Design As Communication

Henrik Gedenryd (July, 1996)

* Design as Communication * (discussion issue)

message by: Henrik Gedenryd <Henrik.Gedenryd@fil.lu.se>

I posted the message below to the Visual-l mailing list. Perhaps we could open the issue for discussion on InfoDesign as well? Henrik Gedenryd

Hello everyone,

And thanks for your responses to my probe about design and communication. Due to the more than fifty replies I got, it has taken me a while to take on writing a summary.

As I try to do so, let me remind you of my original intent (my original posting is included at the end of this message): Graphic designers often describe design as communication. There are even terms like "communication design" and "information design". But as common as these "shallow" uses of the communication metaphor are, as absent are deeper explanations. (Examples of this are everywhere in the design literature. I leave them out here.) Designers speak of communication as if its relation to their own trade was obvious. My opinion is that there is little to justify this assumption: the intuitive meaning that everyone thinks is there does actually not exist.

The reason why I got interested in the communication perspective is that I think it has something to say about the very nature of what designing is about; what the designer's task is, from a cognitive point of view. I have been working on this for a while, so I have thought quite a bit about this. I didn't say this in my original posting, as I wanted your contributions as informative as possible.

The discussion that emerged from my initial question quickly came to divert quite far from my actual question. In particular, it came to concern the idea of affordances, Donald Norman's "the Design of Everyday Things", and his Design Model/System Image/etc. model of what a designer does. There was also the ubiquitous issue of whether design is just art or something more. People also suggested books to read. However, all of these issues had already drifted away from my original concern. (I think this confirms how slippery the communication metaphor is.) For instance, Norman's book was seen as the major example of how design communicates, but Norman doesn't say anything about this explicitly. OK, affordances communicate, carry meaning, and so on. But what does that mean? Where is the deeper significance, the "meat", of the communication perspective?

I believe that communication alludes to the designer's concern with the eventual user - this is the one whom she is communicating with. They want to make their designs understandable, and in this respect the communication perspective is the forerunner of the rather recent concern with usability in design (not to confuse with *function*), which has only become *explicit* with the advent of HCI. I believe that this connection is easiest to make from Mullet and Sano's book - not surprisingly since they link the two perspectives. In fact, their book is among the most informative with respect to the communication perspective. (Besides, it is an excellent book in general. I believe it is the first book about interface design that is on a par with good texts on graphic design in general. I would say it even says many things that advance the state of the art of graphic design literature itself, for example in its treatment of simplicity as a fundamental principle.).

Some of your responses have supported my idea, eg. this one from Andrew Scott <aj.scott@qut.edu> : "Richard Saul Wurman talks about making design a conversation or dialogue with the user/reader. I take it that he means, as much as is possible, listening to the user and responding in useful ways. I imagine this means the designer must try to anticipate the needs of the user and have relevant, understandable replies prepared for all likely 'conversations'." [is this from "Information Architects"?]. And Ben Zuidwijk <ben@codim.nl> : "It's so obvious to me, When designing a user interface, the designer tries to communicate how the product is to be used. In simpler terms: a handle that needs to be pulled should communicate: 'pull me' (preferably by its shape and not by having a sticker that says 'pull')". Well, Ben, I think the discussion has shown that it isn't that obvious to everyone. I believe we should always try to articulate things like this, for teaching especially.

Many people replied about the "meaning" of products, eg. sophistication, status robustness, etc., but I don't think that this is the same kind of communication as when a graphic designer is concerned with making a design as obvious and understandable as possible.

I find it very interesting that there is a symmetrical "communication as design" metaphor in linguistics, called "recipient design". It refers to a speaker's need for designing her message for her specific recipients (ie. make it usable by taking its users into concern). This has shown to be a very important part of speech production in real life, in contrast to what theories of language production say. This feature of speech might be what gives the "design as communication" perspective its intuitive appeal. Cf this reply from Susan Lynn Kropf < slk@sgi.com> : "I've been working on a bunch of Japanese interactive television applications ... In January, there was a big 'launch', .. I wrote the original script for the demo at the launch, and then worked with the NTT folks to refine it according to their content. Most of my suggestions were geared towards making the demo interesting and understandable. (E.g. finding a place in a movie that would be exciting to the press, using timing for maximum impact, being relaxed etc.) ... I was really struck by something that one of the NTT higher-ups said to me in a conversation about UI design. ... He realized that I was _designing_ the demo to communicate the essence of a complicated system to a specific audience in a short time period. ... [When] I write a demo or a paper, I _design_ it to communicate effectively in exactly the same way that I design an interface to communicate. ... That's a very specific example, but I thought it was good to look at it from the reverse also - communication asdesign."

Also compare this to a section from Maria Wadlow's VID column I mentioned in my original posting. All her examples are of *recipient design*: "Typically, we think about design when it comes to the big things, usually the things we are selling: the systems, the documents, the brochures, the products. For these products, we worry about whether our design is better, faster, easier, more intuitive, or more useful than others. But what about all of the other things we produce? What about the recommendations, the instructions, the reports, the meeting minutes, and yes, even the email. These must also be 'designed', but perhaps we don't put as much thought into them. For the most part, these are intermediate products, the means not the end, so we rarely think about 'designing' them, we justfocus on producing them."

