

Perspective Of Visual Literacy

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Abstract

An alternative to the common approach to defining concepts is introduced, where the primary goal is to point to what is large and essential in a concept, that is, to its *perspective*. Based on this new approach, visual literacy is defined as the ability to decode and design *implicit information*. It is argued that such literacy is no less needed than the common literacy, which is the ability to read and write explicit information.

Introduction

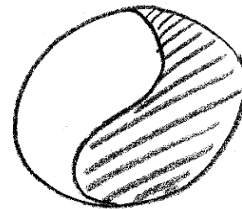
The Visual Literacy movement started three decades ago, motivated by the insight that there is something hidden and essential in visual information. An essential part of information being hidden, decoding visual messages requires special training without which one is in a certain sense illiterate. The Visual Literacy movement developed as an effort to produce the required research and education. But, as we have seen during the panel on the yr. 2000 IVLA Conference, an agreed-upon definition of visual literacy, which would direct the movement, has not yet emerged. In this article a definition of visual literacy is proposed based on a non-traditional approach to information called polyscopic modeling (Karabeg, 2002).

There is an interesting paradox associated with the definition of visual literacy. If pictures can indeed express something that words alone cannot, and if that 'something' is what visual literacy is all about, then it may be difficult to define visual literacy in the usual, verbal way. Perhaps to define visual literacy one needs to draw a picture! That is in essence the approach taken in this article.

The Perspective Criterion

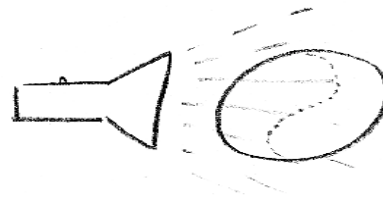
In Polyscopic Modeling factual truth, the main conventional criterion for evaluating information, is replaced by four criteria, one of which is the perspective. Karabeg (2000) defined the perspective with the help of ideograms (a visual technique) as follows.

Figure 1
Yin-Yang Ideogram



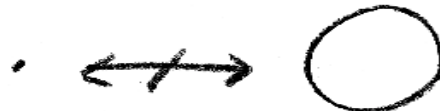
The Yin-Yang ideogram (see Figure 1) is the age-old symbol of holistic thinking. The ideogram suggests that a whole (represented by the circle) has a visible (light) side and a hidden (dark) side. Wisdom, or holistic thinking, means seeking to see what is hidden and making decisions based on the whole.

Figure 2
Perspective Ideogram



In the Perspective ideogram (see Figure 2) information is symbolically depicted as light. It is suggested that the purpose of information is to illuminate what is hidden so that we can see through the whole (have a correct perspective).

Figure 3
Factual Truth And Perspective Ideogram



In the Factual Truth And Perspective ideogram (see Figure 3) factual truth, the dominant criterion in both legislature, media informing and science, is represented by a point, while the perspective is represented by a circle. It is suggested that the two criteria are fundamentally different. Factual truth is

truth without body and shape, isolated from the whole and reduced to a point which is a single bit of information that must be either true or false. The perspective, on the other hand, means knowing how the points fit together and compose a whole.

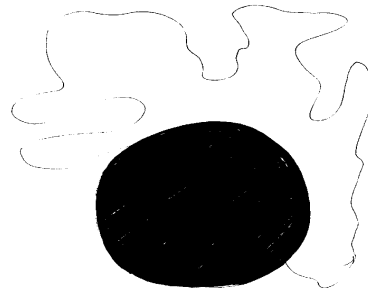


Figure 4
Facts Are Not Enough Ideogram



In the Facts Are Not Enough ideogram (see Figure 4) facts are depicted as parts of a human body. It is suggested that even when all the facts are present, by distorting their relative sizes and positions the idea of the whole may still be arbitrarily distorted. The conclusion is that the knowledge of facts is not sufficient and that the perspective is also necessary. While facts are usually stated verbally, the perspective (what something looks like or is like) is naturally presented by a picture.

Perspective As a Basis for Definition

Figure 5
Factual Definition Misses The Point Ideogram

The Factual Truth Misses The Point ideogram (see Figure 5) depicts the situation where the factual definition fails to express what is essential about the concept being defined, where it misses the main point.

The factual way of defining things is depicted as a line in the plane. A factual definition carefully traces the borderline of a concept X to make it possible to always determine whether something is or is not X, that being the fact that is considered the purpose of definition. But such focus on the borderline of the concept tends to make the definition complicated and still miss what is at its center. A definition that is based on the perspective would do the opposite, namely focus the main point even if that main point does not fit entirely within the borderline of the concept as it is usually understood and defined.

Definition of Visual Literacy Based On Perspective

I submit that the following definition of visual literacy reflects its perspective:

Visual literacy is the ability to decode and design implicit information.

