Appealing Looks: Web, Infographics and Visuals
21st October 2016

Speakers: Gabriel Alvarez (Communications Manager at the Interact Programme, Austria), Vasilis Lampropoulos (DG Climate Action), Frédéric Grelet (Webmaster at the European Parliament's DG Communication)

Moderator: Nicola Vatthauer (Communications Director at EuroCities, Belgium)

The objective of this workshop was to share best practices in conveying complex messages through the use of modern web trends, visuals and interactive graphics, with a particular focus on the institutional context.

Nicola Vatthauer opened the session by asking what the main challenges are of using visuals in digital communication. How can we make them attractive, accessible and interesting to our audiences?

The first speaker was **Gabriel Alvarez**, who pointed to a disconnect between designers and their public 'clients', insisting on the importance of starting with a thorough discussion between the two on the approach to be taken. The objective is to understand the message, and to convey it both appropriately and in a way that makes an impact. The message must be absolutely clear to both parties. He outlined several elements of what makes a good design, pointing out that it should be clean, simple, not overloaded with information, and well-organised.

Bad designs are complex, cluttered, old-fashioned, amateurish and dry. In the past, rebrandings often only had the logo in common, but there was no further visual consistency. The objective now is to harmonise and simplify, using the same style of illustration. Designers refer to this as recognition, because the illustration you see should remind you of the organisation.

Mr Alvarez then presented three popular, free and open source CMS solutions; Drupal, Joomla and Wordpress, which bypass the problems of protection that plagued websites in the past. In terms of front-end (visible on the site) trends, modern design is moving towards responsive websites (where the content adapts to the screen), clear and friendly presentation, and embedded content (linked to the 3-clicks principle which reduces the number of clicks to access content).

Vasilis Lampropoulos was the second speaker, comparing the use of visuals to storytelling. Visuals enhance communication – if one image is worth a thousand words, then one symbol is worth a thousand images. He added that if we truly understand the message we want to deliver then we should be able to convey it even to a 6-year old.

In terms of social media, research shows that a message is more likely to be shared if it contains images, and even more so if it includes animated content such as videos. It has also been

demonstrated that animated or interactive infographics attract more attention than simple ones. However, he reminded the audience that it is crucial to adapt content to the particular platform in order to convey the message effectively.

Mr Lampropoulos recommended starting the process with brainstorming, using relevant images, making inspirational posts by enhancing an image with a short text, being concise, respecting the format of the different platforms, defining the right moment to deliver the message, and the importance of informing designers well in advance of any communication plans you have. Above all, however, he emphasised that having a good understanding of the message to be conveyed is crucial.

The final speaker was **Frédéric Grelet**, who began by stating the European Parliament's communication motto – transparency - means reaching citizens where they are and in their language. The EP typically needs to convey large amounts of information on complex issues, for example the Ordinary Legislative Procedure. In consequence, defining the essence of the message and taking time to understand it clearly must be priorities for any visual communication of these complex matters. Like Mr Lampropoulos, he suggested beginning the process by brainstorming and involving editors and web designers from the start. The next step is to decide the format for delivering the message, and to meet the designers who will translate the message into visuals and interactive texts. Accessibility is also very important, as all content should be accessible to everyone, everywhere.

Nicola Vatthauer then asked the speakers what the key ingredients are for creative visuals that actually work. **Mr Alvarez** emphasised the principles of modern graphic design; clean and simple, and sophisticated work done by professionals. If possible, adding an emotional touch always works well. Infographics are also good for transmitting complex issues in an easily digestible way. **Mr Grelet** and **Mr Lampropoulos** also highlighted the importance of using professional graphic designers.

Noting that all speakers had mentioned brainstorming as an important step, **Ms Vatthauer** asked whether this was always a possibility in an institutional context, or whether work always needed to be done immediately. **Mr Grelet** agreed, noting that brainstorming was more or less a luxury. **Mr. Lampropoulos** stated that often a post does not have a lot of 'likes' but still has a lot of reach, and that it is important to explain and understand this. The key, for him, is communication and taking the time to talk to people involved. **Mr Alvarez** also noted the importance of talking with the service provider beforehand and reaching compromises, as deciding the approach properly is key to the ultimate success of the project.

Discussing political buy-in, the speakers emphasised continuous communication as a way of building trust and encouraging involvement. For smaller offices without the resources for a professional graphics team, **Mr Alvarez** suggested making sure to use images, videos or illustrations rather than just text. **Mr Grelet** and **Mr Lampropoulos** agreed, adding that many content sources are free, such as libraries. In terms of branding, **Mr Alvarez** noted that the EU flag must be used in order to comply with EU regulations, and mentioned Interreg as a good example of coherent visual products, as it has a common nomenclature, logo, thematic objectives and icons for all its projects.

Finally, **Ms Vatthauer** asked each speaker to identify one essential ingredient of developing a digital story. **Mr Lampropoulos** said it was essential to get input and ideas from other people. **Mr Alvarez** highlighted the importance of making it visual and staying away from technical terminology, while **Mr. Grelet** reiterated the necessity of asking for lots of feedback during the creative process – and making sure you have fun!