

Visible Language

the journal of
visual communication
research

Pedersen, et al

6 – 25

a study exploring visual crowding within the frame of a pictogram, measuring the effect of spacing between two icons and between icons and an outline frame on icon recognition, concluding that the most limiting factor for recognition is two icons overlapping or placed in close proximity to each other

Zender

26 – 33

reflection on upon the change from publishing *Visible Language* for 58 years under the direction of a single Editor to publishing *Visible Language* by a consortium of institutions and an editorial staff led by an Editor in Chief

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Contents

Pia Pedersen
Chiron Oderkerk
Sofie Beier

**Crowding impairs recognition
of framed icons**

6 —
25

Mike Zender

**Ruminations on
Being a Journal Editor:
Out with the old.
In with the new!**

26 —
33

Ruminations on Being a Journal Editor: Out with the old. In with the new!



Mike Zender

Abstract

This non-research article reflects upon the change from publishing *Visible Language* for 58 years under the direction of a single Editor to publishing *Visible Language* by a consortium of institutions and an editorial staff led by an Editor in Chief.

Keywords

research journal
scholars
editors

Out with the old, in with the new. It being January, reflections on the year gone by and anticipations of the new year still echo in our minds. The emotions evoked by that have particular relevance for *Visible Language* in 2025 as the journal changes from being published by a single institution with a single Editor to being the product of a consortium of three esteemed universities and ten editors, associate editors, and assistant editors. In *Visible Language* 58.2 we described the *Visible Language Consortium* and I won't repeat that complete story here. It's a new version of an old approach where multiple institutions support and staff the a scholarly journal.

My first thought is why didn't we do this before?

The Consortium has been a success thus far with all the benefits I expected and several benefits that I never imagined. I expected that the new model would provide both diversity of perspective and unity of purpose maintained by stability due to multiple lines of support. And it's true, the energy to do the sometimes grinding work is nicely dispersed across multiple capable individuals. No one person gets worn out. That's nice. We've already broadened our network, which I anticipated, but we also have begun to grow multiple lines of succession, which surprised me. We're already cultivating the next editor who will take over the rotating position in a few years. That's a huge win as any editor knows. Being an editor of a non-profit academic journal is hard enough but being able to stop being an editor of a non-profit academic journal is even harder. Replacement editors don't grow on ivory towers. But now I can step away from major editing responsibilities knowing there is a whole cast of editors ready and getting more ready every day to take over. This is so different from how I became editor.

In 2012 I had written a manuscript "Improving Icon Design: Through focus on the role of individual symbols in the construction of meaning" and submitted it to *Visible Language* for publication consideration. Then Editor Sharon Poggenpohl wrote me back saying that perhaps I should look to another journal because she was not certain that *Visible Language* was going to continue publication. She was ready to retire and was having a hard time finding a replacement Editor. My response was that letting *Visible Language* die was a terrible idea, which led, as such observations have at many times in my life, to more work for me. Yes, Sharon said "You could be the editor." We met and Sharon transferred ownership of *Visible Language* to the University of Cincinnati and graciously mentored me into my editorship.

Knowledge from the knowledgeable

That leads to the first principle of this rumination: academic research journals should be owned and controlled by academic researchers, not by professional journal businesses. As Sharon and I initially met to discuss my personal qualifications and lack thereof, we agreed that *Visible Language* should be associated with a university and that the

University of Cincinnati had the necessary reputational chops to continue to advance a design journal like *Visible Language*. Besides the pure logic of researchers and scholars driving an academic research journal, the energy, enthusiasm and commitment of professors (people who profess to both know and advance knowledge) motivate a journal properly. We want to advance knowledge. Money is secondary, as most academics and researchers can prove by their bank accounts. You want to make money, be a banker. You want to advance knowledge, be a professor. It's that simple. Our new Consortium builds upon that logic by grounding *Visible Language* in not one professor but many scholars from three universities.

Sitting at the hub

That leads to the second principle in this rumination: publishing a research journal from a research institution enriches the institution through enrichment of its people. Being a journal editor puts a scholar in the hub of current knowledge formation. Manuscripts advancing all kinds of ideas cross the editor's screen. Some good ideas, some half-baked ideas, but all purporting to be fresh thinking. There's often an important seed of an idea even in the worst manuscript. Being privileged to read all the studies that come in is like a being a post-doc. It's the continuing PhD Program for those with PhD's. And for a scholar engaged with knowledge creation, it's a lot of fun. New ideas are engaging and even the poorly developed or inadequately supported ones can provide at least reverse inspiration. That's the kind of inspiration that comes from thinking through a bad idea or poorly supported study and exposing not only why it fails to satisfy but being inspired by what it attempted or saddened by its fatal flaw or imagining how it might have worked or what parts could be made to work. Out of the ashes often arises a firebird of what a good replacement idea might be.

Nobody seems to talk about this, and I'm not suggesting that an editor or editorial staff pirate other people's ideas, but just being exposed to so many different thoughts can't help but enrich an idea-monger. Every idea no matter how bad, and sometimes the bad ones stick out the most, goes in there somewhere and eventually makes connections which stir up fertile soil. A university owning, and its scholars managing, a journal is a huge source of intellectual energy, and one that I am very surprised not many universities tap into. Publishing a journal is almost free these days. Ten thousand dollars will get you there since your staff are already paid to do scholarly work.

 Not from trivial or trendy

Sitting at the hub of disciplinary conversation exposes a third principle: hearing a wide range of diverse voices sharpens scholarly discernment. One soon sees patterns among those research studies that get weeded out. In the past ten years I've observed that weak manuscripts have tended to lean one of two directions: research focused on minutiae or research following trends.

