

Design, Power, New Media and Discourse

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the issue of what should be the future role of designers in a context mostly ruled by New Media. Like old media, these communication channels are constantly governed by discourses which reach audiences with the aim of influencing them and thus constructing a media based power over some individuals.

The main focus of this paper are designers and artists as political actors in this media environment. The following pages seek to generate a discussion around the responsibilities and challenges that come with the fact of being a manager-creator of discourses that help to construct and/or eternize power.

The intention of this paper is not to establish concrete answers on this particular issue. On the contrary, it wants to present ideas that can be taken by others to generate questions which eventually could help us to build a broad set of values and actions to work with as designers, artists or other specialists in this realm.

Keywords: design and new media, design activism, politics and ethics, social networking.

1. Introduction

If we think about what designers have been doing the last seventy years, one could say that the core task of their duty has been to manage discourses to obtain or maintain the power of something else over a specific group.

Some examples of that could be the power of a political ideology over an ethnic group or nation, the power of a car brand over a specific group of people, the power of a rock band over a young generation, or even the power of an aesthetic vision in a culture.

Most of the time, especially in the last three decades, designers have been cynical about their role in media, trying to be a neutral agent in the workflow of mass communication. This has happened probably because many of us were taught in institutions based on the premise that design practice must not have its own discourse but rather it must be an instrument to convey the message of a client in an efficient and beautiful manner.

In my opinion that previous vision (which it is also a discourse) was influenced by a simplistic interpretation of some McLuhan's sentences. In which case, one could understand that if the content of any message carried by a given medium, is also another medium¹ then the message is a secondary factor, and our efforts should be put only in how to "play" with media rather than with its content.

Obviously, as we know, not all the designers have followed that pattern, and there are cases in which they have decided not only being the constructor of the carrier but also to be the manager of the content if not the creator. Examples of this are well documented and we knew about them in classes of history of art and design during our undergraduate studies or maybe while we were visiting a museum of modern art. In this point, it is interesting how the word *art* is stated. Apparently while the designer becomes more independent in his practice, deciding to put on it some of his own thoughts and/or opinions, history and art classifications seem to be more comfortable treating him as an artist rather than as a designer. Then the topic of the designer as an author appears here as conflict. This issue is a common point of conversation among practitioners and theorists of this discipline, and many things have been said regarding this matter without reaching major consensus. However it might be interesting to remember the essay *What does it really mean to call for a graphic designer to be an author?*, written by Michael Rock and published in the Eye Magazine². Here Rock presents an interesting approach to the meaning of authorship, discussing the theories of important intellectuals to set models to analyze the designer's work. However he establishes the discussion around the designer-client relationship, and he does not make a concrete analysis of the self generated project basis in which many designers have put their efforts. In my opinion is there where designers can find the more fertile field for authorship. Considering this topic is important to understand the development of my paper, but is not fundamental. The political role of designers exists even if there is no authorship, however being an author implies the maximization of that social condition.

With these preliminary thoughts already said, I think I am able to declare and explain what it is my core opinion about this topic. I believe that being a designer, as well as an artist, is a political act in all the sense of the meaning, and new media has the potential to be the best set of tools to play that role in a free and conscious way.

When I say that being a designer is a political act, I mean that once the designer makes the decision of working to deliver any sort of message which can have a potential influence on people, he is being part of the chain of responsibility in the action of executing that type of power over the society. This fact, if we are honest with ourselves, is something impossible to avoid no matter if we are about to design an interactive installation piece to promote a sport shoes' brand or if we are about to design a Web campaign to invite people to compost. In both cases, and always, as designers we try to reach audiences and influence them. No matter if you are planning to contribute to the construction of a real unreality³ or if you are looking to directly politicize your art⁴, the goal will always need spectators understanding the message and making it their own.

On the other hand when I say that new media has the potential to be the best set of tools to play that role in a freely and conscious way, I want to make the point that any medium which is consider new, is distant enough from standardization to give us room for experimentation which as we all know, has been always a good place to act with a fair amount of freedom. These changes would create the conditions to execute our political role in society if that is our will.

To put all this comments in context I will try to analyze three design projects from the perspective of what I have said in the last paragraphs to develop these ideas in a more tangible way.

2. The Obama Logo

Probably we all know well the logo used by the campaign of Barack Obama during 2007 and 2008 while he was running to become president of the United States of America. I am talking about this circle shaped symbol which is a mixture between the letter O, an abstraction of the USA flag, and a landscape showing a sunrise beyond a seeded lawn.

