Sustainable Communication Design: a methodological approach

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ABSTRACT

Until recently, “eco” and “sustainable” have been subjects mainly in the industrial designers’ research sphere. However, Graphic and Communication Designers, especially since the “First Things First Manifesto”, have gradually become more aware of issues like ethics, environmental and social responsibility. Paper is a sensitive matter nowadays, mainly because of the transformation process of wood into paper. For Communication Designers, paper is one of the main supports, but they use many other that also need to be researched. However these environmental concerns should not be seen just as an altruistic duty from designers: they are a recent but increasing demand from companies. The knowledge about sustainability can be an empowering situation for designers. AIGA points out the need for designers to have a proactive attitude, showing to clients that they are informed and able to advice them: this gives designers more responsibility, but also new market opportunities, and more control over their work.

Keywords: communication design; cognitive ergonomics; design principles; sustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of an ongoing PhD research, which is expected to bring relevant contribution in defining Sustainable Communication Design principles and code of practice. It
starts with a general overview about what is Sustainable Development, and where the concept began. Next, we acknowledge the most relevant contributions from Industrial Designers to "eco" and "sustainable design". And finally we analyze the most significant aspects from Communication Design evolution. Equally important, are the efforts from some institutions, designers, and writers, among others, already engaged in working towards sustainability. However, the PhD research is wider and could not be completed without analyzing the markets and the interaction from fields such as cognitive ergonomics as a way to uncover more respectful forms of connecting with the consumer / individual, to whom Communication Designers mostly work for, but it will not be the focus of this paper.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Sustainable Development

We live in a world that faces unprecedented social and environmental challenges. The differences between north and south countries are still far from being overcome. Even in industrialized countries social differences are a growing problem. This is a problem that concerns us all, and individuals, as citizens and as professionals. How Communication Designers can contribute, to proactively work towards a common solution, is what this PhD research is set to uncover.

In 1983, under the chairmanship of Mrs. Brundtland, The World Commission on Environmental and Development (WCED) was created. This commission task was about "identifying and promoting the cause of sustainable development" (O'Riordan, 2000) and the first definition of sustainable development was: "For development to be sustainable, it must take account of social and ecological factors, as well as economic ones; of the living and non-living resource base; and of the long-term as well as the short term advantages and disadvantages of alternative action" (WCED 1983 cited in O'Riordan, 2000).
Many important conferences and documents came later on. Nowadays, it is estimated that there are 64 sustainable development definitions and many interpretations of the term "sustainability", and the number will continue to grow as the global debate on the topic widens. For some, it means maintaining the status quo. For others it is equated with notions of responsibility, conservation and stewardship. However for a growing number of people, sustainable development is a "triple bottom line" activity, based in economic, social and environmental impacts. (AIGA – American Institute of Graphic Arts, 2003). For the PhD research, and therefore for this paper, we are going to use the concept of "Sustainable Development" as the triple bottom down balance between economical, social and environmental issues.

2.2 Steps Towards A Design For Sustainability

Already in 1971 Papanek, in his book "Design for the real world", challenged designers to act upon a social responsibility. He wrote that designers could propose from simple solutions, to products, or services to be used by the community and the society (Papanek, 1985). In 1971 the world faced the first energetic crisis, and in 1974 the petroleum barrel was costing more then ever before. Since then, there has been a rising environmental awareness. It was facing the need to produce eco-solution that eco design first emerged. In the early 90s TuDelf University and Philips designers created a method for Life-Cycle Assessment (LCA), which is the evaluation of the environmental impact cost product: during production, life and disposal, in what concerns resources, and energy (Faud-luke, 2002).

Taking into account that we need to consume fewer resources the model "Factor 4" was first proposed in 1995 by Weizsacker, Lovins, H, Lovins, A (cited in Wuppertal Institute, 2009), as a model that would hold the key to sustainability. However "Factor 4", was soon proved not to be sufficient and the Factor 10 was recommended, meaning we need to reduce
by 90% the use of natural resources, in a global scale by 2050 (Schmidt-Bleek, 2000 cited in Factor 10 Institute, 2009).

Facing the need to reduce the resources consumption, analyzing product’s cycle and environmental impact just was not enough. Han Brezet (1997) proposed a four-step model that represented a paradigm shifting that initiated the transition from "eco" to "sustainable" design. The four steps are: product improvement; product redesign; function innovation; and system innovation. Also Ursula Tischner (2005) provided a great contribution by asking designers to consider social and economic issues, while seeking a greater balance between countries, people, and wealth.