Every important idea has multiple dimensions with various nuances which can trap those that are unaware of the big picture. A poorly informed scholar can easily focus on a detail without regard for the relevance of that detail to higher issues or ideas. And even important design issues are often studied in isolation, as if there is no knowledge from other disciplines that might inform or ground the design issue.

The other frequent failing comes from following the latest intellectual trend or theory. Theories abound. Ungrounded speculations, some of which fly in the face of experience or "common sense," take on a life of their own in narrow echo chambers and capture the imagination of those who lack historic perspective.

Listening to many often unanticipated and surprising proposals forces one to notice what's working and what's not, what's building something useful and what's not, what's enriching others and what's falling flat. The resulting discernment can lead to the identification of sustainable lines of inquiry that have the potential for lasting high impact, and can compete with the best researchers for potential funding.

 Connecting with the best

This leads to the fourth principle: being a hub for new knowledge connects scholars with the best scholars from all over the world. By far the most cherished benefit of being the editor of *Visible Language* over the last dozen or so years is the new colleagues I've connected with. Reviewers, board members, contributing authors all make unique contributions. Finding reviewers means making contact with the top people in various fields. Manuscripts leaning into different domains cause the editor to seek and find experts who possess unfamiliar knowledge. For example, I recently had a manuscript on graphemics and grapholinguistics. It's a fairly new area of study related to reading and typography. Who knew. Well, I emailed the world-renowned type designer and scholar Chuck Bigelow, and asked him if he knew anyone in this area. True to form, Chuck immediately got back to me with list of members of the editorial board of a proposed journal on the topic. One eminent scholar, Chuck, connected me to 15 others, most of whose names I did not recognize and could not pronounce.

 Bonding with new friends

Mentioning Chuck Bigelow evokes a fifth principle: being a journal editor is a wonderful way for an introvert to make new friends from among some of the most wonderful people. Chuck Bigelow and Kevin Larson are just two examples worth elaborating. In 2016 *Visible Language* celebrated its 50th anniversary with a series of special issues, the most extensive of which reflected on 50 years of typographic research. Chuck and Kevin guest edited that special issue. They leveraged their extensive knowledge and rich networks to produce 224 pages of wonderful information from some of the best designers and scholars in the world. I have come to trust them and rely upon them many times over the years when I was in a pinch. In short, they became not only colleagues but friends, yet I've never met either of them in person. What a wonderful world where a shy and socially inept guy like me can forge such wonderful lasting friendships with smart people like Chuck and Kevin. Various jobs have benefit packages. Friendships with quality people throughout the disciplinary community is part of the benefit package of an editor.

 Knowledge in community

The sixth principle in this meditation is this: knowledge is communal. One individual alone can certainly observe and connect and analyze and infer and conclude. We are individual beings and can operate no other way. But if we want to develop a principle or rule of thumb to guide future actions, we need to know that our personal observations apply in other places with other people. Fortunately, we are also social beings and can share our observations, connections, analysis, inference and conclusions with others to see if they have observed analyzed and concluded the same things we have. We compare notes. When a lot of individual observations align we have some confidence that our knowledge is not just individual and personal but also general and universal. Universal knowledge is not only more certain but more useful because it applies in many (nearly all) places and situations.

And a discipline is a self-disciplining community. This is the essence of peer review. Community members with knowledge generously and kindly evaluate each other. Imagine a world where non-experts evaluated the work of experts. It's hard isn't it. Peer-review is one of the ways a knowledge community endorses new knowledge.

 Quality from character

The seventh and last principle in this reflection is this: character matters most. This may seem to contradict the importance given to scholarship and research in the previous principles, but

knowledge is communal and communities function, or not, on relationships and relationships thrive among people of good character. Honesty and trustworthiness are the bedrock foundations without which nothing can be accomplished. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are the food that feeds productive collaboration. The opposites of these destroy community as surely as any bull in any china shop. Deceit kills collaboration. Unfaithfulness demolishes trust.

A healthy community thrives on quality character of the individuals in it. Few people would say this off the top of their heads, but I think one of the most important articles *Visible Language* published in the last 15 years was an article in the 50th anniversary issue memorializing scholars who had contributed to *Visible Language* in the previous 50 years. It's been said that we stand on the shoulders of giants, and that article acknowledged that reality. It's healthy for good people to recognize and be in a bit of awe of those who have gone before. It parks the ego and bursts the illusion of novelty. None of us create out of nothing. We all build on what's gone before. Pondering this breeds humility. And humility greases the wheels of relationship.

I learned at Yale that the greatest scholars are often the nicest people: curious like children, excited by new good ideas wherever they come from, humble because they love ideas more than just about anything else, generous since their joy is enhanced as they share ideas with others who love ideas too, supportive because it's advancing and making new cool ideas that's fun and more cool ideas from more sources are more fun than fewer ideas from fewer people. I could go on. Getting to know such top scholars is a real joy. Now by *know* I do not mean in-person face-to-face knowing. So many great people I've never met in person. More than once who I thought was a woman turns out to be an older man, and vice versa. It doesn't matter. The internet has a way of anonymizing tangible details like gender and skin color and focusing us on intangibles like knowledge and character.

Our Consortium is a community

Of course, this takes me back to where we started. *Visible Language* will no longer be published by one editor at one university. Instead it will grow out of a community of design colleagues who I testify are not only great scholars but exhibit admirable character. What a joy it is and has been working with them. Ideas emerge, spark new ideas, are fanned into flame and explode into new initiatives that were the product of no one and everyone. The new ideas are better than before. The new *Visible Language* will be better than before, and will continue to grow because it's a knowledge building community focused on humbly sharing and joyfully celebrating new knowledge.

Out with the old. In with the new!!

Author

Mike Zender

Mike has served as Editor of *Visible Language* since 2013. He will remain one of the editors of *Visible Language* until his replacements are established.