

Visual Communication and how to make it work for non-expert audiences

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The visual medium is often said to be powerful in its ability to mimic reality as closely as possible, thus allowing easy and enjoyable processing of information for broad audiences. Yet, when looking at visual representations used to carry over complicated communicative messages, visual realism is a poor design strategy.

First I will discuss the issue of visual realism in relation to visuals fulfilling different types of communicative functions in the field of climate change. Next, I will review a number of studies on the effect of design strategies deliberately deviating from reality. The studies fit in three lines of research in linguistics, cognitive science and communication studies, respectively.

(i) Language production, in particular the way in which visual variables affect the way in which humans produce referential expressions. One study shows the relative power of visual and linguistic salience on the production of referential expressions, another the disturbing effect of realistic detail (visual clutter) on the production of referential expressions (landmarks) in route directions.

(ii) Metaphoric conceptualization. The visual medium is well equipped to represent different semantic domains connected in a metaphoric representation, useful in domains like learning, comprehension, instruction, and behaviour change. The study reported on makes clear how viewers use low level perceptual cues as bootstrap mechanisms in establishing metaphoric conceptualizations based on visual representations;

(iii) Communication studies. Real life visuals often combine many design features, aimed at meeting multiple functions for multiple audiences. When time allows, one or two examples will be given of effect studies of visuals in particular contexts (health communication, leisure).