and the web as a medium for news dissemination. Further, these periods both have a body of contemporary discourses and secondary literature historicizing and criticizing new production and dissemination technologies, socio-political and economic conditions, and design and journalism practice. As this study is concerned with understanding the phenomena of information disorder as it relates to

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* Defined as the conviction that "only those who created wealth in tangible, material ways […] could be trusted to guard the nation's piety and liberties" (Kazin, 2017, p. 13).

sensational visual rhetorics of political communication over time, a comparative case study approach allows for the evaluation of similarities and differences of design and political aestheticization in two periods characterized by information disorder in the American mediasphere.

4. Findings

The following section considers two design elements from 19th-century sensational newspapers and 21st-century post-factual websites: layout and display typography. Conducting a visual analysis, the section reveals how these elements exhibit "genre characteristics" associated with certain news design codes, and/or appeal to affect. Although each element is analyzed individually, the overall visual rhetoric of sensational design is supported by Gestalt theory as applied to communication design (Lupton & Phillips, 2015; Moszkowicz, 2011). This argues that elements within a graphic composition are visually read as a whole, rather than as distinct units, subject to the ways in which viewers interrelate individual elements to order visual information.

4.1. Layout

Layout refers to the underlying logic of the composition of elements. For post-factual websites and newspapers, layout creates salience hierarchies, emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain design elements. "Salience" is a term used to describe the way different elements in a composition "attract the viewer's attention to different degrees" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 182). The term "salience hierarchy" describes the "path" a viewer reads a visual text from the most to the least salient element (p. 211). There are two main ways these hierarchies are created in the case studies: use of the fold/scroll and the variety/constancy of layouts employed. However, layouts do not only work as an underlying structure to create salience hierarchies, but themselves represent a visual rhetoric. Understanding layouts as rhetoric is supported by previous studies of news design, which note that in "socio-semiotic and perceptual psychology, visual space is seen as a semiotic space", an aspect of visual grammar structuring information (Ozretić Došen & Brkljačić, 2018, p. 4).

