

YOU ARE PRIVILEGED. Just reading this sentence makes you part of the 85% of the world population that is literate¹ and the 20% that understands English.² You've spent around €15 on this book, which is a price only 20% of people (those earning more than 10 dollars a day) can afford.³ If you are reading an electronic version, you are among the 40% who have access to the internet.⁴ If you bought this book, you probably have a higher education, which is only available to a privileged few.

As you can see, this book is not so global. The media are dominated by the world's urban regions in the Northern Hemisphere. Their reach, however, is worldwide, which is why they should become more inclusive and more aware of political responsibilities. This is why this book may still be useful in a 'not so global context' after all.

1. Adult and Youth literacy, *UNESCO Institute of Statistics Factsheet*, September 2015.

2. Crystal, David. 'Why English? The Historical Context', *English as a Global Language*, 2nd Ed. Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 69.

3. Chen, Shaohua, and Martin Ravallion. *National and International Poverty Lines*. Washington: World Bank Development Research group August 2008, p. 11.

4. *Internet Users (per 100 People)*. The World Bank. data.worldbank.org

This book is not about the design of propaganda or political parties. Rather it acknowledges that all design is political. Every design 'either serves or subverts the status quo', as Tony Fry argues.⁵

A design cannot be disconnected from the values and assumptions in which it was created, from the ideologies behind it. It can be difficult to see how visual communication and ideology are related because ideology is in everything around us, we perceive it as natural.⁶

Acknowledging that communication is not neutral puts everything in perspective. It is by realising that we are all culturally biased that we can understand why communication often fails. This book examines such realising using visual examples, accompanied by ideas from anthropology, psychology, communication science, and cultural studies, written for all readers with an interest in visual communication and visual culture.

5. Fry, Tony. 'Book review: The Archeworks Papers', *Design Issues: Volume 23, Number 3*, MIT Press, 2007, p. 88.

6. Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 21.

The impact of visual communication has increased exponentially. Only a few decades ago visual communication was largely contained within cities or countries. In today's network society, messages ooze into each other, from Tumblr feeds onto Facebook walls. This allows people from across the planet to meet and socialise, but it can also lead to miscommunication and conflict. Something that was meant to be funny can incite violent protests the same day on the other side of the world.

Communication was and is a volatile process, wherein misinterpretations cannot be entirely avoided. At the root of miscommunication lies the assumption that people will understand us because we use 'universal' or 'objective' communication. Assumptions of objectivity and universality in design are closely tied to the modernist design principles as they are taught in Western design education. This book is about debunking these assumptions.

As an author, I am privileged. As a Dutch designer, I am from a country whose design culture is supported by the state. During my fifteen years as a designer, I worked in advertising, for governments, cultural institutions, and in political activism. I have learned that visual communication comes in many flavours, none of which are exempt from ideology.

Working in different countries, I have made many of the false assumptions which are shown in this book. A way to share these experiences is to examine them, trying to prevent others from making the same mistakes.

Being from Western Europe, my view on the world is not neutral. This is why I have asked others to help me with this book. To correct my blind spots as much as possible and ask the hard questions. This book is not without bias; at best it offers a multitude of perspectives on a wide range of topics. That is why I would welcome the input of the reader.

This book is organised according to the formal elements of graphic design: language and typography, colour and contrast, image and photography, symbols and icons, and information graphics. The collection of examples in this book is only the beginning. It is still limited in size, and not anywhere close enough to be representative of the challenges faced in visual communication.

For this I could use your help. If you have an example that should be included in this book, please share your ideas, texts, or images on the book's website www.thepoliticsofdesign.com.

This collection of examples will evolve into a growing online archive, accessible to all, to serve as a point of reference for designers and communication specialists as a reminder of the responsibilities we face today.

Ruben Pater,
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