AI: Another Tool, Not a Revolution in Visual Journalism and Illustrative Infographics

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence in journalistic infographics is often presented as a revolution destined to replace authors and redefine newsroom practices. This paper argues the opposite: AI is another link in a long chain of tools — from print to Photoshop — that democratize and accelerate processes but do not assume responsibility for meaning. I analyze the role of AI within the tabloid model of communication, whose logic differs from analytical press. Using BILD as a case study, I describe the mechanism of the informational poster and the 'Trojan horse of data': emotion first, information second. In this context AI accelerates sketching and reconstruction but does not decide on hierarchy or ethics. Theoretical frameworks such as DIKW and the alphabet of perception (Bertin; Cleveland & McGill; Gestalt; Sweller; Ware) highlight the boundaries of machine assistance: data and information may be generated, but knowledge and wisdom remain human. A case study of the 'Homes' project — a scrollytelling piece on mental disorders — shows that AI acts as an accelerator of variants, not as the author of narratives. I argue that AI does not dehumanize the process but instead removes technical burdens and allows designers to focus on composition, readability, and ethics. The future belongs to 'craftsmen of ideas' who combine speed with rigor, emotion with truth.

Keywords: infographics, generative AI, journalism, ethics, data visualization

1. Introduction

For more than twenty-five years I have designed infographics and illustrations for mass media, cultural institutions, and publishers. I lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, but my everyday laboratory is the tabloid newsroom. Often dismissed as shallow, this environment is in fact a testing ground for intensive forms of infotainment where information, image, and emotion merge into a single structure.

The goal is no different from analytical journalism: to convey knowledge. What differs is the trajectory — tabloids begin with emotion and only then deliver facts. This is the 'Trojan horse of data': the reader lets in emotion, and with it information. My central thesis is that AI is not a revolution in infographics but another tool, particularly useful in fast-paced journalism, because it democratizes and accelerates processes without removing authorship. Media history shows that new tools do not reduce work but increase speed and expectations.

2. Anthropology of Tools and False Revolutions

The history of visual culture is a history of reducing the gap between idea → execution. Print, offset, desktop publishing, and 3D software all lowered technical barriers but did not change authorship. Retouching existed before Photoshop; layout programs did not invent typography but democratized it; social media did not invent image manipulation but made it a daily ritual.

AI plays a similar role today for sketching, prototyping, and reconstruction. It enables rapid visual metaphor variations, shortens research, and aids reconstructions. It does not assign meaning — meaning is a human decision. AI is an extension of the hand, not a replacement for the head.

Unlike deterministic tools, AI is stochastic. It produces probable images, not guaranteed semantic accuracy. It is a 'random hammer': without an operator it can produce striking but misleading results. Some control is possible (prompt engineering, guiding images, image-to-image tools), but a margin of error remains. Thus AI requires a supervisor — the designer who verifies data, context, and ethics. Its value lies in accelerating brainstorming and opening visual directions, not in autonomous meaning-making.

3. The Technology Cycle

According to Rogers' diffusion of innovations and Gartner's hype cycle, after the 2022–2023 peak of enthusiasm AI has entered slowdown and stabilization. Improvements are now incremental (interfaces, stylistic coherence, inpainting), not semantic breakthroughs. AI is maturing into a workshop tool: it accelerates iterations, but the core of work — data selection, hierarchy, and ethics — remains human. The supposed revolution is transforming into normalization.

4. Tabloid as a 'Trojan Horse of Data': The Case of BILD

In analytical journalism the sequence is often argument → emotion; in tabloids it is emotion → data. Infographics act as informational posters: they capture attention instantly, then deliver data. In BILD, the mechanism has remained consistent for decades: visual hook → semantic bridge (metaphor) → numerical evidence → closure.

AI functions here as an accelerator of sketching and reconstruction: enabling metaphor variations, reconstructing inaccessible places, harmonizing series. Risks increase with stochasticity and attention pressure: exaggerating scale or contrast is easy. Thus time saved in generation is reinvested in QA: verifying data, captions, and context. The 'Trojan horse of data' works only if the 'capsule ingredients' are honest: sources and proportions are transparent, and interpretive risks are minimized.

5. Tool Metaphors and Process Implications

- Epistemic wheelbarrow — AI shifts effort from production to curation and verification.

- Sail → steam → combustion → electric — parameters change, the communication goal does not.

- Narrative calculator — computes quickly but does not understand results.

- Random hammer — stochastic output requires an operator.

- Giant stock — image availability ≠ semantic or legal adequacy.

The common denominator: AI shifts effort from technical production to interpretation, hierarchy, and ethics. It democratizes the craft, allowing illustrators to work with data and analysts to create visual metaphors.

6. Theoretical Frameworks: DIKW and the Alphabet of Perception

The DIKW model (Data–Information–Knowledge–Wisdom) positions AI at the data and information levels. Machines organize and visualize, but knowledge (interpretation) and wisdom (ethics) require humans. AI resembles a savant: strong in combinations, but without goals.

The alphabet of perception (Bertin; Cleveland & McGill) and visual cognition studies (Gestalt; Sweller; Ware) show that attention is guided by position, shape, color, contrast. AI imitates these statistically, but designers apply them intentionally to reduce noise and guide the eye. In tabloids this means balancing poster-like impact with readability. AI can prototype forms, even kitsch, but responsibility for choice and hierarchy remains human.

7. Case Study: Homes — Scrollytelling on Mental Disorders

Goal: present complex psychological phenomena clearly and without stigma.

Metaphor: architecture — each disorder as a 'house' with its own structure (stability/fragility, openness/isolation). The metaphor shifts focus from aestheticizing suffering to structuring experience and enables comparisons.

Process:

1. clinical consultations and shared glossary;

2. mapping features → architectural parameters;

3. AI iterations (forms, layouts, textures) — accelerating sketches;

4. manual data layer (prevalence, age, comorbidity);

5. QA: anti-stigma checklist, readability tests, expert reviews.

Role of AI: accelerates variants and details, but hierarchy and language remain human. Conclusion: AI = accelerator, not author.

Status: demonstration version at the symposium; wider publication later.

8. Discussion: Newsroom, Roles, Market

AI humanizes the process by removing technical burdens and enabling focus on narrative and ethics. In the newsroom it acts like a scalpel: increasing precision, but demanding skilled hands. The main risk is the illusion of author replacement; the main potential is empowering small teams to achieve big newsroom quality. Roles shift (more curation and QA), but the number of projects does not decline. Documentation of sources, scales, and editorial decisions becomes increasingly important. Classical design education is essential context for AI use.

9. Conclusions

The future belongs to craftsmen of ideas: creators who combine speed with rigor, emotion with truth, aesthetics with ethics. AI does not kill the art of information — it accelerates sketching and prototyping, but does not take responsibility for meaning. In tabloid

journalism its potential is high, provided the ethical task of the infographic designer — to produce forms that are both engaging and accurate — remains central. The core of visual communication remains human: decision and interpretation.