

Book Reviews

EDITOR: MAARIT JAAKKOLA

Yvonne Eriksson & Anette Göthlund

Foundations of Visual Communication: How Visuals Appear in Daily Life

TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2023, 142 PP.

Advances in information production and distribution are constantly changing as a result of the development of new digital technologies and visually oriented social media applications. The result is that the current media and information ecosystem is inherently visual. We are constantly being bombarded by visuals – emojis and GIFs on our smart phones, street signs, building signage, advertising, and government communication. The list is endless. Subsequently, there is growing scholarly attention undertaken to understand visual communication in online spaces but relatively less critical focus on offline spaces. This accomplished publication considering visuals in our everyday life, in offline spaces, is what makes *Foundations of Visual Communication: How Visuals Appear in Daily Life* a particularly interesting and useful resource in visual communication scholarship. The central argument of the book is that sociocultural factors and historical recollections, which are often overlooked, play a significant role in the interpretation of visual communication.

Let's put this into context. Depending on one's history and cultural orientation, a picture of a tag on a toe can be interpreted to mean that a hotel guest does not need room service or as an identification label at a morgue. (For me, given the copious amounts of crime dramas I watch, the tag on a toe would take the latter

interpretation!) This example from the book made me question my assumptions about my overall interpretation of everyday visuals, but it also helped me to reflect on the extent to which my sociocultural disposition and familiarity with the genre of crime investigations would influence my interpretation of this visual. Several other examples were also explained, with a witty style of writing scattered throughout the book, which makes Professors Eriksson and Göthlund's book engaging. Yet, how often do we critically stop to think about how culture and history shape our understanding of visual representations? This question is carefully answered throughout the book's six chapters, which encourage the reader to reflect critically about their own experiences.

Chapter one explains how our interpretation of visual landscapes (visual representations) is dependent on what we pay attention to, which is based on history and a context that is specific to us. History comes from a place of previous interactions and recollections, while context is about a current situation. Over time, both become second nature so that we hardly consider how they influence our interpretation of visuals. The authors argue that visuals in and of themselves are abstract pointless concepts to audiences, and they only derive value after sensemaking and interpretation through the audiences' own cognitive and sociocultural lenses.

Cognizant that audiences are an important part of the visual communication process, in chapter two, Eriksson and Göthlund proceed to expound on the role of the audience as a co-creative when they interpret visuals based on their own cultural and historical references. Visual communicators send out messages, and audiences engage in a dynamic process to decode not only what is represented visually, but how it is represented. How visuals are represented is important, considering that the audience interprets visuals using social, political, and cultural lenses. This has implications for practice because it means that communicators must adopt strategies to mitigate any unintended negative consequences from the audiences' social, political, or cultural lenses in the interpretation of communication.

The introduction of the Gestalt's and Fludernik's theories in chapter three adds some theoretical frameworks for how visuals can be analysed. Continuing the thread throughout the book on the inextricable relationship between visual culture and visual communication, this chapter applies Gestalt's theory to give context for how audiences subconsciously seek patterns and continuity based on their sociocultural and historical references' disposition when decoding visual communication. The authors then proceed to explain the importance of visual emphasis and visual cues that communicators can use to guide audiences' interpretation of visual communication. They argue that visual cues are valuable for potentially overcoming any cultural and historical references that audiences bring when analysing visuals that are not always necessarily aligned with the visual communicator's objectives. The authors equally apply Fludernik's theory to situate how an audience's historical experiences influence their interpretation of visual narration.

Visuals have agency and the potential to create emotions. Visuals can make us think, act, or feel in a particular way. Audience effects from exposure to visual communication is the essence of the fourth chapter of the book, explained using

rich historical and contemporary examples drawn from traditional visualisations in art from the 1700s to medical, furniture, and mechanical models and drawings in the twenty-first century. In this chapter, the authors show how visuals bring about new information and trigger feelings that essentially determine how audiences respond to visual communication.

Contexts, situations, and framing in visual communication are the focus of chapter five. Visuals are context- and culture-specific and therefore require certain cognitive orientation to decode. The authors use the example of pictograms directing people to the toilet. While toilet pictograms rarely have representation of an actual toilet, they are conventionally understood. Yet, toilet pictograms adapted to conform to the concept of gender neutrality can lead to confusion for audiences unfamiliar with the topic. In addition to cognitive orientation, context also aids in shaping our visual encounters and is useful for the accurate interpretation of everyday visuals such as signage, art installations, historical sculptures, and religious or mythological depictions, and for sensemaking. Additionally, context adds to visual literacy and enables audiences to easily identify manipulation and separate fact from fiction when visuals are edited or retouched.

