

Chapter 2

Engagement Design: Toward a Holistic Model for Digital Communication Design

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ABSTRACT

Evolutions in digital communications since the beginning of the century require information designers to think about the possibilities that digital technologies present and the boundaries they allow communicators to appropriately bend or even subvert. Arguing for a more holistic and humanistic approach to digital communications, this chapter approaches the subject with a proposed theory for “engagement design,” a design process that integrates the expedience of usability, utility, and cognition with human experience, rhetoric, and emotion.

INTRODUCTION

In an emergent, design-centric economy, the time has officially arrived for those in science- and technology-oriented disciplines to peer out from the shadows of communication protocols, grammars, and methods traditionally brought to us from long-standing cultural paradigms. Historical Western practices of communicative precision and expedience in the sciences date at least as far

back as the 17th century to the development of the Royal Society of London, where communication protocols were established to diminish rhetoric’s “parasitic” influence on technical and scientific texts. This ancient establishment of conventions and methods may be labeled as one of the primary catalysts for the wedge that divides the humanities from the sciences today; it is also an antiquated standard that restricts instrumental communications from holistically engaging and instructing its recipients.

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In the modern era, a “digital age,” procedural and grammatical approaches to argumentation (as in the Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion [IMRD] format of the scientific method) have not only continued, but in many disciplines have been refined, systematized, and methodically integrated into higher education’s communication curricula—frequently at the expense of ethical awareness and humanization. As the new millennium unfolds, a continued march in this direction can only, sadly, perpetuate the issues raised in Steven Katz’s (1992) important article on the ethics of expedience, where human beings seem mechanically removed from communications in order to promote efficiency or, worse, shroud ethical consequences of science and technology.

Fortunately, the crescendo of digital rhetoric as a field of inquiry in the past two decades has provided an exceptional opportunity to re-evaluate the communication practices and pedagogies that have placed a longstanding chokehold on disciplines that Moore (1996) has labeled as *instrumental* (where the communication’s intention has typically been to “govern, guide, control, and help people execute physical actions”—usually communication fields related to education, science, technology, engineering, and math). For those who work or teach in such instrumental disciplines, communication design (and by “design,” I mean the confluence of the visual, the textual, and/or the interactive) is often awkwardly pitted between two historically conflicting ideologies: rhetoric and objectivity. On the one side, instrumental communicators are being told to be more humanistic, to use creativity, values, and cultural judgment to effectively and ethically persuade their users; on the other side, instrumental communicators are being told that communication is like a “window pane,” clear and unambiguous and that objectivity, cognition, and expedience should reign (Miller, 2004).

Moore, in 1996, identified the growing problem: the search for humanism in instrumental communications moved disciplines away from

objectivity and closer to rhetoric at the expense of, well, instrumentalism. Fighting off the “expedience” stigma, the goal for practitioners and academics, of course, was to “make it more palatable to themselves and to other academic audiences” (p. 100) by championing humanism. Yet the reality then, as is now, is that industry still has a pressing need: clarity-driven communications that appropriately guide users toward intended actions. They need communications that promote expedience—cognition, usability, and clarity.

Into the new millennium, scholarship and pedagogical philosophies have largely advocated for rhetoric, but the practicality of instrumental communications coupled with industry and societal needs has pressed textbooks and classroom assignments to perpetuate the rigidity of rules, formats, guidelines, rubrics, and protocols. To complicate the matter, in a digital and global era, the design of communication is rarely isolated to writing. As such, we have seen similar restrictive approaches to writing bleed into visual communication. Information design in instrumentally-oriented disciplines have frequently been treated as if they could be reduced to a universally applied grammar (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) and have even been compared to mathematics, “not tied to unique features of a particular language or culture” (Tufte, 1990). Such perspectives are not without merit, of course—they provide productive insight into the fundamentals of visual literacy. But it does not take much imagination to recognize the limitations of such formulaic (and simplistic) approaches to information design.

Such restrictive, non-rhetorical methods of communication design inhibit holistic approaches (not simply left-brained, analytical, but also inclusive of right-brained, conceptual) and engaging viewing and learning experiences (Daniel Pink’s [2005] wonderfully insightful exposition on this in *A Whole New Mind* is worth mentioning here). Conversely, extreme favoritism of rhetorical and emotive approaches precludes the need to actually make communications function well in practi-

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