OK, that's too long already. I'll probably return when I have more to say on this issue. Again, thanks everyone for a very interesting discussion.

Henrik Gedenryd, Lund University Cognitive Science, Kungshuset, Lundagard ,Lund, Sweden

Thread | Message Archive | Home

John Jay Miller (July 17, 1996)

Henrik,

Thanks for the post and the start of a nice thread.

>The discussion that emerged from my initial question quickly came to divert quite far from my actual question. ...

>> I frequently see comments tht directly or indirectly refer to design in terms of communication. What is the idea behind this metaphor, and does

I was interested in your original question because I have come to view design* (see below) as a 'meta discipline'. The reason for this is that design has appropriated much of its terminology and methodology from other 'disciplines'. The some examples I see are:

the visual language - balance, harmony, symmetry, etc. - from art
gestalt principles - from gestalt psychology
communication theory - from Shannon & Weaver etc.
ethnography - from anthropology
semiotics - from linguistics/philosophy
deconstructionism - from philosophy
'Donald Norman' - from cognitive psychology
etc.

Think back over the responses to your post, how many references to designers or books by designers vs. Norman etc.? Another way to think about it is, how many quotes of designers do you see in non-design journals/books etc vs. how many references do you see to computer scientists/engineers/psychologists etc. in interface/multi-media/interactive design journals/books?

One of the reasons that design 'appropriates' much of it's theory relates to the fact that the terminal degree is the MFA (it could even be argued that the BA/BFA is terminal in practice). Design does not have a scholarly tradition of reading and writing (what doctoral students do), as does almost every other professional discipline that you could name, this is also why I do not put architecture in the professions that I consider design* (see below).

As the uses of computer technology become more important for the practice of design, its implications for design education become _much_ more profound. Where traditionally design education could annex some amount of theory with minor inconvenience/implication when it came to actually doing design, the new technologies require an understanding/basic vocabulary in at least five new (to design) areas that are _vital_ for design education:

1. Programming (try to do Director w/o touching Lingo)
2. Usability Engineering, Testing and Inspection (you made it, now does anyone understand it?)
3. Content Origination (how many empty web-sites or slide-shows posing as 'interactives' have you seen lately?)
4. Cognition/Learning Theory (so we got technology that can be tailored to the learner, so now we have to find out how to design for different learning styles.)
5. Film Theory (moving images and their creation have a whole discipline behind them, so graphic designers are going to move in on the great film-makers?)

Right now, I hear a lot of hand-waving and gnashing of teeth coming from the designers, "But I will be part of a team, someone else will do the programming ... ". Two things about this:

(1) In order to design for a medium you must know what it is capable of. This seems transparent to me but, seemingly, absurd to others. _Please_ see "Understanding Computer and Cognition - a new foundation for design" by Winograd and Flores.

(2) Like photography and art history (which most designers won't become), designers must study these in order to conceptualize and communicate with others.

In most schools it seems (and please let me know if different), novel use of the new technology (interactive applications, user interface design, web design, etc.) is being grafted onto existing the curriculum, usually in graphic design. Ok (and for sure all design professions will/are/should make appropriate use of computers - but hopefully in all areas of the design process (ideation, planning, problem-solving, documentation) not just form-making/visualization which is the norm now), --- but --- the big problem here is that there is now just too much 'stuff' for the bag. So now, students get a little type, a little html (but no cgi), a little layout (but no in-depth education on print technology), a little navigation, etc. etc. etc. Question is, will they be jack-of-all and master-of-none, or will this approach really work.

One answer to this is - Graduate School. This seems to just put of the day of reckoning. Try coping with a grad student who is all set to make the next 'Great American Interactive' and doesn't know what an external function is - yet alone how use/make one, hasn't heard of Busby Berkeley - let alone Luis Bunuel, has never heard of hypertext, and of course wouldn't have clue about setting up a usability inspection run.

No, fellow design educators these issues are not going away. So we need to get busy and restructure our curriculum (academic war time) or introduce new majors (financial/political war time). This doesn't look pretty.

Thanks for your consideration -

*design - graphic, fashion, product, visual communication, industrial.

James Souttar (July 17, 1996)

Henrik, a thought-provoking post.

My immediate reaction is to question whether 'communication', in most human interlocutions, is more than incidentally about 'content' (i.e. structured verbalized information). When we talk to one another, it is generally the unspoken meta messages that are important. Spoken content contains a significant amount of repetition, redundancy and irrelevance. And then there are equally important ways we communicate outside of 'language' - through our use (and reading) of space and time (as the anthropologist Edward T. Hall shows in 'The Hidden Dimension' and 'The Dance of Life').

Is this really any different in graphic design? First reactions to a document (the direct marketeers' 'three second test') really get as far as making sense of the written messages - yet already we have acquired a significant amount of information about it: its 'positioning', its 'tone of voice', how we are intended to approach it (supposing this is clear) and whether we are likely to enjoy it.