4.2. Use of the Fold/Scroll

One of the ways salience hierarchies are created is by placing some elements "above the fold" or "above the scroll" and others "below the fold/scroll", as in what could be seen when the newspaper was folded on a newsstand versus when the front page was unfolded, and what a user can see on a webpage before scrolling down. Both newspapers and websites tend to place the boldest headlines and largest images "above the fold" and "above the scroll", creating a strong hierarchy between content that is immediately seen and that which one would need to unfold the paper or scroll down to
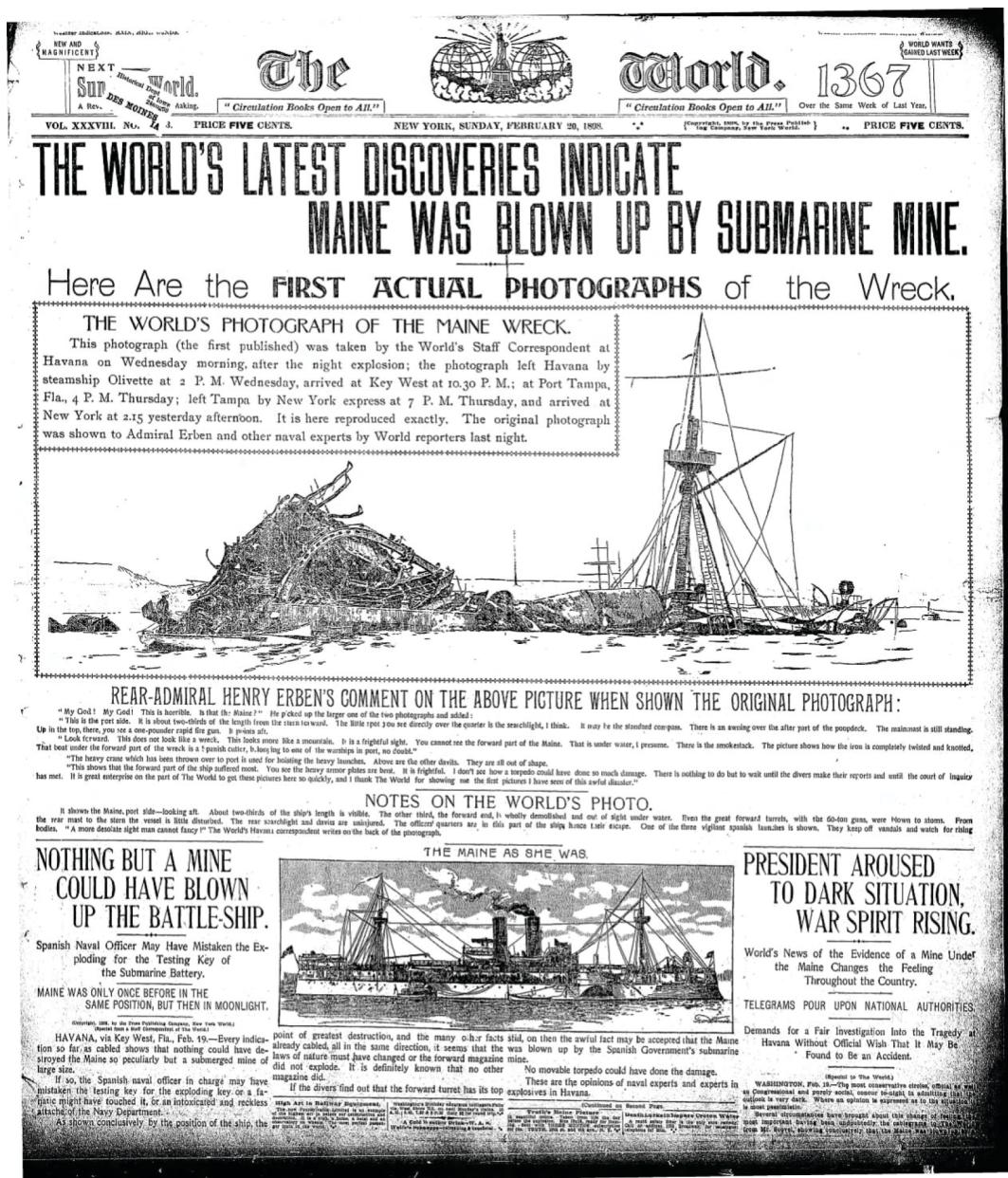
Figure 1. *The World*, 20 February 1898.

see (Figure 1). For most websites, emphasis is placed on the main headline story in the top left or center, with a large headline and image (USA Daily Politics, 2016).* However, newspapers went further than to just use the fold as a frame, sometimes using the fold to create dramatic tension in stories. In the *Journal*, a month after peace was accepted

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* Due to copyright restrictions, images of these websites are unable to be reproduced. However, each reference links to an archived version of the website in the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, where archived versions of the websites can be viewed online.

Figure 2. *The Journal,* top half, 3 August 1898.
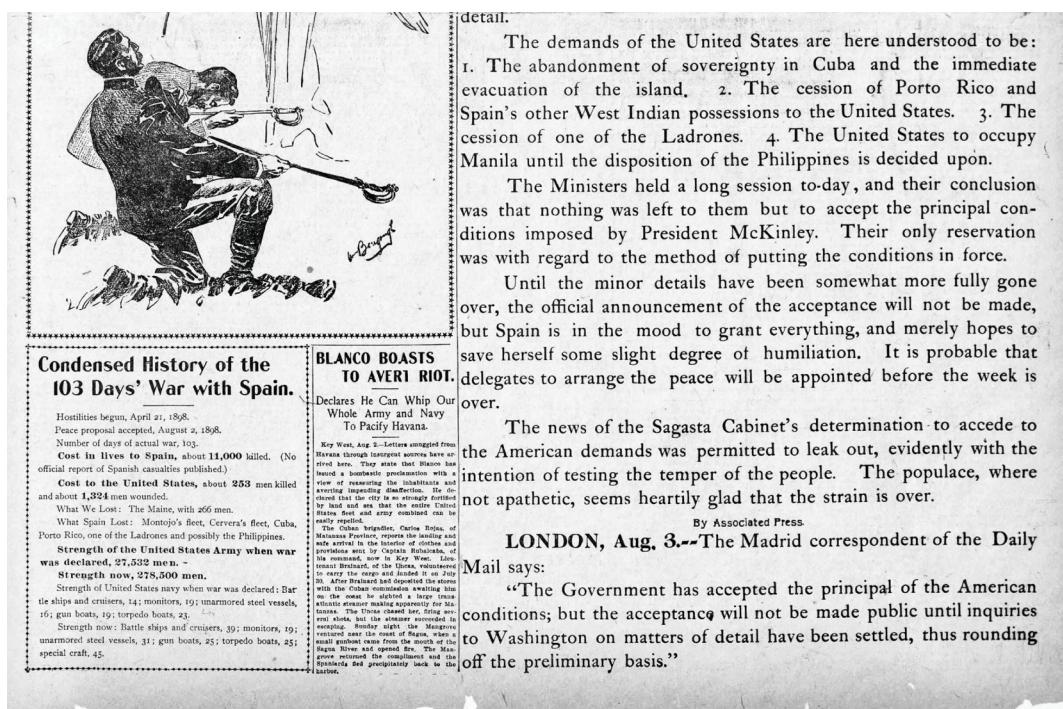
Figure 3. *The Journal,* bottom half, 3 August 1898.