The final chapter of the book carries on the theme of contexts and situations from chapter five, with the authors alluding to how technology accelerates the transportation of history and historical visuals across time, place, and media, thereby influencing the interpretation of visual communication in the current era. They draw examples from maps, fashion, and religious symbols and explain how virtual and physical transportation of visual representations from history means that audiences in the current era are bound to have different interpretations and recreate and reimagine their own visual narrative by virtue of time and space. This transportation opens up conversations about the originality, aura, and authenticity of visual representations that are physically or virtually multiplied and transported globally for consumption, which is also a form of visual communication.

The authors achieve their objective of producing a well-articulated resource that interrogates the connection between perception and reception, vision and visuality, in interpreting visual communication in everyday life. Overall, this book is a timely resource for research on audience effects and the interpretation of visual communication and is handy for both practice and research. Anyone reading this book is likely to reconsider their and others' assumptions when interpreting visual communication, as well as reflect on the extent to which sociocultural and historical reflections have influenced their worldview. On the other hand, the questions raised are important for communicators incorporating visuals into their messaging strategies and in understanding potential audience interpretation.

Considering the trajectory of Big Data showing the exponential generation of images daily, this book could not have been authored at a more apt time. In 2017, it was projected that 1.2 trillion photos would be taken by the end of year. Separately, the advent of generative artificial intelligence brings a unique dynamic which has seen at least 15 billion images created every year, the amount

of time it took photographers 150 years to achieve a similar collection (Kahil, 2021; Marr, 2018). Although created online, we interact with a considerable amount of these images, along with immeasurable other visuals, because they end up in our everyday life discourse. By challenging audiences to consider the influence of culture and historical recollection, this book potentially offers ideas for visual literacy and how we might interpret this avalanche of visuals being produced daily.

Grace Omondi

PhD Research Fellow

Kristiania University College, Norway

References

- Kahil, N. (2021, August 21). GenAI generated 15 billion images in one year, a feat that took photographers 150 years to achieve. *Wired*. <https://wired.me/culture/ai-image/>
- Marr, B. (2018, May 21). How much data do we create every day? The mind-blowing stats everyone should read. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2018/05/21/how-much-data-do-we-create-every-day-the-mind-blowing-stats-everyone-should-read/>

Susan Zummo Forney & Anthony J. Sadar

Environmental Risk Communication: Principles and Practices for Industry (2nd ed.)

CRC PRESS, 2023, 222 PP.

Industries and organisations are increasingly aware of and concerned about environmental risks due to the ecological crises experienced around the world, including climate change and biodiversity loss. Organisational communication on environmental risks has undergone radical changes in recent years, and organisations are now actively promoting their agendas to meet climate targets, comply with increasingly stringent reporting regulations, and convince customers, investors, and other stakeholders of their environmental ambitions. These recent shifts, coupled with the pressing ecological crises, form the backdrop for my reading of the book *Environmental Risk Communication: Principles and Practices for Industry* (2023).

It is evident in the book that environmental risks stemming from organisational practices translate into reputational and financial risks. The authors emphasise effective communication to inform others about potential risks, as well as the strategies to address the concerns or outrage caused by environmental risks. The first half of the book provides recommendations for communicating risk, while the second offers tools for “dealing with the tough cases” (p. xxii). Four types of risk communication are delineated: precaution/care advocacy, communication upkeep, outrage management, and crisis management (p. 5).

Drawing on the Environmental Protection Agency’s definition, in Chapter 1, the authors define environmental risk communication as “informing people about potential hazards to their person, property, or community” (p. 3). The communication models presented in the book primarily rely on a transmission model, which assumes that information can be transmitted (p. 1) or conveyed (pp. 125–142) from sender to receiver. The authors largely overlook the potential for communicative involvement and dialogue between companies and stakeholders to shape the understanding of environmental risk and relevant actions.

