Public Abstract
First Name:Richard
Middle Name:F.
Last Name:Shaw
Adviser's First Name:David
Adviser's Last Name:Rees
Co-Adviser's First Name:
Co-Adviser's Last Name:
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Newspapers rely on photography, maps, charts, and design to visually communicate important news topics and current events. As newspaper circulations declined in the mid-1980s, editors began introducing soft news features onto their front pages as a mix to the traditional hard news. Along with that, the visual content on front pages -- the photographs and charts -- began to change as well. Editors started using more reader-friendly feature photographs and vibrant icons to attract readership and make the newspaper more marketable. Content-rich visual journalism was replaced with visual fluff. The result was that readers were presented with a changing "visual character" or "visual personality."
Today, newspapers struggle to evolve into online "news organizations" and visual journalism competes with entertainment, advertising, and marketing to attract viewers. The central question for the digital newspaper of the future is, will the marketing pressure continue to dilute visual journalism and overload viewers with visual distractions? And, how will the "visual character" that newspaper Web sites project influence viewers' perception of credibility?
Through a series of Web site reviews and interviews, this research examined how the visual choices online newspapers make -- their "visual character" -- influence audience perceptions of news credibility. Five random research participants reviewed six newspaper Wed sites during late-2009 and early-2010. The study participants gauged credibility based on a number of visual characteristics such as photography, content, and design. The results showed that readers are affected by each site's "visual personality" based on its journalistic content; how photographs are used and edited; and how the home page is designed to provide an organized structure. The study found that online advertising that was aggressively animated was a significant detraction and often overpowered other visual news content. And finally, the research showed that linking visual branding to the newspaper print version could add to credibility.