in the Spanish-American War, an illustration of an angel above a soldier was featured on the *Journal's* front page. The angel was placed above the fold and the soldier below, which would have made for a dramatic reveal upon unfolding the newspaper (Figures 2 and 3). This is a technique not seen in post-factual websites, which tend to keep their most affective content 'above the scroll', reflecting the habit of scanning and immediacy that is characteristic of digital content.

4.3. Variety/Constancy of Layouts

One difference between newspapers and websites is the variety versus constancy of layouts used. The post-factual websites analyzed in this study employ largely unchanging templates that adhere to a consistent grid structure. However, the *World* and *Journal's* layouts changed almost daily (Figures 4–7). In their analysis of typologies of news form, Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) note how what they call "Victorian" newspaper designs reflected the "endless variation and diversity" of news in the period (pp. 81–83). The variety of layout types and creative use of the fold demonstrates how the layout of 19th-century newspapers adapted to the day's news.

This contrasts with post-factual websites, where a template is usually applied. These templates are often described as being suited to news content, modern in style, image-forward and emphasize their ease of use. For example, the template used by *World Politicus* until October 2016 was Themeum's "NewEdge: News and magazine theme", which had a "clean, fresh and modern look", a drag and drop page builder that made it easy to "Build your influential news/magazine site in the shortest period of time" and a "stunning photo gallery" (World Politicus, 2016; NewEdge, 2016). Lack of visual variety is evident in the use of templates across websites, which adhere to a minimalist, functional style.

Further, these minimalist layouts can mimic the design of legacy news media websites, which also follow in the modernist tradition. This is most evident in "news imposter" (PolitiFact Staff, 2017) websites, such as *CNNews3* (CNNews3, 2016). *CNNews3's* design loosely mimicked that of the cable news channel CNN (PolitiFact Staff, 2017). It employed the same black, white and red color palette and had a knockoff *'CNN'* logo in a red box to the left of the menu bar, which was black, as in the original. In terms of structure, the original CNN news website employed a two-column layout, with "Top Stories" and "News and Buzz" in the left column and a large focal image with a headline above on the right. The imposter site included a carousel of images in a section at the top, each with a superimposed headline over the image *CNNews3* used the NewsAnchor template by aThemes for its web design. The NewsAnchor theme was described as "an easy to use magazine theme, great for online news sites that want to have a fresh and modern look" (NewsAnchor, n.d.). The template was released as both a free and a paid version. It appears that *CNNews3* used the free template, suggesting that the ease and inexpensive
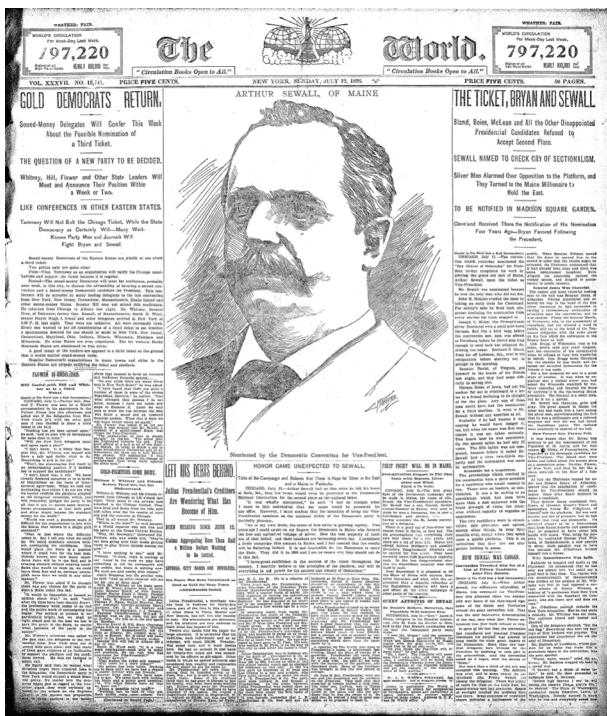
Figure 4. *The World,* 12 July 1896.

