

The Importance and Power of Visual Storytelling

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Introduction

On September 11 in New York City, there was a series of terrorist attacks that caused nearly 3,000 deaths and billions of dollars in infrastructure damage. Americans commemorate the lives lost and “9/11” is a household term that nearly everybody is aware of; but without seeing what happened would they be willing to acknowledge this day yearly? Would people truly understand what happened? Without the effective use of photographs and videos, it would be near impossible for anybody who was not there to fully fathom the level of destruction and chaos in New York City on that day.

Visual storytelling is the usage of photographs, videos, and illustrations to tell a story or to assist a text-based story. Although visual storytelling has existed in different aspects throughout history, the advent of social media and the internet has propelled reporters, media professionals and other storytellers worldwide to capitalize on it. These storytellers are realizing the importance of using visuals and are relying on them heavily to share their stories. While becoming an integral and almost expected part of a story, visuals have changed the way that audiences interact with stories.

History

Visuals have been used to tell stories for centuries. When cave-people wanted to explain processes to each other or wanted to tell stories, they would etch into the caves to clarify their message. When the newspapers started circulating, journalists would receive help from artists to sketch photos for their stories. In 1824 heliography- the first photography-like process- was invented, and not long after, the first photograph was printed into a newspaper in 1880.

The trend of using visuals continued at this steady pace until the advent of the Internet and Youtube, which skyrocketed its usage. YouTube put an idea of videography in the hands of the public because everybody was able to create their own shareable content. YouTube also made it possible for reporters to share their clips on the platform. Before YouTube, social media outlets did not have a way to share visual stories. The internet also made it easy to quickly share large amounts of information and digital content with different people all around the world.

Nowadays, companies and individuals both easily access these outlets to share their stories.

Benefit/Importance of visuals

Using visuals to tell stories is important because it makes it possible to understand serious issues. According to Plus Media Solutions, visual storytelling effectively has changed the way that people view climate change (*The Power of Visual Storytelling, June 2015*). For somebody who is not very knowledgeable of statistics, number-heavy stories will be difficult to understand. The use of visuals will make the content easier to understand. By replacing or reinforcing difficult jargon with visuals, storytellers are able to reach people who need to know this information but may not be as educated as other audiences. According to Shifaa Abdallah Ahmed, a student who participated in a visual storytelling workshop for Iraqi school girls, seeing photos makes it easier for her to understand other people's perspectives on things and that gives her better insight on things that she did not previously understand (*States News Service, 2018*). The use of visuals also humanizes stories and makes them more relatable for audiences.

Humans are ‘trained’ to quickly process photos - the human brain processes photos and illustrations 60,000 times faster than text. The human brain’s focus on visuals is another benefit to using them within stories. This use of visuals also benefits readers because the average human attention span is 8-seconds long. According to PR Hacker, the use of GIFs and short videos trick our brains into paying attention because of their movement (*Andrews, 2017*) . Furthermore, once executed effectively, those visuals are able to maintain that attention in ways that text is unable to. Knowing this ‘flaw’ in the human brain also benefits the organizations that are constantly fighting to break through the noise - which is anything that interferes with the intended message- on social media. There are also reports that claim that a tweet with a visual is 80 percent more “memorable” than a post containing strictly text, This pushes organizations to create captivating visual content or to add visual content to drive people to read through long text pieces.

Visual storytelling is also necessary because text is very easy to misread or misunderstand. According to Plus Media Solutions, 93 percent of all human communication is visual and so is 90 percent of the information sent to the brain. Because of this, the human brain has to work much harder to process text; it can also be argued that because of this, humans are not good at understanding non-visual queues (*Plus Media Solutions, 2016*). Visuals are a more effective way of communicating emotions in stories because people will be able to see it and relate to it. Visuals are also beneficial because it almost puts viewers in the shoes of the person experiencing it. This, in particular, would benefit nonprofits because it would influence people to support their cause.

Implications for the Future

Although visual storytelling has experienced exponential growth within the past 10 years, I feel like we can expect to see more within the next few years especially with the growth of virtual reality and artificial intelligence. The creation of this new software would create new ways to share digital content. In the future, I think that nonprofits would be able to benefit from visual storytelling because they would be able to tug at the heartstrings of potential donors by using emotional stories and videos.

Resources

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