ELEMENTS OF STYLE

HELENA HAAPIO JA STEFANIA PASSERA: VISUALIZING LAW

All legal texts are not words on a paper. The traditional way of legal communication is complemented – and sometimes challenged – by legal infographics, which may be pictures, charts or even comics. Trailblazers of legal visualization Helena Haapio and Stefania Passera tell us why law needs good design. Helena Haapio is a lawyer and associate professor of business law at the University of Vaasa. Stefania Passera is a graphic designer and PhD student specialized in information design.

Why do you think visualizing law is important?

H: For me, visualization is about understanding: helping people convey and receive contractual or legal messages in a way that gets across as intended. Visualization can help us revolutionize the way contracts and the law are communicated, taught, and perceived.

S: Law is complex, but it is too essential a part of the society to leave it only to lawyers. Visualization can be used to show complexity and interconnectedness of legal concepts or it can be used in contracts to help parties succeed together. As an example, Robert de Rooy, an attorney from South Africa, created a brilliant employment comic-contract to empower seasonal fruit-pickers, who often have low levels of literacy.

Do you see a risk of ambiguity when using pictures rather than text?

H&S: As we see it, ambiguity has to do more with poor communication than with either words or pictures. Neither words nor pictures as such are a silver bullet: clear communication needs effort and empathy with the intended audience. The main point is to use all means of communication that drive the point home and decrease ambiguity – be it words or pictures. We suggest using words, icons and diagrams together, set in a good layout.

Moreover, if visualized contract images and text should ever contradict each other, the contract is interpreted just like text-only documents. Judges and arbitrators are certainly accustomed to doing so.

You have stated that lawyers should get more into the mode of thinking and acting as a designer. What do you think would be important to teach law students to promote this?

H&S: The first rule of being a good lawyer is to empathize with the end users and understand their needs. Secondly, it is crucial to let go of the myth of perfection. Innovations and novel ideas cannot be "planned into existence", they require experimentation. Third, lawyers are in the communication business. It is crucial to make ideas concrete, understandable, and actionable.

All in all, sometimes it seems that some people – particularly lawyers – believe that by controlling words they can make things happen, but they forget that only people can do that. A more effective way to make things happen, in our opinion, is to understand people's behavior, ambitions, and needs, so we can support and "nudge" them towards desirable actions through well-designed instructions, contracts, and laws.

You have said that legal visualization can deal with data, information or knowledge. How do you see the role of a lawyer in carrying out the legal visualization? How a multi-disciplinary approach could be promoted?

H&S: There are many different roles that lawyers can take, depending also on their interests and computer skills. Perhaps the most important skills are to be able to sketch ideas visually and be able to work in a multidisciplinary environment.

S: To promote multi-disciplinarity, it would be great to have cross-university cooperation, and have law students work together with business, design and technology students on service and information design projects. It is important to learn to explore ideas in a hands-on way.

H: While it is good to learn how to think like a lawyer, it is also good to unlearn and relearn. One needs to be able to think like a layperson or a business person. If you are a law student, I would recommend to take classes in other disciplines, especially in design thinking and communication.

Do you think that law studies make students less creative?

H: Perhaps temporarily, if law students are still taught to "think like lawyers" and to use text – the written word – as their primary or only tool. But they can learn to be more creative. No law requires them to use text only in their work products.

S: Maybe not less creative per se, you see people solving problems creatively within the profession. But the conception of what the profession is remains quite narrow. Perhaps not all needs and aspirations of the students are addressed within this narrow frame.

Lastly, would you like to say something to future lawyers?

H&S: Future lawyers need not rely on text only; they can rely on visualization as well. In the digital world, contracts and laws actually need a visual user interface. With a little help from designers, future lawyers can provide this. The benefits will be great for lawyers, clients, and the society.

Interview: Laura Salokangas.