

Visible Language

the journal of
visual communication
research

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a study analyzing the playful use of punctuation by children 9-11 and the design-like process they use to communicate effectively, with implications for how the writing process is conceptualized

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study exploring the integration of visual cultural elements in emerging scripts, suggesting that incorporating visual cultural elements in script design could play a significant role in promoting cultural continuity, supporting language preservation

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announcing changes in how *Visible Language* is published

Visible
Language

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A New Era: *Visible Language Consortium*

Abstract

This is an announcement of changes in the editing and publishing model for this journal, *Visible Language*. We have established a consortium of institutions to ensure *Visible Languages'* independence and longevity. This takes effect January 1, 2025.

On 10 July, 2023, Editor-in-Chief Peter Lloyd and the entire editorial board resigned in protest from the design journal *Design Studies*. The journal's publisher Elsevier had insisted, among other things, that the journal exponentially increase the number of articles accepted each year. Like many journals, *Design Studies* works under a pay-to-publish model. An exponential increase in published articles would produce an exponential increase in revenue for the publisher. But since there was no evidence of an exponential increase in the number of quality design research manuscripts in the world, the result was likely to be an exponential reduction in quality.

Just as that unfortunate separation was unfolding, a mature author, researcher, and contributor to *Visible Language* asked us about getting immediate open access, required by their grant-funding agency, for a draft manuscript. This was yet another example of the increasing pressure *Visible Language* had been under to become open access. For some years our response had been to operate under a hybrid model where subscribers got access to articles immediately, with open access for everyone else following a 12 month embargo. This incident was just one in a string of similar incidents that indicated to us that our hybrid model was becoming untenable.

These two simultaneous events launched us on a thorough examination of scholarly publishing models and a reevaluation of our own publishing model. We did not like general the picture. The publishing world has moved to open access. But the open access movement has conspired with a variety of other pressures on scholarly publishing to produce a system whose trend is for authors to pay publication fees. This we oppose. It is perversely upside down for open access to produce a system where the only ones with access to distribution of their work are those with significant financial resources needed to cover publication fees (typically several thousand dollars). We were unwilling to participate in pay-to-publish. Neither were we willing to sell our financial and functional independence, which subscription support had provided for over 50 years, either to a large publisher or to total dependence on a single institutional benefactor. Even the highest-minded of public institutions are subject to social, cultural, and political pressures to compromise freedom of inquiry and this we were anxious not to submit ourselves to.

Disliking the current picture, *Visible Language's* editorial staff had applied for and received funding to conduct research studies to look at what design professionals, design scholars, and design researchers want from *Visible Language* in particular and design journals generally. The preliminary results of that study were reported in the December 2023 issue by D. J. Trischler. That funded research is ongoing. We believe it will positively impact how we publish but it does not specifically address high-level publishing models or sources of financial support. During the summer 2023 crisis we shared some of the ideas spurred by our research with peers at *Design Studies*, other leading design journals, and a few members of our advisory board. After that and considerable internal deliberation, we have identified a new publishing model for *Visible Language*.

First some historic facts about *Visible Language: The Journal of Visual Communication Research*.

- The oldest design journal
- Continuously published for 57 years – since 1967
- Owned by the University of Cincinnati School of Design and published by UCPress using OJS publishing system
- Minimum three 96-page issues per year
- 6×9" full color
- Existing business model: hybrid open access with paid subscriptions, all articles available online after a 12-month embargo
- Annual expenses: a little over \$10,000 per year (including printing and mailing)
- Current cash-on-hand sufficient for several years of operation.

That last point is to emphasize that while *Visible Language* is a not-for-profit journal, our subscription model has sustained the journal well with no end in sight. Financially, we have no need to change anything.

Reflecting upon all of the above, *Visible Language* has decided to become full open access but without any publication fees (or "diamond open access"). We will cover our costs and maintain our independence by forming a consortium of three peer institutions to jointly publish *Visible Language*. Thanks to publishing systems such as OJS our costs are low enough that each institution, by contributing a few thousand dollars annually, will sustain *Visible Language* without any sacrifice of independence.

