

FOR A EUROPEAN PATH OF "VISUAL CARE" BEYOND RISK. BEING WELL INFORMED ABOUT HEALTH AS AN INDIVIDUAL RIGHT

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Abstract

Well-designed visual languages have the power to communicate health messages clearly and effectively to non-experts, including journalists, patients and politicians. Otherwise, they can confuse and alienate recipients, undermining the meaning of the message and leaving room for conflict, mistrust and pseudoscience. In this perspective, the paper reflects on the importance and complexity of visual communication of health information as an individual's right to be well informed, especially in risk and emergency scenarios.

Keywords

health, communication, crisis, creativity, human rights

Introduction

There can be no medicine without communication between health professional, nurse, physiotherapist, speech therapist and patient. Contemporary medicine is evolving towards ever greater complexity. New possibilities for diagnosis and therapy are becoming available at an ever-increasing pace. The responses in the medical-scientific field to this change can certainly be complex, technological, with an increase in the availability of resources, but what can have the greatest impact is linguistic-organizational simplification (not trivialization) accompanied by the dissemination of a systemic culture.

This means providing information and building horizontal relationships that have as their purpose cooperation, the 'pooling' of medical knowledge, the sharing of doubts and health data between professionals and their patients, avoiding prevarications, prejudices, forms of paternalism, guaranteeing and maintaining, at the same time, a certain authoritativeness on the part of the specialist, a (guiding) role in critical and decisive moments.

Appropriate forms of communication, education and empowerment are needed on both sides, based on appropriate principles of ethics and efficiency, especially in the face of global health crises. In fact, even the most traumatic experiences today increasingly pass through

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different forms of communication. Among the most widely used in recent years is visual communication.

"Visualizing trauma" through the opportunities that dialectics and media offer us, somehow documents how individuals deal with the unexpected in the contemporary world. Faced with a social phenomenon, in fact, each one of us is a potential "generator and consumer of content", an exceptional witness who can insert himself within this (hyper)textual flow looking for a quick way to learn and a compact form to memorize (Buoncompagni, 2023).

In 2021, Anthony Elliott, a well-known Australian sociologist, published the second edition of one of his recent volumes entitled *Reinvention* (Routledge), a clarion call on the consequences of rampant, excessive and uncontrolled consumerism, a culture of do-it-yourself quick fixes, on-demand and just-in-time expectations. Within the frenetic times of globalization, the impulse to reinvent ourselves is a necessary response to survival. Whether it is our lifestyle or personal identity, 'reinvention' is the result of the spread of the new individualism that leads to revisit and re-evaluate every aspect of the mind, spirit and society through the reprogramming of our careers, companies, digital networks, even our cities and airports.

Elliott's main point is that 'reinventing ourselves' is a necessary action in this highly globalized world and is the only appropriate way to deal with it. And that is exactly what we have tried to do in and out of the pandemic. Reinvent ourselves. Reprogramming our normality or reinventing everyday life on an institutional-professional, relational-communicative level, shocked and infected by a virus that has created a common social condition of interconnectedness, confining bodies and communication formats, however, within the home (Plava, 2023).

Textual images or stills characterized the alarming representation of risk by staging the different and fluctuating danger situations related to the spread and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Talking in 2025 about the pandemic period tires one out, and frightens one at the same time. But for those who have worked, and work, in medicine, and put themselves on the line every day to guarantee health and wellbeing to citizens, that health crisis, in particular, was a real communication-relational laboratory, a dangerous training to assess and generate new treatments also from the point of view of the relationship between health worker and patient and the management of spaces and resources dedicated to health (Maturò & Moretti, 2020).

The reconstruction of a more efficient healthcare system, of a preventive action and of an intimate and constructive relationship with the patient, but not an invasive one, in the post-pandemic era, is a necessary step today that needs to re-explore and reactivate strategic forms of health communication, such as the visual one.

The right to health is an integral part of internationally recognized fundamental human rights: the right of every person to enjoy the best conditions of physical and mental health that he or she is capable of achieving was first mentioned in 1946 in the Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO), whose Preamble defines the concept of health as 'an overall state of physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. The Preamble further states that 'the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political opinion, economic or social condition'.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 define the right to health as a human right, in Articles 25 and 12 respectively. Subsequently, other international treaties have recognized or referred to the right to health or some of its components, such as the right to medical care. In

this sense, health information becomes an essential prerequisite for 'access' to the right care and for the citizen/patient's conscious application of this right.

