

THE META-IMAGE MOBILE APP

A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How do digital users produce and understand visual communication within and beyond social media platforms? In turn, to what extent do smartphones convey the richness and complexities of today's visual-centred world upon digital storytelling's practices?

In May 2018, I was awarded a £ 500,000 grant to build, as a co-P.I. at the University of Westminster, an App Lab. My role is to support UoW's REF-related activities, while innovating teaching approaches for UG and PG's students; the focus is on developing visual awareness of students as they engage with newest digital media platforms, including VR, AR and MR.

In addition, I manage research and development of my own visual-centred mobile App, *The Meta-Image*, as a learn-by-doing tool to enhance visual literacy. Integrating my PhD research with 20 years as a professional visual journalist, I am advancing *The Meta-Image* as a visual-embedding, multi-media and multi-layered mobile App.

By embedding actable layers on top of the still / moving images (see below), *The Meta-Image* is set to expand and enhance current visual-centred journalistic communication and digital storytelling practice. Simply by using *The Meta-Image* 'socially,' users will be prompted to critically engage the complexities of today's visual cultures and reflect on their own practice.

The Meta-Image, in turn, will support users in informing the public sphere with their *designed* digital communication, and, through that, open a complementary space for debates on 'truth' and the 'real.' In order to best contribute to said debates, a collaborative framework has been finalised with the US-based image authentication company TruePic.

Competencies in visual literacy, from design to *montage*, from layout to editing, have become pivotal not only for computational journalists, but to everyone. As Facebook – among many IT leaders – stated that it will turn into a visually informed platform by 2020, my aim is to rely on *The Meta-Image* to offer a visual-first communication format to digital-first users.

Consequently, my medium-term plan is to fully integrate *The Meta-Image* mobile App onto my TheVisualStorytelling.Academy online lab. With the 2021 release of my monograph 'Aesthetics As Storytelling,' I aim to establish TheVisualStorytelling.Academy as the digital platform for research and production of visual storytelling.

THE ISSUE OF AESTHETICS IN JOURNALISM

To best analyse and produce visual storytelling for multimedia journalism I have been combining my academic expertise with my professional background in the creative industries. I did so to revive the tradition of photo-reportage and open-ended narratives at a time when the role of visual journalism is unprecedentedly challenged by the easiness of digital 'manipulation' and its uncontrolled dissemination over social platforms.

In response, *The Meta-Image* informs a strategic review of the role of design. Arguably, design is a notion of multiple meanings and applications. For the present context, design is assessed as the product of 'composition' by 'aesthetics:' the former indicates the arrangement of lines, shapes and volumes within the image, as the latter points to the adopted visualization strategy.

It follows that design is what actually arranges produced digital data across all production stages, from pre- to post-production, from montage to media distribution and engagement policies. As such, 'designed images' find themselves right at the centre of the highly controversial relation juxtaposing the 'recorded real' with its 'communicated representation/s.'

To exemplify the extent to which digital media epistemologically disrupts the semiotic practice of visual journalism, let me just refer to how camera settings (for instance: camera colour spaces) design the recording of 'the real' well before it being not only shot, but possibly even 'seen.' Even though this is not a new dynamic - choosing a colour or B&W film had the same effect on analogue photography - nevertheless today's designed visual communication produces a much far-reaching and thorough impact because of its 'social' presence and dissemination.

Contrary to much of the established research on visual journalism, I recognise the valuable *potential* of design, and I consequently enhance it as my device to communicate *visually*. This is the reason why I approach design not as that 'which re-signifies the real,' but, instead, as an unbiased tool to understand visual communication and produce multimedia storytelling.

I am fully aware of the dramatic ethical issues the above approach entangles. At the very same time, I believe that these concerns have not yet been convincingly addressed, nor previous solutions have been in any way valuable. It could even be argued that the insistence of photojournalism to advocate its mission as the assessment and communication of truth, might actually have proven ineffective, if not, misleading. Therefore, I engage the semiotic power of design and aesthetics, rather than rejecting it.

