

Elizabeth Ray

Mrs. Beale

Journalism

23 January 2023

A Graphic Is Worth A Thousand Words

In a society where decreasing attention spans lead consumers to look towards social media posts for information, journalists should practice visual journalism to communicate accurate information without losing the interest of readers. Rather than replacing written journalism, journalists and editors should strive to include more graphics, charts, and videos to explain complex information in a compelling way.

In a 2015 article, Time Magazine made the somewhat comical claim that the average human attention span was now shorter than a goldfish's.¹ While such a claim seems initially nonsensical, researchers for Microsoft found that the average attention span was 8 seconds in 2015 (a 4 second drop from the year 2000) while a goldfish has an attention span of 9 seconds.² Society's increasing dependence on technology has changed people's brains, leading consumers to search for instant gratification in all forms of media, including the news.

Visual journalism solves the readers' need for the instant consumption of information. By presenting important data through digital content such as animations, graphics, or videoclips, news outlets have begun to incorporate visual content into digital articles as a way to maintain reader engagement. For example, British visual journalist Allison McCann created a 3D animation of Notre-Dame Cathedral for the New York Times to illustrate how the

¹ McSpadden, Kevin. "Science: You Now Have a Shorter Attention Span than a Goldfish." Time. Time Magazine, May 14, 2015.

² "Microsoft Attention Spans Research Report ." Consumer Insights, Microsoft Canada, 2015.

building was set on fire in 2019.³ This interactive model allowed readers to explore the damage done to the cathedral, which would have been difficult using solely the written word.

Additionally, investigative journalist Lena V. Groeger uses graphics to communicate large amounts of data to readers. In May 2020, Groeger created a series of charts and infographics that displayed the rise and fall of coronavirus cases that spring in each U.S. state.⁴ If this data was simply written, the article would have been an uninteresting list of numbers and statistics rather than a compelling visual.

Journalists must find ways to make their content more appealing so that readers do not only rely on social media for their news. While consumers are drawn to social media posts to access appealing and instantaneous information, this content can easily be biased or false. In a survey done by Statista.com, around 40% of Americans reported that they had seen and shared fake news on social media.⁵ The spread of misinformation on social media is increasing. When readers read articles made by professional journalists, the information they consume is more likely to be truthful and of a higher quality.

Visual journalism encourages readers to make the shift from social media posts to news articles by making data more attractive and accessible. Appealing graphics or animations accommodate the public's decreasing attention spans without worsening the journalism's quality. In a time where access to truthful information is essential, journalists should prioritize maintaining the reader's interest by using visual journalism.

³ Kim, Katherine. "9 Visual Journalists Changing the Way We Tell Stories with Data." Sprout Social, July 24, 2019.

⁴ Lena V. Groeger and Ash Ngu, May 20. "States Are Reopening: See How Coronavirus Cases Rise or Fall." ProPublica, May 20, 2020.

⁵ Watson, Amy. "Fake News Shared on Social Media U.S." Statista, June 21, 2022.

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