Over the last few decades, the global awareness of the interdependent relationship between the environment and the individual has strongly influenced both the general themes relating to health promotion and the studies that have been conducted in order to understand the laws that regulate the adoption of healthy lifestyles and the processes of changing risk behavior. The centrality of lifestyles in determining the health status and wellbeing of young people (and thus also their future health as adults) is one of the important acquisitions of the modern approach to health promotion that must be taken into account in social and health research, policy actions and education programs. Every health education and promotion intervention must also take into account knowledge of social inequalities, particularly in access to services and information itself, in order to correctly identify and best reach the population groups most at risk (ISS, 2020)

In this regard, in the age of transparency and spectacle (Couldry, 2015) communication by images, including that of health, makes use of multiple tools and languages - from photographs to videos, from static drawings to animations, from billboards to wayfinding systems (Pilozzi & Torresan, 2018), at the center of our interest are so-called 'infographics'. An infographic - literally the combination of information and graphics - is a way of communicating content visually, through colorful and concise language (McCrorie et al., 2016). It can make use of images, pictograms, icons and symbols, graphs, tables, maps and representations of various kinds to facilitate the understanding of a message.

Numerous authors attribute additional benefits to images: they are the most immediate and sudden way of disseminating information (Siricharoen & Siricharoen, 2018), they are representations that manage to direct the viewer's gaze, stimulating their curiosity (Dur, 2014). They are visual content with an explanatory, persuasive, inclusive and exploratory purpose, which can make certain abstract concepts concrete (Riggs et al., 2022) and the processing process more fluid, reducing the negative effects of technical or slang language in certain subject areas, such as medical, economic, regulatory).

Within such a scenario, health, medical-scientific, and in some cases online participatory patient communication, the work of curation and 'translation' of illness or treatment, through a clearer and more comprehensible language (Fioritto, 1997), is beginning to be flanked by communication through images (or visual communication) that seems to transcend the complexity of regulations and administrative texts, increasing the attractiveness of the contents, speeding up the receptive process of the interlocutors and expanding the number of audiences, real and potential (Pratt & Searles, 2017). Increasingly, people are also beginning to value visual aspects in the design and presentation of their health image/status. Such practices are particularly strengthened in crisis and emergency contexts, such as the one faced as of March 2020 following the global lockdown.

Methodological note

The use of infographics in the field of health and healthcare is not a recent novelty. This practice returns to interest scholars and communication professionals when it finds wide space in the digital environment, on institutional websites first, on social channels more recently. In fact, digital infographics seem to be particularly suited to activate the response of their recipients and encourage their involvement (Lovari & Righetti, 2020); at the same time, it is in this same environment that the risks of information overload are highest and most widespread (Masini et al., 2013). By this expression we refer to the information redundancy that generates opacity, to that cognitive and symbolic overload connected both to the quantity of data and

information available that the individual has to process, and to the quality of the content produced (Lee et al. 2020).

This is why numerous scholars dwell on the effectiveness and design of infographics, because, while they facilitate and enable the understanding of a content, they also risk oversimplifying and trivializing the topics covered or pandering to the risks of misinformation (Weikmann & Lecheler, 2022); moreover, segmenting and disaggregating.

In the following paragraphs, without claiming to be exhaustive, an attempt has been made to answer the question of researching: how the use of infographics is articulated and declined today - outside of the emergency - in the content produced on a daily basis? through a phase of observation and online collection of the main open source sources, as well as of the most important visual forms of covid-19 health in the main social networks (Facebook, X, Instagram) using keywords (in Italian, here re-proposed in English) which, on the one hand, refer to what social research today proposes as creative methodologies for exploring products and contents of a visual artistic nature (Giorgi, Pizzolati & Vacchelli, 2021; Tan, 2021), on the other, highlighting expressions that have become commonplace in media and political language to represent the circulating virus. All obviously analyzed within a narrative frame that forms the backdrop to our research: the recent global health pandemic.

The main keywords used represent nothing other than the media forms of communication used in the field of emergency health to explain risk and access to care in a simpler manner: 'newspaper', 'comics', 'diary'. This way of proceeding allowed us to identify four main topics (**Table 1**), which will be re-proposed in more detail later on in relation to the medium used for its dissemination: metaphors (virus as war/enemy); collective trauma (death/salvation); action/reaction (to illness); anti-contagion products (masks, hand sanitizers).

Through a content analysis, the research carried out in the first exploratory phase (from December 2021 to April 2022), produced 58 images. Of the 35 further filtered for research purposes, 15 were selected for this work as they were considered particularly significant and studied through a creative methodology based on the visual analysis approach of artistic research. A limited number, but considered important to answer the question posed, as elements capable of showing the different facets of health communication produced online by different audiences in different media environments in Europe (with a focus on the Italian country).