Even information design falls into this category. Despite its often dessicated appearance, the semiotics of info design can be quite profound. An example that I find quite compelling is the 'draft form' from the Vietnam war - an inconsequential piece of administrivia, but possessed of such apparent authority that thousands of young Americans meekly complied with its demands to engage in a stupid war in a faraway place.

It seems to me that most information design concerns itself with representing the rigidites and fixities of the machine (and its analogues, the 'corporation as machine' and 'government as machine') to a human audience. As information designers, we probably concentrate overmuch on the cognitive aspects of this process - the efficiency and effectiveness of the putative communication - and downplay the extent to which we try and frame it as a palatable user experience. [As an aside, I can't help wondering whether the term 'information design' was deliberately coined to link with Claude Shannon's use of 'information' in his 'Mathematical Theory of Communication'. Perhaps an info-design-historian, if there is such a thing, has an answer.]

Most 'mainstream' graphic design, however, is more concerned with *framing* and less with *cybernetic communicative exchanges*. Layout (as in the aesthetic disposition of masses), typography and type design, use of colour and images, all speak for the emotive, non-verbal side of graphic communication - and seem to closely parallel the non verbal aspects of speech. In the sense that graphic designers do shape multi-levelled messages that encompass both apparent, verbalized messages as well as unspoken (and sometimes unconsicous) ones, I think they *can* truly claim to be communicators.

Roger Stotesbury (July 17, 1996)

A contribution to the discussion 'design as communication':

Those of us with commercial clients are not paid to design, but to facilitate a message. Perhaps the issue is time. In most cases of design or information design the actual transmission of the message (the communication) happens at a later time than the designing ie when the product is used, or the direct mail campaign is sent out.

However, a focus on communication is helpful as it maintains attention on the receiver, not the craft.

Thread | Message Archive | Home

Geoff Hart (July 17, 1996)

It seems to me that there are only three ways you can look at a graphic image (including hybrid forms such as the printed page):

1. It represents the designer's self-expression, with no intention that anyone other than the designer receive any specific message or experience any response.
2. It represents the designer's attempt to stimulate some _undefined_ response (whether emotion or comprehension) in the viewer, with the explicit intent that the response _should_ differ among viewers.
3. It represents the designer's attempt to stimulate a _specific_ response in the viewer; usually, this response is comprehension of the same message by each viewer, or by as many viewers as possible.

The first is intellectual masturbation, since it reflects solely a desire to please oneself, with no consideration of others. The second is a copout if you believe (as I do) that artists should have something to say before they "speak"; however, I'm no art critic, and many others consider this form of expression to be a legitimate art form. Some days, I can see this logic and accept it; other days, it just irritates me. Only the last of these three alternatives is really within the realm of information design.

The goal of information design is to use visual images, whether words or text or both, to communicate as clearly as possible. Given the random meaning generators we call brains, we'll rarely communicate clearly to everyone, but it's our job to try. Any other goal is "art", not information design; artists may intend to communicate, or they may not, but communication per se is not the defining criterion of art. Art and information design are equally valid forms of expression, but their contexts don't necessarily overlap.

Thread | Message Archive | Home

Robert Jacobson (July 21, 1996)

Henrik Gedenryd began the thread, "Is design communication?", on the VISUAL-L newsgroup. No sooner had he posted his question than it was transformed into a discussion regarding the theoretical foundations of visual design. The responses given here so far are more on-point, which says something good about the profession of information design: we get down to business more quickly.

In response to Henrik's question, I suggest that a design, to be truly successful, must be commutative as well as communicative. Communication, as Gene Youngblood was wont to point out, is the act of sharing meaning: this means such to me and through communication, you understand my meaning to be so. By definition a

communication is reciprocal, however, so in some way, via some channel, your meaning is conveyed to me. (A non-reciprocal expression is not by itself a communication unless there is a feedback channel. It's a bleat.)

Okay. So we exchange meanings. Is that all there is? No. In the act of communicating, elements of our understanding change, whether these changes are accomplished in our cognition or, haptically, in our body (the architect's smart hands, for example). We are changed by the communication. We commutate. Check it out.

It's a neat term meaning to reciprocally change.

It seems to me that a successful design necessarily engenders commutation as well as communication, since its purpose is to provoke us to act -- and whether we do or not must be taken into account by the designer, who changes his/her position accordingly.

[Thread](#) | [Message Archive](#) | [Home](#)

David Sless (July 29, 1996)

I have been following the discussion initiated by Henrik Gedenryd on the VISUAL-L newsgroup and now on InfoDesign. My interest comes from three perspectives. First, our Institute (the Communication Research Institute of Australia) has done a lot of information design projects. Second, I have been doing research on theory in communication for quite a while now. Finally, I have also been doing research on design methods for some time.

