

## Chapter 5, or Epilogue

# Massaging the medium, or Graphic Design and hoaxes

Graphic designers are among those people who are substantially aware of the power of the image and how it can manipulate other's perceptions. One can argue that the way of perceiving the message depends on the content. But it is only partly true – it also, and actually same importantly, depends on the context the content is placed in, and this context is often built by means of graphic design. It means that designers might not be involved in creation of the content directly, but they have the power of shaping the way it is being presented, and therefore perceived and that matters equally. Also, design is not only a choice of the typeface the message is delivered in, but the choice of medium in general, the creation of the hierarchy and the angle through which information presentation is built, and therefore creation of value or importance of it's certain pieces.

This peculiarity of presenting and perceiving the information related to the importance of the medium was noticed by a Canadian philosopher of communication theory Marshall McLuhan, who was the author of an infamous concept "Medium is the message" and co-author of the iconic book "Medium is the Message" published in 1967. The central theory behind "the medium is the message" is that the medium through which content is carried plays a vital role in the way it is perceived.

*"Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world. The way we perceive our own bodies. When these ratios change, men change."*  
— Marshall McLuhan

McLuhan argued that modern electronic communications(including radio, television, films, and computers) would have far-reaching sociological, aesthetic, and philosophical consequences, to the point of actually altering the ways in which we experience the world. Although McLuhan's understanding of media was not indicated only by electronic communications listed above. Extending the argument for understanding the medium as the message itself, he proposed that the "content of any medium is always another medium" – thus, the content of writing is speech, print is that of writing and print itself is the content of the telegraph.

McLuhan understood "medium" in a broad sense. He identified the light bulb as a clear demonstration of the concept of "the medium is the message". A light bulb does not have content in the way that a newspaper has articles or a television has programs, yet it is a medium that has a social effect; that is, a light bulb enables people to create spaces during nighttime that would otherwise be enveloped by darkness. He describes the light bulb as a medium without any content. McLuhan states that "a light bulb creates an environment by its mere presence." As it's often assumed, it doesn't actually mean that the contact is MORE important than the content, but that it is equally important, and in the process of communication it creates it's own meaning.

To narrow it down to design point of view, if you read an article in a newspaper, the way you read it, perceive it, and even the amount of attention you pay to it, depends on this newspaper, the way it looks/ is designed, and the format/kind of periodical publications – i.e. the context of New York Times is essentially different than, let's say, Cosmopolitan's.


On top of that, the established value of such editions is shaping a certain impression in our mind, which leads to the unconscious assumption that if some edition looks similar, then it's similar in its trustworthiness and its content. So again, if to take New York Times as an example, the newspapers that are designed similarly, are embraced with the same level of seriousness and attention, despite of the quality of the content (at least, at first). A good example to illustrate or test this effect, is Clone Zone art project by Brooklyn based creative studio 4REAL.. Clone Zone is the app, that allows you to literally clone any website you want, by just entering the URL in a required field and there you have an exact copy of the it, but with a crucial difference – the content is editable. You can upload your own images, link videos, write your own text, and what is also important, you can share it. With this tool anyone can treat themselves to publishing a The Guardian article or the announcement of a lucrative round of funding on TechCrunch, what the creators of the app actually did as April Fools joke. They shared the cloned site to their personal networks, and immediately the likes and reposts came pouring in, along with congratulations from friends and strangers. According to Analisa and Slava, founders of 4REAL, the story was even being passed around the Genius offices—an actually well-funded startup whose core product is in many ways similar to Clone Zone—along with murmurs about the necessity of acquiring this competitor. The concept of cloning websites is not particularly new – In 1998, the Italian artists Eva and Franco Mattes gained notoriety for buying the domain name vaticano.org and using it to undermine the Catholic Church's official website; they later cloned the websites of their contemporaries and exhibited them as their own works. The Yes Men, a culture-jamming collective, have created and maintained plenty of fake websites—for George W. Bush, Dow Chemical, the World Trade Organization, and the New York Times—in their ongoing attempt to impersonate and lampoon figures of authority. The thing that makes CloneZone project different though, is the fact that it is in itself a public tool, accessible to anyone, and demonstrating how easily credibility can be achieved.