Ezio Manzini and Carlo Vezzoli (2002) took Design for Sustainability a step further. They proposed an interconnected system of services instead of physical objects for a sustainable quotidien. Ezio Manzini with François Jégou (2003), have also been researching in sustainable lifestyle options. The concept is based on communities that engage themselves in finding sustainable solutions for their daily problems, like taking care of children, older people, cooking for the community, or lift sharing. By proposing this, Ezio Manzini wishes to empower people to find the necessary solutions by using the available resources at hand (Manzini, Collina, Evans, 2004). When Manzini is proposing shared products or services as an alternative, he is obviously looking for less production and less consumption of resources, but he also brings design to a new levels: service, social, community design, just a few to mention. And those are a very interesting new area for designers to research and work.

2.3 Green Markets, Green Consumer and Campaigns Fighting Unsustainable Practices

The “green market” and marketing was a response to the growing “green consumers” and public opinion that in 1980, feeling more informed were also more demanding. In 1988, John Elkington and Julia Hailes, wrote “The Green Consumer Guide”. The books sold
thousands of copies, and raised a new conscience. A better environmental legislation, a more informed public opinion, and more competitiveness in the public sector, were the responsible factors for making companies demand “greener” product to designers.

However, from the 80’s until now, the “green market” did not grow as expected, and for that two reasons can be pointed out. For one side, companies without the necessary information, technology or tolls, failed in delivering product that were real and committed green solution. And unfortunately, that also means that today we need to regain the consumers’ confident. On the other side, people tend to say they would prefer to buy green, but at the moment of purchasing other reasons come first such as, price, brand, style, or quality.

For the discrepancy between what the consumer says they would do, and what they actually do, three reasons may be pointed out. The first one concerns people, they simply may not say the true in surveys; simple by stating an intention that in the end may not be carried out. Second concerns the market, consumer may want to buy green options and may not find them available. Finally the third reason may be illiteracy: people may not understand what green (and all the related words) really mean, and marketing may take advantage from that confusion. Reinforcing this idea, it is evident that when using words such as “organic”, “natural”, “eco”, “green”, applied almost to anything, mainly because they are not legislated and there is no established glossary, it is difficult for the consumer to know which the real differences are.

Illiteracy or deceiving labels, is another aspect that communication designer’s should be concerned about. It may be illiteracy or simply miss leading information but this is where designers should have the responsibility to draw a line, in what and how they are whiling to communicate.
Over the last years, not only the consumers were confused or realized that companies were, making false "green" promises or having unsustainable practices in their production; also NGO, journalists, some designers and artists.

When the 2000 version of the "First Things First Manifesto was published in a few magazines, one of them was "Adbusters". This magazine together with some NGO have made some aggressive advertising against companies such as Nike or Camel cigarettes, or social problems such as alcoholism, or anorexia related to an "ideal of beauty" "sold" by fashion.

O'Rourke (2005) has made an interesting research on some of these campaigns for companies such as Nike, Computer Take Bake or Staples Inc. and she argues that, when facing a discrediting campaign (or the perspective of a campaign) companies, will change their unsustainable practices, either social or environmental. The downside to this approach is, if we attack all the unsustainable companies in the same way, after a while it will lose impact. In the end we would be fighting advertisements with advertisements.

Another interesting communication project is the magazine "colours", which was a concept introduced by the photographer Oliviero Toscani, and the editor in chief Tibor Kalman. Together they made some of the known protesting advertisements about: AIDS, racism, refugees, or violence. The controversy always attached to these campaigns has much to do with the fact that they use human suffering, polemic, death, as a way to sell clothes, so in the end it can be perceived as being cynical.

2.4 Communication & Graphic Designers Towards Sustainability

Parallel actions were emerging among graphic and communication designers. Already in 1964, twenty-two Graphic and Communication designers signed the first version on the "First Things First Manifesto". The second, and latest version led by Max Bruinsma, in 2000,
essentially claimed that Graphic Designers should be able to work independently and regardless the marketing, and the advertising, to pursue more valuable causes.