Implicit information is information which is not explicitly stated as a fact but implicitly present in a picture, artifact, sound, movement, choice of words etc.

In the culture where 'information' means 'facts', 'implicit information' appears as a contradiction in terms. If one should establish visual literacy on such grounds, one has no other choice but to show that pictures (or implicit information) are necessary for communicating factual messages. Although this is true because, as we shall see, explicit information depends on implicit information, it is a relatively minor point because implicit information is information of its own right. It is not any less relevant than factual

information. But one needs the perspective as the frame of reference to see that, not factual truth.

An objection may also be raised that the subject of visual literacy is 'visual information,' not 'implicit information.' I answer that the main reason for focusing on the distinction between the word and the picture may well have been that the dichotomy between implicit and explicit information is most clearly manifested there. Explicit messages are predominantly verbal, while visual messages tend to be implicit. However, implicit information is diverse and tends to become more so with the development of multimedia. Since similar issues arise in all its forms, it seems natural to study them together. But even if we choose to specialize and study implicit visual communication separately, we still need to secure that such focus does not distract us from the central point, namely that it is the implicit information that most urgently requires a literacy. I hope to make this point clear in the rest of the article.

Relevance of Implicit Information

Figure 6
Implicit Vs. Explicit Information



The word 'literacy' implies that its subject is so basic that everyone should know about it. Is implicit information indeed comparably as relevant as knowing how to read? The example of cigarette advertising

suggests that it is. In cigarette advertising (see Figure 6) implicit and explicit information meet in a face-to-face duel. The black-and-white, square verbal message warns us explicitly not to smoke. The colorful visual implicit message invites us to do so without making any explicit statement, and wins by a large margin. We are able to claim that because we have a proof, which is the cigarette advertising itself. If the explicit message were stronger, cigarette advertising would not be cigarette advertising but an instrument of anti-smoking campaign sponsored by cigarette manufacturers.

This example also shows that while our culture (legislation, education, ethics) is focused on explicit information, implicit information is used liberally to direct or misdirect our views, preferences and values.

Theoretical Underpinnings

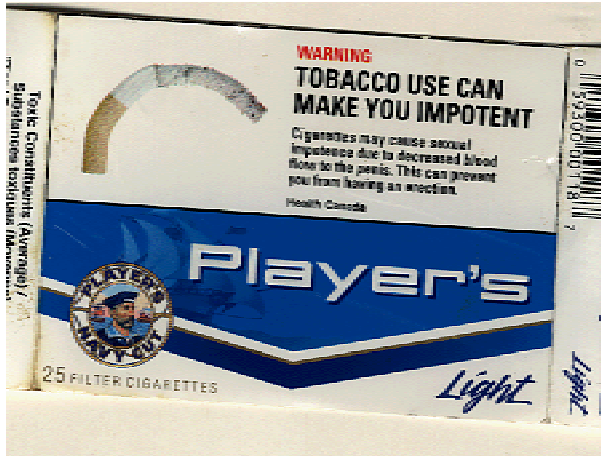
An insight from cognitive science gives us a theoretical foundation for understanding the effects of implicit information. In "Descartes' Error," (Damasio, 1994) a scene is described where a team of medical experts sit and listen attentively while a patient is thinking aloud, trying to decide whether to schedule his next appointment for Tuesday or Thursday. The patient continues for half of an hour until he is interrupted, while it is obvious to everyone except himself that the issue he is contemplating is completely irrelevant (he has no other important obligations and both Tuesday and Thursday are fine). Why is then everyone listening to such nonsense with such interest? Because they are witnessing a first-hand demonstration of the Descartes' error! The patient, to whom a part of the brain was removed in a surgery, exhibits perfect Cartesian rationality: He is analyzing all possibilities, considering all pros and cons. What he is lacking, however, is the emotion that would allow him to eliminate the uninteresting or unfeasible possibilities already before they present themselves to his rational mind.

The Descartes' error is that reason is distinct from emotion and that rational choices are based on facts alone. It follows from the mentioned insight that reason is inseparable from emotion. Even a seemingly purely rational decision may be controlled by implicit messages that speak directly to our emotions and make no sense to our reason.

To appreciate the possible impact of Damasio's insight one only needs to consider how much of our culture has been founded upon Descartes' error.

Recognition of Implicit Information

Figure 7
Implicit Vs. Implicit Information



In Canada it is now required by law to supplement the usual explicit warnings on tobacco products with prescribed suggestive visuals (see Figure 7). “This really works!” said the Canadian acquaintance who gave me the pack. As this example shows, the prescribed visuals have a similar appeal as the advertising visuals and a similar ability to strike a sensitive spot. The fact that the battle for such legislation must have been won against a strong tobacco industry campaign suggests that a large-scale legal regulation of implicit information may not be impossible.