*"This is probably the most exciting part for us—the possibility of transforming the viewer's sense of reality, even if for a short time. Some uncomfortable situations will inevitably occur."*

4REAL

The shown tendency of people falling into a trap of believing in these websites authenticity without checking the sources or URL (in case with CloneZone, the URL is the exact thing which makes everything clear) only proves the point that often we rely on the incoming information from purely visual point of view, especially now, in time of fast growing information consumption and "like and share" cultural phenomena.

Taking visual credibility from another point of view, I would like to bring as an example the infamous NSA secret presentation files leaked by Edward Snowden, which are made in PowerPoint and contain information about PRISM surveillance program. Taken out of the context, the presentation appears to be extremely poorly executed and almost childish looking, and if you see it without having any background information about the subject chances are that you will not realise that it is in fact top-secret quality information that refers to such a serious subject of global importance as civilian privacy threat, produced by a governmental organisation. It looks rather like a middle school presentation on biology matters or whatnot, so if you accidentally stumble upon it on Google search, and if you never heard of such thing as PRISM, you will probably will not be interested in looking through it. On the other hand, it is very true that visual quality of data presentation is not an important issue for NSA since it is meant to be insid-


ers information  change, so this, makes it, in a way, credible, which is, again, a topic related to visual means – if something is not meant to look attractive and is created by non-designers for purely informative purposes (and not only by top-secret information agencies, but also scientists, researchers, etc) chances are that it will have certain amateur-looking aesthetics. It means that if you want to achieve a particular effect, you have to imitate these very particular kind of aesthetics.

Same applies to such prosaic things, as, let's say, food-spots signboards and menu's (and of course the interior and other kinds of representation of these food-spots). If you take, for instance, the same restaurant, with the same name, prices, food, and other attributes, and create different ways of presenting it, it will as a consequence create different perceptions and attract different kind of audiences. Roughly speaking, if you use Comic Sans and a cheesy smiling potato mascot for a logo then people most likely think that this is a Kebab or fast food place, and if you use sophisticated floral patterns and golden lettering then it will probably be perceived as a fancy restaurant. Or still a Kebab, but a fancier, more expensive Kebab, and probably better, since very often we tend to assume that the more expensive or expensive looking the subject is, the better quality is it. As you come inside, you, of course, become capable of figuring out the real picture, which can lead to surprise or disappointment, but the deed is done – you were being tricked to enter.


Talking about typefaces and perception, there was an actual psychological experiment about the influence of particular typefaces on our perception conducted by Errol Morris.

*"What if the font in which that sentence is expressed influenced our perception of that truth somehow? Would there be a way of testing that, to test our capacity for credulity? Whether we're more willing to accept it as true because it's written in one typeface or another?"*

*Errol Morris*

Talking about rather "credible" power of design, rather than hoaxes, there are interesting investigations in the field of typography. A filmmaker and author Errol Morris ran an experiment in 2013 in collaboration with New York Times, where he asked 45,000 people to take an online test. The test allegedly measured whether or not readers were optimists or pessimists, but in reality, Morris was trying to find out if the typeface a statement was written in had any impact on a reader's willingness to agree with that statement, thus asking a question if some typefaces are more believable than others. Turned out, that Baskerville, a 250-year-old serif originally designed by John Baskerville, was statistically more likely to influence the minds of readers than Computer Modern, Georgia, Helvetica, Comic Sans or Trebuchet. The New York Times experiment found that readers were more likely to agree with a statement written in Baskerville than other fonts. This experiment works as a proof that such, at the first glance, non suspicious visual elements as the typeface choice actually have the real power to influence the viewer's perception of the  content, despite of the content itself.