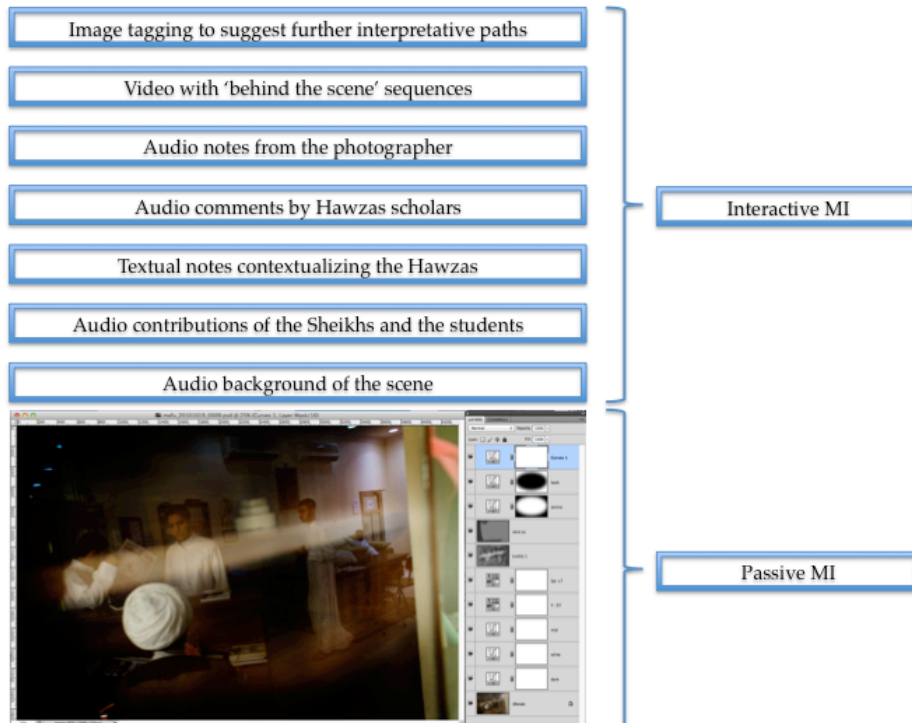
In result, whether to *take* or *make* a photograph is not a small issue of semantics, but the way visual media and today's digital storytelling communicate.

FUNCTIONING

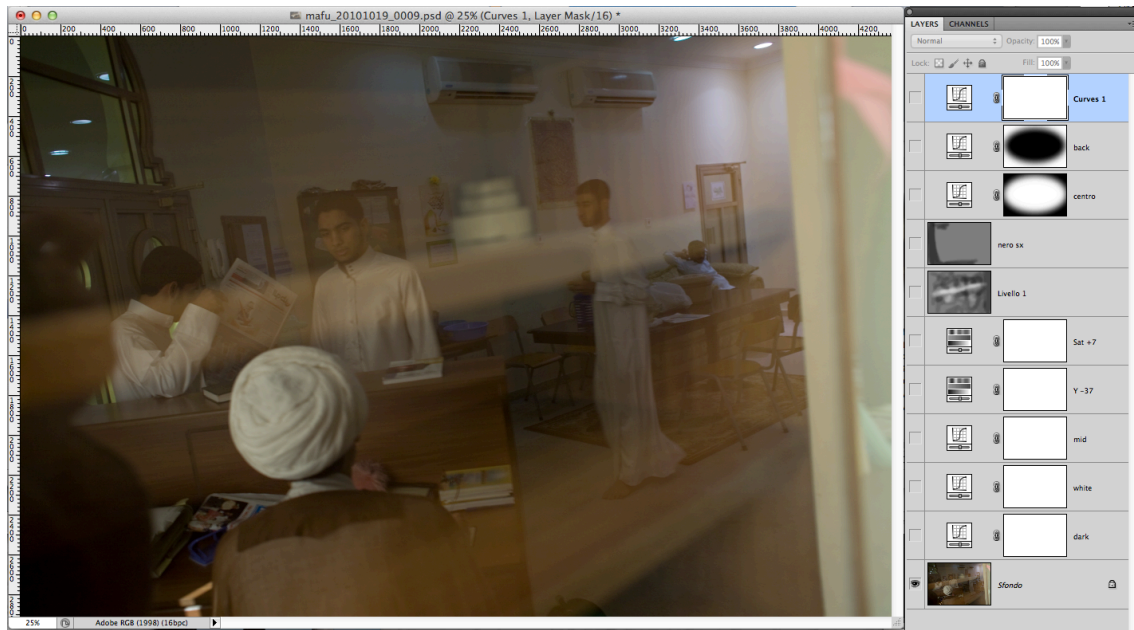
Following on from the above, *The Meta-Image* mobile App is set to complement the University of Westminster's multifaceted App Lab, to focus on the crucial component of today's media dynamics, i.e. visual communication.

