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### Information Design: Creating a Place in Academia

Information Design is a relatively new field of study in academia. Although information design has been a part of our daily lives for centuries, it has not always been a part of the lexicon in academic circles surrounding art, graphic design, writing, rhetoric or other historically academic disciplines. With the ever increasing barrage of information at our fingertips through the World Wide Web and other forms of technical and informational communication, a way to organize and sift through this information is being demanded. With this increased demand of organized information comes a greater need to clearly define what is considered effective use of information, better known as *information design*. Information Design is a necessary area of study in academia in order to map out the numerous and complex elements that help define it as a discipline as well as a legitimate profession in the workplace. There are various subjects within the study of information design that help articulate and define good information design. These include but are not limited to a cohesive and recognizable definition; an understanding of the history of information design including typography, visual structure, and visual social semantics; understanding the methods of information design achievement through content, task and audience analysis; and creating research and theory to back up the practical needs of good information design in order to overcome corporate boundaries. Through these areas of focus a clearer picture of effective information design will emerge.

There is no precise definition for information design. Every scholar who writes about information design attempts a different definition. According to Michael J. Albers, "A major reason for the varying definitions comes from the immaturity of the information design discipline and the bias of each person that reflects the previous experiences. Right now, information design can handle and should have a wide range of definitions that help spur debate and inquiry into exactly what the field does and how it should focus itself. As information design matures into its own field, an overall agreed-upon definition will emerge; one that will probably take elements from each of the foregoing definitions but will integrate them in a unique way" (Albers 3). With so many varying definitions, it is no surprise at the confusion of what constitutes information design, what is included and what is not. The more specific a definition gets, the more limiting it becomes in the scope of information design. What scholars can agree on is that information design is more than just the simplification of document design.

There are a multitude of factors that go into creating an effective piece of communication within this field. Saul Carliner tried to break these factors down into a three-part framework: physical, cognitive and affective. According to Carliner, "From the user's perspective, good physical design lets them find information of interest easily" (Carliner 564). He then continues with the definition of cognitive design in that it "primarily focuses on the design process: adequately defining the users' performance goals and preparing a solution that addresses them" (Carliner 566). He continues, "The last level of design is the affective, designing the communication product for its optimum emotional impact" (Carliner 568). It is the affective part of the framework that I feel separates Carliner from other theorists in the field. However all theorists understand that the ultimate goal should be user-centered. Without an analysis of the end-user, information design is essentially ineffective. Information design sets out to solve the problem of the end-user. Carliner continues this idea stating that "Design is a problem-solving discipline. It considers more than the appearance of the designed product, but also the underlying structure of the solution and its anticipated reception by users" (Carliner 563).

In order to develop a definition of information design, it is absolutely necessary to understand the history of information design and how it has evolved over the centuries. Two scholars who delve into the history of information design are Karen A. Schriver and Walter J. Ong. What Schriver uncovered in her research was that true document design has developed from a long history of varying disciplines. “Rarely do they [historical sources] make reference to the relationship between writing and design. To newcomers, the histories of rhetoric and composition, on one hand, and the history of graphic design, on the other, suggest that these areas have little to do with each other. Of course, experienced document designers know that just the opposite is true” (Schriver 15). Schriver also highlights both consumerism and technology as major influences in the advancement of information design. Ong, on the other hand, focuses on the evolution of print versus manuscript and how print has greatly affected the field of information design. Manuscript writing was more interactive, more social. It was the exchanging of ideas through the pen. It was always a “working” document. Manuscript writing was also meant to be read orally. When print came into being, much of this changed. Ong wrote, “All text involved sight and sound. But whereas we feel reading as a visual activity cueing in sounds for us, the early age of print still felt it as primarily a listening process, simply set in motion by sight...Print situates words in space more relentlessly than writing ever did. Writing moves words from the sound world to a world of visual space, but print locks words into position in this space. Control of position is everything in print” (Ong 54). With print, then, came a “private ownership of words” as opposed to the shared intellectual property of collective ideas. As Ong states, “Print culture of itself is a different mind-set. It tends to feel a work as ‘closed,’ set off from other works, a unit in itself. Print culture gave birth to the romantic notions of ‘originality’ and ‘creativity,’ which set apart an individual work from other works even more, seeing its origins and meaning as independent of outside influence, at least ideally” (Ong 60). And with this new approach to individual ownership over writing and thought came copyright laws and publishing rights forbidding a printed book to be reprinted without the permission of the original

