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COMMUNICATION DESIGN AND THE AGE OF ABUNDANCE

DESIGN DE COMUNICAÇÃO E A ERA DA ABUNDÂNCIA

RESUMO

O design não acontece no vácuo. Designers trabalham com materiais externos e no contexto de nossa diversificada e globalizada cultura. Em tempos que já se foram, essas fontes eram muito limitadas. Hoje em dia - na aldeia global da comunicação digital - há uma superabundância de recursos descartáveis com o clique de um mouse. Os olhos de todos estão constantemente inundados por uma cachoeira de material visual de origem e qualidade diversificadas. Estudantes e profissionais de design, tendo este vasto reservatório de recursos, vivem na era da abundância. Isto os torna melhores?

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Design de comunicação. Abundância. Escassez.

ABSTRACT

Design does not happen in a vacuum. Designers work with external material and in the context of our diverse and globalized culture. In times that are now gone, these sources where very limited. Nowadays – in the global village of digital communication – there are a super-abundance of resources disposable at the click of a mouse. Everyone'seyes are constantly flooded with a waterfall of visual material of the most diverse origin and quality. Design students and professionals, having this vast reservoir of resources, are living in the age of abundance. Is this making them any better?

KEYWORDS

Communication Design. Abundance. Scarcity.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, our visual world has changed drastically.Visually speaking, we can say that we have moved from a world of scarcity to a world of abundance. Not so long ago, when the disciplines of Graphic and Industrial Design where consolidated(Buchanan, 2001), Communication Design students and practitioners from all over the World had access to a very limited set of resources, as inspirational sources and as working material. The luckiestcould access to a not-so-extensive bibliography – sometimes printed in a foreign language –,visit places with a deep visual and Design culture, have access to enormous libraries of typefaces, illustrations and photographs. Others – particularly those living in the Periphery – had access to a very limited set of resources: a few books, a small collection of materials acquired on personal travels were they were eagerly scouting for Design objects likea copy of the London's Underground map or a photograph of the Metro in Paris. They had access only to a few typefaces available on the print shop and limited access to illustrative and photographic material. The list of

elements that students and professionals need can be expanded.

There are at least two different angles to consider from this perspective: the creative one (the things that one can think of) and a production one (the things that one can actually do). As Bruno Latour clearly explains,Designers – acting as modern Prometheus – do not create*ex-nihilo*(Latour, 2008). These scattered collections mentioned beforecan undoubtedly be considered as the sources of inspiration for projects to come – one can only know those things that can name and probably can name only those things that have seen – and the resources at hand (namely typefaces, photographs, illustrations) can be understood as the raw material forforeseeablevisual communication projects.

These days, living completely immersed "in the electronic age which succeeds the typographic and mechanical era of the past five hundreds years" (McLuhan, 1962), the existing situation for Communication Design students and practitionersseems to bequite different.

Potentially, this ishighly positive as designers certainly have more options – hence the possibility of getting better outcomes – but in practical terms thiscould also lead them to what the North American psychologist Barry Schwartz have called "analysis paralysis": a situation where too many choices creates a paralysis effect(Schwartz, 2004).

In the year 2008, the technology writer Nicholas Carr published an article in The Atlantic magazine under the bold title of "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" (Carr, 2008). On this article, Carr speaks about the influence of new media on the way we concentrate on tasks, discussing the shift from scarcity to abundance in written material. According to him, this is a fact that could lead individuals to a superficial comprehension of many facts instead of a deep comprehension of just some. Carrexplains,"as the media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s, media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought." (Carr, 2008)

Carr's article was broadly discussed in the global village (to use McLuhan's words) but beyond being for or against his argument – is this making us stupid or less focused –, we have to recognize that the abundance of visual (and textual, para textual, audiovisual and more) material disposable at the click of a mouse is vast.

Paraphrasing Carr, the question to pose then could be "Is Google

Making Designers Stupid?"

2. ANALYSIS PARALYSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN

On the book "The paradox of choice"(which has a provocative subtitle, "why more is less", that ring the bells of designers, used to hear the motto adopted by Mies van der Rohe, "less is more") Schwartz explains that too many choices do not increase satisfaction. On the contrary, having too many choices decrease satisfaction. Even worse than that: it creates paralysis. Anyone, confronted with multiple alternatives, has to select. To have some alternatives is definitively better than to have none, but having too many is not necessarily better.This increases the expectations and creates a false assumption: if things go wrong, the person making the choiceis at fault (because he had many choices and he had selected the wrong one) (Schwartz, 2004).