The co-creational approach core to *The Meta-Image* project enhances a pedagogy combining curricula with extra-curricular activities. *The Meta-Image* will support this framework by later widening its participatory model to general users, thus connecting with stakeholders from the creative and media industries. As such, it is set to expand online archives and interactive storytelling frameworks by featuring the production of novel multimedia materials.

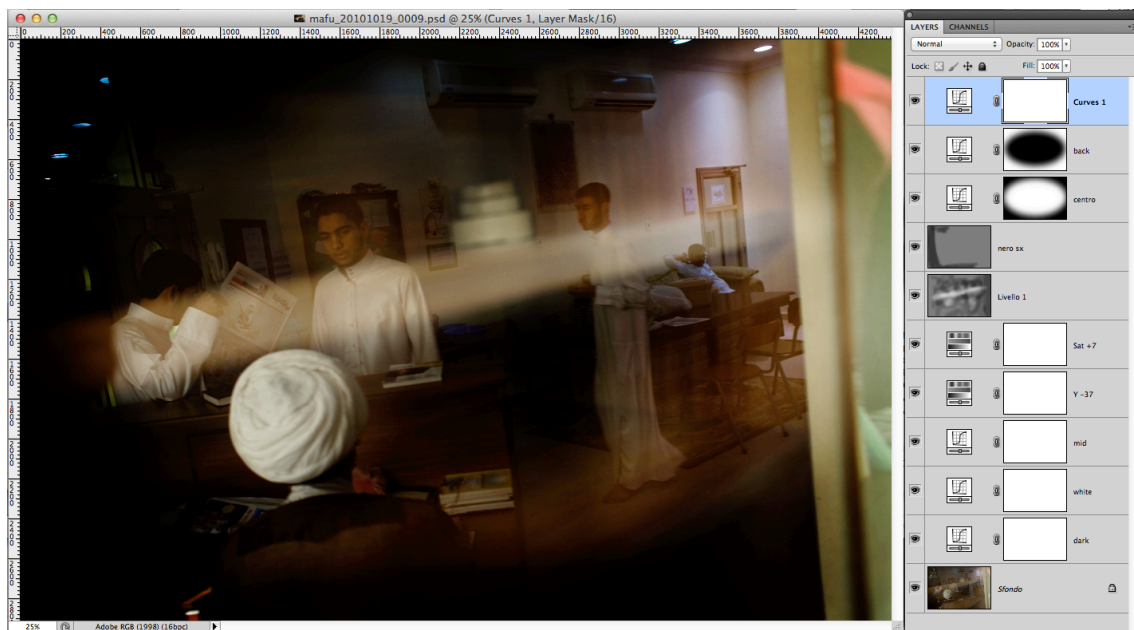
As briefly mentioned, *The Meta-Image* consists of a number of embedded actable layers providing with added information the nesting visual document. Through its interactive features, *The Meta-Image* empowers digital communication by incorporating - for instance - debates on its design, ethical and aesthetic decision-making as well as the explanation of specific storytelling techniques. It will do so by hosting as many media forms as possible, from audio interviews to video, from verbal to background recordings. As per the prototype below:



The upper part of the nested layers - the active Meta-Image (MI) - are activated by audiences as they choose to engage with the photograph and its communicative universe.
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The lower part of the nested layers - the passive Meta-Image (MI) – traces how design, i.e. composition and aesthetics, thoroughly shapes the semiotics of the image. Above: before activation. Below: after.
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My presentation of *The Meta-Image* project at *The Future of Digital Journalism's* BBC public event on 24.04.2018 was a first opportunity to showcase its participatory approach as a way to innovate established (visual) journalistic practice. By looking at visual journalism as a co-creation of many different digital voices, *The Meta-Image* is set to enhance citizen journalists' skills with a new educational tool, and further support users' understanding with production.