Although the "First Things First Manifesto" was a call for action, involvement and engagement to graphic and communication designers, it had less impact than the desired one. Apart from some individual designers and initiatives with a more acute perception of the state of the world, it is fairly reasonable to say that most communication designers (including graphic and visual) feel that they work for the client, under their directives and briefing, as a response of the market.

In order to establish a common ground, for the PhD research and therefore in the paper, we use the term "Communication Designer" as the discipline that communicates visually but also in more abstract ways: it is able of sending the required message, in an explicit or implicit form (for example, an event, an experience, a perceived feeling). And when we refer to "Communication designers", in the context of this research, it includes "graphic designers" and "visual designers" as well. "Sustainable Communication Design" is used as the discipline that communicates in visual but is also capable of sending the required message, in an explicit or implicit form; that consciously, and within its possibilities, reduces adverse environmental impact and takes in consideration the social aspects.

In matters of Sustainable Graphic Design, one of the most relevant contributions is being given by American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA, 2003) with their Sustainable Centre, where designers can find information on resources, technical advice and information on materials, such as paper. Using data from the United States, we can understand the relevance of Communication Designer working towards Sustainability: "Americans receive over 65 billion pieces of unsolicited mail each year, equal to 230 appeals, catalogues and advertisements for every person in the country. According to the not-for-profit organization Environmental Defense, 17 billion catalogues were produced in 2001 using mostly 100 percent virgin fiber paper. That is 64 catalogues for every person in America" (AIGA, 2003).
Paper is a sensitive issue nowadays, not so much because of the number of trees that are cut down (they are a renewable source), but more to do with the transformation process of wood into paper (AIGA, 2003). For Communication Designers paper is one support, but they use many other that also need to be researched.

However this environmental concern should not be seen just an altruistic duty from designers, they much rather are a new but increasing demand from companies. To give an example "Sustainable Reports" have increased 100% in one year alone, comparing 2002 with 2003 (AIGA, 2003). For designers the knowledge about sustainability can be an empowering situation: "This increased attention to environmental responsibility can be an opportunity for designers to be seen as critical advisors to corporations on how to reduce their negative impacts without compromising the imperative for product differentiation and promotion through design and printing" (AIGA, 2003).

What AIGA is pointing out, is the need for designers to have a proactive attitude, showing to clients that they are informed, and able to advise then. What gives designers, for one hand more responsibility and more control over his work, and on the other side there are new market opportunities.

The Designer Accord, represent an important step. For designers to adopt the accord they must undertake some steps, which are quite open and easy to follow, so they are intended to be a kind of motivation for beginners. On the other hand, if these guidelines were too restrictive they would be felt as discouraging. It is also reasonable to expect that most of the 170 000 members are probably just using the accord as a way to promote their image, or as a light commitment.

Specifically committed to Sustainable Communication Design, is the Society of Graphic Designer of Canada (GDR, 2009), that in April 2009, during the annual general meeting, proposed the first definition for Sustainable Communication Design: "Sustainable communication design is the application of sustainability principles to communication design
practice. Practitioners consider the full life cycle of products and services, and commit to strategies, processes and materials that value environmental, cultural, social and economic responsibility". This definition came with a statement of values and principles to guide the GDC's members during their design practice (GDR, 2009). The statement has three parts; the first one is assuming responsibility in this interconnect world. The second is about the in-house changes that can be done. And the third part is a set of guidelines for the design practice and client advising.

Brian Dougherty is the author of the book "Green Graphic Design" and also an experienced Communication Designer, partner in the studio "Celery Design Collaborative". Based on his eleven years experience, he says "the message designers make, the brand we built and the causes we promote can have impacts far beyond the paper we print on", and adds: "In addition to seeking our better material and manufacturing techniques, designers can craft and deliver messages that have a positive impact on the world" (Dougherty, 2008).

Although the presented cases are relevant, they demonstrate that the paradigm is still the same as conventional communication design and advertising. They think how to use eco supports, or less pollution printing, or going carbon free, however there is much more to be done.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research objective and reasons

The PhD research aims to define Sustainable Communication Design as a way to add value to Communication through the regular practice of Communication Design, and using the triple bottom down (economy, social and environmental) principles of sustainability.

