

THE META-IMAGE MOBILE APP

A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How do digital users produce and understand visual communication? In turn, to what extent do smartphones convey the richness and complexities of today's visual-centred storytelling?

In May 2018, I was awarded a £ 500,000 grant to build, at the University of Westminster, an App Lab. My role as co-P.I. 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 and AR.

In addition, I am managing research and development for 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 currently 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 confront the complexities of today's visual cultures.

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 image authentication software 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.

Then, my medium-term plan is to integrate the Meta-Image mobile app into my developing TheVisualStorytelling.Academy online repository. With the 2021 release of my monograph 'Aesthetics As Storytelling,' I aim to establish TheVisualStorytelling.Academy as the pivot of contemporary research and best practices on visual storytelling as specifically applied to emerging media and digital platforms.

THE ISSUE OF AESTHETICS IN JOURNALISM

To best analyse and produce visual storytelling for multimedia journalism I have been connecting my academic expertise with my professional background in the creative industries. I do 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 recommends 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, spaces and volumes within the image, as the latter points to the visualization strategies chosen for produced digital data.

It follows that design is what shapes each and every stage in digital production, from pre- to post-production, from montage to media distribution policies. As such, 'designed images' find themselves right at the centre of the highly controversial relation that juxtaposes the 'recorded real' with its 'communicated representation/s.'

To exemplify the extent to which digital media have epistemologically disrupted the semiotic practice of visual journalism, let me just refer to how camera settings (for instance: colour spaces) design the recording of 'the real' well before it being not only shot, but possibly even 'seen:' this is by no means a completely new dynamic (choosing a colour or B&W film had the very same effect), but today's designed visual communication, because of its 'social' and digital dimensions, indeed produces a much far-reaching and thorough impact.

Contrary to much of the established research on photojournalism, 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 un-biased tool to understand visual journalism and produce multimedia storytelling.

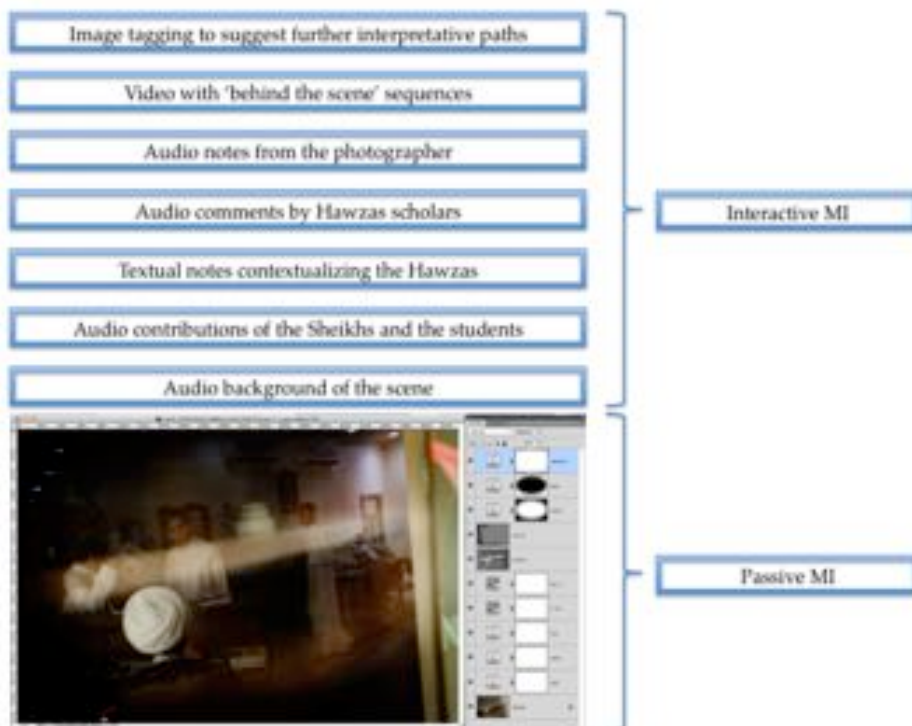
I am fully aware of the dramatic ethical issues that the above approach entangles. At the very same time, I believe that these concerns have not yet been convincingly addressed, nor previous solutions have been in any way effective. As such, engaging the semiotic power of design and aesthetics might be more valuable 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, visual communication.

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

As briefly mentioned above, the Meta-Image consists of a number of embedded actable layers providing the nesting visual document with added information. Through its interactive features, the Meta-Image empowers digital communication by incorporating - for instance - debates on its finalised design, the ethics of its aesthetics as well as the explanation of specific storytelling techniques. It does 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 interactive Meta-Image (MI) - are activated by audiences as they choose to engage with the photograph and its communicative universe.
© Massimiliano Fusari / massimedia



The lower part of the nested layers - the passive Meta-Image (MI) – traces how design, i.e. composition by aesthetics, thoroughly shapes the semiotics of the image. Before activation above and, below, after.
© Massimiliano Fusari / massimedia



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 journalistic practice. By looking at visual journalism as a co-creation of many different digital voices, the Meta-Image will enhance citizen journalists' skills with a new educational tool, and further support users' theoretical understanding with production features.

RATIONALE

The presumed paradigm shift occurring nowadays from verbal-driven to visual-centred communication urges digital storytelling to be practiced and, at the very same time, endlessly reviewed. This would prove particularly relevant with regard to visual media production frameworks. In 2008 Peter Greenaway reminded his viewers that “just because you have eyes does not mean to say that you can see.” I agree that, in spite of its richness and complexities, visual communication still remains profoundly overlooked and trivialised.

The renewed appreciation of the storytelling potential of each and every image is arguably leading audiences into consuming '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 is 'true' and 'real' 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 creative storytelling features, and advance public awareness on the changed space, role and dynamics of today's visual communication. As such, the Meta-Image will make use of the image as a space to question, explore and contextualise, much more than stating or assessing.

Finally, the production of a mobile app, instead of an academic book or a website, is justified by the established centrality of mobile apps in every day life, and has been identified as a most impactful dissemination policy. 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

Massimedia.Com

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 learning 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 this would enable students to learn about mobile storytelling; and, in parallel, via the Meta-Image mobile app, explore, assess and engage issues in visual journalism.

The project is equally set to enable students to learn about, and work with, the next generation of media technologies, specifically VR and AR. 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.