Figure 5. *The World,* 9 August 1896.

Figure 6. *The World,* 26 August 1899.

Figure 7. *The Journal,* 25 March 1896.

production made the "NewsAnchor" theme an attractive option for the creators. The fact that the creators then spent time to edit this generic template to loosely resemble the real CNN website raises the question: why do so, if many other post-factual sites used templates 'out of the box'? What might these conscious design choices suggest about the real, or perceived, effect of visual rhetoric on the authority or authenticity of information?

4.4. Display Typography

Like layout, display typography is used to create salience hierarchies that can emphasize or deemphasize content through color, capitalization, scale and contrast. Further, typography's style can convey certain connotations. This is described by Noble and Bestley (2005), noting that type is in itself semiotic (p. 63).

Through connotations associated with type families and styles, and by emphasizing affective content through its treatment, typography plays a role in sensational rhetoric. This is true for both 19th-century newspapers and post-factual websites. This section describes two aspects of typography in each case: mastheads/lettermarks and headlines. Though this analysis focuses on typefaces, their treatment, and scale, there are a variety of other features that constitute typographic analysis that might be employed in future studies focusing specifically on typography (see Coles, 2016, for details on such features). In particular, this study calls attention to the different ways in which serif typefaces, those which have strokes at the end of letterforms (the "serif"), and sans serif typefaces, faces without strokes (Evans et al., 2013) might convey meanings associated with genre characteristics of certain news forms.

A turn-of-the-century history of printing notes that, "Were Gutenberg called upon to print his Bible to-day he would find virtually the same type ready for his purpose" (Hoe, 1902, p. 5). Such a statement draws attention to the fact that physical, metal, moveable types, were how newspapers were set at this time. Even with the introduction of the linotype machine, some sizes and faces of type were not available and had to be set by hand (Sutton, 1948, p. 99). Further, types were stored in cases in newspaper compositing rooms, taking up physical space in cabinets (Sutton, 1948, p. 101). The limitations of using physical type can be evidenced in the limited variety of headline types, in a limited size, observed in the *World* and *Journal*, which consistently used Quentell, De Vinne Outline, Gutenberg and Elzevir Gothic. These limitations contrast with web typography, which has experienced an "explosion" of typefaces since the mid-2000s (Teague, 2012). Despite this abundance, in the websites observed in this study, post-factual sites most often use default, sans serif types for headlines.
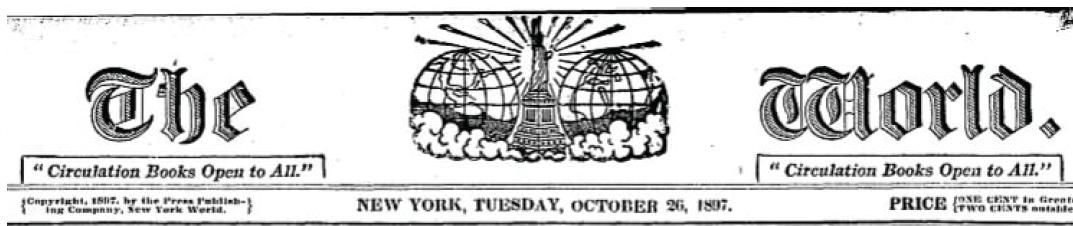
Figure 8. Masthead of *The New York World*.