publisher. "Typography had made the word into a commodity" (Ong 58). This leads the discussion into another element of the discipline of design, understanding the history of typography, visual structure, and visual social semantics.

The best place to start with a history of typography is Eva R. Brumberger who states, "Only a handful of studies have looked beyond typography's role in the physical act of reading to its role in the rhetorical act of meaning-making" (Brumberger 224). Brumberger did a couple of studies that measured typeface appropriateness. Her first study hypothesized that readers are aware of typeface/text matches and mismatches. That study provided clear support for the first hypothesis. Her second study and hypothesis focused on the persona of typeface affecting a reader's perception of the text persona itself. This study came back inconclusive. Ultimately, more studies need to be done to show how typography can affect the overall meaning of information design and its impact on the user.

Along with typography, how text is structured also plays a role in the visual design of information. Stephen A. Bernhardt explores this idea when he writes, "Writing, especially when visually informative, encourages the writer to be exact about grouping related ideas, delineating beginnings and ending, and using cues to signal to the reader a graphic representation of cognitive organization. By studying and writing text which display their structures through white space, graphic patterning, enumerative sequences, and so on, student writers can gain a heightened sense of categories, divisions, and orderly progression" (Bernhardt 67). This, in turn, provides a more effective end product for a user/reader. The structuring of text provides the reader with a map in which to gain the information they need quickly.

Learning how typography and structure affects meaning is important in information design. Along those same lines, still images are also used to create meaning for document designers. Claire Harrison refers to the term "visual social semiotics" to explain the use of still images in making meaning.

Images take that meaning one step further. Harrison writes, “The important fact for professional communicators is that readers/users no longer rely solely on written text for comprehension; they absorb and process all that they see within a document to create meaning for themselves. Horn calls this multi-modal mix *visual language*:

*...the tight coupling of words, images, and shapes into a unified communication unit. ‘Tight coupling’ means that you cannot remove the words or the images or the shapes from a piece of visual language without destroying or radically diminishing the meaning a reader can obtain from it”* (Harrison 46).

Horn actually created and copyrighted a name for this idea known as VLicons or Visual Language icons. Horn’s VLicons are a direct response to the complexity of information in contemporary society. “Visual language has emerged just as other languages have – by people creating it and speaking it. It has evolved, I believe, because of the urgent needs of contemporary individuals and organizations to deal with complexity. Many ideas are best expressed with visual language, and others can only be expressed by visual language” (Jacobson 28). With all the complexity that so much information brings, the problem of how to interpret and use all of it can only be solved through various modes of expression. Typography, text structure and visual language are three important areas of study within information design that must not be neglected.

As complexity is discussed, complex problem solving within information design requires various methods. However, every method comes back to the end-user and the goals they wish to achieve with documents they encounter. “Support for complex problem-solving must focus on the user’s goals and needs and provide that information in a manner that allows a person to rapidly develop a solution appropriate for the situation” (Albers 267). Albers’ solution is audience, context and content analysis. The information designer must have a strong sense of who the end-user is, what motivates them and

essentially what their goals are as it relates to the information in front of them. Once the end-user is understood, the information designer must take it one step further and understand the context from which the end-user is viewing the information. Additionally, and equally as important, the information designer must understand the content they are providing. They must know the data, the interrelations within the data, and then be able to make predictions or relate the information to the larger picture. “Thus, the users’ main need is information that supports gaining a clear understanding of the problem and the possible solutions” (Albers 277).