The methodological choice to limit the research (even if it is carried out online) to a specific geographical area, the Italian-European one, is due to the fact that this reality was one of the most affected by the pandemic and initially the least prepared, causing a cascade of regional crises, such as the economic and health ones, which added to the Covid-19 emergency. In fact, as reported by Istat (2022), Italy, together with Spain, is one of the most affected countries in the EU in the biennium 2020-2022.

Political instability and geo-social polarization are another typical condition of Italy and Europe, making them, after some time, countries where, according to Wolton (2022), "incommunication" reigns, the latter understood as closed, non-negotiated, polluted communication. In this cultural and political context, we believe that the authors of the article's choice to return to the symbolic-visual forms of the pandemic narrative could help readers and institutions to reflect on the importance of responsible health information, made up of images, but not for the sake of being banal, but perhaps more open and empathetic, and therefore strategic in times of instability.

Topic	Medium
Pandemic and infectious disease preparedness	newspapers
collective trauma	comics

(re)actions	diaries
anti-contagion products/ metaphors	emoji

Table.1 Topic-medium identified

Visual formats for “caring”

In contemporary times, visual narration plays a significant role in documenting even the most traumatic experiences. Through the opportunities presented by dialectics and the media, 'visualizing trauma' offers us a means to understand how individuals deal with unexpected situations. In reality, individuals are potential "generators and consumers of content" when faced with a social phenomenon. As exceptional witnesses, they can be placed into the (hyper)textual flow to rapidly learn and store information.

The representation of risk features textual images or photograms, staging varying and unstable dangerous situations related to the dissemination and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, in the conclusion of this study, we will focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication, relationships, and the behaviors of individuals and communities.

The visual representation of COVID-19 utilizes figurative and symbolic language, demonstrating how the disease and its effects, including both direct and indirect consequences, have been portrayed in different creative forms. The use of metaphorical and iconographic vocabulary in the visual representation of COVID-19 highlights the ways in which the subject has been addressed in creative media. The representation of COVID-19 through visual communication encompasses metaphorical and iconographic language, uncovering the expression of illness and its consequences in diverse creative mediums. This approach presents an objective illustration of the disease's virulence and implications for the individual, both directly and indirectly.

The semantic virulence linked to COVID-19 also passed through a visual methodology that dialogued with health through metaphorical and iconographic words. The way in which illness and hetero-disease related to COVID-19, i.e. people's (direct and indirect) experience of the disease event, has been expressed through perhaps more 'creative' channels will be emphasized.

COVID-19 metaphors

The parable of battle is one of the most commonly used metaphorical representations in disease narratives. In the context of COVID-19, this battle was both individual between the individual, and the disease and social between society and the virus, conveying the gravity of the moment, the powerlessness of the individual and the strength of the collective struggle. The virus emerges as an invisible and unstoppable enemy that has led humanity to live in a time of war (**Figures 1 and 2**).



Figure 1. Win the War/New Hero. Win the war against the Coronavirus

Source: own synthetic reworking

The war to save humanity, therefore, soon invoked a superior force. To fight the virus, not mere 'soldiers' were needed, but warriors with special powers who sacrificed themselves for their own and others' cause. Doctors and nurses, in PPE armor, thus became the heroes who fought tirelessly on the frontline of the unexpected where the possibility of falling in battle could be an unfortunate eventuality. In this way, the sanitary commando was narrated with images of brave men and women with a great spirit of self-sacrifice, intelligence and confidence in their own abilities. Super-humans with super-powers essential to save humanity from contagion and death.

But there was also a need for the cooperation of the army of people who through basic heroic acts - staying at home, maintaining social distancing, using masks, not touching their faces, sneezing into their elbows, washing their hands and finally, vaccinating themselves - could help make a big difference (**Figure 1**).

In this metaphorical war/heroic narrative, the collective #ReframeCovid initiative was inserted, promoting alternative ways of looking at the emergency and pandemic trauma that are not necessarily military in character. The pandemic, then, arrives like a bus/shuttle on its way to the next evolutionary stop. On this journey, mankind will try again to be in harmony with the earth and all living beings and to care for each other as never before.

Through a different virus imagery, an attempt is made to convey a less fearful and authoritarian message by encouraging and uniting people in a difficult time. 'Prepare to disembark (...) Flight C-19 will land sooner or later. But it is too early for passengers to unbuckle their seat belts'. From travel, to sport, to natural events, to people and animals, non-war metaphors offer a way to break with conventional semantic domains but not metaphors.