4.5. Mastheads and Lettermarks

A masthead is the 'title' of the newspaper, printed at the top of the front page, often in a distinct typeface to the rest of the text. The equivalent of a masthead for post-factual websites is the lettermark. Mastheads are a consistent element of newspaper design and serve as an "ideogram" representing the identity of the newspaper for readers (Arnold, 1981, p. 74). Historically, newspaper mastheads were set in a blackletter type, the boldest type available in the early years of printing (Allen, 1947, p. 102). The connotation of tradition this provides is commented on in several early texts on news design. Arnold writes that blackletter "gives this face a good acceptance by the public" and is associated with "permanence and power," making it a strong choice for papers wishing to convey these qualities to their readers (1956, pp. 106, 109). The *World*, throughout the 1890s, used a blackletter type for its masthead (Mastheads can also be paired with images, and both the 19th-century mastheads and 21st-century lettermarks incorporate imagery. For example, the Journal employed nationalist language and symbols in its masthead. In 1898, the Journal's masthead included an illustration of an eagle imposed over the image of an American flag (Figure 9), and in 1899, the masthead

Figure 9. *New York Journal* masthead, 2 January 1899.

Figure 10. *New York Journal* masthead, 6 May 1899.

changed to include an image of a map of the United States, positioned below an eagle with its wings outstretched (An analysis of each version reveals the affective, populist rhetoric of the Journal's masthead. These two versions use the image of the eagle and of the map as iconic signs to represent the United States and the American people, and the banner text aligns the newspapers with an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) of American readers. Images showing the US's new territories could be seen as representing conquered peoples, literally under America's wing. This visual/verbal rhetoric establishing an imagined community of the American populace is common in populist narratives and might be understood as a strategy used by news outlets to collectivize their readership.). Underneath the wings float images of four newly acquired territories or spheres of influence, the Philippines, Hawaii, Cuba and Puerto Rico.) and this style is mimicked by some post-factual websites, such as the *Florida Sun Post* and *Washington Evening*, giving them a more traditional connotation (Florida Sun Post, 2016; Washington Evening, 2017).

Mastheads can also be paired with images, and both the 19th-century mastheads and 21st-century lettermarks incorporate imagery. For example, the *Journal* employed nationalist language and symbols in its masthead. In 1898, the *Journal's* masthead included an illustration of an eagle imposed over the image of an American flag (Figure 9), and in 1899, the masthead changed to include an image of a map of the United States, positioned below an eagle with its wings outstretched (An analysis of each version reveals the affective, populist rhetoric of the Journal's masthead. These two versions use the image of the eagle and of the map as iconic signs to represent the United States and the American people, and the banner text aligns the newspapers with an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) of American readers. Images showing the US's new territories could be seen as representing conquered peoples, literally under America's wing. This visual/verbal rhetoric establishing an imagined community of the American populace is common in populist narratives and might be understood as a strategy used by news outlets to collectivize their readership.). Underneath the wings float images of four newly acquired territories or spheres of influence, the Philippines, Hawaii, Cuba and Puerto Rico.

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Figure 11. Banner headline in the *Journal*, 5 July 1898.
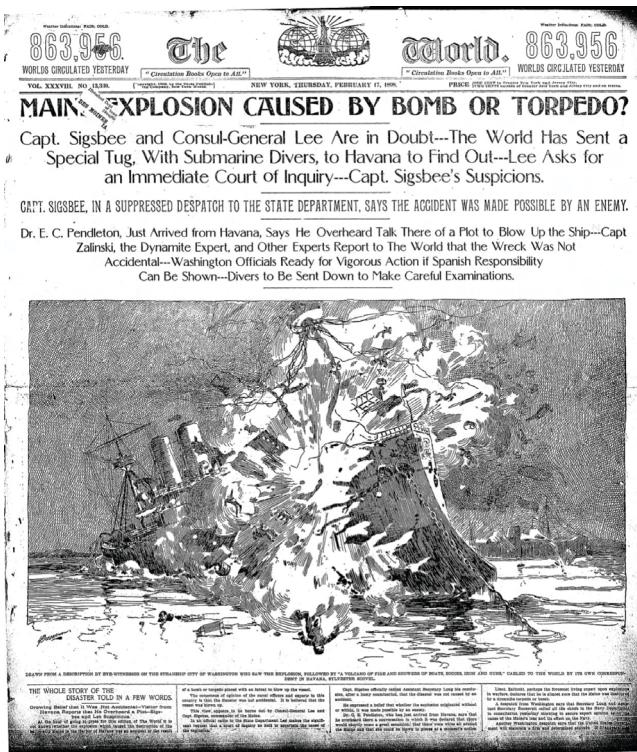
Figure 12. Banner headline in the *World*, 17 February 1898.