In the context of Communication Design, we are not in a different world than the consumer world that Schwartz depicts on his book. Let's consider some different cases from the Design repertoire such as Typography, Color and Photography.

Not so many years ago, the options of typefaces to choose were quite limited. In personal conversations with former students of the hochschule für gestaltung ulm (hfg ulm), the author of this paper has found out that many of the statements they did – typographically speaking – were based on the fact that the school didn't have any other typeface (and it could not afford to buy more). Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk – the typeface the hfg ulm used most of the times – was and was not a communication design statement: it was also a matter of limited choice. As a matter of fact, they used other typefaces when they didn't have Akzidenz Grotesk for a particular size. Those days – the hfg ulm run from 1953 to 1968 – typography was not only expensive: it was also controlled by a handful of people in the World that – as Mike Parker explains on avideo interview (*Mike Parker*, 2012) – decided which typefaces to develop and who will market them.

In 2014, we are certainly living in a quite different environment. Consider for example Apple products, as they have won a space in design studios of the World particularly because they did good typographic choices

from the very beginning(*The Dawn of Desktop Publishing - Computerphile*, 2014).In 2014 the Macintosh Operating System – OS X – comes with more than a hundred different typefaces – including non-latin ones –available for the user tochoose. On top of that, every user can further expand this library using the myriad of free fonts available in the market – consider for instance the Google Webfonts initiative that releases hundreds of fonts under the SIL Open Font License – or by buying fonts from hundreds of different type foundries located around the World. Where the designers should start? Should they use a typeface available with the Operating System because is handy? Should they use a free font? Should they go out and buy one? Ifthey decide to do so, from which foundry are they going to buy? Which would then be their favorite typographer (typographers are like rock stars these days)? And then, it get much worse, one weight or multiple weights?

To illustrate this concept, only one example will be sufficient. When Linotype released the Univers system, designed by Adrian Frutiger in 1957, it consisted of 21 different cuts, from Univers 39 (ultra light condensed) to Univers 93 (ultra heavy expanded). In the new version released by Linotype – named Univers Next – there are 59 cuts plus 4 monospaced weights. This situation can create not only a moment of paralysis while picking the right typeface for a given project but a great dissatisfaction after the fact because it hasn't been selected properly.

As the famous North American designer Massimo Vignelli once said, a designer shoulduse only five typefaces: Bodoni, Helvetica, Times Roman, Century, Futura. He was probably foreseeing these abundance days. But if a typeface is "how language looks like",wouldVignelli's comment still valid in a world of multilingual and diverse contexts?

Considering another aspect where visual communication designers work on a daily basis, the universe of colorcould be understood in a similar way. In precedent days, the options of colors were limited by economic reasons. It was – and in certain contexts still is – cheaper to print using one ink (hence, one color) than using two, three, four or – invery particular contexts – more than that. Therefore, the designer had to carefully choose which color (or colors)would use. Designers had to think more beforehand, but the options were limited. Once a decision was made, the possibilities were even fewer. Theycould move even faster and the satisfaction came

from the fact that – with limited resources – the acquired results sometimes were quite impressive.

Even in the early days of digital technologies – specially speaking about personal computers and screen oriented projects – the different colors that a designer could use were limited. In 8 bit resolution screens, there were only 256 different colors to visualize. In projects developed for the early World Wide Web, the shared color palette between Windows and Macintosh systems include only 216 colors. There was a clear absence of diverse possibilities.

Moving ahead a few years, in 2014 most of the people using computer technologies are using 24 bit digital screens – a spaced denominated as "True Color" – where a possible number of 16,777,216 different colors can be visualized. The nuances that this provides are much more subtle. But, once again, too many choices can lead to paralysis.

It is possible to understand a similar situation moving to another context, the world of photography (or to be more accurate these days, the world of photographic image creation). There are possibly two aspects that can be considered: image access – either as a source of inspiration or to use in a communication design project – and image creation.

Not so many years ago, access to images was certainly limited. Photographs were printed in books, catalogues from stock photography agencies, showcased in galleries and so forth. To actually see these images, designers had to physically access these resources – mainly in printed form – or to be in the place where images were exhibited. Clearly, those designers were accessing to a very limited reservoir.

There was also another option, which was to create photographs for a particular use. Considering the former days of film cameras, a 35 mm single lens reflex (SLR) was among the toolset that every design studio used to have at hand. These cameras, from different manufactures – from Leica to Nikon – provided a similar approach to the medium. Only a few companies (Ilford, Kodak, and the likes) produced the 35 mm film substrate.The image ratio was one: 36x24 mm. It was possible to shoot black and white or color photographs – in negative or diapositive form. There were other more expensive options, available to the more focused photographic studios, from medium size cameras to large format ones. Design studios – in the need of photographic images – either produced their own, mostly using 35 mm cameras, or hired full-

time professional photographers equipped with better gear. It was certainly a limited choice and most design studios establish a relationship with certain photographers and hire their services repeatedly.