I think one of the basic problems that dogs this type of discussion is that many people take the notion of communication as simple, commonsensical and unproblematic. Unfortunately it is not. [This is probably not the place to go into the many reasons why communication is deeply problematic, nor why many people use it is a 'success' word (eg communicating effectively). But anyone who wants to follow this through might like to look at some of the stuff I have written on this (eg *In Search of Semiotics*, *Learning and Visual Communication*) and the writing of others who take what is called a 'social constructionist' view. (A useful recent book is *Social Approaches to Communication* edited by Leeds-Hurwitz, W. NY: The Guilford Press (1995), or *The Discursive Mind*, by Harre, R. and Gillett, G. London Sage (1994), or *Acts of Meanning* by Jerome Brunner.)]

If one starts talking about communication in relation to design, lots of problems occur.

1. If one says that communication is a method of transmitting information or meanings, its not entirely clear what it is that is transmitted in a design. Does something come out of my head, go through the design and pop into the head of the user? And what is the nature of the 'something'.
2. If one says this is shared meaning or understanding, this is manifestly not true on many occassions. For example, when I design a Web site or a billing system, I have to understand how a user might use these things, but I don't have to share the same uses or meanings. Indeed, much of the design we get called on to do is for people with whom we have very little in common and who see the world in very different ways to us. That is part of the design challenge. Reciprocally, to use the design succesfully for their own purposes does not require that the user understands me, my intentions, or the meanings I personally read into the design, so long as they can use the design effectively for their own purposes. So, at the very least, what it is that is 'shared' needs to be carefully teased out.

3. When people think of communication as a process of transmission they often indulge in a misleading kind of animism. It is as if designs, as part of the transmission between designers and users *do things* to users: they 'provoke', 'excite', 'stimulate', 'inform' etc. But this contradicts the notion of the user as an active agent *doing things* with the design, and suggests that the design (remember, an innanimate object) *does* things to people. Voodoo and magic are not far away with this type of reasoning.

For all these reasons, and many more, I think it is useful for information designers to stear clear of the term communication. Moreover, and probably more to the point, I don't think it is necessary in any definition of what we do.

In 1990 our Institute ran the first conference on information design in Australia and in that conference I tried to offer a working definition of information design which deliberately avoided the problematic term communication (See *Designing Information for People* edited by Penman, R. and Sless, D. Canberra: Communication Research Press, 1992). The definition, which is not unlike one offered on this list by Robert Horn a few months ago - though much shorter - is that information design is concerned with making information accessible and usable to people. This definition helps us in a number of ways.

1. It makes clear what good information design is.
2. It tells us how we might determine whether a particular design 'works' or not.
3. It avoids lots of conceptual problems that do not necessarily make us
4. better designers.
5. It gives information design a clear focus on the user.

None of this is to suggest that information design is simple, far from it. But there is little point in complicating life uneccessarily with other people's intellectual baggage.

[Thread](#) | [Message Archive](#) | [Home](#)

Kent Smith (August 5, 1996)

A selection from a rather pragmatic, but insightful, discourse on 'Managerial Communications' from "Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices" by Peter Drucker, HarperCollins, 1985...

> In Plato's "Phaedo" which, among other things, is also the earliest extant
> treatise on rhetoric, Socrates points out that one has to talk to people in
> terms of their own experience, that is, that one has to use carpenters'
> metaphors when talking to carpenters, and so on. One can communicate only
> in the recipient's language or in [their] terms. And the terms have to be
> experience-based. It, therefore, does very little good to try to explain
> terms to people. They will not be able to receive them if they are not
> terms of their own experience. They simply exceed their perception
> capacity.
>The connection between experience, perception, and concept formation -- that
> is, cognition -- is ... infinitely subtler and richer than any earlier
> philosopher imagined. But one fact is proven and comes out strongly in the
> most disparate work, e.g., that of Piaget, B. F. Skinner, and Jerome Bruner.
> Percept and concept in the learner, whether child or adult, are not

> separate. We cannot perceive unless we also conceive. But we also cannot
> form concepts unless we can perceive. To communicate a concept is
> impossible unless the recipient can perceive it, that is, unless it is
> within [their] perception.
> There is a very old saying among writers: "Difficulties with a sentence mean
> confused thinking. It is not the sentence that needs straightening out, it
> is the thought behind it." In writing we attempt, first, to communicate
> with ourselves. An "unclear sentence" is one that exceeds our own capacity
> for perception. Working on the sentence, that is, working on what is
> normally called communciations, cannot solve the problem. We have to work
> on our own concepts first to be able to understand what we are trying to say
> -- and only then can we write the sentence.
>> In communicating, whatever the medium, the first question has to be "Is this
> communication within the recipient's range of perception? Can [they]
> receive it?"

There is no possibility of communications... unless we first know what the recipient, the true communicator, can see and why.

[Thread](#) | [Message Archive](#) | [Home](#)

Case Roole (August 5, 1996)

Here are some comments on David Sless's stimulating message concerning

Design as Communication.

> I think one of the basic problems that dogs this type of discussion is that
> many people take the notion of communication as simple, commonsensical and
> unproblematic. Unfortunately it is not.

Right, this is our common starting-point.