Metaphors are a constant historical presence in the lexicon and popular interpretations of medicine and illness, yet - as Susan Sontag (2003) reminds us - one must always beware of their encumbrance. While metaphors provide meaning to unfamiliar situations, in fact, they also risk dispensing somewhat simplistic views, exaggerated and paranoid interpretations, creating an aura of misconception.



Figure 2. Summary of recurring war/heroic metaphors in the pandemic narrative

Source: own elaboration

Dear diary: living with trauma

Within this methodological pathway of visualization of pandemic trauma, we mention the (visual) health diary, a tool which, starting from daily schematic notes - both textual and iconographic - stimulates not only attitudes of care and promotion of one's psycho-physical wellbeing but also extends to social reflection.

Among the diaries shared after the emergency period is Ludovica Bastianini's. At the beginning of the Italian quarantine, Ludovica feels the need to document the unexpected experience she is going through. She is an artist and as such decides to use her creative side to stimulate the capacity for understanding, to try to process the trauma and to interpret the effect the events have on herself in the first place. She decides, therefore, to keep a diary (**Figure 3**) as if it were the therapy that accompanies days of uncertainty and confusion. To this end, she mixes media of all kinds and portrays that sudden and surreal everyday life made up of domestic walls, rules and freedom suspended until a date to be determined. The diary allows her to realize a constant and unexpected fear towards her anesthetist sister's life.

In Ludovica's narrative, where the specter of the virus is an absent presence, one finds the typical characteristics of the health diary (Ingrosso & Pierucci, 2019): the periodic observational phase held from the first day of the 'urgent measures for the containment and management of the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19'; a continuous reflective phase with herself and with others with whom she exchanged images and videos; a project phase where she keeps alive the changing experience and the ways through which to visualize it; an implementation phase where she decides to share the diary by transforming it into a work of art.

The author lets the diary be displayed like a brochure on a museum bench within a large exhibition on civilization. Without imposing herself, she lets the perceptive ones notice it. And so the enormous amount of visual data that stimulated her to process the trauma and interpret its effect becomes, in the verification phase, a key to stimulating collective memory. To retrace a sequence of spatial-temporally emotional states.



Figure 3. Covid19. A visual diary from Naples, Italy.

Source: Ph Museum

Comics, a way to react to trauma

Comics, for example, have always responded to pandemics/catastrophes by documenting how people - adults or children - deal with them. In 2007, the term Graphic Medicine was coined to indicate the role that animated cartoons can play in health care, suggesting their use as a therapeutic medium. Through an extensive set of images and captions, it can not only educate on a wide variety of medical topics but also be accessible for public awareness and improvement of the healthcare professional/patient relationship (De Stefano et al., 2021). As argued by its creator, Ian Williams (2015), Graphic Medicine can be the meeting

point between image and health, the intersection between comics and the dimension of health care.

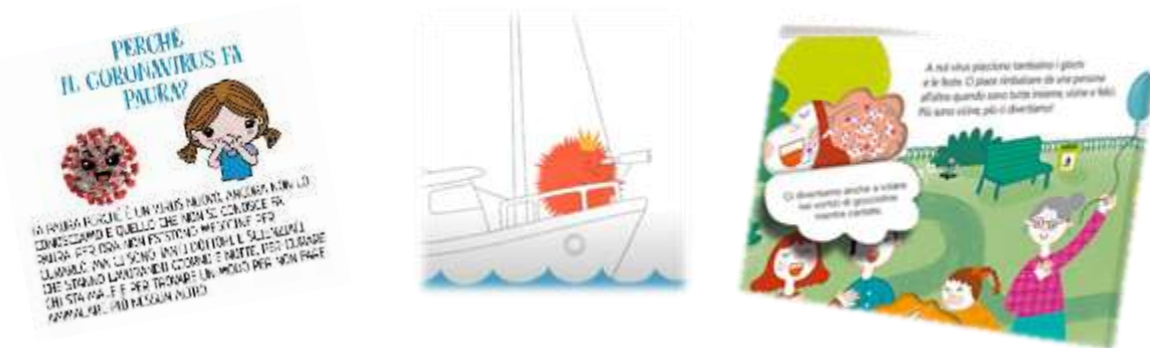


Figure 4. Telling children about Covid-19, Italy

Source: 'Laila and the Coronavirus' (Vascotto, 2020); 'Palletta Coroncina' (Giusti et al., 2020); 'Ti conosco mascherina' (Capua, 2020).

