

White Rose Research Online

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York

Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/205316/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:
Moys, J.-L. (2024) Review of Pontis & Babwahsingh (2023): Information Design Unbound: Key Concepts and Skills for Making Sense in a Changing World. Information Design Journal, 29 (1). pp. 84-88. ISSN: 0142-5471

https://doi.org/10.1075/idj.23009.moy

© John Benjamins Publishing Company. This is an author produced version of an article published in Information Design Journal. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse
Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.





Book review: *Information Design Unbound*

Pontis, S., & Babwahsingh, M. (2023). *Information Design Unbound: Key Concepts and Skills for Making Sense in a Changing World*. Bloomsbury.

[insert Figure 1]

Information Design Unbound is visually engaging and easy on the eye. But don't mistake it for yet another of those graphic design books that are all style and no substance. This book is full of robust and useful content -- across both text and graphic material.

Pontis and Babwahsingh (2023) draw on the concept of "sensemaking" to frame their approach to information design. Within information design, the authors have articulated this concept in previous publications, examples include articles published in *Information Design Journal* (e.g. Pontis and Babwahsingh, 2016) and Pontis' (2018) book on field research. Its links to conceptual design activities are also noted in Pontis (2014). However, it is not a new term within communication studies and is also associated with organisational and leadership theory (e.g. Weick, 1995).

Returning to Pontis and Babwahsingh's focus, sensemaking provides a useful way of highlighting the meaningful interplay between content and design in information design. It simultaneously communicates both the process of *doing* information design and its broad communication goal or intended effect. It also provides an underlying narrative for highlighting the embedded integration of research and practice in human-centred information design. Sensemaking is both something that designers need to do within their creative process and something that they, hopefully, enable for their collaborators, clients and audience or user.

Written primarily for design students, *Information Design Unbound* is organised into three main sections: "Context", "Skills" and "Practice" (Pontis & Babwahsingh, 2023). All three sections are well-supported by a range of visual resources, including: design examples, diagrams and summaries. The first two sections also include a variety of exercises to support learning and application.

In “Context”, the first two subsections provide a useful introduction to information design, how it has evolved, its remit, principles and ways of working. Even within these broad introductory sections, there are well-considered, concise summaries introducing design students to key dimensions of research and practice like collaboration and ethics. These are particularly useful for both undergraduate and postgraduate students whose prior art/design education may have perpetuated the myth of the individual design hero making isolated aesthetic judgments. Within communication design education, the importance of challenging students to move beyond “superficial and subjective” (Weil and Mayfield, 2020, p. 161) responses to complex, robust responses is acknowledged. Furthermore, I would argue, shifting this myth is similarly very important for readers from other disciplines who may not recognise the multifaceted complexity or rigour of information design practice. Good information design is often simple. Yet, this simplicity of solution can mask the range of activities, knowledge and skills involved in the process of reaching that solution. For a relatively young discipline that is often viewed as “an aesthetic-led and intuition-based activity” (Corazzo et al, 2020, p. 9, see also Walker, 2017) -- in comparison to other areas of design -- demonstrating the contribution information design can bring to complex problem-solving is important.

The remaining two subsections in “Context” provide overviews of relevant design theory about visual processing and meaning-making. These include familiar and expected topics in design books for student audiences such as: visual perception, Gestalt theory, signs, rhetoric -- ‘rhetoric’ used in the information design and technical communication sense (see Kinross, 1985; Kostelnick, 1990; Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003), rather than the persuasive angle emphasised in graphic marketing circles (see Phillips, & McQuarrie, 2004). However, they also discuss important information design topics like learning, information retrieval, reasoning, decision-making and problem-solving that are less frequently foregrounded in graphic design lore. The discussion of meaning-making also includes good consideration of issues of representation as well as contextual attributes and genre. Together, these sections provide an integrated foundation for approaching information design that considers both functional and cultural aspects of socially responsible communication.

The “Skills” section is packed with insights and strategies, presented in ways that will make them easily transferable to information and communication design student practice. It

comprises three subsections that focus on visualisation, research, and sensemarking and a fourth that focuses on clarity and effectiveness. These provide a systematic and engaging overview of design activities and the ways in which designers make decisions and evaluate these. The section on sensemaking (Chapter 7) is particularly useful as it provides clear steps for engaging with information before translating this into visual design decisions (Chapter 8).

The final section, “Practice”, presents a series of 13 case studies, organised thematically in terms of “Communication”, “Experiences”, “Organisations” and “Systems” (Pontis & Babwahsingh, 2023). The case studies showcase examples of good practice across a variety of audiences, clients, genres, media, sectors, and technologies. Given this variety, this section is perhaps the most useful section for experienced practitioners.

Each case study is presented in three stages: “gaining understanding”, “visualizing connections”, and “communicating with impact” (Pontis & Babwahsingh, 2023). This structure provides an effective way of balancing discussion of process and outcomes and integrating clear design principles in action. The illustrations include final outcomes as well as concept sketches and visual planning graphics. This mix makes it particularly interesting and useful to both novice and experienced information designers as it provides insight into working processes as well as the challenges and opportunities experienced within particular projects. For student designers, making the approach to different kinds of projects explicit may help demystify information design and enable complex projects to be more readily achievable. The sustained use of the three stages across all the case studies, potentially provides a systematic way for students to action sensemaking in their own process.