Similar to the patriotic images used in the *Journal's* masthead, the lettermark of the post-factual site *USA Daily Politics*, makes use of nationalist imagery and styles. The masthead of *USA Daily Politics* is set in a hollow, black-outlined, Varsity-style slab-serif typeface (USA Daily Politics, 2016). Varsity-style type is connotative of American sports after the popularization of heat-press felt lettering for sports apparel in the mid-1940s (Stahls & Hotronix, n.d.). Further, this association with letterman jackets and high-school varsity sports gives the *USA Daily Politics* lettermark a vernacular*, nationalist aesthetic, compounded by an imposed image of an American flag in the outline.

National symbols such as flags and eagles align with Edelman's (1995) idea of the "kitsch" in political aesthetics. Edelman (1995) describes kitsch as "art that sentimentalizes everyday experiences, or that appeals to beliefs and emotions encouraging vanity, prejudices, or unjustified fears and dubious successes" (p. 29). Kitsch can create divisions through sentimentalizing, appealing to an imagined community of Americans, as much as it can encourage division through fearmongering narratives. In sensational and post-factual news outlets, "kitsch" is often present, such through

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★ For more on the digital vernacular, see: Howard (2008).

nationalist symbols and typographic styles that appeal to American pastimes, as in the USA Daily Politics lettermark.

The lettermarks above demonstrate how connotations related to imagery and typographic style can create a visual rhetoric that suggests traditionalist or nationalist values. Below, we will see how styles of headline typography also carry connotations, as well as emphasize particular words and narratives.

4.6. Headlines

The other most salient typographic element in 19th- and 21st-century layouts is the headline. From one column to multi-column stories, the *World* and *Journal* used different serif and sans serif typefaces that, due to their decorative styles and dramatic scales and contrast, created visual interest on front pages that shifted from day to day.

The use of full-spread banner headlines was the most dramatic, which Olson (1930) observed was a product of the competition between the *Journal* and the *World*. He noted that the circulation war between the two papers "brought a new idea, that of using the headline to advertise the news to possible buyers, as well as to bulletin it" (p. 214). This resulted in headlines that grew in "size and blackness" with the Spanish-American war in particular giving the papers "a heaven-sent opportunity to try to outdo each other in striking and sensational display" (p. 214) (Figures 11–12).

Like their 19th-century counterparts, large-scale, full-caps headings are used by post-factual websites to draw attention to their headline stories. For example, the use of all-caps in both *World Politicus* and *World News Daily Repor*t echo the "screaming" headlines of the 19th-century (World News Daily Report, 2015; World Politicus, 2016). However, post-factual websites follow in the history of modernist newspaper design, where headlines are set in sans serif faces with contrast created using differences in scale and boldness (Garcia, 1993, p. 33). Like modernist layout designs, these sans serif faces can carry with them connotations, such as their association with objectivity (K. G. Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, pp. 191–192; Kinross, 1985; Rath, 2020), "default aesthetics" (Etienne, 2002) and ready-made "good enough" design (Engholm, 2010, p. 149). It is also evident comparing pages from template providers and post-factual websites that many creators did not change the default typeface, such as in the case of *World Politicus*, a visual expression of the "default aesthetic" (Etienne, 2002) and Engholm's "good enough revolution" in web design (2010, p. 151). This suggests that the choice to use default type is one of efficiency, prioritizing speed in the production process.