With the advent of affordable digital cameras for the masses, the situation is completely different.Almost everyone carries a quite decent photographic camera in his or her pocket (also known as a smart phone). Then there is the Internet. According to unofficial figures, in one of the multiple services offering photo hosting named Flickr,peoplepost more than several millions of public photographs per month (Michel, 2012). There are several services like this on the WWW where communication designers can either see – as inspirational material – or use – in the context of a given project – photographs from people around the World.

Considering only these three facets from what Communication Designers use – typography, color and images – it seems to be clear that the context has change from scarcity to abundance.

3. THE PARALYSIS IN AN EDUCATION CONTEXT

Which are the problems in the educational institutions that can be correlated to this world of abundance? In the year 2014Facebook, a social network with more than 1.23 billion users("Facts and figures about Facebook on its 10th year," n.d.),celebratesits 10 years anniversary. Considering only this fact, people that these days are entering the tertiary education system – maybe on their late teens or early twenties – were children when this revolution started, back then at the early '90s. They lived most part of their lives inside this media ecosystem and most probably, they consider the Internet as part of the reality (as it is mentioned on the Away From Keyboard documentary film (*TPB AFK*, 2013)). They have probably seen much more hours of YouTube videos than elderly people have been exposed to different forms of media. On the one side, youngsters are definitively 'constant creators' – hencethe social network, the 'selfie' portrait and so forth – and 'constant curators' – using the binary Like / Dislike methods to qualify and crowd-filter what is good. Given this context, it seems to be more difficult – if possible at all – to surprise a group of students with something 'new', as in the world of abundance they have been living for most of their lives, they have the (perhaps false) perception that they 'have seen it all'.Design educators have

to struggle with this perception.

Living in this context of abundance, there is no need to filter before creating new things, there is no strong need of planning before doing. But in real terms, the problem is how to separate the wheat from the chaff: how to make clear what is good, useful or valuable from what is worthless.In this context, it is clear that the idea is to produce first and crowd-filter later. This seems to be the logic of the many people creating in the digital realm, from blog posts to Instagram snapshots, from photographs to YouTube videos.

More than 25 years ago, this was the role of teachers, editors, and publishers: there was a curated collection of items – namely typefaces, photographs, moving images, illustrations and other kind of visual material. Now, there is an extensively increasing crowd-curated collection of documents – namely again typefaces, photographs, moving images, and illustrations.

The problem of education sometimes is that communication design students confronted with the open waters of a vast ocean, paralyzed. Apparently, too many choices lead them to the analysis paralysis moment.

4. FOLLOWING THE DISCUSSION

In the preceding paragraphs, we have stated the contextual differences in the communication design world for professionals and students coming after what can be understood as a shift between scarcity scenarios to a world of abundance. These changes are a byproduct of the shifting in communication technologies that our society has experienced with the introduction of digital technologies. It must be noted that, as Kevin Kelly clearly writes, "when technology shifts, it bends the culture."(Kelly, 2008). This can be also confirmed with McLuhan perceptions:"any technology tends to create a new human environment. Script and papyrus created the social environment we think of in connection with the empires of the ancient world." (McLuhan, 1962)Comprehending this situation, we can also agree with Kelly when he writes that

> the distribution-and-display device that we call printing instilled in society a reverence for precision (of black ink on white paper), an

appreciation for linear logic (in a sentence), a passion for objectivity (of printed fact) and an allegiance to authority (via authors), whose truth was as fixed and final as a book. In the West, we became people of the book." (Kelly, 2008)

But the changes we have experienced in the crossing between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century cannot be considered only on the bad sides. If it is true that many choices can lead designers to the fearful moment of the paradox of choice, to understand that more is less (Schwartz, 2004) but it is also truth that the world of abundance is a space of saying YES much more than NO, of egalitarianism more than paternalism, a space of bottoms-up decisions much more than top-down ones and where there is a clear shift from the command and control methods proper of the 20th Century to an out of control environment (*Chris Anderson - PopTech 2006*, 2010). In the terms of Chris Anderson, the long tail provides more opportunities for all of us.

Everyone involved in the Design realm, being a student, a professional practitioner or an educator has to comprehend that the abundance of choices can provide a fertile soil for new ideas. And, after all, to be prepared tofight against the analysis paralysis, a strong side effect of the many choices we have.

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