Reasons why this research is being undertaken: first, when we study to the Designer Accord that has been adopted by 170 000 designer (or agencies) it is clear that there is a growing interest among practitioners. Secondly, as it was presented earlier in this paper,
more than one institution has provided guidelines, but none are consensual or even connected. Third, the information available not always is accurate or reliable. Fourth, there is a growing interest in the consumer and market for sustainable options. Finally, it can be an opportunity to empower designers, to adopt other practices, and to explain them to clients.

3.2 Research strategy

With the research process evolution other research methods may be needed, but for the moment, these are the ones being taken in consideration:

- Data collecting and literature review;
- Survey by interview with a panel of experts
- Research techniques
- Data collection

Apart from the information collecting mentioned before, other forms of survey or data collecting are not been foreseen, for now. If later, it proves to be necessary, the research will adopt the necessary techniques.

3.3 Delphi methodology

This research aims for a consensus in defining “Sustainable Communication Design”, as a concept and as a way to improve the design practice. For this reason a focus group of experts agreeing in same sort of definition, or guidelines, or procedures would be most relevant for Sustainable Communication Design to reach full acceptance and maturity. Within this perspective, and as it is foreseen now, from all the research techniques, Delphi Methodology seems to be the more adequate, in this case.

In their book “The Delphi Method: techniques and applications” Linstone and Turrof (2002) state that “Delphi may be characterized as a method for structuring a group
communication process, so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individual, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem”.

The way Delphi works is: a monitor (or a team) carefully selects a group of people and provides then with an initial questionnaire, that should completed alone, without the others participants, neither knowledge nor influence. When all the participants have replied, the monitor (or the team) looks for a consensus in their replies. In the end of this phase the participants are allowed to review their replays. Completed the first round, they go for the second one, and follow the same procedure. The rounds are repeated as many as necessary to reach a general consensus (Linstone and Turrof, 2002).

Delphi methodology has two basic models; one is the “conventional” Delphi, where the questionnaires, the replays and the consensus, are done by written hand; the other one is “Real-Time Delphi” that explores the computer technology, as a way to facilitate the process and make it quicker (Linstone and Turrof, 2002).

For now we are considering Real-Time Delphi, the possibilities provided by the computer, can allow, speed, real time discussion between persons from different countries; but also structure and systematization when collecting information, and while looking for consensus. For this research a site is being prepared www.sustainablecommunicationdesign.net and that will host a platform with restrict access, especially design to work with the Delphi Method (see ahead in tools).

3.4 Approach analysis

The data analysis will be prominently qualitative, because as it can be read in the objectives, this research deals more with concepts, definitions and guidelines. In what concerns, materials, techniques and tools, the goal is not to experiment, but to take advantage from the existing data.
3.5 Research tools

Site | www.sustainablecommunicationdesign.net (under construction)

For this research, the investigator is expected to create a website to share the contents and evolution of the research with the community in general (academia, other designers, and society in general). The site will be specially designed as an investigation platform to host the Delphi Method.

Blog | http://sustainablecommunicationdesign.blogspot.com/

The existing blog is soon expected to be transfer into the site, to improve discussion between the researcher and the community in general (academia, other designers, and society in general).

4. CONCLUSION

Looking in perspective the growing need to have a sustainable pattern is evident. Associations such as AIGA, Design Accord, or Society of Graphic Designer of Canada, just to mention the most relevant ones, demonstrate the relevance to research in this area. However, the lack of interconnected information between these associations, or the inability to speak as one, brings even more pertinence to the proposed PhD research. As the research, first outcome, it is evident the need to collect the emerging data related to Sustainable Communication Design, in order to validate it, and to be used as common ground data for all designers. Through the methodology here presented, we expect to be able to understand how sustainability can be applied to Communication Design practice, and how it can be used to add value to the end result. This means breaking down the intervenient parts, the stakeholders, but above looking for a new paradigm shift in how Communication can be defined and applied. That also means to find a balance between social, nature and economic aspects, and how it reflects in the designer's studio, project, the client and the final
consumer. Also, in looking for a more respectful ways for communication, not just environmental or socially speaking, but also in terms of content, we try to establish a different relation with the final consumer or end user. For that, we expect to interact with fields, such as ergonomic cognitive, as a way to relate in a more adequate manner to the individual. In conclusion the positive aspects are, the awareness, the rising interest, and definitely the first attempts to define Sustainable Communication Design, because they set ground for this research to evolve in a structured way, and hopefully be able to contribute to a better design practice.

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