In the case of post-factual websites, the rhetoric of sensational design is not visually matched to its content as obviously as in the 19th-century. Though they may use large sizes or all-caps, which can stimulate an affective response, the typefaces themselves visually appear as "modernist". In this case, the "rhetoric of neutrality" (Kinross, 1985)

of sans serif types belies their often affective language. This demonstrates that visual characteristics of sensational design are slippery and must be understood within a larger socio-cultural context of information disorder, for example, the way in which efficiency and speed in contemporary production impact the visuality of information.

5. Discussion

5.1. How Layout and Typography 'Act' as Rhetoric

Layout and typography in both 19th-century sensational newspapers and 21st-century post-factual websites act as elements of visual language in an overall rhetoric of sensational design.

Layout can also be understood as a rhetorical element in the way it is associated with certain kinds of content. In the 19th-century, there was a responsiveness to the daily influx of information that shaped front page designs, and the visual form of news was specific to its content. Front page newspaper layout was conceived of as a "window" in which type and image created the "personality" of the paper (Olson, 1930, p. 298). In this view, structure is recognized as being used toward subjective ends and became associated with certain types of news. This aligns with Ihlström and Lundberg's work on "genre awareness" as applied to online newspaper design. They describe how "genre characteristics may be copied and refined to reflect resemblance to an existing genre" (Ihlström & Lundberg, 2004, p. 51). Olson (1930) observed that mixed makeup is the "style that lends itself most readily to sensational make-up" and even notes that "It is the type of make-up much used by Hearst newspapers and others making an appeal to mass circulation" (p. 318). This contrasts with post-factual website design, wherein the "neutral", functionalist style of design juxtaposes the dramatized narratives it frames. For these examples, the default is applied consistency, in part due to the low-cost and low-effort application of web templates. These templates are examples of "good enough" design (Engholm, 2010, p. 149), and the design logic on which these web templates operate, "presumes a split between form and content" (Riley, 2010, p. 74). This split becomes problematic, as with these templates, there is a seeping of a modernist design style, historically seen as "objective" and "authentic", into the aesthetics of post-factual news. Further, the fact that many of these templates market themselves as being for news information suggests that the creators of these websites consciously chose their designs to align with a pre-existing notion of what "news" should look like.

Historically, "traditional" or "modernist" news design is associated with a sense of professionalism and authority (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, p. 21). Guides for newspaper professionals, which appeared following the professionalism of design in the early 20th-century, demonstrate an interest in perpetuating balanced, symmetrical,

modernist forms (Allen, 1929; Allen, 1947; Olson, 1930; Sutton, 1948). In the spirit of these early guides, books such as Hurlburt's *The Grid: A Modular System for the Design and Production of Newspapers, Magazines, and Books* (1978), Moen's *Newspaper Layout and Design* (1989) and Garcia's *Contemporary Newspaper Design: A Structural Approach* (1993) served as guides for quality in news design, all touting modernist, grid-based layouts. Rather than being emotive in and of itself, as might be the case with a more bespoke 19th-century layouts, these templates frame affective narratives, while carrying a visual metaphor of objectivity due to the layouts' association with modernist design and legacy media news websites. Samara (2017) has recognized the subjectivity and cultural variability of "neutral" grid structures writing, that designers should consider "how various layout conventions may be interpreted on cultural, historical, and associational levels" (p. 60), making the point that all aspects of design, including the layout, can be and are subjectively constructed and experienced. Drucker's (2014) work on interfaces is also instructive: she describes how seeing interfaces with a "humanistic approach" emphasizes that interfaces "have to be defined as rhetorical arguments", recognizing their subjective construction and experience (p. 54).