It is interesting to mention, that sometimes fake is being perceived as real even when it is openly stated that it's fake, due to the viewers lack of attention or focus on the obvious. This year (2016) Snickers, an American candy bar brand company, released a super interesting and clever, in my opinion, ad, featuring a classic "model-on-the-beach" poster with a caption "Photo Retouchers Get Confused When They're Hungry". When looking closely one might notice various Photoshop fails – horizon is levelled on different heights, belly button located right under the breasts, a third hand appearing out of nowhere on the shoulder, and many others (the creators of the ad claim that there are 11 photoshop fails, some of them are much more or less obvious than others therefore easier or harder to find). Thinking logically, even without seeing the caption you come to a conclusion that all those mistakes are being intended – their amount is overwhelming for only one poster, the way some of them are being hidden reveals that each

was carefully thought through, and eventually, no way such a large corporation as Snickers would allow a sincerely tacky advertisement to be released publicly. To my surprise, not everyone was thinking the same way as me – stumbling upon the image on Facebook newsfeed through one of common entertainment pages, I noticed that the reaction of 70% of community was furious and confused. People were leaving such remarks that the one who created the image was an idiot, that a 3-year old could handle the same task better, that advertisement makers are being paid for nothing and that Snickers failed really hard  time. It is especially surprising, since the caption reveals basically the whole concept, and still, some people refused to realise that it all was a carefully thought through advertisement. Without being intended to be a hoax, it became it somehow anyway, for certain people, and illustrates very well that we often tend to focus on the obvious, “in-your-face” kind of imagery and message, without paying attention to the actual message which is hanging right there.

There are multiple pranks related to the field of graphic design that make their own statements, about which I am going to tell below.

One of the hoaxes aiming to prove and show how easily false information found on the internet can be perceived as credible was executed by a dutch graphic design student Zilla van den Born, who conducted an interesting experiment on the power of phoney and misleading photos on social media. For five weeks, Zilla tricked her family and Facebook friends into thinking that she was on a long and exciting vacation through South East Asia. In reality, she never even set foot outside of her home city of Amsterdam, and was merely setting up situations in which you expect a traveling tourist be, by taking pictures in her room with a set up background so it looks like a fancy hotel, photoshopping fishes into her swimming pool photographs to make it look like sea diving, taking pictures in buddhist temples in Amsterdam and etc. It was an experimental project for her school, about which only her boyfriend knew, the rest of people thought she was having a legit vacation. The objective was to explore how simple it was to put up a façade and fake a persona on social media. In speaking with local news in Amsterdam, she said:

*“I did this to show people that we filter and manipulate what we show on social media, and that we create an online world which reality can no longer meet. My goal was to prove how common and easy it is to distort reality. Everybody knows that pictures of models are manipulated. But we often overlook the fact that we manipulate reality also in our own lives.”*

This experiment also illustrates that there is no need for an “authoritative” source to succeed in a hoax, and that people might believe you without questioning anything because of the assumptions going along with social media.

Another fabrication I want to talk about is Ernst Bettler, who is a fictional Swiss graphic designer, who was invented by Christopher Wilson in a 2000 hoax article published in the second issue of Dot Dot Dot, a magazine of visual culture. It is particularly interesting because of causing a lot of frustration and anger in graphic design community by revealing a deeply hidden secret wish of any designer to prove that design has a real power to make real social change and “save the world”. According to the article, Bettler was asked in the 1950s to design advertisement posters for Pfäfferli+Huber (P+H), a Swiss pharmaceutical manufacturer. The article states that Bettler knew of the company’s involvement in Nazi concentration camp experiments and decided to accept the commission with the intention of damaging P+H. The four posters he created, Wilson’s article recounts, were exemplary works of International Typographic Style design, advertising P+H drugs such as “Contrazipan”. However, according to the article, the posters featured abstract compositions that could be read as capital letters – spelling out “N – A – Z – I” when displayed in sequence. Wilson’s article states that the public outcry that followed the public display of the posters ruined P+H in a matter of weeks. Even though it was highly detailed



and featured many photographs and illustrations, the article was a complete fabrication. Ernst Bettler, Pfäfferli+Huber and its drugs do not exist, and neither do the Swiss towns "Sumisdorf" and "Burgwald" that feature in the article – their names are presumably based on the real Swiss towns of Sumiswald and Burgdorf. Nonetheless, the story was well received in graphic design circles. Among others, the September/October 2001 "Graphic Anarchy" issue of Adbusters magazine hailed Bettler's work as "one of the greatest design interventions on record", and the 2002 graphic design textbook Problem Solved by Michael Johnson covers Bettler as one of the "founding fathers of the 'culture-jamming' form of protest". When the story was revealed to be a hoax, design community was furious, which led to many articles criticising its creator, one of which was even written by Rick Poynor and published in Eye Magazine. The purpose of the creation of this fabrication was not very clear, but in its own way, it basically became a satire on how seriously designers take themselves, showing something that they were secretly hoping to see, to gain importance, and that is the exact reason why they were so disappointed when finding out that it has never happened.

