

ONLINE NEWSPAPERS' VISUAL CHARACTER AND PERCEPTIONS OF CREDIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

Newspapers rely on content-based documentary photography to visually communicate current news events. As circulations declined in the mid-1980s, media owners persuaded editors into mixing traditional hard news on their front pages with reader-friendly soft news features. Content-based visual journalism was challenged by the encroachment of visual fluff, altering the character projected to readers.

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 future is, will the marketing pressure continue to dilute visual journalism and overload viewers with visual distractions? And, how will design and organization influence the viewers’ perception of credibility?

Through a series of elicitation interviews, this research examined how the visual choices that online newspapers make — their “visual character” — influence audience perceptions of news credibility. The responses showed that readers’ perceptions of credibility are influenced by the visual content on a newspaper Web site. The study participants gauged credibility based on factors like photography use, competing advertising, and design organization. The study also found that linking visual branding to the newspaper print version could add to credibility.