In chapters 2 and 3, the authors advise companies to “walk the talk” and set goals for communication investments, with a focus on compliance rather than leading the way. Simultaneously, companies are increasingly equipped to mitigate their negative environmental impact by measuring the direct and indirect emissions caused by their operations, largely due to new regulations, such as the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive in Europe, and pressure from investors requiring more precise environmental responsibility reporting. Furthermore, some frontrunner companies have shifted their attention from defending business-as-usual to maximising their positive impact on society – their

“handprint” – by actively contributing to solutions. These companies can play a vital role in guiding societies and industries toward systemic change. What is missing in the book is the idea that environmental risk communication could also involve an active role in helping stakeholders reduce risk.

It is also important to pay attention to the seemingly invisible adverse environmental impacts. Environmental risk is not always directly visible in a location, such as the 2010 BP oil spill, but its adverse effects can be experienced in distant locations, around the world, and by future generations. How are these environmental risks made visible? In general, the framing of environmental risk in the book raises the following question: What is the risk in environmental risk communication – the negative impact on the environment or the risks to reputation and financial performance?

This brings us to another central concept in environmental risk communication: the stakeholders. In Chapter 4, the authors advise companies to tailor their messages effectively and categorise stakeholders as “opponents”, “supporters”, and “in-betweeners” (p. 39). However, a widely used definition understands stakeholders as individuals, groups, or organisations that *affect* or are *affected by* organisational activities (Freeman, 1984). Following this understanding, organisational scholarship has increasingly included non-human actors such as artifacts, future generations, and ecosystems (Cooren, 2020) as organisational stakeholders. Humans can actively give voice to these non-human stakeholders to participate in debates. In this time of extreme environmental crises, the more inclusive understanding of stakeholders should not be neglected. In other words, stakeholders such as employees, customers, suppliers, competitors, local communities, citizens, as well as non-human stakeholders, possess important knowledge of environmental risks that surpasses their judgments of an organisation’s legitimacy.

Categorising stakeholders as people who oppose a company, agree with a company, or are located somewhere in between not only neglects those stakeholders affected by company activities without having any opinion or even knowledge of the company but also neglects the responsibility of companies to actively reach out to such groups. For example, the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive in Europe is expected to significantly increase the liabilities and obligations of companies to mitigate possible adverse impacts of their own operations and those of their subsidiaries and business partners. The responsibility of companies to address environmental risk is therefore not limited to informing people about potential risks but essentially includes efforts to prevent, avoid, and mitigate adverse impacts caused by the value chain and the industry.

Chapters 5 and 6 advise companies on navigating outrage, the emotions involved in controversies, and engaging stakeholders in public participation processes. While the authors mention the importance of listening to concerned citizens, this seems to undermine the value of listening to stakeholders more generally and taking stakeholder concerns seriously. For instance, corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication research has shown that one-way communication, such as informing and responding to stakeholders, does not suffice: Companies are advised to involve stakeholders in CSR communication and address stakeholder concerns in dialogue with them (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Chapters 7 and 8 offer advice on how to deal with critical stakeholders such as activists (Chapter 7) and the media (Chapter 8), and the final chapter summarises best practices for effective communication. These chapters present rather adversarial relationships with activists and journalists. However, it has been shown that companies can gain reputational capital for seeking transparency and inclusive stakeholder dialogue, and for genuinely trying to fix the problems revealed by activists and journalists. Chapter 8 presents a critical view on the journalistic aim to avoid “false balance” – that is, media bias in which journalists present an issue as more balanced between opposing viewpoints than scientific evidence supports. This journalistic effort has been widely accepted as important in the climate crisis era, to avoid misrepresenting climate science (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). It is important to emphasise that fighting false balance does not mean biased reporting, such as not giving a voice to companies and industries, but it is an important principle to avoid presenting any misconceptions related to climate change and related crises.

If we are to take environmental risk seriously, we need a shift in conventional organisational practices as well as in ideas about business-as-usual. To start, this includes considerations of what kind of environmental risk can be allowed during environmental crises. For example, the authors suggest that “where possible, eliminate marginal products or processes that generate a disproportional amount of pollution” (p. 13). However, should extractivist and exploitative business models – represented by the smokestacks on the cover of the book – be allowed at all in this time of climate emergency? The book *Environmental Risk Communication: Principles and Practices for Industry* provides practical guidance to organisations on how to communicate about environmental risk strategically, but it offers limited insights into what environmental risks are and the business models in which they are prominent, what needs to be done to address them, and how we conceptualise and redefine environmental risk in the climate crisis era.