The project that is an actual satire on the world of Graphic Design is "Grafik BS" (which, as you might guess, stands for "Graphik Bullshit") created by Amy West, – a fake graphic design studio. Amy West set up this studio after noticing the superficiality of an online community that practices design "with the understanding that the entire process consists solely of applying style to anything", and just basically follows trends. She created a creative director persona called Bjorn Svenson (a reference to scandinavian graphic design), who she also filmed in an "interview", where he talks about the importance of trends in graphic design, and created an online portfolio of poster designs that is completely fictional—the designs are based on trend tags provided on Trendlist and created by the website's poster generator, while being arguably attractive but completely meaningless. The most interesting about this project is the reaction of public it's actually aimed to, that proves Amy's point. Those designers liked it and were very much pleased with "Bjorn Svenson"'s work, liking and sharing on various design platforms.

*"A fake Behance page for the studio received hundreds of appreciations, positive comments on the style of the posters and even a job application for a position in the studio." – said Amy. "Grafik BS was an experiment set up to catch the attention of those who have come to rely on the aesthetic qualities promoted by new technologies within graphic design," West concludes. "Designing stylish posters with meaningless messages was made to see if this is what people thought graphic design should be."*

This project personally for me reflects many things surrounding graphic design nowadays. The whole field becomes in a way a hoax, since the aesthetics are very often covering the message, overlay it, distract from it, and become more important than the message itself eventually replacing it. The power of the image is fooling you, and while being impressed by it you create your own interpretation of the meaning that might be not even there.

A project of similar kind was created by Portugal's Royal Studio. It was not exactly the hoax, but an open but nevertheless working statement that for the viewer's visual aesthetics are indeed often more important than the content. The project is called "The Dishonest Manifest" and consists of a series of posters that aim to prove the very statement above. Here's how they describe it over on their Behance page:

*"The unknown is the key. Taking it as a manifesto regarding the global language, the beauty of globalisation, and how pure form tends to overlap conceptual meaning. You'll enjoy it for the visuals. If you get the language, you'll notice the poster is in fact the acknowledgement of not knowing a single detail about it. All of them. Ultimately we are telling you how ignorant you might be: though it doesn't matter – you'll love it."*

*"Single-handedly, this would be funny. Though they are a serious compilation of posters for single events and clients. You may never eat cheese, Palestine may never find understanding, Europe may never be on time, Berlin and Vienna may never play it fair, we may never speak Japanese in the day nor at night, and we may not give a fuck about content."*

The project was originally published on Behance and immediately met with praise and gained a lot of exposure, which eventually lead it to become noticed and featured by It's Nice That, which editors themselves admit that Studio Royal's point about importance of visuals strongly proved itself – the credibility sometimes relies on attractiveness.

One might perhaps get an impression that I am trying to prove an opinion which states that the way the subject is visually presented, or designed, is more important than the subject itself. This impression is far from true – what I'm trying to do is to deliver a message that the presentation is EQUALLY important to the content, and is capable of mutating it. Perception and angle of view on the problem is the reality, or rather say, "hyperreality" we live in, and often we are not aware that it is shaped by structures that provide and choose the way of presenting the information. Besides psychology and concepts of selectivity it is also important that we as humans are very visual creatures – there are 5 physical senses that we possess and receive information with – hearing (audioception), taste (gustaoception), smell (olfacoception or olfacception), touch (tactioception) and sight (ophthalmoception). Sight was proven to be the most dominant sense – we perceive up to 80 per cent of all impressions by means of our sight, neurophysiologically, visual sense is dominant. Thirty to forty percent of our cerebral cortex is devoted to vision, as compared to 8 percent for touch or just 3 percent for hearing (auditory sense). Hence it is not surprising that the way we perceive information visually has the most impact on our vision of the world, and plays an important role in what aims to be considered credible.

