

## I am a visual journalist

Gerlinde Schuller interviewed by Euikyung Kim

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### **Euikyung Kim: How would you define 'Information graphics' in one word?**

Gerlinde Schuller: A simple information filter.

### **What is the most important value in your information graphics projects?**

The journalistic investigation and the professional translation of this research into information graphics. Within information graphics projects I act as a 'visual journalist'.

Unlike a traditional journalist I deliver an image story at the end of my research – a combination of images and words, with the focus on the image. The smallest application I work on is a single infographic, the largest would be a book of my own like 'Designing universal knowledge' that I wrote, edited and designed myself.

### **What is the strength of an information graphics company compared to the individual designer?**

My company is very small. As our projects and the data we design are very complex, it's easier to keep the right focus and overview in a small team. Information graphics projects are generally designed by a very small team or by myself. But we are also doing large information design projects like signage or directory design, where we often work in interdisciplinary cooperations with people from outside.

### **What is the process of information design in your company?**

For us 'data' can be everything. Our main objective is to derive additional knowledge by organising, combining, condensing, filtering and translating complex data into an 'information' visualization. I am not interested in data aesthetics. For me, taking the right steps 'from data to information to knowledge' is the challenge. Therefore an editorial impact is essential. Finally, information design should be at once inspiring, enlightening, entertaining, informative and functional.

### **It seems that information graphics extracts and abstracts the meaningful information from a bundle of data. I guess it requires other extensive professional knowledge than just design. In this regard, in what kind of environment and under which conditions does your company work?**

To make great information graphics you have to be a 'visual journalist'. Most of my projects require a large journalistic investigation before I start designing. I also prefer to build up my own database, if possible, or at least have control over the data that I have to design. For my book 'Designing universal knowledge' it took me two years to collect a 'material database' consisting of own images, press material, essays, interviews, talks etc. Therefore I travelled to France, the United States, Germany and Austria to interview designers and scientists, visit libraries, archives and museums. Although we have Internet, email and telephone, I find it impossible to make a book from my desk. Most of the interesting data, books and other material cannot yet be found on the Internet. For me it is also very essential to have a broad, interdisciplinary and international view on the topics I am working on.

### **Depending on different kinds of media such as newspapers, magazines, professional books and digital applications, the approach to information graphics seems to be very different. How does your company approach different media?**

In my opinion, information design does not depend on certain media. The research process is pretty much the same for printed or digital information graphics. In the concept and design phase later on, we often work together with other professionals, for example, if we need expertise from disciplines such as 3D, programming or photography.

### **Some people may become uninterested in statistics. The statistic itself can be boring but the graphic related to it can be interesting. How does this magic possibly happen? I am curious about what is required in terms of talent and skill.**

There is no magic, it's hard work, because I don't want to make pretty illustrations of boring data. An infographic is not a nice illustration for a journalistic text. It's a journalistic piece on its own, something you cannot summarize in words. The basic data, and the information you filter out of it, have to be interesting, at least for the target group it's meant for. If this isn't the case, it is the task of the information designer to broaden the context or change the focus of the infographic to make the subject more interesting, without manipulating the data.

**The media, methods and forms containing information reveal rapid transitions and revolutions, more so than the information itself. Regarding the rapid transitions of new media, what is the most challenging task for information graphics?**

I see the challenge in creating a 'universal image' that is understandable for almost everyone. That's idealistic and might not be realistic for a lot of commissioned projects because I often deal with a certain target group. But if you think of airport signage, map navigation systems or patient information leaflets, the 'universal' approach is important. Information design should be legible for a broad, international target group.

**As can be seen in the iPhone phenomenon, the media these days are very individualized and will be even more so in the future. How can we come up with the right information graphics on the small interface display of individual media? And how can information design remain valid without losing its value and the depth of the information?**

Information design always got a boost from new inventions. In my opinion, the next big milestone for information design and 'universal understanding' will be the creation of a software for smooth automatic translation. Global players within the information business such as Google, Yahoo and SDL plc. are engaged in developing software for automatic machine translation. The software nowadays is still very faulty since it cannot translate context-sensitively. A person speaks on average just one language. That's why the Google search engine exists in 40 language versions and Wikipedia in 260. So you can imagine how little we can understand of what's going on on the Internet. So if someone succeeds in creating a perfect 'text translator' it will trigger a cultural revolution like the invention of the printing press in the 15th century did. It will change information society and maybe information design because we might have to reconsider the widespread opinion that image is superior to text.

**Do you have any advice for future information graphic designers? What kind of talent is required to be a professional in this field?**

An information designer should be talented in systematic thinking and needs a combination of analytical, editorial and graphic abilities.

If you want to specialize in information graphics for the media you should be interested in designing and writing. You should have an eye for details and some stamina when it comes to checking sources, facts and databases.