Meri Frig

Postdoctoral researcher

University of Helsinki, Centre for Consumer Society Research

Hanken School of Economics, Department of Marketing

References

- Boykoff, M., & Boykoff, J. (2004). Balance as bias: Global warming and the US prestige press. *Global Environmental Change*, 14(2), 125–136. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2003.10.001>
- Cooren, F. (2020). A communicative constitutive perspective on corporate social responsibility: Ventriloquism, undecidability, and surprisability. *Business & Society*, 59(1), 175–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650318791780>
- Freeman R. E. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Pitman.
- Morsing, M., & Schultz, M. (2006). Corporate social responsibility communication: Stakeholder information, response and involvement strategies. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 15(4), 323–338. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8608.2006.00460.x>

Anne Kaun & Fredrik Stiernstedt

Prison Media: Incarceration and the Infrastructures of Work and Technology

MIT PRESS, 2023, 208 PP.

While the prison population around the world is growing steadily, the conditions of inmates continue to be overlooked. *Prison Media: Incarceration and the Infrastructures of Work and Technology* is an unusual and valuable study that attempts to overcome this omission and assess the impact of media on the penitentiary system. Authors Anne Kaun and Fredrik Stiernstedt from Södertörn University argue that our social world and the world of prison are more closely connected than one might realise. This book overviews the development and changes in the Swedish penal system; however, the authors not only use historical analysis but also look into the future, explaining the collective imaginaries that have developed in modern societies.

The most significant aspect of this book is the introduction of the concept of prison media, which can be heuristic for further research in the field of media and communication. Prison media is defined by the authors as “both media that are produced in and for the prison and the prison as a medium” (p. 1). In this sense, media are understood not only as materials and devices but also as social practices, imaginaries, and representations. This dialectical approach helps to find the tensions that exist in society regarding the prison world.

As Chapter 2 reveals, the ideas of punishment and rehabilitation are deeply rooted in political economy. Swedish prisons were very barbaric until the early nineteenth century, when there was a shift towards humanisation and modernisation, namely the abolition of corporal punishment. This shift was linked to the ideas of the Enlightenment that advocated for criminals to be considered objects capable of correction through self-formation. Then, the penal ideology changed in the post-war period when work became the main driving force of prisons, contributing to the collective rehabilitation of the incarcerated. Kaun and Stiernstedt emphasise that the industrial turn happened largely due to the Keynesian economic model in which prisons were used as a cheap labour force for the production of goods. Later, when Keynesianism was superseded by neo-liberal economics, the penal system changed again with the growth of the prison population, the decentralisation of prison facilities, and the declining demand for prison work due to outsourcing and automation trends.

It is even more important to consider the way the understanding of communication has changed, and the role the media has fulfilled throughout the historical development of the prison. Kaun and Stiernstedt write in this regard:

The penal history, then, can also be interpreted as a form of media and communications history in which communicative ideals, media technologies, and media infrastructure, together with other social and cultural changes, produce different penal regimes that crystallise and materialise in different kinds of policies in prison practices as well as in architecture and buildings. (p. 36)

In the following chapters, the authors discuss three elements that constitute prison media: work, architecture, and technology. Each of these elements provides an opportunity to consider the phenomenon of prison media from different perspectives.

An important theme in the book is prison work, which has evolved from being perceived as a form of punishment to a way of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Applying the media infrastructure perspective, Kaun and Stiernstedt conclude that society largely depends on prison work, although it often remains invisible. Usually, the work done by prisoners is manual and does not require creative endeavours, yet it is essential. Regarding media industries, it is precisely the construction, repair, and maintenance work that allows people to use media and stay in touch. In other words, media work should be seen from a holistic perspective in which the routine “back end” tasks enable creative, cultural, and informational “front end” production. Meanwhile, the labour conditions of prison workers remain an important issue. As the book shows, during the industrialisation period, work became the cornerstone of correctional facilities; thus, the incarcerated merely became a means of production. At the same time, prisoners received low wages and were essentially exploited by companies because of cheap production. Between the 1960s and 1980s, prison manufacturing was one of Sweden’s biggest industries, while many facilities produced components specifically for the media and communications sector. Keeping this in mind, one has to wonder whether prison work is a way of rehabilitation or just an economically driven thing. The newest form of prison media work is influenced by digitalisation. Manual prison work is supplemented by the work of being watched and tracked. In the era of surveillance capitalism, human behaviour in the form of data is the new raw material for the production of surplus (Zuboff, 2019). The prison is thus a test bed for companies that test innovative technologies before introducing them into society. In this sense, the book highlights the question of humanity that can be denied to inmates in prisons that resemble real-life laboratories.