> [This is probably not the place to go into the many reasons why
> communication is deeply problematic, nor why many people use it is a
> 'success' word (eg communicating effectively). But anyone who wants to
> follow this through might like to look at some of the stuff I have written
> on this (eg *In Search of Semiotics*, *Learning and Visual Communication*)
> and the writing of others who take what is called a 'social constructionist'
> view. (A useful recent book is *Social Approaches to Communication* edited
> by Leeds-Hurwitz, W. NY: The Guilford Press (1995), or *The Discursive
> Mind*, by Harre, R. and Gillett, G. London Sage (1994), or *Acts of
> Meanning* by Jerome Brunner.)]

I am not familiar with any of the works you mention, but I guess that I am correct in saying that I am working from a different tradition leading to the same conclusions about the problematic status of "communication". In

the work of W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson, the hard constructional work of an interpreting agent of expressions is taken as the starting point for making sense both of the expressions and the person who produces them. This work is mostly categorized under "Logic" or "Philosophy of Language" and the word "communication" is virtually absent in it.

Anyone interested might check Quine's "Word & Object" (1960, MIT Press) (basic) and Davidson's collection of essays "Inquiries into Truth & Interpretation" (1984, Oxford University Press). The most appropriate essays in this collection are "Radical Interpretation" (basic), "Thought and Talk", and "Communication and Convention". The highly argumentative style makes for tough reading.

The rest of David's text can be divided in two pieces:

1. Criticism on the inclusion of the term "communication" in theorizing on information design.
2. Theorizing on information design from the basis of social construction, that is, with the user's intentions and actions in mind.

I'll comment on David's text piecemeal:

----== 1. Criticism of the notion of "communication". ==----

> If one starts talking about communication in relation to design, lots of
> problems occur.
> 1. If one says that communication is a method of transmitting information
> or meanings, its not entirely clear what it is that is transmitted in a
> design. Does something come out of my head, go through the design and pop
> into the head of the user? And what is the nature of the 'something'.

Right, if a theory speaks in terms of "transmission" it must also include *what* it is that is transmitted.

> 2. If one says this is shared meaning or understanding, this is manifestly
> not true on many occassions. For example, when I design a Web site or a
> billing system, I have to understand how a user might use these things, but
> I don't have to share the same uses or meanings. Indeed, much of the design
> we get called on to do is for people with whom we have very little in common
> and who see the world in very different ways to us. That is part of the
> design challenge.

This is the notion that the shared thing is first available to the expressing agent, then, in encoded form, it resides in the expression, and subsequently it is decoded again by the receiving agent.

You continue the same item with:

> Reciprocally, to use the design succesfully for their own purposes
> does not require that the user understands me, my intentions, or the
> meanings I personally read into the design, so long as they can use
> the design effectively for their own purposes. So, at the very least,
> what it is that is 'shared' needs to be carefully teased out.

I propose a little shift in emphasis that is completely in accord with what you say.

I think it is important that an understanding of an *expression that is to convey information* comes through the *attempt* of the user to understand the designer's intentions and meanings. Only, the value of interpreting the expression depends not on coming to *share* these intentions and meanings.

I emphasized the "information" part, because the necessity of trying to understanding the designer (producer of an expression) seems more obvious there. This specification might not even be necessary.The designer of a door might not at first glance try to convey anything, but the attempts to get through it by a user are based on the recognition that the object *is* a door and that it is designed with the intention to let someone through.

> 3. When people think of communication as a process of transmission they
> often indulge in a misleading kind of animism. It is as if designs, as
> part of the transmission between designers and users *do things* to users:
> they 'provoke', 'excite', 'stimulate', 'inform' etc. But this contradicts
> the notion of the user as an active agent *doing things* with the design,
> and suggests that the design (remember, an innanimate object) *does* things
> to people. Voodoo and magic are not far away with this type of reasoning.

This is the notion that the shared thing is first available to the expressing agent, then it is put in a form *that doesn't encode the shared thing fully*, but that, on interpretation, leads the receiver to the shared thing again, due to hir psychical make-up.

> For all these reasons, and many more, I think it is useful for information
> designers to stear clear of the term communication. Moreover, and probably
> more to the point, I don't think it is necessary in any definition of what
> we do.

Right, but what's the alternative?

---- 2. social constructionist basis of information design ----

> In 1990 our Institute ran the first conference on information design in
> Australia and in that conference I tried to offer a working definition of
> information design which deliberately avoided the problematic term
> communication (See *Designing Information for People* edited by Penman, R.
> and Sless, D. Canberra: Communication Research Press, 1992). The definition,
> which is not unlike one offered on this list by Robert Horn a few months ago
> - though much shorter - is that /information design/ is concerned with making information
> accessible and usable to people.

> This definition helps us in a number of ways.
> 1. It makes clear what good information design is.
> 2. It tells us how we might determine whether a particular design 'works' or not.
> 3. It avoids lots of conceptual problems that do not necessarily make us better designers.
> 4. It gives information design a clear focus on the user.

I am new to this list. Sorry if I tread any well-worn paths below.

"Information" is a term no less popular than "communication" and no more explained. I wonder if the criticism

on "communication" also applies to "information". I wonder if "information" has a very definite meaning on this mailing list or that it also needs further scrutiny.