Examples

The following examples show that implicit information is ubiquitous.

Implicit information in casual conversations

It is not difficult to see that the bulk of information communicated in a casual conversation is implicit. Already the usual ‘Hello!’ and ‘How are you?’ have little explicit meaning but mainly serve for expressing friendliness and care that people feel for each other, or for showing that they are respectful of social conventions and therefore non-dangerous. More than by choice of words, those implicit messages are carried by gestures, tone of voice and body language.

Implicit information in traditional customs and rituals

In the town where I grow up it was a custom that people pay bills for each other when going out together. It was even usual to ‘argue’ over the bill a

bit, each person insisting that he should be the one to take care of it. I thought that the custom was silly and only years later I understood its purpose.

If you bought me a coffee yesterday and I buy you a coffee today, it seems that we would have accomplished nothing more than if each of us bought himself two coffees. That, however, is not at all true. When I buy you a coffee I communicate to you my friendliness and care. When you buy me a coffee you do the same. When we habitually buy each other coffee, we end up living in a world where we feel cared for. Something deep in the psyche feels safe, trusts and relaxes.

Information implicit in religious beliefs

In traditional cultures, religion was the center pole of culture, the binding tissue of the community and the foundation for ethical conduct. For many of us and perhaps for our culture as a whole the issue of religion seems to have been decided based on factual concerns, such as whether God exists and whether the species in nature evolved or were created. But what if the explicit information in religious beliefs and scriptures is relatively unimportant and serves only as a container for implicit messages, whose purpose is to socialize or ‘nourish’ certain desirable patterns of feeling and conduct?

Implicit information as nutrition

Junk food is the food that satisfies the appetite but fails to fulfill the biological purpose of both eating and appetite, which is to nourish the body. To help us recognize and avoid junk food, manufacturers are legally obliged to specify the nutritional value on food labels.

As food nourishes our bodies, so does information nourish our minds. Both kinds of nourishment are subtle and our senses can be deceived regarding the value of what we take in. But unlike processed food, information has no warning labels and no recognizable nutrients. Even if junk information were far more common than junk food we would still be unable to notice that.

Implicit information in media informing

If I treat people with loving kindness I am of no interest to media informing. But if I murder or rape someone, the journalists will instantly arrive. By systematically selecting information with a certain bias, the media news give us a biased picture of the world. And by distorting our world picture, they direct

us to create the world that corresponds to that picture.

Information implicit in arts and artifacts

Why do the works of art cost so much? Their price often stands in drastic contrast with their explicit function (covering a small area of the wall). Of course, the value of a work of art is not its use value but the value of the information that is implicit in it. The purpose of works of art is to serve as containers for beauty, creativity, ingenuity, and that subtle, unnamable quality which distinguishes art from non-art.

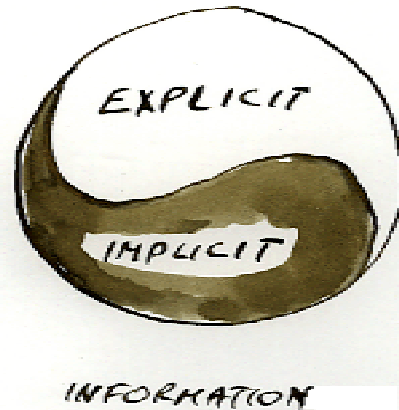
An artist at work is not unlike a researcher doing a long-term experiment. The result of that 'experiment' is a particular way of being from which creative acts naturally spring. Doing art is both the way to reach that result and to communicate it to others. Perhaps if the importance of this sort of 'experiment' for everyone's life were properly understood, we would all be like true artists, caring a lot more about the implicit information that we put into our work than about its explicit function.

Implicit information and power

In olden days the sword, the chain, and other explicit instruments of power were widely used for controlling people. We have become rather successful in regulating those by legal and ethical means. But what if the explicit power has in the meantime been largely surpassed by the subtle, implicit power? What if already during the Industrial Revolution subtle economic dependencies made the sword and the chain obsolete? And if in the Information Age even the economic dependencies have been surpassed by the subtle power of information? Implicit information could make us serve the interests of power holders of our own accord and without our awareness.

Conclusion

Figure 8
Whole Information Ideogram



The Whole Information ideogram (see Figure 8) summarizes this discussion: All information has two sides, the visible explicit side and the subtle implicit one. While those two sides are similarly relevant, the subtle implicit information requires the light of information to be recognized and taken into account.

These two sides of information are also closely related. Implicit information may determine the meaning and importance that we attribute to explicit information. On the other hand, we need explicit information to understand the meaning and influence of implicit information. I believe that this need has been the main motivation for founding the Visual Literacy movement.

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