Additionally, communication is mediated by space, and Kaun and Stiernstedt apply this idea to the prison, with special attention to the architectural aspect. They emphasise the ambiguous meaning of prison as a medium:

The prison, with its walls, windows, doors, corridors, towers, screens, fences, shafts, balconies, and pipes, is a medium of communication. But the prison is also a medium that carries messages of crime and punishment to the wider public that crystallise the penal regimes of a given society and in that sense mediates and configures the ideas of what punishment is and what kinds of social problems the penal system should remedy. (p. 73)

The cell prison architecture was based on the idea of punishment through silence and isolation, while in the industrial period, architecture emphasised the importance of communication and collectivity for the resocialisation of the criminal. This is why solitary confinement cells were replaced by communal barracks and the prison was moved out of the city centre, as more space was needed for production workshops and common areas.

Hence, an important aspect of prison architecture is the dichotomy of visibility and invisibility. Bentham's panopticon, for example, represents the depersonalisation of power and the self-regulation of inmates through simultaneous visibility and invisibility. Historically placed in the city centre, prisons represented the institution of justice, while prisoners were fenced off from the public. During industrialisation, collective labour made prisoners visible to each other, while the introduction of CCTV technology made the guards invisible to the prisoners. In essence, the idea of surveillance technology is a modern alternative to the panopticon. Moreover, prison architecture can be considered the materialisation of the socio-technical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015) of the punishment and rehabilitation system. The history of prison architectural development reveals the dynamic nature of these imaginaries and their intentions to automate and digitalise the institution.

Along with critical infrastructure studies, the authors choose socio-technical imaginaries to examine prison media. Applying this perspective, Kaun and Stiernstedt evaluate the role of technology both inside and outside the prison. Thus, social imaginaries of prison as a place stuffed with technology suggest that a technologised future is perceived by humanity as a good thing that can improve the situation in prisons. The great advantage of this book is that it debunks this common myth. In fact, prisons are test beds for new technologies that are later disseminated in society. Moreover, the idea of prison digitalisation is constructed through a discourse of technological backwardness. This discourse is a necessary precondition for motivating the use of prisons as test beds. As the authors note, "prisons are intricately linked with technological development, although this linkage often remains under the radar of public attention" (p. 110). Examples of technologies that stem from prisons include treadmills, smartwatches with tracking technology based on ankle monitors, and a biometric system widely used in border control. Moreover, technology has made incarceration more mobile, flexible, and decentralised. The ankle monitor has made it possible to control the location of inmates outside prison walls. In this sense, punishment has in some circumstances moved from special penitentiaries to homes, while control has become ubiquitous. Hence, it is worth emphasising that testing technology on prisoners is an essentially inhumane act and is comparable to colonial experiments, studied by Tilley (2011).

All in all, Kaun and Stiernstedt insist on the ambivalent nature of prison media, which functions because of prisoners but is also used against them. This places the book in the global context of debates about the impact of media on subaltern communities. Prison media is a unique perspective that allows us to

“rethink the role and aura that media carry in our societies, an aura of freedom and possibility, of creativity and inspiration, that is increasingly situated at the heart of social power” (p. 159).

Finally, *Prison Media: Incarceration and the Infrastructures of Work and Technology* is well-organised, easy to read, and exemplifies timely thinking in media studies. I hope that the book will be useful to the academic community and beyond, while the prison media concept will be applied to various studies on prisons and human rights in other countries.

Kirill Stukanov

Master's Student in Media and Communication Studies

Department of Communication and Media

Lund University, Sweden

References

- Jasanoff, S., & Kim, S.-H. (2015). *Dreamscapes of modernity: Sociotechnical imaginaries and the fabrication of power*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tilley, H. (2011). *Africa as living laboratory: Empire, development and the problem of scientific knowledge, 1870–1950*. University of Chicago Press.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Profile Books.