If "information" is to designate the contents of actual databases and directories with text files, I am quite happy with the given definition of information design. However, if it is to have a more inclusive meaning than that, I wonder what this could be and I expect that it is under too much pressure to be able to carry the mentioned definition of information design.

I won't go into the mentioned ways in which the "communication"-free definition of information design helps us. I just notice that the enumerated items very much overlap. It would be nice if further comments to David's message would lead to their elaboration.

Thread | Message Archive | Home

Steve Smith (August 5, 1996)

Bob Jacobson introduces to the discussion, the term Commutation, which indicates a reciprocal change in both the receiver of the communication (design in this case) and the designer.

Bob leads us to a very good point... we do not only "exchange meanings" but we "reciprocally change" when we communicate (commutate?). Is it even possible to communicate without "commutating"?

Most (all?) artists and designers are driven to create and design by their own need to change. They need an audience, someone to spin and thereby take spin from, someone to react to their act.

To adopt a spiritual concept, Karma; in art, design, communication there is always equal action and reaction. No brush stroke, no hammer blow, no word, no intention goes unnoticed, has no effect. In fact, every act, whether deliberate or subconscious, every intention, every nuance is overlayed on every other one to create the final message, the final product, the final "life" we each lead which, of course, is only part of the larger fabric we weave collectively.

The act of encapsulation, modularizing our communications, our acts, our intentions IS the act of communication, the act of design, the act of art. While we may think a word, a phrase, a paragraph, an article, a chapter, a book stands alone, it doesn't. While we may imagine that the hammer blow to soft metal will be hidden by the subsequent hammer blows and therefore not matter, it does, it determines s how the subsequent blows leave their own mark. While we may imagine that what we are thinking while we create a work of art or design something will be opaque to the viewer, the user, the reciever, it isn't.

In a sense, science, art and design are all an attempt to create duality where there is none The experience Jacobson describes as commutation is a dualistic view of what the non-dualist knows implicitely. No word is uttered without both the utterer and the hearer changing for it. No design is generated without the reciever of the design and the designer changing for it. The difference, as Jacobson describes it between a "communication" and a "bleat".

Thanks Bob for this very simple but powerful reminder.

Thread | Message Archive | Home

James Souttar (August 5, 1996)

David Sless wrote:

> 3. When people think of communication as a process of transmission
> they often indulge in a misleading kind of animism. It is as if
> designs, as part of the transmission between designers and users *do
> things* to users: they 'provoke', 'excite', 'stimulate', 'inform'
> etc. But this contradicts the notion of the user as an active agent
> *doing things* with the design, and suggests that the design
> (remember, an innanimate object) *does* things to people. Voodoo and
> magic are not far away with this type of reasoning.

Perhaps it's worth considering that our (popular) employment of 'communicate' derives from the use of the Latin verb communicare for the administration of Holy Communion. In this sense, it clearly implied the descent of an 'inward and spirtiual grace' into the communicant. I'm not especially interested in the Theology, but I do think that the original sense of 'communicate' has interesting echoes in David's accusation of 'Voodoo' and 'magic'.

Owen Barfield suggested that language developed at a time when human consciousness was 'participated' - where 'self' and 'other' were not distinct as they are to our modern sensibilities. He points to some of the ways this lingers in our speech - how we still use the Latin 'genius', for instance, with its implication of something that is outside the individual.

I would suggest that there is more than a vestige of this 'original participation' in graphic design (and the fine arts generally). I think many of us do feel, albeit in a vague semi-conscious way, that 'design' originates from a consciousness beyond the individual - a shadowy, archetypal, collective consciousness, if you will. It's interesting that in this most unparticipated time, it is graphic imagery (as well as music) that provides a focus for the new tribalism. How is it that designers like David Carson and P. Scott Makela manage to evoke such a strong sense of recognition in their audiences, as if they were speaking to each and every one of them individually, despite using a graphic language that is so improbable and obscure to the rest of us? The only plausible explanation I can think of is that there is some kind of 'communication' going on (closer to its original sense than we might feel comfortable with) - with the designer acting as an intermediary, seer, shaman.

Thread | Message Archive | Home

Kent Smith (August 11, 1996)

Case Roole had written:

> "Information" is a term no less popular than "communication" and no more
> explained. I wonder if the criticism on "communication" also applies to
> "information".

Once more I'd like to share an excerpt from 'Managerial Communications' from "Management: Tasks,
Responsibilities, Practices" by Peter Drucker, HarperCollins, 1985. (This is currently available in my local
Barnes & Noble bookstore; I strongly urge you to get a copy.)