The use of comic strips to describe medical phenomena is nothing new. As early as the 1940s, medical figures occupied a prominent place in various adventure comics, so much so that medical discoveries were likened to heroic and valiant deeds and the realm of medicine to a battlefield, which immediately leads us to a comparison with what happened to the medical-medical category during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which the power of metaphors and symbols was enlivened by both fiction and science. In this regard, Graphic Medicine addressed COVID-19 by visualizing the trauma through the concept of 'covidity' (Saji et al., 2021). This neologism summarizes the material and emotional responses provided by the cartoons aiming, in children (**Figure 4**), to trigger a 'friendly' understanding of the complicated emergency reality and, in adults (**Figure 5**), to capture moments, stimulate reflection and/or irony.



Figure 5. Covid-19 Graphic Novel

Source: 'Covid and vitamin D' (Goodwin, Zabdyr, 2020); 'Drug store workers are essential and feel under pressure' (Mirk, 2020); COVID-19 defeat (Embriostories, 2020)

Emojis. All the smileys of the pandemic

Rapid point-and-tap communication has become a fundamental element of our everyday life, naturally integrating social artefacts belonging to the therapeutic language. Certainly, the pandemic trauma with its 'sociographic breakdown' (Maturò & Moretti, 2020) has reinforced its use. Emoji characterizes the most salient fac(in)es of the pandemic by outlining its major

socio-cultural changes and its impact on everyday life and the way we talk about illness (Hewitt, 2020). In 2020, for example, the lungs, the organ affected by Covid-19, entered the world of instant messaging with a specific emoji (Lai et al., 2020) but also the 'virtual' hug and the soldier's helmet (**Figure 6**).

The use of emoji to express attitudes towards health issues, as it turns out, is part of a trend to strengthen the way people share their moods and also try to offer mutual support.



Figure 6. Old and new emoji

Source: Emojipedia

Given their origin, emoji often symbolize Japanese culture. Among these is the 'face with a medical mask' that originated because, in many other Asian countries, it is customary to wear a mask in public when one has a cold or flu. With the spread of COVID-19 and the obligation to wear masks, the popularity of this emoji increased. However, it was deemed necessary to rethink the design for the face behind the mask by pinching and straightening droopy eyes and flushing cheeks. A cheerful interpretation was needed to represent its use by people who felt good but wanted to play their part in the fight against the pandemic. Sometime later, the 'syringe' also enjoyed a rise fueled by COVID-19. Indeed, in April 2021, Apple replaced the 'syringe' full of blood (and dripping) with one with a transparent barrel to better represent vaccines (Tan, 2021). Add to this the acquired value or the creation of a list of smileys linked to individual symptoms such as high fever and daily practices such as soap, toilet paper, sanitizer.



Figure 7. Before and after

Source: Emojipedia

Conclusion

In the recent pandemic crisis, iconographic language, therefore, has provided an immediate, direct and universal way to speak to health professionals and their patients about wellbeing, but above all about discomfort. The set of emoji retrieved, created or retouched to keep up with the times has supported discussions in various communication platforms (Broni, 2020). But it has also been appreciated in more institutional health campaigns to help raise awareness, for diagnostic purposes or for the various aspects of health communication.

For medicine to be effective, there must be a continuous two-way flow of information, of perceptions, which make the relationship between health worker and patient an empathetic one, and health facilities hospitable places. Fundamental therefore in this area is training for health professionals: the acquisition of a 'health communication culture'. This last expression is not a slogan at all, far from it.

Communication culture means, in this case, knowing how to distinguish communication for patients from communication between and for specialists, giving them tools to manage the relationship in an understandable way (even in visual form). It is therefore a question of "taking care of one's communication", perhaps even before the health of one's patient. That is, understanding when what I say, through words, images or other communication formats, whether within a physical or digital context, nourishes or damages the relationship (of trust) with my interlocutor. Thus creating a relational space and an ad hoc communicative time, for and with the Other.

Here, therefore, "beyond risk", the title we wanted to give to this paragraph of analysis and discussion of the research results, refers precisely to this expansion, recomposition and rearticulation of the themes, objectives and purposes that seem to guide the use of visual communication - and in particular infographics - at the service of communication, beyond emergency contexts.

Obviously without wanting to diminish the strength and strategic importance in exceptional moments, we want to underline here the possibility of resorting to visual communication to pursue other and no less significant purposes of general interest for the public sector: legitimization, recognition, sharing.

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