RATIONALE

The presumed paradigm shift occurring from verbal-driven to visual-centred communication urges digital storytelling to be understood hands-on through practice and, at the very same time, endlessly reviewed. This proves particularly relevant with regard to visual media analytical frameworks. Indeed, Peter Greenaway reminds us that “just because you have eyes does not mean to say that you can see.” I agree that visual communication remains profoundly overlooked and trivialised in spite of its richness and complexities.

The renewed appreciation of the storytelling potential of each and every image is finally leading audiences to engage 'informed communication' rather than 'clearly-cut forensics.' With this, I am pointing out the extent to which practices of post-production, 'alteration' and 'manipulation,' of both still and moving images, have become as immediate as easy, and, in turn, rendered the understanding of what 'true' and 'real' mean, truly unattainable. The latest examples of Deepfake videos represent a most telling argument.

In response, I have been bridging the capital research produced at the University of Chicago (USA) with the crucial contribution of practitioners from the media and creative industries to finalise *The Meta-Image* mobile App. By incorporating interventions from different parties, *The Meta-Image* aspires to combine educational capabilities with storytelling production features, and advance public awareness on the changed space, role and dynamics of today's visual communication. As such, *The Meta-Image* is set to use images as a space to question, explore and contextualise, much more than stating or assessing.

In such a context, the production of a mobile App was preferred as an impact tool to academic publication or a website, because of the central role mobile apps have acquired. In turn, it is hoped that users of *The Meta-Image* might experience the relation between the 'real' and its 'representation/s' in a more thoughtful way, as they share their visual productions 'socially.'

ONLINE REFERENCE

TheVisualStorytelling.Academy

THE QUINTIN HOGG TRUST AWARDED BID COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK

The £ 500,000 award from the Quintin Hogg Trust is set to establish an App Lab at the University of Westminster.

Despite the name, the App Lab is not a physical space – it is a series of linked activities, supported by software and online platforms, designed to deliver hands-on training for students and staff in mobile-based journalism and media. The App Lab is not environment-dependent, as it could run in any space with basic computing and networking capacity.

From 2019 onward, the co-P.I.s will be (1) Engaging students from a digital-first background to learn-by-doing new pathways in current multimedia journalistic formats; (2) Making students experience the process of developing a mobile App from prototype thinking to production and distribution; and (3) Finalising a practice-led framework in visual journalism for the mutual implementation of theoretical understanding with hands-on skill development.

Thus, the App Lab is, first and foremost, a student-centred learn-by-doing opportunity. It is designed to develop students' understanding and awareness of the use of apps and mobile platforms in the production and consumption of journalism and media content in general. It is hoped that students will learn about mobile storytelling; and, in parallel, through *The Meta-Image* mobile App, explore, assess and engage issues in visual communication.

The project is equally set to enable students to learn about, and work with, the next generation of media technologies, specifically VR, AR and MR. Whilst still some way off being mainstream, these technologies are current and used across most modern newsrooms and media organisations. Though it is not yet defined how best to use VR and AR for journalistic storytelling, the commitment of media companies to experimenting with these technologies indicate that in the next five years, they will mature into mainstream formats. This project will help students to develop awareness of and skills in these emerging media technologies.

To further support the University's policy of engagement with external stakeholders and the media and creative industries in general, apps and programs developed in the App Lab will be built with open-source code. As such, produced outputs will be freely available and open to external programmers, to modify and extend them in ways yet unthought-of towards maximizing social impact.