> The requirements for effective information are the opposite of those for
> effective communication. Information is, for instance, always specific.
> We perceive a configuration in communications; but we convey specific
> individual data in the information process. Indeed, information is,
> above all, a principle of economy. The fewer data needed, the better the
> information. And an overload of information, that is, anything much
> beyond what is truly needed, leads to information blackout. It does not
> enrich, but improverishes.
>
> At the same time, information presupposes communication. Information is
> always encoded. To be received, let alone to be used, the code must be
> known and understood by the recipient. This requires prior agreement,
> that is, some communication. At the very least, the recipient has to
> know what the data pertain to. Are the figures on a piece of computer
> tape the height of mountaintops or the cash balances of Federal Reserve
> member banks? In either case, the recipient would have to know what
> mountains are or what banks are to get any information out of the data.
>
> The prototype information system may well have been the peculiar language
> known as 'Armee Deutsch' (Army German) which served as language of
> command in the Imperial Austrian Army prior to 1918. A polyglot army in
> which officers, noncommissioned officers, and men often had no language
> in common, it functioned remarkably well with fewer than two hundred
> specific words -- "fire," for instance, or "at ease," each of which had
> only one totally unabiguous meaning. The meaning was always an action.
> And the words were learned in and through actions, i.e., in what
> behaviorists now call "operant conditioning." [A-ha! That's what we
> information designers need, Operant Conditioning!]
>
> The tensions in the Austrian Army after many decades of nationalist
> turmoil were very great indeed. Social intercourse between members of
> different nationalities serving in the same unit became increasingly
> difficult, if not impossible. But to the very end, the information
> system functioned. It was completely formal; completely rigid;
> completely logical in that each word had only one possible meaning; and
> it rested on completely pre-established communication regarding the
> specific response to a certain set of sound waves. [Start strong
> emphasis...] This example, however shows also that the effectiveness of
> an information system depends on the willingness and ability to think
> through carefully what information is needed by whom for what purposes,
> and then on the systematic creation of communication among the various
> parties to the system as to the meaning of each specific input and output
> [...end strong emphasis]. The effectiveness [of the information system],
> in other words, depends on the pre-establishment of communication.

[Emphasis inserted by me]

Geoff Hart (August 11, 1996)

There's been some interestingly convoluted rhetoric that "communication" and "information" are too vague and poorly defined to be useful terms for information designers. Although I certainly understand the need for precision in speech (written or otherwise), I think this rhetoric splits hairs far beyond the point of usefulness for _practitioners_ of information design. Thus, I'll don my devil's advocate hat and leap into this particular part of the fray. [Looks something like... =@8^{)}]

Communication is like pornography: nobody seems to know how to define it, but we all know it when we see it. Webster's tells me that communication is the act of transmitting information; information, oddly enough, is that which informs. I believe we need go no further than this to have a common basis for discussion: we communicate whenever we transfer meaning to ("inform") someone else (even if the meaning isn't what we intended). _Successful_ communication transfers the meaning that we intended. Information design has the goal of successful communication.

[Removes devil's advocate hat] Having said that, let me take a more conciliatory approach. For some theoretical purposes, it may indeed be useful or even essential to develop a more specific vocabulary. I'm not aware of any, but then again, I'm a practitioner, not a theoretician. Thus, my proposal: use "communication" and "information" as appropriate terminology when fine shades of meaning are irrelevant; use more specific jargon (and define what your goal is in so doing) when you're focusing on a specific shade of meaning.

For the original thread, whether design involves communication, both terms suit me just fine, thanks. Information design is all about successful communication, no matter how you define information and communication.

... no matter how you define information and communication.

[Geoff Hart also sent the following thoughts concerning 'Design Karma':]

Steve Smith raised a fascinating concept... communication as kharma! I'd (mildly) take issue with one of Steve's assertions, however: kharma implies only the existence of cause and effect, not specifically equality of action and reaction. Indeed, although the reaction is most commonly in proportion to the action that precipitates it, a small act can have great kharmic consequences, and a large act can have no few or no consequences (though only rarely would this happen).

The commutation aspect of the discussion is certainly intriguing. It reminds us of a continuing theme in information design: before you can communicate, you must understand something of your audience (audience analysis!), and change your style (thus, yourself) by so doing.

Claude Cossette (August 13, 1996)

On the 17 of July I received a writing from InfoDesign@wins.uva.nl concerning "Design as Communication (2)".

Here is my comments to John Miller as of July 21st

The text you wrote teased me as no one before. Because it echoed my own thoughts and papers on the subject. I dont know in what field you come from (information, computer sciences, bibliotheconomy, design?) but you sure know pretty well how graphic design schools work.

Here are some of the echos you sparkled:

1. "design has appropriated much of its terminology and methodology from other disciplines". It has or it should have. Some designers are at ease with semiotics, marketing or psycho-sociology (attitude change); but unfortunately, most are illiterate in these fields. I know why: all their education come from aesthetics of visual arts. How come? Mainly because graphic design is taught in art schools, and more than often, by few graphic designers and many artists. Still, most graphic designers think that their mission (mystic) is to educate people to "good taste", not to solve effectively a communication problem for the person or the organization that pay them.

2. "how many references to designers or books by designers". Not very many for sure. It is my 25th anniversary of teaching at the university level. I admit it is very paintaking to get students to read one book; so we can understand why they cannot write one page. Young people who engage in plastic arts are of two sorts: some opt for it by choice... some by "obligation" (because they are weak in other matters... or as a bumper because "pure" plastic arts they adore do not bring bread to the table). On the other hand, most of them are "homo faber" more than "homo sapiens". Graphic designers can "do"; few can "speak about" or "write about". Normal, maybe. Designing is synthesis while discoursing about design is analysis. Performing in both is difficult if not impossible... Graphic designers do; they do not think about design. A pity! So it is a fact: we don't read designers no more in design journals than in non-design ones.