The concept of "genre awareness" can also be applied to typography. Typography as a form of visual rhetoric was recognized by Bonseipe (1965, p. 40), and previous studies have considered the rhetorical potential of typography (Brumberger, 2003; Wyatt & DeVoss, 2018), revealing how it is possible for typography to carry cultural connotations. Through cultural connotations associated with type styles, and by emphasizing affective content through its treatment, typography acts as an element in sensational design. The typography of both 19th-century papers and 21st-century websites demonstrates how type works not only to draw attention to dramatic language, but also how the type style acts through its connotations. This is evident in the example of the *US Daily Politics* logotype, which incorporates nationalist, kitsch aesthetics, as well as the way in which blackletter type expresses authority and tradition. Other post-factual news websites exhibit typographic consistency due to keeping with the templates' defaults, using almost exclusively sans serif types. These default, sans serif types, like the templates in which they are embedded, project a "rhetoric of neutrality" (Kinross, 1985). However, their modernist treatment lend these headlines a different kind of authenticity: a sense of objectivity, which belies their often purposefully affective narratives. Therefore, though previous studies have seen serif and sans serif typefaces as associated with right/left political leanings in print newspapers (Schindler & Müller, 2018, p. 146), this study reveals how these ideological distinctions dissolve when applied to the visual analysis of online news in mediaspheres of information disorder. This highlights one of the most deceptive characteristics of sensational visual rhetoric in political contexts: its belying of preconceived ideological connotations.

5.2. Design and Political Aesthetics: Implications

Revealing the ideological codes that make up sensational design contributes to studies of visual rhetoric and political aesthetics by revealing how the visual rhetoric of design contributes to the aestheticization of politics in American news media. This design perspective on political aesthetics and political rhetoric builds on previous work that has explored the ways in which symbols (Edelman, 1971), art (Edelman, 1995) and spectacle (Edelman, 2002), though often subliminal, take advantage of pre-existing cultural narratives to play on the emotions of voting publics.

The aestheticization of politics (Corner & Pels, 2003; Zoonen, 2005) is "equated with a potential for manipulation and mystification" in how it combines political actions with performativity, style and spectacle (Aiello & Parry, 2016). The aestheticization of politics through visual rhetoric has the potential to adversely manipulate political information in the mediasphere, the phenomenon of which can be understood as information disorder. This study brings to light the negative consequences of the political aesthetics of communication design, particularly in the context of right-wing, populist narratives. Awareness of this visual manipulation is particularly important in modern politics, where such visual rhetoric can appeal to *ressentiment*, a "moral anger" that is a pervasive emotion in voting publics (Demertzis, 2006, p. 104). Kitsch and vernacular aesthetics appeal to *ressentiment* in the way they can evoke "spurious fears, hatreds, enthusiasms, and victories" that ultimately can shape views on politicians and policies (Edelman, 1995, p. 31). These views, under the influence of such rhetoric, are often "based on doubtful or blatantly false assumptions and contrived narratives", but they nonetheless shape the publics' support for certain politicians and policies (p. 32). Sensational design is implicated in shaping the publics' support for such politicians and policies in acting as a visual rhetoric, appealing to affect and spurring *ressentiment*.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Future research should explore how sensational design appears in different geographic and political contexts to gain an understanding of manifestations of sensational design as understood within culturally specific expressions of political aesthetics. This speaks to the limitations of the current data set, which is bounded by its cultural and geographic scope, as well as size, so the findings cannot be generalized. Additionally, because this article focuses on layout and typography, it neglects to include a myriad of other elements, such as typographic elements (sub-headlines, body copy, captions), photographs, illustrations and the use of color, that would inter-relate to form a comprehensive analysis. Further, the present paper is limited in the depth of its analysis of individual elements. Expert focus on component elements of sensational design, such as those mentioned above, would be beneficial to support the study's overall argument.

This paper has focused on the appearance of sensational design as associated with populist narratives. This is to exemplify how the rhetoric of sensational design affects political communication in mediaspheres characterized by information disorder, as many studies of information disorder focus on news with a populist bent, and it is easy to distinguish in the contemporary case studies the rift between charged populist language and the "neutral" rhetoric of modernism. However, per the claims above, the rhetoric of sensational design can appear in various contexts, which means that future studies would do well to look at both left-leaning and what otherwise might be considered "objective" news for evidence of sensational design.

Finally, the commodification of news and the role of advertising as supporting both 19th-century papers (Dicken-Garcia, 1989, p. 188; Guarneri, 2017, p. 22; Stevens, 1991, p. 65) and online news (Boyer, 2013, p. 8; Pickard, 2020, pp. 44, 60) must be acknowledged as an important contributing factor to information disorder. A complete materialist analysis of design and information disorder in America cannot ignore the relation between the aestheticization of politics and the political economy of news.

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