The case studies encompass information design projects from individuals and companies based in: Australia, Austria, Bhutan, Canada, Colombia, Finland, New Zealand, and the UK and US (5). However, a greater range of countries are represented in the book as a whole, including information design examples from countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Japan, and Russia.

Nevertheless, across our discipline, there is a need to substantially extend the geographic range of the examples discussed to represent more emerging research and practice within information design in regions within Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Today’s designers need to be better equipped to work across geographic boundaries. Furthermore, given current global economic shifts and pressures, considering how different

economies may influence information design practice is becoming increasingly important. Within design pedagogy, there is significant emphasis on the importance of building skills for creativity and innovation in a changing world (Wild 2020). Yet, it seems there is scope to extend the ways in which we develop the ways student (and professional) designers might engage with the feasibility of ideas for different contexts of economics, governance and policy, production and waste management (to single out a few parameters). This is particularly important to encourage sustainable and socially responsible practices in design. And, returning to points noted earlier in this review, to shift outdated but pervasive views of visual design as the domain of aesthetic judgment.

To work towards developing these global agilities, it might be that future editions of publications like *Information Design Unbound* and new publications could include within these kinds of case studies, discussion of ideas that were not taken forward and the reasons why. This could complement the emphasis on decision-making within the design process that is featured in the earlier sections of the book and build greater awareness of the complexity of design decision-making and the range of parameters that affect the implementation of ideas.

Beyond the remit of Pontis and Babwahsingh's new book, the concept of sensemaking has potential for further exploration. Sensemaking is a situated practice. In this respect, there could be synergies between design thinking and sensemaking that merit further cross-disciplinary development, particularly given the increasing popularity of design thinking across different sectors (Dorst, 2011). Within product design, links between design thinking and sensemaking have been explored (e.g. Rylander Ekland, et al., 2022). It could be useful to extend the intersection of these concepts to information design and their links to culture and critical theory to develop frameworks to inform socially-responsible practices. For example, Rylander Ekland et al. (2022, p. 37) argue that sensibility is an important part of creative practice and call for "design thinking scholars to continue to explore the role of sensibility in sensemaking". They emphasise the importance of imagination, improvisation, empathy and embodied experience in creative exploration.

Empathy in creative problem-solving is particularly important for addressing urgent twentieth century crises. However, students often struggle with the uncertainty involved in exploring design problems. *Information Design Unbound* highlights many robust theories, strategies and examples for pragmatic sensemaking. These can be helpful for helping

students (and practitioners) develop ways of working that help identify relevant parameters for working with seemingly boundless briefs and counterbalance some of the necessary, but potentially overwhelming, uncertainty in design. It is important for educators drawing on this work to foreground the importance of empathetic and human-centred creativity within these processes. Sensemaking is about creating meaningful solutions.

Overall, *Information Design Unbound* is a timely contribution to our physical and virtual bookshelves and student reading lists. It provides a readily accessible, applicable and insightful discussion of information design principles and skills, appropriately contextualised and supported by a good range of examples.

This review also reflects upon current challenges and opportunities for writing about design with a view to encouraging the information design community, educators and publishers to extend the ways in which the discipline evolves for future, socially-responsible practice.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Bloomsbury Publishing for permission to use the cover image and access to an advance proof of this manuscript.

References

Corazzo, J., Harland, R.G. , Honnor, A., & Rigley, S. (2020). The challenges for graphic design in establishing an academic research culture: lessons from the Research Excellence Framework 2014. *The Design Journal,* 23(1), 7-29.

Dorst, K. (2011) The core of 'design thinking' and its application. *Design Studies,* 32(6), 521-532.

Kinross, R. (1985) The rhetoric of neutrality. *Design Issues,* 2(2), 19-30.

Kostelnick, C. (1990). The rhetoric of text design in professional communication. *Technical Writing Teacher*, 17(3), 189-202.

Kostelnick, C., & Hassett, M. (2003). *Shaping Information: The Rhetoric of Visual Conventions*. SIU Press.

Phillips, B. J., & McQuarrie, E. F. (2004). Beyond visual metaphor: a new typology of visual rhetoric in advertising. *Marketing Theory*, 4(1-2), 113-136.

Pontis, S. (2014). A guided approach to conceptual design in the information design

process. *Information Design Journal*, *21*(2), 115-128.

Pontis, S. (2018). *Making Sense of Field Research: A Practical Guide for Information Designers*. Routledge.

Pontis, S., & Babwahsingh, M. (2016). Improving information design practice: a closer look at conceptual design methods. *Information Design Journal.* 22(3), 249-265.

Pontis, S., & Babwahsingh, M. (2023). *Information Design Unbound: Key Concepts and Skills for Making Sense in a Changing World*. Bloomsbury.

Rylander Eklund, A., Navarro Aguiar, U. & Amacker, A., 2022. Design thinking as sensemaking: Developing a pragmatist theory of practice to (re) introduce sensibility. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, *39*(1), 24-43.

Walker, S. (2017). Research in graphic design, *The Design Journal*, 20(5), 549-559.

Weick, K. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Sage.

Weil, D., & Mayfield, M. (2020). Tomorrow's critical design competencies: building a course system for 21st century designers. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation,* 6(2), 157-169.

Wilde, D. (2020). Design research education and global concerns. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation,* 6(2), 170-212.