3. "Design does not have a scholarly tradition of reading and writing". See second point. I add that a survey among graphic designers (made here at Laval University) about the opportunity of a MA in graphic design revealed that professional graphic designers do not believe that a MA can give more "useful knowledge" to professionnals. In fact, as you suggested, they are NOT professionnals, even if they seek ardently professional status (hoping naively that legislation would bring them the credibility they dont gain through their expertise).

4. "the new technologies require an understanding/basic vocabulary in at least five new (to design) areas". Yes, a professionnal graphic designer must have knowledge from many fields. --Incidently, changing the designating term would help change the reality: a graphic designer is what we now know; the "one with knowledge" may be called a "graphiker" (@#$%?)-- So, I agree with you, the graphiker must master

- simple logic to be able to structure problem environment,
- problem-solving techniques,
- marketing concepts because most of the time he works for commerce and industry,
- applied social research techniques to check the effectiveness of his messages,
- learning theory to understand how the receptors function,
- plastic composition theory,
- semiotics to construct purposely his image-messages, Plus, yes, I must admit, realizing at what pace multimedia progress:
- film theory because there is no precise boundary between static and motion pictures anymore,
- computer programming,
- and without doubt some others.

I think all these knowledges are not and will not be offered in graphic design curricula now officialized, and will never be offered if curricula stay tied to art departments.

5. "someone else will do the programming". Evidently, it is magic thinking on the part of graphic designers that "some other" will do the job. One must know the medium to be able to "imagine" some original way (or plainly some efficient way) to use that medium. No graphic designer would deny that knowing photography or photolithography is useless, even if most of them know far too superficially these techniques. Just take a look at this (mine) web page created by a young talentuous graphic designer. She has done the best job she could not knowing Html, Perl or whatever: http://www.ulaval.ca/ikon/HOME.HTML

Now look at this one (also mine) done by a similar young talentuous graphic designer who masters programming: http://www.ulaval.ca/ikon/IKONWEB/ikon.html

There is no good graphic design concept without extensive knowledge of the medium that will materialize that design idea.

6. "novel use of the new technology (interactive applications, user interface design, web design, etc.) is being grafted onto existing curricula". It is a fact that new technology is grafted onto existing curricula (if it happens that such an hypothetic interest in new technology has to be placed somewhere in a curriculum). Mainly because most of the professors who manage design curricula do not know new technology, nor how new technology could help good design, etc. Consequently, only few students try to bypass the walls they encounter and get to master new technology with sweat and time, and maybe the encouragement of few young professors -often at the price of bad grades in the traditional courses of their traditional professors.

7. "Graduate School. This seems to just put of the day of reckoning. Try coping with a grad student who is all set to make the next 'Great American Interactive' and doesn't know what an external function is". It is true that a 4000 hours curriculum might not be enough to garantee a profoundly educated graphic design professional; this graphic designer will inevitably be a generalist. Here at Laval, we CHOSE to give birth to a jack of all trades; a small market like ours could not absorb a specialized medical illustrator, a cuisine photographer, a typographiker or... whatever. But with new communication facilities (Internet and so on), an expert graphiker would have clients hundreds miles away. (I am the editor of a collection at Editions Trancontinental in Montreal, 250 km away from Quebec City; layout and prepress are done in Quebec City; email, fax, FedEx, ftp shrink the gap.)

On the other hand, a MA would be the place to specialize... if a true graphic design MA would be effectively given in any university. Most of the MA and MFA offered (would it be in Europe or in North America) are in fact masters in PLASTIC ARTS because hooked to art departments: such a "master in graphic design" ending as a composition made out of alphabetic letters and showed in a gallery (as I have seen it many times) is in fact a master in plastic arts. A professional graphiker would better do a master degree in sociology, psychology, history, marketing, law or any other matter; THAT would bring a new perspective to visual communication.

8. "So we need to get busy and restructure our curriculum". These issues are not going away but few professors sense the urgency to transform curricula; they are tenured; in Quebec, they even are syndicated.

The only way I see graphic design would progress one more step would be sideway: getting its new material from other sources. Graphic design is in a stall as long as it stick getting all its knowledge from art. For myself, after 25 years teaching and directing graphic design programs, I came to the conclusion that -situation beeing what it is- "graphic design out of art departments" could not be transformed; I better try my "last" chance

elsewhere. In a communication or marketing department for example. There I could train "graphikers", "visual ommunicators", capables of PLANNING EFFECTIVE VISUAL COMMUNICATION MESSAGES. And hire -as slaves to handmake to orders the images I need- graphic designers coming out of art departments.

Best,

Claude Cossette
Directeur du Programme de Communication graphique
Ecole des Arts visuels, Universite Laval, Quebec, Canada
http://www.ulaval.ca/ikon/HOME.HTML

[Thread](#) | [Message Archive](#) | [Home](#)

InfoDesign (version 0.b2.1) - For comments on this site, contact its [WebMaster](#).