During the campaign period, this piece appeared in different media in a wide variety of forms, such as billboards, posters, stickers for windows and cars, T-shirts, coffee cups and many other kinds of merchandising. However it was the flirt the logo did with new media what gave it the category of cultural brand. My opinion is that two initial actions were important to allow the mark reaching the status it had. First, the designers managing the Web campaign took the original logo reconstructing it, delivering new informal versions. These marks were connected to the reality of cultural groups or minorities in the USA such as Veterans, People of Faith, Latinos, etc. As banners these images were used in the Website to identify policies and news related with these groups. The importance of this action was that people saw the logo was not untouchable and in some way could be part of them. Another important step, also related with the online campaign, was when the logo was available in the Website to be downloaded and used as computer wallpaper, avatar image for IM applications, etc. The delivered message was clear but not totally conscious accordingly with the sayings of Sol Sender, partner of SVA, the company which designed the mark⁵. Those two actions were apparently understood as the releasing of an "open source" logo, inviting people to play with it and making it their own source of expression. After this, everything went viral and common people totally outside of the campaign started their own initiatives to show their support to the candidate. Not all of them went through new media but everything started in that realm. Thus interesting cases took place inside of the Web, among them, the *Logo Obama* Website in which, using a small Flash application, people could customize the original logo, adding their own picture on it and changing its colors to create a new and personal version, which can be downloaded but also was stored in the Website's public gallery⁶.

The second part of my thesis which says: "new media has the potential to be the best set of tools to play that role in a free and conscious way", can be easily identified in this first case of study. Internet offers a great opportunity for experimentation and for acting freely because as a new medium is not fully standardized and the regulations are low and/or vague yet. If there is no major complain from the counter part, people can create without big restrictions, using the information they have chosen to work with as their material. That is exactly what happened in the case of the Obama logo.

You may think that I am considering each person that modified the Obama logo in that Website as a designer. Not at all, but maybe they were. However, I am focusing my interest in the designer who built the *Logo Obama* Website. It was he or she who made a conscious and free decision to use new media to influence on people, in other words, designing in a political manner. In this case doubly political because the subject was related to a presidential election. Thus, as you already probably noticed, it appears the first part of my thesis which says: "being a designer, as well as an artist, is a political act in all the sense of the meaning." Other examples in the very same context could be given to match the same idea. The reader might think that the *Hope Poster* of

Obama, designed by Shepard Fairy⁷ it was the most iconic piece of the Obama campaign, but it doesn't address my thesis properly because it is print media which is not new media. I would say that the reader is right in that argument, however I would say too that this poster became widely famous only after Fairy published it in his online portfolio and his fans embedded it in hundreds of blogs around the Web. The authorship factor comes to us here again. In the case of the *Logo Obama* Website, this is more vague because it is difficult to identify a unique product in this project due to the generation of many micro results produced by each custom logo. However in the case of Fairy's poster the authorship seems to be more clear because there is a unique and self-generated product. Maybe because of that, the latter project had more political relevance.

3. The CyberSyn Project

This is a very unknown project in the traditional media culture, so I will try to make a very efficient introduction of it. *CyberSyn* was a project developed in Chile during the early 1970s as part of a government policy to administrate the economy of that country in a central and non bureaucratic manner. In those days Chile was living a socialist process since Dr. Salvador Allende, a politician with Marxist ideas, was elected president through a democratic election. His government nationalized several companies along the country, giving big part of the administration to the workers. However authorities viewed the necessity to control that and be able to make quick and effective decisions to optimize the workflow. Thus, the Chilean government asked the British scientist Stafford Beer to build a system which was able to achieve that.

Beer who was an expert in operational research and cybernetics, worked with a team formed by British programmers, Chilean engineers, a German designer and a group of young Chileans graphic and industrial designers to build *CyberSyn*. The project consisted in a network of telex machines, one of them in each factory, connected to an IBM 360 computer located in Santiago, the capital city of Chile. A software named *Cyberstride* processed the data coming from the factories, delivering intelligible information which was reviewed in the *Opsroom*, a space specially designed to take important decisions. The room which had a very science fiction look⁸, was composed by seven swivel chairs facing the center of the room. All the chairs had a custom designed control panel to operate the screens in the walls, in which the participants of the meetings could view the information provided by the *Cyberstride* software.

The *CyberSyn* project was never completely functional because its construction and development couldn't be finished due to a military *coup d'état* in 1973 that put end to Dr. Salvador Allende's government and its policies. However in 1972 during a strike in which 50,000 truck drivers blocked the streets of Santiago, the system was used to coordinate the delivery of food into the city using 200 trucks loyal to the government.