In looking at all the elements that go into great information design, what is needed more than anything is research and theory to back up the practical needs of good information design in order to overcome corporate boundaries within the workplace. There are many factors that limit the information designer in the workplace. The biggest obstacle is that only recently has information design emerged as a legitimate field of study outside of the broader scope of communication. And without a field of study, it is less likely to be accepted as a legitimate profession in the workplace. In the past, information designers have been more specialized to copy writer, graphic designer, or web developer to name a few. With so much information being produced now through the advancement of technology and social media, a broader form of communication is needed. That professional is the information designer. It encompasses all of the elements of the more specialized fields along with a broader understanding of the relationship with the end-user. With the myriad of demands being put on the information designer, it should have its place as a legitimate profession, but it has yet to gain widespread credibility. However, the perception of information designers is gradually changing. Robert Jacobson comments that “While it’s difficult to ascribe to information design all the desired characteristics of a mature profession, there is clearly movement, if not yet toward professionalism, then towards standards” (Jacobson 6).

Another factor that limits the effectiveness, importance and capability of the true information designer is the lack of time and effort given to this group of professionals as they are charged with designing complex documents that serve a vast and undefined group of end-users. A great information designer spends the majority of their time analyzing the situation and audience of their eventual end product. However, most workplaces only give them the time and resources to simply create the document needed without proper analysis or collaboration among necessary departments. Without a vision of utilizing the end product, it is sure to fail or be ineffective at best. Without the proper understanding of everything that must go into document design in order to create highly effective pieces, information designers will never get the credibility or the resources they deserve. Jacobson alludes to this problem when he writes, "There is no time for most things, including information, to be designed well. The quality we cannot attain we make up in quantity: kilobytes, megabytes, gigabytes, terabytes – so many bytes that we may need a data muzzle. This deluge of information, as Richard Saul Wurman notes in *Information Architects*, is contributing to a crisis of understanding on every front. It's a common design cliché that 'less is more,' but good information design isn't a matter of more or less. Rather, it results from harnessing the determination to engender better understanding to the appropriate skills for doing so" (Jacobson 8). In other words, design is about empowering the user through easy, efficient, stream-lined documents to make information easily accessible and understood.

So, ultimately, who has the power? Most would say that employers and those who commission information designers are the ones with the power yet without the knowledge to be effective. But information designers do have a space to prove their value through the work they are commissioned to do. They simply need to identify where the information chaos is and provide an effective solution. Jacobson points out, "Presumably, the more the information designer identifies with the dispossessed – those currently without access to the information necessary for bettering their lot, those for whom the world is eternally in informational chaos – the cleverer and better skilled he or she must be to succeed"

(Jacobson 12). This statement sounds like a scary threat that information designers must be on their game to succeed. However, it can be viewed in another way. Information designers, because it is a relatively new field, can use this lack of knowledge in the workplace to their advantage. They do this by using the skills and methods presented here to create highly effective solutions to communication problems within their places of work. By creating solutions to the ever-increasing chaos of information sharing, they have the opportunity to prove their value and carve out a place for themselves. Ultimately, they become the pioneers for information designers in creating a legitimate and respected profession. It will require dedication, persistence and perseverance, but it will be highly rewarding.

Information Design has been around since the beginning of human existence. We transfer information in a multitude of ways, some effective and others ineffective. Although the principles of design have been around a long time, the world of information sharing is changing and increasing so rapidly that new and innovative solutions are needed to not only keep up with the content but find effective ways to translate that information quickly and effectively. This is where the study of information design as a field of study has flourished in the information age of the last few decades. But there is a continued need for more research and more studies on the elements of design and the way they affect the transfer of information from one individual to the next. Legitimizing the field of study in academia will pave the way to being a respected profession within the workplace.



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