Visible Language Consortium

In January 2024 *Visible Language* created a consortium of three academic institutions:

- North Carolina State University, College of Design, North Carolina, USA
- Leading PhD design school
- Heavily invested in research, faculty with significant funded research, technology oriented
- University of Leeds, School of Design, West Yorkshire, UK
- Leading PhD design school, large PhD program
- Heavily invested in research, faculty with significant funded research, information design and healthcare research oriented
- University of Cincinnati, Ullman School of Design, Cincinnati Ohio, USA
- Leading design school
- Heavily invested in professional practice.

This consortium will manage and publish *Visible Language*. Each institution has a functional seat for one of their faculty/leaders on the *Visible Language Executive Board* as an editor, as well as two additional seats on the *Visible Language Editorial Board* for associate and assistant editors. One of the three members of the executive board will serve a rotating three-year term as editor-in-chief. Everything about the journal and its possible extensions and activities will be governed by this 12 person board working under a three-institution collaborative agreement. The *Visible Language Editorial Board* will maintain complete editorial control of the journal, guide the journal's direction, review articles, plan issues, solicit contributions, etc. Each institution is publicly recognized as a member of the consortium and publisher of *Visible Language* with their logo/name on the journal cover and related materials.

While our consortium model may seem new, it builds upon a long history. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (established 1665), widely viewed as the first “peer-reviewed” publication, was published by the Royal Society whose Fellows reviewed manuscript submissions. Fellows such as John Locke, Robert Boyle, and Isaac Newton represented various institutions: the Board of Trade [Locke]; Oxford University and the “Invisible College” [Boyle]; Trinity College [Newton]. While the wealthy gentleman scholar was the 17th century norm and is not a direct equivalent of professional tenured system of scholars at institutions

today, there are nevertheless clear parallels: a group of scholars from various organizations freely joining to manage a scholarly publication. Thus the *Visible Language Consortium* “stands on the shoulders of giants.” Ours is but a revision of the original journal model.

We believe a consortium has several advantages over current publishing models. It makes the journal financially sustainable and intellectually independent, free from control of any individual funder or single special interest. It means that *Visible Language* will be free and open to everyone, readers as well as authors. The *Visible Language Consortium* ensures diversity of perspective within unity of purpose, broader than one institution in one region. It will promote publication of the widest variety of quality papers. It provides ample energy with different associate and assistant editors representing different research foci. It broadens access to alternate networks to enrich intellectual quality and rigor. It provides a continual pool of successors to become the next editor-in-chief. While the initial consortium is three institutions, it could grow to include research institutes and professional organizations, potentially strengthening the integration of theoretical and professional design knowledge. There are many other enticing possibilities we have just begun to discuss.

The *Visible Language Editorial Board* has been operating for most of 2024 and we have already experienced first-hand many of these advantages. Not only do “many hands make light work” but many minds come up with a plethora of great ideas driven by a load of energy. We will begin publishing *Visible Language* under the consortium model in January 2025 with a series of significant special issues exploring the past, present, and future of design research and practice. One theme that has emerged already is the necessary integration of research and practice. We are excited to not only report rigorous, relevant research, but also to make it visible and accessible to professionals while gleaning from them new areas that need research.

There are potential downsides inherent in any diverse body which will require wisdom, tact, and some skill to manage. Fortunately, we have independent publishing professionals at UCPress to help us navigate and operate. So far, it's been a dream.

Our Subscribers

For past subscribers, we will publish a printed anthology of 2025 *Visible Language* articles at the end of 2025. This will be a print document, in full color, of high design quality. It will include every *Visible Language* article from the volume in full, along with commentary provided by members of the editorial board. Past subscribers will get a discounted price for the 2025 edition as a thank-you for years of faithful support. We intend this book anthology to become a permanent feature of the journal and an additional source of support.

We're excited at this evolution of *Visible Language*. It comes shortly after *Visible Language* has been included in the Scopus index. This plus diamond open access are positive steps that will support further growth and quality of submissions. We think the consortium could become a model that others adapt to solve some of the problems that pervade scholarly publishing today.

We welcome any comments: mike.zender@uc.edu

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