The reader could think that it is easy to fit this project into my thesis due to its obvious political character. However which is more interesting to me, is not how political it is a project by itself, but rather how the practice of the designers is political no matter what, and how new media allows to use that power in an easier way. To address that we should have a broader definition of what a designer is. Particularly I will use the vision of the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design⁹ at the Stanford University where they conceive design as multidisciplinary practice in which professionals from different areas work together to execute a *design thinking* process. I am telling this because for analyzing the *CyberSyn* project, we should consider all the people who worked there as designers, since all of them, from their area of expertise, helped to design that system. They did this in a conscious manner, knowing well what were the social repercussions their work would have. There is no clear authorship in this project to be claimed, however the political role of designers here cannot be denied. My key point rests on the idea that in the very same moment in which a designer decides to participate or not in a project, he or she is making a political decision because of the nature of the discipline. In design, any resultant work is always meant to influence a certain group of people. When designers are completely conscious of this situation they are able to put their will in the exercise of this power, and thus new media would be always the best way the reach audiences. As we have seen, the *CyberSyn* project built an interconnected network using cybernetic principles in times where the Internet as we know it did not exist yet. Considering behavioral factors they made a room with individuals work stations which had an interface to operate screens presenting software generated data, using technology and media totally unknown for the majority of the population in those days. It is the ignorance on the technology of a particular medium which gives the quality of novelty to a project, and social structures cannot control or "standardize" something they barely know that exists. Something similar happens with spectators who are confronted to sorts of information that work with ways of perception they do not know well. This scenario of broad ignorance gives to the designer a power that he or she should know it is there.

4. What Barry Says Video

As a last piece, I would like to discuss a motion graphic project named *What Barry Says*¹⁰. This video was based on the script written by Barry McNamara and designed and animated by Simon Robson under the name of his one person studio Knife Party. This project was released in 2004 and won the price for the best animation in the Brooklyn International Film Festival the same year. The content of the video presents a critical vision about the military actions done by the USA government during the George W. Bush era, with special focus in the roles of Dick Cheney, Ronald Rumsfeld and Richard Perle as leaders of a movement that McNamara calls *War Corporatism*.

The advantages of new media can be seen in two levels within this piece. Primarily on its form, the video presents a very rich technique in graphics animation, mixing 3D modeling and very well treated high contrast images and iconography constructed using semi abstract vectors. All these elements are precisely synchronized with a multilayered audio track, which not only provides the atmosphere but also sets up points of attention in concordance with the narration and the visuals. Animation, motion graphics and sound design are techniques which we catalogue as part of new media, specially when they work together into one piece. Apparently traditional media managers do not consider that this mix can be used to convey very serious messages. That leaves room for the experimentation of designers and artists using these tools, allowing them to have different approaches to people's perception, building a very interesting and not yet clear, relationship between content, form and the audiences of these pieces.

In a second aspect, new media is also present in the way this video was distributed. The piece can be seen officially in the online portfolio of the studio Knife Party where the video is exhibited in good quality. As we all know, Quicktime files can be "borrow" easily if you have a Pro version of the Quicktime software as well as using a couple of tricks from a Mac computer. Probably thanks to these features the piece can be seen also in YouTube, loaded in several accounts and thus embed in a large number of Blogs and Websites, which helped to make of *What Barry Says* video a well known piece.

The authors (or just designers) of this nano-film were conscious they would deal with controversy by doing the piece because of its topic. However they took the political decision of being part of the project anyway. They even decided to submit their piece to an International Film Festival and after their success there, some condition were facilitated for an open distribution of the video through the social media networks.

5. Conclusions

People working with media had and will have a different amount of power in society, depending on their role in the industry. Normally that power is administrated by corporations and/or governments but the access that individuals have to create and distribute content using new media have changed the scenario. Designers and artists should be conscious of their role in this chain because there is no way to avoid the fact of releasing discourses to the society from the very moment in which a piece is delivered to be seen, heard or perceived by a group of people.

The natural role of designers is to create and innovate through visual discourses, using their power in media culture to influence on people. Denying this implies to skip the real character of Design since it was conceived as a discipline, or even worst, it would imply to ignore the eternal human action of modifying the surrounding space to generate reaction on others.

Lev Manovich presents an interesting way to differentiate new media design from new media art¹¹. He says that in opposition to media design within the media art realm, content and shape are an indissoluble body. I would like to think that this differentiation comes when the political consciousness of the designer is a fundamental part of the creative process and its content. Thus, maybe a willing designer is also an artist.

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